

## **AP: Cuomo tours NY state prison as he pushes sentencing reform**

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COXSACKIE, N.Y. (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo visited a state prison in the Hudson Valley on Thursday, met with three 17-year-old inmates and ended the tour by repeating his call for keeping the youngest law breakers from adult prisons.

During two hours at the medium-security Greene Correctional Facility, about 25 miles south of Albany, Cuomo walked through a wing of the disciplinary housing unit, where up to 200 prisoners are confined in pairs for 22 hours a day in small cells and for two hours can exit onto even smaller caged balconies.

The governor was accompanied by corrections officials and some of his own staff. He greeted guards, said hello to inmates pressed against the small windows of their locked cells, and met separately with some correction officers and the teenagers to ask about their experiences.

Currently, the state's prisons have fewer than 100 inmates under age 18, including 49 at Greene, according to prison officials. Ten were in disciplinary housing Thursday.

Other young teens are in county jails or Rikers Island in New York City, awaiting trials or serving shorter sentences.

"Most New Yorkers don't ever experience walking through a prison facility, a corrections facility," Cuomo said afterward. "If you did you would feel how intimidating, frightening, threatening an environment it is."

The governor is advocating legislation to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to 18 for many crimes. The move would spare more minors from adult prisons and jails.

Cuomo called on the Senate and Assembly to work out their differences on the issue and decide what level of crime should put teens in family court and which of the more serious offenses should keep them in adult courts and lockups.

"In my opinion, it is too early to condemn a 16-year-old to a life without redemption," Cuomo said.

Only North Carolina and New York do that, he said, adding that a second chance is not only morally right but makes more economic sense than paying \$50,000 a year for 50 years for a prison cell.

The cells in the disciplinary housing unit are about 8 feet wide and 14 feet deep, with bunk beds, a long desk with two attached seats, shower and toilet.

Cuomo looked through an empty cell and walked up and down a wing of cells, where pairs of inmates pressed against small permanently closed windows to see the group go by. Nearly all were African-American.

Commitments to the disciplinary unit vary, often 15 or 30 days for fighting, but can last months, such as for a serious stabbing, Superintendent Brandon Smith said. A committee meets weekly to review the inmates' status.

The governor shook hands with all the prison staff he met or passed, thanking them, and said hello to inmates as well through their windows. Many greeted him back. Others stared.

The prison holds about 1,500 inmates serving sentences for such crimes as robbery and burglary, corrections officials said.

Mental health counselors told Cuomo that about 180 inmates are on psychotropic medications, including antidepressants, that excessive anxiety and depression are the most common problems and that the occasional inmate suffers from psychosis and bipolar disorder.

A group of corrections officers told Cuomo fighting stems partly from gang affiliations and partly from the youth and impulsiveness of the inmates, where incidents can escalate fast. Most at Greene are under 21, Smith said.

The guards also said they need more staff.

Cuomo noted that revisions in the Rockefeller drug laws over two decades have taken about 18,000 nonviolent inmates out of New York's prison system, leaving a smaller, more violent population. His administration is funding 100 additional corrections officers for the system this year, he said.

Greene has 631 staff, including 487 in security. It has about 800 inmates in school, about 760 taking high school equivalency courses and about 150 of them are in special education. About 40 are taking Siena college classes, according to Greene officials.

Guards said some new drugs, including synthetic marijuana, have become a problem the past two years and make some inmates particularly violent. The double bunking in the disciplinary unit, especially on hot days, also often leads to fighting, guards said.

The three 17-year-olds who met with the governor told him they previously spent time in juvenile detention facilities. All were housed in dormitories, not disciplinary housing.

Xavier Pirela of Troy, serving up to two years for attempted robbery, said Greene has more programs, including a class in electrical work that he took for seven or eight months. "That was good. It taught me a lot," he said.

