

Panel may cut federal prison terms

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- Thousands of prisoners in the United States could be freed or have their sentences for crack cocaine reduced under new sentencing guidelines. The U.S. Sentencing Commission, created by Congress in 1984 to set guidelines for federal prison sentences, takes up the issue Tuesday. Earlier this year, they adopted more lenient guidelines for crack offenders and are considering whether to make the guidelines retroactive, the Washington Post reported Tuesday. The proposal, which is opposed by the Bush administration, would not affect state prisoners. If adopted, the new policy would reduce the sentences of some 19,500 federal inmates, by an average of 27 months. Moreover, about 3,800 inmates now incarcerated for possession and distribution of crack cocaine could be freed within the next year, the newspaper reported. Inmate advocacy groups, civil rights organizations and some judges have complained the federal sentencing guidelines are more stringent for crack cocaine offenses, which usually involve African-American defendants, than for crimes involving powder cocaine, which generally involve whites. Nearly 86 percent of inmates who would be affected by the change are black while fewer than 6 percent are white, the Post reported.

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