

Cutting the Prison Rate Safely

By John Vratil and John Whitmire
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The news that more than 1 in 100 adults in our country are behind bars shocked many Americans, but it shouldn't have come as a surprise.

The U.S. incarceration rate has been marching toward this milestone for three decades, a result of policy choices that put more offenders in prison and keep them there longer. Harsher sentencing laws, more restrictive parole policies and the practice of locking up people who have violated the rules of their probation or parole have been driving up the inmate population since the early 1980s.

What is remarkable, and has been highlighted alongside the incarceration figures in a recent report from the Pew Center on the States, is that our states, Kansas and Texas, and others are finding effective ways to fight crime and punish criminals without breaking the bank on prisons.

Locking up 2.3 million people has undoubtedly helped reduce the nation's crime rate. And we certainly believe that violent and chronic criminals deserve a good, long term behind bars.

Yet high numbers of nonviolent, lower-risk criminals have been swept up in the prison boom. Getting tough on them has gotten tough on taxpayers, without an adequate public safety benefit. A prison cell costs about \$65,000 to build and \$24,000 a year to operate. States spend nearly \$50 billion a year on corrections, more than four times the amount from 20 years ago, and they are projected to spend an additional \$25 billion over the next five years to accommodate more inmates.

For this much money the public expects lower recidivism rates and safer communities. Yet crime rates are still too high. Recidivism rates are still too high. And corrections spending is crowding out dollars for other pressing priorities such as health care and education.

Like many of our performance-minded colleagues across the country, we have wondered whether we are getting our money's worth out of prisons. For violent offenders and sex offenders, the answer is yes. For many nonviolent offenders and probation violators, the answer is no. We've got to find a better way.

Many states are doing just that. In law-and-order Texas, we expanded a network of residential treatment centers for low-risk, substance-abusing offenders in prison and under community supervision, as well as intermediate-sanction facilities for probation and parole violators. Texas might avoid increased incarceration costs for the next five years, saving taxpayers millions of dollars, according to the latest projections.

After Kansas found that nearly two-thirds of its prison admissions were probation and parole violators, the legislature set up an incentive program for community corrections programs.

Counties that cut their revocation rates by 20 percent will get a share of new state funding -- money made available because of averted prison construction -- to help them hold violators accountable without using up prison cells.

Other states are taking similar steps. We aren't going soft on crime; we're getting smart on crime.

Our country has a million more prison beds today than it did just 20 years ago, yet the average time served behind bars has increased by only six months, to about three years. Holding inmates an extra six months costs a bundle, but greater reductions in recidivism may be achieved by the alternative treatment and sanctioning programs that have begun to be funded.

For the same price, we can put four offenders through a drug court or reentry program and actually alter the course of their criminal careers. Research has shown that by using new technologies and treatment strategies, community corrections programs can cut rates of repeat offenses by 25 percent. Rather than claiming new victims, these offenders have a decent shot at rejoining society, paying taxes and supporting their children.

Public safety spending, like other areas of government responsibility, is not exempt from the test of cost-benefit analysis. Taxpayers want the job done as effectively as possible. It's up to us as policymakers to consider all of the options and create an array of punishments and programs that deliver the biggest public safety bang for the buck.

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