



## Building boom

### Does "Lock 'em up" work, or just feel good – and cost a lot?

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Are we beginning to think that, maybe, housing and feeding nonviolent lawbreakers — white-collar criminals, drug users and the like — over long periods of time lacks utility? Good sense? Fiscal prudence?

Last week, when a federal court in Chicago sent international publishing tycoon Conrad Black up the river for six years on an array of financial charges, a University of Toronto professor commented, "When more taxpayer money goes into shutting a white-collar offender up than is spent on a hospital patient or a university student, isn't it time to rethink our assumptions?"

That seems like a reasonable question, not because of the flamboyant Lord Black's jail time, but because of the bigger picture, in Virginia and across the country. The number of people in U.S. prisons is up eight-fold since 1970, and a new report says that the massive expense involved has not yielded much in the way of crime reduction.

Check today's paper — or any paper, on any day — and you'll find a judge or jury saying, "Do the crime, do the time." Throw in a few bags of taxpayer dough in that process, because when you say "Jail 'em," you're also offering up three daily meals and a roof.

Such impulses, well ingrained in Virginia, have made the Department of Corrections the state's largest agency, when measured by its numbers of full-time employees (13,760). The cost of running that agency? For the first time, it will crest a billion bucks — \$1.025 billion, to be exact, in fiscal year 2008.

Where does the money go? As of June, according to a recent state Senate Finance Committee report, it pays for the incarceration of 38,000 felons and the supervision of almost 57,000 offenders through various probation and diversion centers.

And the state doesn't even hold all the convicted criminals. In an example repeated across the state, the Newport News City Jail has about 700 inmates packed into a space built in 1975 for about 250. That's untenable, but it's been untenable for a long time and it will cost some serious money to put it right.

It used to be that the state parole system worked as a relief valve when correctional costs outran

their social benefits. But then came 1994 and the abolition of parole, a political choice that required felons to serve at least 85 percent of their sentence. State officials believe that actual time served in Virginia may be as long or longer than any state in the nation.

Something may have to give. State officials anticipate that Virginia's adult "state-responsible offender population" will increase to almost 45,000 by 2013.

Unless we engage in some new thinking — like release more or jail fewer — that means that Virginia will be obliged to build at least one 1,000-bed prison every year for the next six years, at a cost of at least \$100 million each. Add it up.

And that's just to build them. It costs about \$25 million a year, per prison, to operate them. Add that in.

And for all the cost of incarceration, are we safer? That's the real question. While the number of violent offenses dropped sharply from 1993 to 2000, the trend is back up, increasing by more than eight percent from 2000 to 2006.

Yes, put the violent ones away. But there are plenty of alternatives worth considering (or expanding) for the nonviolent: shorter sentences, alternative punishments, far more training inside and more transitional help on release. (About a third of the nearly 13,000 inmates released last year will be jailed again, if existing trends hold.)

Less politically attractive possibilities include the decriminalization of recreational drugs and the return of parole.

To his credit, Virginia Sen. Jim Webb has tried to stir up this issue and get the public thinking about the right questions. What is the correlation between mass imprisonment and crime rates? The impact of incarceration on minority communities and women? The economic costs of the prison system? Of helping ex-offenders back into their communities and into productive employment?

Over the next few months of crafting the 2008-2010 budget, Virginia's General Assembly will haggle over what's essential and what's just nice to have in state services. When it comes to crime and punishment, the legislature and the governor should apply that test to the imprisonment of nonviolent criminals. Is imposing long sentences and no parole essential to punishing lawbreakers, or just nice to feel?

Let the budget-makers and the budget-breakers take up this challenge: Why can't we be physically safe and fiscally sane at the same time?

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