

# Corrections systems is using up too much of our tax money

**S**ome critics of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's proposed state budget point to the prison system as a source of waste and accuse her of not tackling the problem.

That is not entirely true. She's launching a new effort to reduce recidivism — the rate of freed inmates committing new crimes and returning to the system.

Patricia Caruso, Michigan prisons director, reports that about half the 12,000 inmates released each year end up back behind bars. Some \$6 million has been earmarked to help prepare inmates for freedom, including counseling and planning before they're released.

Let's hope it works, because this state imprisons people at a rate higher than that of any other state, according to the Michigan Citizens Research Council.

The organization says our already high incarceration rate continues to increase. We have about 50,000 people behind bars, compared with 18,000 in 1980.

The Lansing-based group Citizens Alliance for Prisons & Public Spending argues that a major part of the cost problem with the \$1.7 billion-a-year corrections system is that too many people are held too long.

An example of prisoners held at high cost and without effect, according to the group, includes those sentenced to life for crimes often committed in their 20s. Many now are middle-aged and older. Half are in for murder and half for second-degree murder.

The State Bar of Michigan recommends a special effort to release prisoners behind bars for those crimes. It suggests the creation of a panel made up of a judge, two corrections professionals and two mental health therapists to individually review each case to determine if release would be appropriate.

The parole board also would have a voice.

The prison alliance says there also are too many people behind bars for an extra year or two, at a cost of some \$30,000 a year, for violating the terms of their paroles. A lot of that has to do with punishment, not public safety.

And nearly 20,000 of the state's 50,000 inmates actually have served their minimum sentences and are eligible for parole.

The alliance calculates that even if fewer than half of those inmates were released under current legal guidelines, the state would save almost \$150 million a year.

It seems obvious that in our anxiety over crime, especially drug-related crime, we have gone overboard on incarcerating more people for longer periods of time. Many states — including New York, which was a pioneer in tough sentencing — are rolling that back a bit.

It is not that the crackdown was ineffective. Michigan's rate of violent crime declined by more than a third between 1980 and 2004, according to federal crime statistics. But the state is under severe financial pressure to fine-tune its sentencing and parole practices to make sure we're not wasting millions.

The citizens alliance also suggests dealing with what has become a clear problem and a likely cause of increasing in recidivism — the imprisoning of people whose main problem is mental illness.

The corrections system clearly needs more attention than Granholm apparently has given it.

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