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EDITORIALS

State Must Evaluate Its Prison Population

*Michigan spends a fifth of its budget on corrections,
locks up more inmates than its neighbors*

Michigan has too many people in prison, consuming too much of the state budget. Less expensive alternatives must be found to punish non-violent offenders.

Detroit last week hosted a conference of criminal justice experts noting that the nation now has over a million inmates behind bars — one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world.

A number of experts, from University of Pennsylvania political scientist John Dilulio to Northwestern University law professor Dorothy Roberts, have noted the devastating effects of this high rate of imprisonment — particularly on the African-American community, which accounts for four-tenths of all of the people in prison.

Children grow up without parents because they are in prison. The community loses the resources of its young men because so many are jailed. And incarceration loses its stigma and thus its ability to deter because such a large segment of the population is behind bars.

The financial cost of prisons in Michigan is ever-growing. The Corrections Department's share of the state's General Fund budget, its main discretionary checkbook, has risen to nearly 20 percent from 5 percent two decades ago. The number of prison inmates in Michigan has more than tripled to 48,000 from 15,000 a quarter-century ago.

The state has recognized the problem and has taken positive steps to deal with it. While the growth in prison population over the long term has been huge, the number of inmates in the last few years is on the decline. This year's total is down from 50,000 prisoners in 2002.

The state has abolished mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenders and the Corrections Department has worked with local governments and judges to encourage special courts for drug offenders and drunken drivers to keep them out of state prisons. It has also begun to increase the number of paroles given to inmates.

As a result, at the end of 2003, Michigan had one of the largest declines in the number of prison inmates in the nation, according to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. Michigan's share of its population in prison, at 489 for every 100,000 residents, is only slightly higher than the national average of 482.

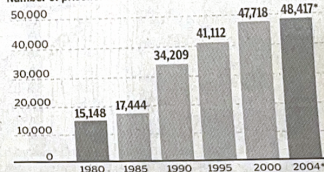
Still, Michigan's incarceration rate is higher than all of its neighbors and higher than the Midwest average of 375 per 100,000 residents.

The state is doing a good job of trying to restrict its prison beds to violent offenders. Last year, 67 percent of prisoners were serving time for assaultive crimes, 24 percent were behind bars for non-assaultive crime and 9 percent were in prison for drug offenses. But the percentages are different for those who were committed to prison last year.

More than 43 percent of new prisoners were sentenced for non-assaultive crimes and 17 percent

Michigan inmates up

Number of prisoners

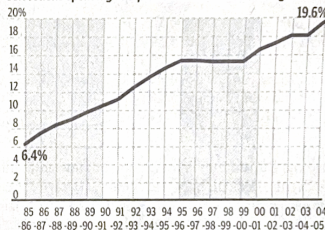


*Through November 2004

Source: Michigan Department of Corrections

Prison spending grows

Corrections spending as a percent of General Fund budget



Source: Senate Fiscal Agency

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were imprisoned on drug offenses, while the remaining 40 percent were violent offenders.

The drug and non-violent prisoners are serving shorter sentences, which is why the total population is weighted toward violent offenders. The opportunities for continued improvement are in the drug and non-violent categories of prisoners.

The state must continue to accelerate the parole of offenders who can safely be released. And it should release older prisoners in their late 50s and above who are statistically unlikely to be a threat.

And the state should act on a recent report issued by the Governor's Commission on Mental Health to get the mentally ill out of the state prison system.

But first, the state needs more information on its prisoners. Currently, the Corrections Department can determine what sentences its inmates are serving, but it can't say what percentage of its prisoners serving time for non-violent crimes have records of assaultive offenses in their past.

For help, Michigan can look to its neighbors with similar demographics such as Ohio and Pennsylvania, whose share of population in prison is as much as one-third smaller.

Putting dangerous people in prison is vital. But locking up prisoners who aren't likely to be a threat to life or property is a bad investment.