

The Detroit News
Friday, June 13, 2008

Prison costs may hit \$2.6B in '12
Nonpartisan group says rising Corrections spending is the leading cause of Mich.'s continued budget woes.

Charlie Cain and Gary Heinlein / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Prison spending is projected to increase by \$46 million a year over the next four years, driving the cost to \$2.6 billion in 2012, according to a report released Thursday by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan.

The 37-page report, reviewing the reasons Michigan incarcerates convicts at a higher rate than neighboring states, says spending on prisons is the leading cause of the state's continued budget troubles. Michigan already spends \$2 billion on Corrections programs, one-fifth of the state's general fund, and had to use tax increases last fall to house the 51,000 inmates and avoid a budget shortfall of \$1.8 billion.

"Given the magnitude of corrections expenditures, it will be extremely difficult to bring long-term balance to the state general fund budget without significant alterations of Corrections policy," the report said.

The Citizens Research Council is an independent, nonpartisan research organization that looks at key state public policy issues.

Its findings mirror those of a Detroit News investigation published April 14-15.

"Michigan's Corrections program is out of line, substantially in some cases, in regional and national comparisons," the report declared.

"The combination of prison population increases and economic factors will cause Corrections spending pressures to grow at a faster rate than they have over the last 34 years."

Since 1990, Michigan has kept its inmates locked up at least one year longer than the national or Great Lakes average.

Had it been in line with the average over that time period, Michigan would have spent \$403 million less on Corrections in 2005 and housed 14,000 fewer inmates, the report says.

The length of stay for a Michigan inmate has grown by 57 percent from 1981 to 2005, seeing the average stay climb from 28 months to nearly 44 months.

"Lower parole approval rates and specific policy changes aimed at being 'tough on crime' are the primary causes of longer prison stays," the report added.

Corrections Department spokesman Russ Marlan said the report "mirrors what we've been saying. When you look at the data, we do stand out."

The department and Gov. Jennifer Granholm have been pushing for money-saving reforms such as releasing sick and dying prisoners and allowing for the release of more nonviolent offenders. Such proposals have gone nowhere in the Legislature.

"It shows the need for corrections policy reforms in Michigan," Marlan said. "We all want the same thing. We all want safe neighborhoods. This says crime does play a role (in prison population rates), but policies are a bigger factor."

Barbara Levine, director of the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending, said she hopes this helps push more policymakers toward the reforms her organization has been advocating, including restoration of a modest "good time" policy that would allow well-behaved prisoners to knock days off their terms behind bars. A truth in sentencing law requires felons to serve at least their minimum sentence in prison without possibility of early release.

"The logic is there," she said. "It's just a matter of public will."

Republican Sen. Alan Cropsy of DeWitt, a legislative leader regarding justice policies, took issue with some of the report's conclusions.

"They haven't taken a good look at what type of people we're sending to prison versus what other states are sending to prison, and that's crucial," Cropsy said. "What they aren't saying is that if we had the same kind of crime other states have, it would make a huge difference. We don't. We have Flint and Detroit, two of the most violent cities in the country."

The report notes that Michigan imprisons a higher percentage of violent and sexual offenders than the national average. For instance, in 2003, 30 percent of those sent to Michigan prisons were violent offenders compared with 22 percent in the rest of that nation. That year, Michigan sent 10 percent to prison on sex offenses, compared with 6 percent nationally.

The report said parole rates for those two crimes have dramatically declined. The rate for violent offenders dropped from 61 percent in 1990 to about 38 percent in 2005. For sex offenders, it dropped from 47 percent to 14 percent during that period.

The report's release comes as the state is undergoing an exhaustive study of its Corrections policies by the nonpartisan national Council of State Governments, which will spend up to three years helping the state devise ways of controlling costs and inmate populations.

In the report, the council said state policymakers and voters have contributed to the dramatic inmate growth.

Their actions included: the 1978 repeal by voters of a "good time" policy that cut sentences by as much as 22 days for each month a prisoner avoided misconduct; the 1988 repeal of a law -- used nine times after passage in 1980 -- that granted 90-day sentence reductions for the entire prison

population each time it reached capacity; legislative approval in 1998 of the "truth-in-sentencing law," accompanied by toughened sentencing guidelines that lengthened prison terms for the most serious criminals.

The report concluded: "Whether the rate of prisoner intake is reduced, the length of stay shortened or other changes adopted, however, the fiscal benefits resulting from any reforms aimed at controlling inmate population and spending growth will have to be weighed against any risks to public safety."

You can reach Charlie Cain at (517) 371-3660 or ccain@detnews.com.