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Crime, crowding and costs

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Cracking down on crime is critically important to Newark and other Essex County towns, but it's a costly proposition.

Just two years after a \$416 million Essex County jail, built to house 2,300 inmates, was erected, it's overcrowded. This week there were 2,472 inmates in the jail. An additional 754 inmates were at Delaney Hall and another 158 were at Logan Hall, two private facilities in Newark. Initially established to provide drug treatment for inmates, the two facilities now house general prisoners at a cost of \$19 million a year.

With homicides up, Essex County mayors responded by putting more police on the streets this summer, and that, not surprisingly, led to an increase in arrests, which in turn caused a 20 percent hike in the jail population.

Part of the increase can be attributed to another "improvement" in the criminal justice system: a more thorough system of determining whether suspects had outstanding warrants from other jurisdictions throughout the state. Another complication leading to more inmates is that Essex County Prosecutor Paula Dow has embarked on a campaign of higher bail and less lenient plea bargains.

In short, the Essex County justice system is addressing past problems, a welcome move.

There is a price for these stepped-up efforts, although it doesn't have to be exorbitant.

The union that represents corrections officers, which says it is worried about the safety of its members, believes the new jail should be expanded. Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo, however, says he doesn't see it happening right now because of the millions it would cost.

It's hard to argue with his position. It costs about \$120 a day to house an inmate in the county jail. The county pays \$64 per prisoner at the private facilities.

Still, prisoners must be housed humanely.

While a long-term solution is sought -- the county has commissioned a study -- there are other steps that can be taken. Moving cases through the system faster has to be a priority. Some suspects, unable to make bail, have been jailed for three years awaiting trial. That's unacceptable.

People arrested for misdemeanors in suburban Essex County, where the municipal judges do not sit daily, often end up spending time in the county jail because there is no judge available for a day or two to arraign them. Those problems are readily fixable.

One sensible idea being discussed is a central judge to push the suburban cases along more quickly. That's the sort of workable and affordable solution that can be realized with officials working cooperatively.

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