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Michigan's prison spending eats large hole in budget

David Eggert / Associated Press

LANSING -- Some politicians are as wary of freeing prisoners as they are of raising taxes.

But with Michigan facing a daunting \$800 million-plus budget hole this year, it's harder to ignore how much the state spends locking up criminals.

States such as Illinois, Ohio and Pennsylvania have more residents than Michigan but incarcerate fewer inmates. Michigan's per-capita incarceration rate is the country's 11th-highest, ranks higher than seven other Great Lakes states and is fourth-highest among the 11 most populous states.

"The easy thing is to say, 'Don't let anybody out,'" said state Sen. Michael Switalski of Roseville, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee. "Then you've got to pay the bill. But we're having trouble paying the bill."

About 1,500 more inmates are being housed in state prisons this year than officials anticipated -- for a record-high total of more than 51,000.

Tom Clay, a budget guru with the nonpartisan Citizens Research Council of Michigan, has given hundreds of talks about the state's fiscal status in recent years. He says people are startled to learn that Michigan spends more on prisons than public universities.

Clay said during a November conference that Michigan's annual prison budget is \$1.9 billion -- roughly a fifth of the general fund -- but would be closer to \$1.4 billion if the state's incarceration rate wasn't 40 percent higher than that of its Great Lakes neighbors.

About 17,000 people, or one-third of all state employees, work for the Corrections Department.

While Michigan was hardly alone in the nationwide "get-tough" movement of recent decades, its crackdown on crime was harsher, says Clay. Truth-in-sentencing laws passed in 1998 require offenders to serve more of their sentence. Release rates for parolees also are lower than 15 years ago, which means Michigan inmates are staying in prison longer.

Clay notes that corrections is one of just two state departments covered by the general fund whose spending is higher now than six years ago. The other is the Community Health Department, which provides health care for the poor.

Health care costs are rapidly rising throughout the entire state budget and broader health reforms are needed at the national level, but Michigan can directly reverse or slow prison spending, Clay says.

State officials agree.

"We're definitely going in the wrong direction," corrections spokesman Russ Marlan said of a rise in prisoners the past two years, which follows earlier declines. "We're not seeing communities that are much safer. What are we getting for (higher spending)? That's what we need to look at."

It's unclear what sort of changes, including major reforms, could be proposed when Gov. Jennifer Granholm unveils her budget plan in early February. But some legislators warn against closing prisons.

"When you let more bad people out on the streets, more people are going to be less safe," said Sen. Alan Cropsey, a DeWitt Republican who oversees the corrections budget. "Public safety has got to be No. 1, and (Patrick) Selepak proved that."

Selepak was mistakenly released from prison and killed three people last February in Macomb and Genesee counties. Republicans criticized Granholm and made it an issue in the Democratic governor's re-election campaign.

Selepak is likely a big reason why the state is housing 3 percent more inmates than expected in the budget year that started Oct. 1, according to prison officials and others. The state hadn't expected to reach 51,000-plus prisoners until September 2008.

Selepak "made the Parole Board very gun-shy and extremely cautious about any paroles," Switalski said. Immediately after the Selepak slayings, the Michigan Parole Board granted fewer requests for parole, and corrections officers sent more parolees back to prison for violations.

"All it takes is one crazy getting out and performing some heinous crime," Clay said. "If you're a politician, you're afraid you're going to get blamed for it and chances are if you're a high-level politician, you will be blamed."

Barbara Levine of the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending, a prisoner advocacy group, says many parole-eligible inmates could be safely released today. The Parole Board should free more prisoners at low risk of re-offending, along with sick and older inmates and those denied parole under the so-called "life means life" policy, she argues.

"The bottom line is we ought to start looking at other states," Levine said. "Our crime rates aren't different. There's simply no evidence whatsoever that dropping parole rates has actually made anybody safer."

An area that policymakers may re-examine is sentencing guidelines. Judges are sending drug offenders and non-assaultive criminals to prison at twice the rate that was projected when the guidelines started in 1999, Marlan says.

Those offenders could instead serve jail terms or go on probation, enter substance abuse programs, undergo drug testing and daily monitoring, or wear electronic tethers -- less expensive options than prison. The average annual cost to house a prisoner is about \$32,000.

The state also wants to expand a program that aims to reduce the number of released inmates returning to prison.

If Michigan brought its incarceration rate of 489 inmates per 100,000 residents closer to those of surrounding states, Clay and Levine say it could save hundreds of millions of dollars.

"Maybe we need to be a little smarter on crime," Marlan said.

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