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Connecticut

## Anything but More Prisons

Connecticut's prison population, at 19,000, is inching up toward record levels, reversing a trend of slight reductions over the last two years. Incarcerating people in overcrowded facilities is inhumane and always expensive: it costs \$29,500 a year to imprison each person. This problem did not develop overnight. The prison population rose steadily from the late 1980s until 2003. And the recent increase is not surprising, especially in light of last year's rising crime rate. But the important thing to remember is that prison is not an answer to crime; bigger prison populations reflect society's failure to find answers.

The state needs to walk a difficult tightrope: reducing the number of inmates in prison while keeping dangerous offenders off the streets. The Department of Correction is trying to make things better, and in time its actions will bear fruit. But ultimately the problem is bigger than any one agency can cope with.

The most effective intervention takes place years before a person enters the legal system. That is clear from two statistics: Eighty five percent of those Connecticut inmates have substance abuse problems at the time of arrest; a staggering three-quarters are high school dropouts. In response, the Department of Correction gives addiction treatment to the vast majority of inmates and gives out more high school equivalency diplomas than any other institution in Connecticut.

But more should be done before a person enters prison. Making preschool programs widely available for the poor, as Gov. M. Jodi Rell has proposed, would have the long-term effect of increasing employment and reducing the incidence of incarceration years later. Improving schools in Connecticut's cities would have much the same salubrious effect.

There are also a range of shorter-term measures that could relieve prison overcrowding. Of the more than 19,000 people behind bars, about one-quarter — or nearly 5,000 inmates — are awaiting trial, a larger proportion than usual. Of these, according to Representative Michael Lawlor, the Democratic co-chairman of the legislature's Judiciary Committee, about 1,000 are indigent and pose little threat to the public, yet they are being held because they cannot post bond for amounts as low as \$500 or \$1,000. It makes no sense to keep them incarcerated; the taxpayers spend more money in less than two weeks to feed and house them than the bail necessary to obtain their release.

Then there are the more than 400 inmates who are teenagers — 14- to 17-year-olds who, because of their crimes and Connecticut's misguided "get tough" philosophy for youngsters, are serving time in

prison along with adults. Connecticut is one of the few states to mix the two age groups for serious crimes. Housing young people with career criminals is bad public policy. Continuing the status quo when prisons are overcrowded makes even less sense. The current conditions add urgency to the need to house young offenders in separate facilities, and not treat them as adults.

Connecticut prisons may be overcrowded, but building more of them is the last thing we need. Thoughtful solutions exist for overcrowding. But the best solutions keep people from being sent to prison in the first place.

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