



## Prison budget burdens Georgia

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

9:58 a.m. Sunday, May 30, 2010

### The cost of justice Part 2 of 2

As states across the nation recognize that prison costs are busting tight budgets and doing little to reform offenders, many governors and legislators are thinking outside the cell.

Mississippi lawmakers decided in 2008 to cut prison costs by allowing all nonviolent offenders to be considered for parole after serving 25 percent of a sentence instead of 85 percent.

In Texas, a bipartisan effort in 2007 avoided \$2 billion in costs to build and operate new prisons by spending \$241 million on alternatives: stepped-up probation and parole programs, new halfway houses and specialty courts devoted to offenders with drug issues and mental health problems.

North Carolina announced in April a bipartisan initiative to develop a new research-driven approach to public safety that is expected to reduce prison costs by investing in alternatives that are more effective.

South Carolina's Legislature last week approved a landmark sentencing reform package designed to save the state \$400 million over the next five years by reducing incarceration of nonviolent offenders and more closely supervising released inmates to reduce recidivism.

Plenty of states beyond the South — traditionally the leading tough-on-crime region — are also adjusting their approach to punishment.

What about Georgia?

So far, the General Assembly has not debated its prison-focused approach in the way other states have. But the discussion may be inevitable as a prison budget that consumes more than \$1 billion a year threatens to force further cuts in education and other high-priority programs.

"The executive, legislative and judicial branches have to get together on this, because we can't have the mind-set of simply locking people up and throwing away the key," said Tifton lawyer Gary McCorvey, a former district attorney who served 12 years as a Superior Court judge. "We need to break that cycle. But no one ever wants to do that. No one wants to be labeled as soft on crime."

A special report in last Sunday's editions of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution revealed that Georgia has the nation's fourth-highest incarceration rate. The state ranks first nationally in overall criminal punishment, with 1 in 13 Georgians either behind bars, on probation or on parole, according to a study published by the Pew Center on the States.

State spending on corrections has increased fivefold since 1985 due mainly to longer stays in prison, the AJC investigation found.

Georgia already spends less than most states to house a convict: \$49 a day compared with a national average of about \$79, according to the Pew report.

Georgia's total state budget of \$17.9 billion is \$3 billion lower than it was just three years ago. Corrections did its part — officials cut prison staff, closed outdated facilities and triple-bunked some cells. But making further cuts will be difficult if the inmate population stays the same or continues to rise.

Lawmakers will likely face a difficult choice in the 2011 session: Opt for more teacher layoffs, higher college tuition bills and less money for transportation, or make changes to lower Georgia's prison population.

In today's report, the AJC is [exploring alternatives to the cell by looking at effective programs that could be expanded in Georgia](#) or wholesale changes that could be adopted.

"The political and policy environment on crime and punishment has changed drastically over just the past few years," said Adam Gelb, director of the Public Safety Performance Project at the Pew Center on the States. "State and national leaders on both sides of the aisle are starting to realize there are research-based strategies that protect public safety and hold offenders accountable without sinking ever more public treasure into prisons."

James E. Donald, a member of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, served until 2009 as the head of Georgia's Department of Corrections.

A retired Army general, Donald said he became aware of the need for alternatives after becoming familiar with Georgia's prison population. About a third of the state's prisoners are people we're afraid of, he said. The rest he described as those that society is mad at.

"We asked ourselves: Is there an alternative for people we're just mad at?" Donald said.

Donald began looking for alternatives for nonviolent prisoners, but had to work within the framework of Georgia's tough-on-crime laws. He supported a movement to create a state network of "day reporting centers," a community-based option for errant probationers who pose little threat but who would otherwise take up prison space.

Danny Porter, Gwinnett County district attorney, said it makes sense to continue to dole out long sentences to violent criminals who are likely to offend again. "Sure, incarceration is expensive," Porter said. "But so is crime."

Porter, however, said he would like to see options other than prison for nonviolent offenders. "We don't offer enough alternatives to prison or different types of incarceration," he said. "What about work-release programs for people to pay restitution for financial crimes? Not everyone needs to be in hard prison beds. I think we can get more bang for our buck with more options."

Scott Ballard, the district attorney for the judicial circuit that includes Fayette County, said he also supports effective alternatives such as drug courts for some nonviolent offenders. But he favors long prison terms even for nonviolent offenders if they have been busted time after time.

"We don't ask for it unless we think it's deserved," Ballard said. "The ultimate goal is to have a safe society. That's the way we have been approaching it."

Criminal justice experts say research now offers a range of alternatives that can improve public safety while saving money. Leaders in tough-on-crime Texas say they have learned that they can be safer and lock up fewer people.

"We have seen the results in terms of lower crime and a lot less costly system than we would have had if we had kept on building prisons," said Marc A. Levin, director of the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. "The proof is in the pudding."

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