

Budget Crunch Forces A New Approach To Prisons

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Budget problems are forcing states and the federal government to rethink their approach to prisons. More than 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States, and the cost is getting unbearable.

Even conservatives who describe themselves as tough on crime are starting to call for the release of some inmates. That's in part because the numbers are speaking louder than ever.

States spend about \$50 billion a year to house prisoners, and experts say incarceration is the fastest-growing expense in state budgets, except for Medicaid.

Adam Gelb, who studies public safety at the Pew Center on the States, says it's time to change direction, and he has some numbers to make his case.

"It costs 23 times as much to have somebody behind the walls as it does in the community, and I think that disparity is what's becoming compelling," Gelb told a House appropriations panel last week.

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Overhauling Corrections

Researchers have been collecting evidence for years about how to cut prison costs and reduce crime rates. James H. Burch II at the U.S. Justice Department says politicians are finally starting to listen.

- Adam Gelb, Pew Center on the States

"The economic situation that we're in is certainly nothing to celebrate," Burch says in an interview. "But at the same time, it has served as an effective catalyst to get people to look at the facts and look at the data and to be more reasonable about the decisions that we're making."

Those decisions are reflected in President Obama's 2012 budget. It includes a plan to save \$41 million by releasing well-behaved inmates.

Recently, Burch says, about a dozen states have reached out to the federal government for advice on how to overhaul their corrections policies.

Experts say the key is to evaluate each prisoner and the risk he poses to the community, just like an insurance company would before writing a policy to cover someone's house or car.

Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) says nonviolent criminals — people locked up on drug charges or for writing bad checks — may do much better out in the world than in a cell next to more dangerous inmates.

"You're finding people ... who have been sent into prison for a nonviolent crime who come out very, very

violent," Wolf says. "Have you been in the prisons? I mean, they are very, very violent. So you've actually been counterproductive in what you're trying to do."

A Changing Atmosphere

Wolf is not the only prominent conservative to speak out about prisons. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and tax-reform advocate Grover Norquist belong to a new group called Right on Crime. The organization wants to see low-level criminals released, with more oversight in their local communities and more focus on programs cut down on repeat offenders.

Those are ideas that they say have worked and saved money in such places as Hawaii and Texas.

Pat Nolan has been working on those issues for 14 years. He says he's picking up a change in the atmosphere.

"All these conservatives now are saying: 'Gee, we need to rethink this huge spending on crime. We need to hold the bureaucracy accountable for results. We need to reserve prison space for people who are truly dangerous,' " Nolan says. "It's beginning to change the whole political equation on crime."

Current and former prosecutors say they aren't opposed to the idea of corrections reforms. "It just makes sense," says Jim Brady, a former U.S. attorney in Michigan during the Carter administration.

"The cost of the current penal system has just gotten to be too expensive," said Brady, who now practices law at the Dykema law firm. "They're looking at alternative methods in terms of rehabilitation, deterrence and the other factors that you consider in sentencing."

A Warning

Then there's Jim Reams, the Rockingham County, N.H., attorney and president of the National District Attorneys Association.

Reams said that his state dived head first into corrections reforms about six months ago. But he's got a warning: Those reforms haven't worked out quite as the activists promised.

"The problems in New Hampshire have to do with the fact that they didn't fund any system for the maintenance and the monitoring of the people in the community," Reams said. "They just started dumping them out with the predictable results."

That means more crime, said Jim Pasco of the national legislative office of the Fraternal Order of Police.

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- Jim Pasco, Fraternal Order of Police

"If something needs to be done, it needs to be done at the front end, before crimes are committed," Pasco said. "This is a sociological, a societal problem."

Pasco said he's worried about proposals to cut police forces and release more criminals to save money.

"You put together reduced police strength on the street and more potentially violent criminals out there and it's a recipe for disaster," he said.

Pasco said his members are fanning out on Capitol Hill this week, to share their concerns with lawmakers.