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Prison spending outpaces colleges'

Black males in system outnumber those in universities

By Mark Fisher
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 Dayton Daily News

Ohio's spending on prisons and corrections rose five times faster during the past 20 years than spending on Ohio's state-supported colleges and universities, and by 2000, more black men were in prison than were enrolled in the state's colleges, according to a study released Tuesday.

The report, *Cellblocks or Classrooms? The Funding of Higher Education and Corrections and Its Impact on African American Men*, was prepared by the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank committed to reducing what it calls "society's reliance on incarceration" to solve social problems. The study analyzed each state's spending patterns based on data from the National Association of State Budget Officers.

Among the study's findings:

From 1985 to 2000, inflation-adjusted spending on higher education in Ohio increased by 38 percent or \$670 million, while corrections spending jumped 211 percent or \$1.026 billion.

More black men were incarcerated in Ohio's prison system (23,200) than there were in Ohio's colleges (20,074).

Ohio has the 10th-highest university tuition in the country and is ranked 39th in the nation in the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree (17 percent). Ohio ranks 40th nationally in public investment per full-time student. Meanwhile, for the annual cost of incarcerating one person in an Ohio prison

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(\$22,044), the state could pay the annual tuition of four students at a public university.

The report shows Ohio's colleges have "lost budget battles to the growing prison system," said Amy Hanauer, executive director of Policy Matters Ohio, which released the Ohio data.

"With harder economic times ahead, we must reduce Ohio's reliance on expensive prisons so that we can invest in the higher education system that is so crucial to our economic well-being," Hanauer said.

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Some criminal-justice experts told *The New York Times* that it was somewhat misleading to compare the number of black men in prison with the number in higher education, because those incarcerated included adult black men ranging upward from 17 years old. The number in colleges and universities was confined to a smaller age range.

Bob Hickey, assistant vice president for public affairs at Wright State University and a former state legislator, said the study's conclusions came as no surprise. Ohio's residents do not raise a fuss about meager higher-education funding, but speak loudly when it comes to crime and punishment, Hickey said.

The need for more prison space came in part because Ohioans were fed up with prison sentences that bore little semblance to the actual time served, Hickey said. The Ohio General Assembly approved tough truth-in-sentencing laws that lengthened prison terms and triggered the need for more corrections facilities and employees.

But Hickey said he and other higher education officials would welcome a reversal of the trend of the past two decades. Making a college education more affordable would provide greater access to people to the training they need to get decent jobs and that could reduce crime.

"If we could reverse those numbers, there would be far less need for spending so much money on prisoners," Hickey said.

The study's authors agreed.

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"Policy makers should be concerned that at a time when college is ever more essential, it is increasingly eluding the pocketbooks of the typical family," institute officials said. "At the same time, the growth in our prison population and spending is absorbing ever larger shares of the state budget, and disproportionately impacting the African American community. Now is a good time to re-evaluate the policy choices that have led to increased prison spending."

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