

CLEVELAND - The writer is executive director of Policy Matters Ohio, a policy research institute in Cleveland, funded primarily by the George Gund Foundation.

Observers across the political spectrum worry about Ohio's shameful levels of higher education.

We rank 39th among the states in the percentage of adults who can claim a bachelor's degree. This matters for individuals -- those without a college diploma have seen their wages plunge in the past two decades.

And it matters for the strength of our economy -- businesses want to locate in places where they can count on a well-educated work force.

The reasons for our college diploma deficit are not hard to trace: We rank 40th among states in public investment in higher education per full-time student, and 10th from the top in the price of a college education.

But budgets are tight. So where can we find the funds to better educate ourselves?

Here's a novel idea: Take the money from our bloated corrections budget. Over the past 15 years, the state of Ohio has increased its spending on prisons at 5 ½ times the rate that it has increased

spending on higher education.

Prison spending has swelled by nearly \$1 billion since 1985 in inflation-adjusted figures.

Just 15 years ago, we managed on a corrections budget of less than \$200 million.

We now spend more than \$1.1 billion to imprison our neighbors.

This behemoth limits our options.

A new study called "Cellblocks or Classrooms?" produced by the Justice Policy Institute of Washington, D.C., sheds much needed attention on the way books and bars compete for scarce public dollars throughout the country.

As grim as the nationwide findings are, the Buckeye state has done worse. The Ohio fact sheet and a link to the full report can be found on the Web at <http://www.policymattersohio.org/>.

We've quadrupled the number of people we house in Ohio's prison over the past 25 years.

Do you feel four times safer than you did in 1975? Probably not.

Because much of the new incarceration is for nonviolent crimes:

Ohio boasts the seventh highest rate in the country for nonviolent, drug-related admissions.

The contrast is particularly stark in the black community:

According to Human Rights Watch, in 1996, 40 percent of black men who entered Ohio's prison system were imprisoned for nonviolent, drug-related crimes.

The staggering 213 percent increase in black men being locked up for drug crimes during the 1980s and 1990s has resulted in Ohio prisons reporting more African-American male inmates of all ages (23,200) than our colleges and universities reported students (20,074).

This appalling incarceration rate devastates prisoners and their families. Once you've served time, you're less likely to ever get a decent job, graduate from high school or college, or be allowed to vote.

You're more likely to be alienated from your children, to be most familiar with violent approaches to conflicts and to have been exposed to the AIDS virus (as a ground-breaking article in the Akron Beacon Journal recently pointed out).

If the morality of taking nonviolent people and damaging their lives in this way doesn't bother you, then the economics of it should.

It costs more than \$22,000 to keep one person in an Ohio prison for a year -- a sum that would allow us to send four people to a

public university here.

Building more jails and prisons not only removes money from the pockets of today's taxpayers, it locks up the finances of future generations.

College is beyond the budget of many working families. Yet the spare change to pay for it is jingling in our prison purse. This is a sign of a state with misplaced priorities.

- Nonviolent drug offenders need treatment, which costs far less than prison.

- Promising high school students need access to an affordable education.

- Ohio businesses and those thinking of coming here need a more educated work force.

We can provide all three. Let's rethink our misguided spending and get ourselves onto a path that leads to a more promising future.