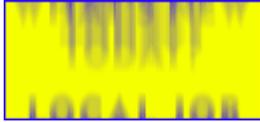




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Other Columns

Ohio's policy wastes money and lives

09/20/02

Blaine Griffin

A

recent Plain Dealer story documented citizens' concerns about the costs of drug treatment for nonviolent offenders. But in Ohio we pay far more, in cash and in lost opportunity, when we send nonviolent offenders to prison.

Prison spending ballooned by more than one billion inflation-adjusted dollars between 1985 and 2000. Just 15 years ago, we got by on a corrections budget of less than \$200 million. Ohio's current approach makes no sense, fiscally or morally.

We've quadrupled the number of people in Ohio's prisons over the last 25 years. Much of the new incarceration is for nonviolent crimes. Only six states have a higher rate of nonviolent, drug-related admissions.

We incarcerate more than three times as many black men for nonviolent drug crimes as we used to. By 1996, 40 percent of black men who entered Ohio's prison system were jailed for nonviolent offenses. I see the results of these policies first hand, in my family, through my

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work at East End Neighborhood House, and in my community.

Nonviolent offenders emerge from prison facing many of the same barriers that hardened felons confront. Ex-convicts are less likely to finish their education, less likely to get decent-paying jobs, more challenged in being good parents and partners, and more accustomed to a violent or criminal culture. This leads to recidivism and deterioration of our family and community infrastructure. These devastating trends are a threat to the future of our culture and the foundations of America.

If the human cost of this doesn't bother you, the financial costs should. Our billion-dollar prison budget limits our ability to fund other services that would contribute to, instead of detracting from, our economy. Our corrections budget has grown 5.5 times faster than our higher education budget at a time when a college degree is becoming more essential to employment.

The monumental 213 percent increase in black men locked up for drug crimes over the last two decades has resulted in Ohio's prisons reporting more black male inmates of all ages (23,200) than our colleges and universities report having as students (20,074). These numbers are shocking, but they're also accurate. In his Sept. 4 column, ("Distorted images from distorted facts") Sam Fulwood expressed concern about the faulty assumptions that could be drawn from these statistics. But unless we talk about these numbers, we can't expect them to change.

Go to any barbershop to find the human faces that confirm these numbers. The number of intelligent men who lack opportunities because they are "on papers" or have a "number" because of nonviolent crime is astounding. We are losing our brothers, sons and fathers. This is an issue that the African-American community must move to the top of our agenda.

Higher education is a much smarter place to invest than prison. But Ohio hasn't learned that lesson. We rank 39th in the percentage of adults who can claim a bachelor's degree. And we're 10th from the top in the price of a college education.

For the \$22,000 average annual prison price tag for one person, we could send four to an Ohio public university.

Ohio can and must do better by its citizens. Nonviolent drug offenders need treatment, which costs far less than prison. Students need affordable universities. Employers need a more educated work force. We can afford all three if we just recognize that we are not the prisoners of our misguided policies.

Griffin is program manager and grant writer for the East End Neighborhood House. He is also on the board of directors at Policy Matters Ohio, which recently released "Cellblocks or Classrooms," a report on prison and higher education spending in Ohio. The report is available on the Web site, www.policymattersohio.org

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