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Ohioans pay for prison now - and later

04/07/03

Amy Hanauer and Mark Cassell

It may sometimes seem that what happens behind bars has little bearing on the economy, and that economics has little to do with public safety. In fact, criminal justice policy is all about how we use resources - economic resources, human resources and development resources. As Ohio stares down a \$4 billion budget deficit, a rising rate of unemployment and entrenched poverty in rural and central-city neighborhoods, we can no longer afford to ignore the price of prisons.

That's why Kent State University and Policy Matters Ohio have invited some of the most insightful people in the nation to talk about the economics of criminal justice at Kent State this Thursday. The symposium brings together those who make the laws, those who enforce them, those who study them and those who critique them.

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction Director Reginald Wilkinson will speak alongside award-winning photographer, author and Soros Fellow Andrew Lichtenstein, who will present a slide show of his disturbing photographs of the prison industrial complex.

Throughout the day, sheriffs, state legislators and other practitioners will discuss grim realities such as:

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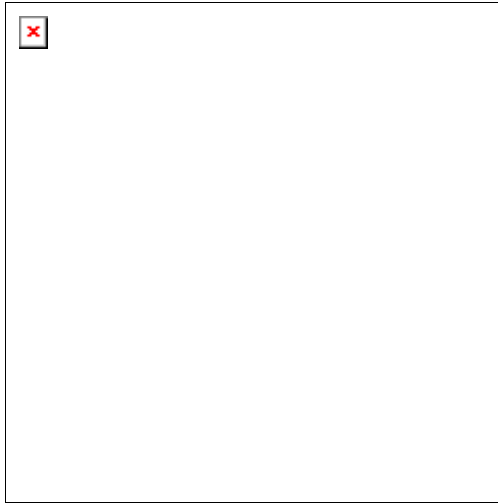
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Nationally, we imprison 2 million people, more than twice as many as in 1985, four times as many as in 1973. More than 60 percent are in for nonviolent crimes. Ohio, which has 11.4 million residents, locks up 45,000 people, more than the countries of France and Turkey. Japan, with its 125 million people, imprisons just 10,000 more inmates than the state of Ohio.



Spending on corrections in Ohio grew by more than a billion dollars over the 1980s and 1990s, according to the Justice Policy Institute, whose president will speak at the symposium. Most of this growth is due to mandatory sentencing for nonviolent crime.

America's high rate of imprisonment masks the true face of our unemployment problem. Symposium participant and Princeton University sociologist Bruce Western shows that the national incarceration rate for young black men increased from 5.7 percent in the early 1980s to 11 percent in the late 1990s. When added to other jobless workers, 32.6 percent of young black men and 12.8 percent of young white men in the United States are not working. These numbers dwarf official unemployment rates.

In addition to increasing the number of people idled because they're behind bars, incarceration saps lifelong employment prospects for ex-offenders. As we've swelled sentences for nonviolent crime, ex-offenders are less connected to community than ever before, less able to parent, work and function in a demanding society. Nationwide, 60 percent of ex-offenders are unemployed a year after release, and 62 percent are re-arrested within three years.

More than 50,000 inmates are released each month in this country. But ex-convicts are not equally distributed throughout the population. Certain communities bear a disproportionate burden in trying to help ex-offenders navigate their limited prospects. Western found that among all African-American men in their early 30s, the percent who had experienced prison (22) by 1999 was greater than the percent who had finished college (12). Central city black communities have to adapt relationships, employment and family roles to deal with this reality.

At Thursday's symposium, we'll hear about options that eat less of the public dollar and don't do so much damage to offenders' lifelong possibilities. Drug courts, community corrections, prison vocational programs and prison education programs can lead to lower incarceration costs and lower rates of return to prison.

Ohio has led the way on some of these options, but the state has more to learn about others.

What is the cost of confinement? It diverts state funding from other priorities, steers municipal economic development policy, removes workers from communities, divorces fathers (and increasingly mothers)

from their families and limits life prospects.

Is it worth it?

It's time to talk.

Join the conversation this Thursday at Kent State University.

To read more, or register, go to:
www.policymattersohio.org/kent_symposium.htm.

Cassell is an assistant professor of political science at Kent State University and the organizer of this symposium. Hanauer is executive director of Policy Matters Ohio.

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