

Rising prison population an undeclared national crisis

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Nearly a month after a published study on increasing U.S. prison population revealed more than 1 in 100 American adults are behind bars, two University of Michigan professors are aiming to elevate the public debate on prison reform.

The timing, they say, should coincide with the intensely debated presidential campaign, where the growing prison population topic should be considered along with the economy and Iraq War.

"This is an invisible subject," said U-M professor Buzz Alexander. "It's a crisis and no one is really talking about it."

In late February, the Pew Center on the States reported that about 2.3 million people are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, and local jails. Last year, population grew by 25,000. After three decades of growth, prison population has tripled. The results, according to Alexander and U-M professor Jeffrey Morenoff, show an alarming and widening gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged.

"The current system is destroying the life-course of those incarcerated, and not providing them with ways to become part of the American economic and cultural fabric," said Alexander, professor of English and founder of the Prison Creative Arts Project, which inspires inmates to express themselves through the arts.

"We are not making active efforts to rehabilitate people in prison,"

Morenoff said. "The rehabilitation ideal died in the 1970s and 1980s. But there are examples of rehab programs in and outside prison that are successful and lower rates of recidivism. The criminal justice system hasn't caught up with the social science."

Each U-M professor has his own way of drawing attention to what they both consider as a national crisis that goes unnoticed and hardly discussed. For Alexander, it's through engaging prisoners to create and participate in the arts; for Morenoff, it's through extensive research into the causes of recidivism rates.

Since 1990, Alexander has worked with state prisoners, offering workshops on visual and performing arts. The 13th annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners runs through April 9. The exhibit is held at the Duderstadt Studio Gallery on U-M's North Campus.

Based on his first-hand experience working with prisoners, Alexander said the sentencing is often arbitrary, perfunctory, inhumane and singles out ethnic and racial groups.

For instance, one in 36 adult Hispanic men, one in 15 black adult men; and one in nine black men ages 20 to 34 are behind bars. While rates of violent crimes has fallen by 25 percent over the last 20 years, prison population has tripled. Overall, the U.S. imprisons more people than any other nation. Second is China, with 1.5 million people in behind bars.

While there appears a public need to make sure people are punished for crimes, the financial cost to incarcerate are staggering. Morenoff estimates that it costs \$25,000-\$30,000 per year (in public money) to incarcerate each prisoner. That cost increases significantly with older prisoners and those who need medical care.

"Right now, we have punishment for the sake of deterrence, and making

examples of people," Morenoff said. "But the deep-seated reason is that people feel that justice is being served.

"You would think that sending more people to prison would lower crime rates, but there is some evidence, albeit controversial, that communities which send more people to prison have higher crimes rates," he said.

"Incarceration can deplete communities of their assets and disrupt their social fabric, which can actually increase crimes rates.

"It's still an open question."

Source: University of Michigan

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