

CITY BUDGET IMPRISONED BY JAIL COSTS

HUGE COST INCREASES HAVE ONE SMART FIX: BEEF UP PAROLE AND PROBATION

THREE WEEKS ago, the Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority released an important report about the astronomical costs Philadelphia pays to house its increasing prison population.

Titled "City Budget Behind Bars: Increasing Prison Population Drives Rapidly Escalating Costs," the 20-page document was issued quietly, with little fanfare.

But the report's release should have been accompanied by the blare of trumpets and news conferences. By showing how the city fails to fund its overwhelmed prison system adequately, and fails to pay attention to a crippled, underfunded probation and parole system, the report provides a clear, though frustrating picture of how expensive that inattention has become. That expense is not just in dollars - which is considerable enough - but in a self-perpetuating cycle of criminal populations with no hope of rehabilitation or change.

Consider: In its five-year plan, the city expected to end 2002 with about 5,670 prisoners. In 2007, the population will increase 54 percent, to 8,850. Each one of these prisoners costs the city \$23,300 a year.

Yearly prison expenditures have soared, from \$117 million in 2002, to a projected \$207 million this year. Those costs are driven by contracts, inmate health care, food service and housing costs, and maintenance of two correctional facilities.

At the same time, the parole and probation system, which could ease these burdens by providing an alternative to incarceration, is underfunded and understaffed.

In Pennsylvania, from 1992 through 2002, the number of parole violators more than doubled, according to the report. But the city's 287 parole officers are just half of what officials say they need.

Those on parole have anti-social attitudes that support their behavior, have unrealistic expectations and don't have the coping skills they need to stay out of trouble. Plus many have not been treated for drug or alcohol problems, which might have got them in the system in the first place.

Crime experts have various theories as to why the city's homicide toll (at 108 yesterday) is so high, but most agree that one of the biggest problems - and perhaps the easiest to repair - is an overcrowded criminal-justice system.

For example, 22 percent of those arrested in Philadelphia last year for homicides and 14 percent of the 406 victims were on parole/probation.

Recommendations that we strongly support:

_ Provide alternatives to incarceration where appropriate, such as electronic monitors, psychological treatment, drug and alcohol counseling.

* Enhance probation and parole: cut down on technical violations that send prisoners back to jail.

* Prepare inmates for re-entry into society.

* Review sentencing guidelines: Inmates should not be sent to a Philadelphia prison if they are convicted of sentences that they should serve in state prisons. Adding more cops is a popular rallying cry to fixing the city's homicide problem, but paying attention to better alternatives to prison would be a far wiser investment. *

Courtesy of Philly.com