

Universities or prisons – which are more important?

Which is more important: educating young people or warehousing criminals?

Most people, I believe, would say the return on investing in young minds far outstrips the costs of jailing felons. Indeed, for many years, the state of Michigan spent more on universities than on prisons.

But if Gov. Jennifer Granholm's budget proposal for the 2004 fiscal year that begins Oct. 1 is adopted by the Legislature, for the first time Michigan will spend more on the corrections system than on our universities. The difference may be small, but the symbolism is enormous.

Granholm's proposed budget for state prisons totals \$1.723 billion, while her spending plan for the 15 public universities in Michigan (plus various scholarship programs) comes to \$1.715 billion.



Phil Power

How has this happened? In part, it's because appropriations for higher education have been cut by almost 12 percent over the past two years, while spending for the corrections system has held steady. Five years ago, for example, state spending on higher education was \$1.6 billion, while outlays for prisons totaled \$1.4 billion.

To her credit, Granholm's budget proposals for the corrections system include a number of cuts. She calls for improvements in the parole system, so once released on parole inmates don't go back to prison. She wants a system of drug courts for drug or alcohol addicts who commit crimes, on the idea that treatment programs are cheaper than prisons. And the governor wants to change the law so that non-violent prisoners would be placed in less-expensive community placement facilities several months before their scheduled release; she says this step alone would free up 14,000 prison beds.

Make no mistake about it. Prisons in Michigan are expensive. Some authorities say that it costs the state \$80 a day per prisoner. Others say that the annual cost of the system runs at more than \$25,000 per inmate.

Peter Luke, the Lansing columnist for Booth Newspapers, points out in a column last weekend that Michigan looks up enormous numbers of non-violent offenders who are sentenced to two years or less. He cites statistics from Corrections Department Director William Overton, that 56 percent of new inmates were sentenced to 24 months or less. Last year, the state's prisoner intake jumped by 15 percent to 11,047 new inmates.

Legislators have for years argued that a public sick and tired of increasing crime rates is insisting on spending whatever it takes to lock 'em up. But crime rates are down, costs to run the corrections system keep going up, and even legislators

are beginning to realize it makes little sense to keep people who commit non-violent crimes in very expensive prison cells.

On the other hand, Gov. Granholm's 2004 budget cuts another 6.7 percent, or \$164 million, for state support for the 15 public universities and 29 community colleges, plus reduces merit scholarships from \$2,500 to \$500. This is on top of last year's cut of 3.5 percent across-the-board reduction for higher education.

According to Michael Bolis, executive director of the Presidents Council of the State Universities of Michigan, state universities now receive around the same funding they got in 1998-99, without any adjustments for inflation. "How can you not have higher tuition when we're being cut like this?" he asks, while pointing out that Michigan universities get about \$1,000 less per student from the state than universities in neighboring states.

MSU President Peter McPherson says his school has 6,000 more students than it did 10 years ago, yet the same number of faculty. U-M President Mary Sue Coleman says she wants to save money, but she is also aware that merely cramming more kids into a classroom is not necessarily what either the kids or their families want. When I was a regent at U-M, I kept pointing out that the university was doing all kinds of things to save money — privatizing services, cutting non-academic staff — but it wasn't emphasizing cost containment in its PR.

Be that as it may, the core of the debate over Gov. Granholm's budget will be whether it's more important for the state to spend money on warehousing felons or educating young people. As far as I'm concerned, college beats the slammer every time around.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at power@hometownlife.com.

Visiting Israeli puts face on impact of terrorism

One of the first things Ron Gertner noticed about the United States was there weren't any guards stationed at the restaurants where he has eaten.

In Israel, where he is a police official, there is a law mandating that all public places, including stores, parks and restaurants, have a trained security guard on duty at all times. Their job is to keep a lookout for terrorists and suicide bombers.



Kurt Kuban

Unfortunately, suicide bombings have become a "routine of life" in Israel, according to Gertner, who heads a police department around the town of Rosh-Ha'ain. Although he is only 33 years old, Gertner has already witnessed the aftermath of 10 such bombings, dating back to the days he worked for the police department in Tel Aviv.

"I've seen some terrible things. It's hard to look at the bodies after these attacks. You barely recognize them as people," Gertner said. "After you see something like that, it is very hard to go on sleeping at night."

Gertner was in metro Detroit for about a week to discuss his experiences with local Jewish organizations and prominent Jewish residents. He was invited by the Southfield branch of Development for Israel/State of Israel Bonds, an international organization that provides funding for infrastructure projects in Israel.

Israel Bonds Executive Director Hershell Wais has set up a tour for Gertner, which included stops in Bloomfield Hills, Troy and Southfield. The hope is that once people meet Gertner and hear his stories, they will invest in Israel Bonds and in Israel's fight against terrorism.

"Ron's story, unfortunately, is not a pleasant story. But it is what is going on over there. It is reality. People in our country need to hear the story," Wais said.

Although most of us have seen the grim images of suicide bombings on the evening news, listening to Gertner describe the terrorist acts brings more life to them. As you hear him talk, you can begin to understand the true meaning of terrorism.

"Today, in Israel, when you walk outside, when you go out to the store, when you take your children to a movie, you have to think twice," said Gertner, a father of two boys.

As we move forward in our own war on ter-

ror, Israel could certainly teach us a few lessons. Its citizenry is educated, alert and aware of the dangers terrorists pose. Frequent suicide bombings tend to make people pay attention.

Last year, police departments around Israel received some 6.3 million calls from residents complaining about suspicious persons. That is an astounding statistic considering there are only about 6 million living in the country.

Israel could also teach our public safety officials how to deal with the terrorist threat. Their military and police personnel work as an integrated force. The military's job is to work the borders, and try to keep the terrorists from entering the country.

In addition to taking care of normal criminals, police officials like Gertner have to deal with the terrorists that sneak through the border checks. One minute, Gertner is collaring a burglar. The next, he is called to the scene of a suicide bombing.

"There is no normal routine for us. We must be ready for everything," Gertner says.

Just a few weeks ago, in fact, Gertner's unit learned that three Palestinian men, who were hiding in an Arab village, were planning a suicide bombing. His unit set up road blocks, and tracked the terrorists to a local mosque.

Inside this holy house, the terrorists tried to dump a belt full of explosives, which, according to Gertner, is the weapon of choice for most suicide bombers, because they can be strapped to an individual underneath a coat.

Gertner's bomb squad took the explosives out to a safe place and detonated them. It was a happy ending to a tense situation.

Unfortunately, many other suicide bombers aren't intercepted before they can fulfill their horrible, misguided mission.

Although he said Israel is trying to stay out of America's conflict with Iraq so it doesn't add fuel to an already burning fire, Gertner said Americans can be rest assured the Israeli people are completely behind them. He said the universal hope from Tel Aviv to Haifa, and from Rosh-Ha'ain to Jerusalem is for Saddam Hussein to be ousted from power.

"We can only hope life will get better. Maybe after the war with Iraq, there will be peace in the region. All the time, we hope for peace," he said.

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