

The nation's appetite for mass incarceration appears to be waning

Written by Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell
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ATLANTA –The nation's appetite for mass incarceration appears to be waning, as many states confront the financial challenges of maintaining large prison populations and as public support grows for more services that better prepare prisoners to come home to their communities.

After four decades of tougher sentencing, the incarceration rate in the United States is the highest in the world at 715 inmates per 100,000 residents, far outdistancing the Russians, who are second at 584 per 100,000. But more Americans are recognizing that mass incarceration has largely failed. Their neighborhoods aren't any safer, and funding the expanded prison system has drained resources that could be spent more productively on rehabilitation, healthcare, education and other social services.

A poll conducted in December 2008 by Zogby International for Community Voices at Morehouse School of Medicine found that across the country and in Georgia there is substantial support for progressive rehabilitation and educational services for inmates and those recently released from prison. A majority of respondents said it was "very important" for former inmates to receive access to job training, drug treatment, mental health care, mentoring and family assistance.

Clearly, the public recognizes that the mass incarceration strategy is not working. Both nationally (72 percent) and in Georgia (86 percent), most respondents said they were concerned about crime in their communities. Moreover, at least half of all respondents agreed that when people leave prison, their life skills have not been improved and they experience too many obstacles to living crime-free lives. In fact, a majority of respondents supported the idea of state-funded rehabilitation services for inmates before and after they are released. Respondents also overwhelmingly supported providing former inmates with job training, public housing, student loans and medical services.

Perhaps the most significant finding was that 70 percent of the national respondents and 69 percent of Georgians said they would rather see additional state money spent on treatment programs and other services for ex-offenders than on constructing new prisons.

The key question now, however, is whether this strong public sentiment for ending mass incarceration and launching comprehensive rehabilitation will actually lead to changes in public policy. It will take bold leadership by our political leaders, ideally starting with President Barack Obama. National, state and local politicians will remain under pressure to take the politically safe route and continue to emphasize locking up offenders. But this policy becomes problematic when states face severe budget shortfalls because of the recession, leaving elected officials to search for ways to cut prison expenses.

In California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is proposing to grant early release to more inmates, while in Kentucky temporary cost-saving measures have already led to the early

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of nearly 2,000. Other states, such as Virginia and New York, are also debating whether to let out thousands of inmates early.

In Michigan, state officials have agreed to make changes in parole policies that will reduce the state's prison population by thousands and save \$262 million over the next six years.

Yet some officials are clinging to the *status quo*, despite its heavy costs and demonstrated ineffectiveness.

In Indiana, Governor Mitch Daniels is under fire from opponents after proposing a budget that includes a \$40 million expansion of two prisons, but cuts funding for several agencies and higher education, and offers no new spending on K-12 education.

In Pennsylvania, Governor Ed Rendell wants fixed prison terms for repeat offenders, rather than flexible ranges.

It's clear, however, that sunset is coming for mass incarceration. Many state officials who are shifting policies to save money will find that this to be a winning strategy—if they steer more resources to rehabilitating ex-inmates. The public already recognizes that this is a better public policy for the safety of their communities. Now, it's time for public officials to get on the bandwagon.

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