



## **Editorial: Harsh sentencing rules cost millions without cutting crime**

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Michigan legislators and taxpayers looking to save hundreds of millions of dollars in corrections costs should check out the Pew Center report ("Time Served: The High Cost, Low Return of Longer Prison Terms") that shows Michigan prisoners released in 2009 led the nation in average time served. Policies that would shave limited time off sentences would have a huge cumulative impact on Michigan's 44,000-inmate system. Harsh sentencing policies are the biggest reason Michigan has one of the nation's highest incarceration rates, making it one of only four states that spend more on prisons than [higher education](#). The Pew study, released last month, ranked Michigan first in time served, with 4.3 years. Pennsylvania and New York had the next longest average sentences, with 3.8 years and 3.6 years respectively. The national average was 2.9 years.

Moreover, on average, Michigan prisoners were incarcerated 23 months longer than their counterparts in 1990, costing the state nearly \$500 million. Rising crime rates weren't the reason, as rates two decades ago were comparable to those of today. Nearly all -- at least 95% -- inmates will eventually go home. National and state [studies](#) have shown little, if any, correlation between length of stay and recidivism. On the contrary, longer sentences might actually increase the chances of recidivism because they make prisoners even less employable and less able to adjust to a rapidly changing society.

Michigan taxpayers pay about \$35,000 annually to incarcerate each inmate. With a \$2-billion budget, the Michigan Department of Corrections now consumes about 24% of the state's general fund.

Nationally, the average time served for all crimes increased 36% from 1990-2009, but in Michigan it increased 79%. The disparity for assaultive crimes was even greater. Pew found that 24% of Michigan's non-assaultive offenders released in 2004 could have been safely released after serving two months to three years less. That would have reduced the prison population by 3,280, saving \$92 million a year.

Restoring good time -- giving prisoners a chance to shave limited time off their sentences with good behavior -- reforming sentencing guidelines and enacting a presumptive parole law are all steps that could greatly decrease spending on Michigan prisons without increased risks to the public.

Unfortunately, Michigan continues to go the other way. In May, for example, a bill supported by state Attorney General Bill Schuette would require a mandatory minimum

sentence of 25 years to life for fourth-time habitual offenders. Another initiative backed by Oakland County Sheriff Michal Bouchard would give criminals who carry or use guns while committing crimes up to 25 additional years or life in prison.

Mandatory and draconian sentences largely fueled the massive prison-building boom nationwide during the 1980s and 1990s. Prison populations quadrupled while crimes generally stayed the same.

Those policies have been an expensive failure, diverting money from [schools](#), community policing, transportation projects and other services. It's time Michigan legislators got smart, as well as tough, on crime by re-examining Michigan's harsh and costly sentencing and parole policies.