

## Laura Sager: Use some of what we spend on Michigan prison to improve our state

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*The Mound Correctional Facility in Detroit / Kathleen Galligan/Detroit Free Press*

In 2014, the Michigan Department of Corrections budget will again be more than \$2 billion — 21% of our state's general fund. Every day that we spend \$4.32 million to operate our prisons robs funding from services proven to better improve public safety and strengthen communities.

Michigan is one of just a handful of states that spend less on higher education than prisons, forcing many of our young adults to choose between a diminished future and crippling debt. Because legislators failed to adequately fund community mental health services when they

closed state hospitals, jails and prisons are the largest mental health care providers in the state. Cuts to state revenue sharing forced some local communities to lay off police or eliminate entire police departments. Policymakers have even cut funding for prisoner re-entry programs.

The size and cost of Michigan's prison system results from policy choices, *not* crime rates. Crime rates have been falling steadily in Michigan and nationally for more than two decades, despite disturbing amounts of crime in some Michigan cities. Moreover, a large body of research demonstrates that simply keeping people longer does not reduce recidivism.

Taxpayers are paying for sentencing and parole policy choices over the last two decades that were designed to keep people in prison longer, regardless of cost or effectiveness. Legislators steadily increased sentence lengths. The parole board has exercised its uniquely broad discretion to "throw away the key" for thousands of prisoners who could be safely returned to their families and communities.

As a result, Michigan keeps prisoners behind bars far longer than other states. Just last year, the [Pew Center on the States](#) found that our state had the longest average prison stay of any of the 35 states it studied in 2009.

If the 15,009 people Michigan released from prison in 2009 had served the national average, Michigan would have saved more than \$530 million — millions we could have used to rebuild our urban centers, increase resources for preventive services like mental health and drug treatment, give vulnerable children a good start, and intervene to keep at-risk youth from entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

That is why Michigan residents should applaud news that Gov. Rick Snyder and the Legislature are finally addressing our outdated sentencing and parole policies. Earlier this year, they retained the

Council of State Governments Justice Center to examine the factors driving Michigan's inordinately long prison length of stay and make recommendations for reforms.

This month, state Rep. Joe Haveman, R-Holland, introduced [House Bill 5078](#), which would reinstate a sentencing guidelines commission. Michigan's sentencing guidelines have not been evaluated for proportionality, fairness or effectiveness since they were enacted in 1998. [HB 4809](#), also sponsored by Haveman, would reform the parole review process. Both bills have strong bipartisan support.

We hope to see additional bills this session that would allow the board to parole people incapacitated by age or illness and require it to release people when they first become eligible, unless there is objective evidence they pose a current risk.

Criminal justice reforms are hot-button issues. As taxpayers, we must let our elected officials know we will stand by their efforts to stop this terrible waste of public resources and use the millions in savings to invest in the infrastructure and services that will create a safer future for us all.

*Laura Sager is executive director of the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending.*

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