

Idaho, the prison state, may reform its ways

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho locks up more of its people than all but seven states. You have to travel to the Deep South or Arizona to find a higher incarceration rate.

Having one of every 18 adults caught up in the corrections system - probation, incarceration or parole - puts Idaho ahead of every state except Georgia.

There's no end in sight. During the past two years, Idaho's inmate population grew 7 percent. Only Kentucky's inmate population expanded faster. At the same time, 28 states cut their prison rolls.

At this rate, the \$204 million Idaho spends on its prison system could swell to more than \$219 million next year.

So Idaho has a problem.

But it's not crime.

Idaho's overall crime rate comes in third from the bottom. Only North and South Dakota are lower.

Compared to Idaho, Washington has 41 percent more crime but 67 percent fewer people caught up in its corrections system.

Whatever else this tells you, it's hard to escape the impression that Idaho's tough-on-crime politicians have been throwing away lives and money - at both the front and rear prison gates.

At the front end is probation and Idaho's rider program, which involves a short stay at a minimum-security prison such as the North Idaho Correctional Institution at Cottonwood. Both are meant to steer largely non-violent offenders away from the dehumanizing environment of the main prison system.

Of the people who appear before an Idaho judge for a felony conviction, 84 percent take this path. But 30 percent of these either fail the rider or violate probation, sending them on to serve an average of almost two years in prison.

At the rear gate is Idaho's parole system - where almost half of the people released return to prison for another 19 months because they violated the technical terms of their parole or committed a misdemeanor. In other words, Idaho is sending people back to prison for offenses that would, at most, land anyone with a clean record in a county jail for a brief stretch.

Says Marc Pelka, program director at the Council of State Governments' Justice Center, these practices account for 41 percent of Idaho's inmate population. Do something about that and you will free up millions that otherwise could be spent on Idaho schools, higher education or health care.

To say nothing of the fact that prison stigmatizes people, isolates them from family, friends and jobs and places them in a world that teaches them how to be more proficient, hardened criminals.

Pelka outlined some ideas, but they boil down to this: The state has to focus on high-risk offenders. Idaho is among 17 states that place no limit on the length of a person's probation - which swells the caseloads of overburdened probation and parole officers.

It also has to come up with a more measured response to low-level offenses.

A low-risk probationer who fails a drug test or misses an appointment with his supervisor ought not merit a one-way trip to the prison complex outside Boise.

And to get anywhere, Idaho has to begin devoting far more resources to community-based mental health and substance abuse treatment. The dearth of those programs means that Idaho taxpayers wind up supplying them in the most expensive venue of all - state prisons.

Idaho politicians have heard - but not absorbed - a lot of this before. But former Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Denton Darrington has retired to Declo and is no longer barricading the doors to Idaho's criminal justice reformists.

With politicians on both sides of the spectrum willing to ask the right questions, Idaho's tough-on-crime crowd may just be willing to get smarter about crime. What have they got to lose? - M.T.