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Leaving Out the Children

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Recently, The Gainesville Sun reported that more than 500 Alachua County high school students left school in 2006 rather than graduate. Many of these young men and women left school for a one-way road to addictions and prison.

Not a ripple of concern echoed through the community.

It becomes a cause for great concern when considering the themes and trends that accompany this deplorable dropout rate. The most ominous trend is its growth from 2.9 percent in 1998 to 6.1 percent in 2006. This compares to a decreasing state average of 3.9 to 3.5 percent over the same period.

Not only is the county moving in the wrong direction, but since 1999, our dropout rate never again fell below the state average. The percentages may sound statistically insignificant but that equates to over 6,000 dropouts in ten years.

These numbers take on new meaning when placed in the context of state and national standings. Alachua schools are headed toward a dropout rate that is nearly double the state average. Going to the national level, we find Florida has the 2nd highest dropout rate in the nation. That puts Alachua's dropout rate among the worst of the worst.

These are not the statistics you would expect from a county whose economic engines are three major hospitals, one flagship university and a stellar community college. However, these are the statistics you would expect in a state recently holding, on the national level, 5th place in spending on police protection; 40th place in spending for K-12 education; and 50th place in spending for higher education.

This spending formula reflects a reality in Florida politics where the criminal justice community and prison industrial complex have become major political forces in Florida politics. The best testament to their diligence is a state incarceration ratio which is higher than any county on God's green earth.

In raw numbers, Florida's prison population has gone from 64,000 inmates in 1996 to 93,000 inmates so far this year. The Alachua jail population has a similar growth rate. It grew from an average population of 717 inmates 1997 to 1,085 inmates 2005.

It is easy to dismiss this growth as a simple product of a growing community. However, when the numbers are converted to population ratios of inmates per 100,000 populations we come up with a growth in the population ratios of 360 in 1997 to 410 in 2005. This, as in the school dropout rate, may sound statistically insignificant but it is moving in the wrong direction.

Matching the county jail ratios to that of other English speaking countries gives a whole new perspective. The national incarceration ratio of Canada is 107 and England/Wales is 148.

The number of inmates the Alachua jail feeds into the state prisons parallels the growth of both the county jail and state prisons. This number went from 304 in 1996 to 795 in 2006.

Not only did the raw numbers grow but the percentage of inmates sent to state prisons grew. The overall percentage went from 1.5 percent in 1996 to 2.3 percent in 2006. These numbers, like the school dropouts and incarceration ratios, are also moving in the wrong direction.

The popularity of illegal drugs accounts for the growth in both the county jails and state prisons. For each of the last ten years, the single largest group of prison admissions was for drug crimes.

Additionally, drug dependencies and school dropouts are the two dominant traits associated with the inmate populations. Sixty percent of the men and women admitted to prison have a drug-related dependency, and the medium education level of those in prison is the 7th grade.

The linkage between dropouts and illegal drugs is accentuated in Alachua County because of the educational requirements of the county's economic engines.

The disposable foot soldiers that link the drug cartels of the world to drug buyers are drawn from the ranks of the uneducated. The educated and the professionals have the money and community standing to enjoy the recreational use of illegal drugs.

When the foot soldiers of the drug trade become dysfunctional, they are sent to prison. The successful ones are first harvested of their illegal gains by the criminal justice community and then sent to prison.

The causalities can be debated. What is not debatable is the linkage and statistics.

This is known to every elected official from the city of Gainesville to the legislature in Tallahassee.

Their electoral viability hinges on an ever increasing supply of expendable foot soldiers that move drugs and fill the prisons. Therein is the reason not a ripple of concern was sounded when the announcement of over 500 dropouts in 2006 appeared in the Gainesville Sun last month.