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Building a Prison Empire

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Our elected officials have unhinged criminal justice and turned it into a massive poverty program that breeds criminality. Prisons alone have consistently consumed a steady eight to 10 percent of an upward-spiraling state budget for decades. The only visible return is a relative political stability for those in power.

Florida is investing \$2.25 billion in prisons this year, and the [prison](#)'s only job is to provide a secure environment with room and board for about 85,000 men, women and children. The state's version of doing "hard time" is so appealing that about 45 percent of inmates have been returning to [prison](#). In fact, there will be more inmates with previous time in state [prison](#) this year than were in [prison](#) 20 years ago.

You could say that Florida state prisons are nothing more than a rest period where inmates often get much required medical attention while honing skills and broadening contacts in preparation for their next round of criminality. By the way, medical attention accounted for over 20 percent of the inmate cost per day for the FY 2004-05.

It appears our elected officials get a better return on their investment of our tax dollars than we taxpayers. Doing "hard time" is nothing more than an excuse for a rural poverty program in the form of a [prison](#) industrial complex and an urban poverty program for the criminal justice community. The big payback is the electoral gold of campaign funds and votes.

There are two lynch pins that can reduce the size of our state [prison](#) population in half. The first is to address the war on drugs as a medical problem, much as we do with alcohol. And the second is by measuring drops in the recidivism rates.

Every argument used to justify the war on drugs was used to justify prohibition. We are suffering identical consequences in the war of drugs as we did prior to the repeal of prohibition.

The saddest consequence is that we are, and have been, sending more men, women and children to [prison](#) for drug law violations than we have for violent crimes over the last five years. Violent crimes include murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

The national closure rate for violent crimes in the same period was less than 50 percent. That means no one is captured, convicted and incarcerated for over half of the violent crimes committed.

It seems we could better protect Floridians by focusing more on violent crime. However, civil forfeitures associated with violent crimes pale in comparison to drug crimes, which probably accounts for the emphasis on drug crimes by the criminal justice community.

Our politicians argue that crime statistics have decreased over the last 14 years. What they are not telling you is that Florida has consistently been above the national averages in violent crimes since 1960.

Studies show that the simple earning of a GED functionally reduces recidivism. Can elected officials justify why they cut the Department of Corrections' capability to provide education to inmates by 50 percent?

The criminal justice codes can be modified so that every time a person is convicted of a felony, they must graduate at the next higher level of schooling. Coupled with this is the requirement to obtain a vocational degree with its corresponding license or certification.

This would not be in lieu of a sentence, but in conjunction with it. It would mean that both sentence and educational performance criteria must be met prior to release.

The DOC does not have the skill to implement such a broad educational mandate. Our state secondary school systems have already failed these people once, and there is no reason to believe they have the desire or ability to redress those failures.

That leaves the community college system. This is a system that has decades of experience in remedial education for thousands of students from a dysfunctional state school system. They also have the skills and experience of teaching vocational programs.

The question of who should pay is simple enough. The state failed in its responsibilities for a secondary education, and so it pays. The vocational programs can be paid by the inmate in the form of a student loan.

There are definite pluses to such a program. Research by both Florida Tax Watch and the DOC shows that inmates participating in educational and vocational programs have higher performance levels, lower disciplinary rates, lower recidivism rates, and are more likely to stay off of public dole. Further, these studies also show there is up to a \$3.20 return on each dollar invested within two years.

The single biggest minus is that politicians lose the political gold from the criminal justice community and the [prison](#) industrial complex. In the end, this is why such a concept will never become a reality.

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