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Schools, Drugs and Prisons*

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We have created a destructive relationship between dysfunctional schools and prisons that hinges on drug addictions, which are distorted by laws that reinforce this relationship.

A comparison of school performance rates and incarceration ratios between Gilchrist and Alachua counties reveals the following: Gilchrist County school district is the only one in the state where every school has had an A or a B in the last four years. They also have the lowest incarceration ratio in the state of 17 jail inmates per 10,000 population.

By contrast, Alachua County schools are all over the board with ratings from A to F. This year the state raised the standards for grading schools. Gilchrist County held their A or B ratings while 14 schools in Alachua went down a grade. Furthermore, Alachua County ranks 11th from the top of all the counties in Florida with an incarceration ratio of 56 jail inmates per 10,000 population.

You can take issue with the causality of school ratings and jail ratios but what you cannot argue is that buried in those statistics is linkage.

The connection between dysfunctional schools and incarceration ratios becomes more apparent when we look at the education levels of inmates in the state prison system: The average inmate tests at approximately a 5th to 6th grade level. About 22 percent of the inmates are under the age of 25 years, which means that a large percentage of inmates have only recently emerged from the public school system.

These facts are compounded by the drug trade in which roughly 30 percent of all prison inmates are in for crimes related to the supply side of the drug subculture. Most of those who get caught can be characterized as the expendable foot soldiers of the trade that connects drug kingpins to well-to-do "recreational users."

So-called recreational users are 14.8 million and spending 64 billion dollars a year. The demand remains strong because this group is largely unaffected by the legalities of the trade.

Gainesville is a clear example of how these dynamics play out. Recently the Gainesville Police Department busted a drug ring alleged to have imported over \$27 million worth of cocaine into East Gainesville. Does anyone truly believe East Gainesville is consuming \$27 million worth of cocaine?

Large segments of our economy are fueled not only by addictions but also by the byproducts of those addictions. The two most obvious examples are law enforcement and prisons. A 50 percent reduction in the crime rate would mean the loss of at least 25,000 jobs in those two fields. Similar cases can be made for other segments of the economy.

Over the years, the state legislature has taken numerous steps towards maintaining full prisons. For instance, they have eliminated funding for summer school programs, "kneecapped" the truth commission for its successful ads against the child smoking and drug use, and reduced funding for prison drug treatment programs. In one period, prison drug treatment programs saw a 47 percent decrease in funding and a 58 percent reduction of treatment slots; at the same time, the prison population increased 15 percent. But to their credit they increased the prison bed capacity.

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Why increase the prison bed capacity? Votes. Despite the fact that inmates can't vote, they are counted in the census and become numbers that are included in gerrymandering of voting districts. Large inmate populations create a stable political base for incumbents and often provide the platform to launch campaigns for higher office.

For a case in point, count the prisons and look at the inmate population growth over the last decade in senate district 14, which includes Alachua, Bradford, Gilchrist, Union, and parts of Columbia, Levy, Marion, and Putnam counties.

Counting inmates as residents also brings federal economic benefits by lowering per capita incomes: for instance, the prison population makes up about 14 percent of the total adult population in the Baker-Bradford-Union census region.

Full prisons also mean jobs. There are only 4 of 67 Florida counties that don't have at least one prison facility. This means a lot in terms of regional economies. For example, Suwannee County was slated to get its own prison of 2,022 beds. Once completed it would have generated \$13.7 million a year in wages and become the 4th largest employer in the county. The prison was put on hold by the legislature and the beds went to other existing facilities. Dennis Cason, president of the Suwannee County Economic Alliance points out the local disappointment: "Those prison jobs are something that people were looking forward to." The depth of disappointment becomes more meaningful knowing the alternative was one of 175 new jobs being offered at the local chicken processing plant.

Yes, we do have a major problem with dysfunctional schools, addictions and prisons. Yes, people and organizations with narrow self-interests complicate the problem.

What can we do? First and foremost is to educate our children. The education equation is simple: an educated child is the product of responsible parents and competent teachers. Second, we should require our elected officials to enforce laws equally on both the supply and demand side. This means equal law enforcement across the entire social spectrum of the illegal drug trade or legalize it.

Over the last decade, I have heard a constant drumbeat of empty promises and shallow excuses reverberate throughout the halls of prisons and jails that I visit. The one truth inside the razor wire is that there will be more here next year not less.