



PRESS-REGISTER

Alabama rates high in locking people up, lower in probations

Tuesday, March 03, 2009

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For every 75 Alabama residents in 2007, one was behind bars, according to a new national study of U.S. prison systems.

Only Washington, D.C., Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia and Texas locked up a greater percentage of their residents, according to the study, which was conducted by the Pew Center on the States, a Washington think tank.

The high incarceration rate contrasts with a relatively low supervised release rate, according to the report. Alabama ranked 21st in the number of residents on probation or parole, the predominant forms of conditional release in the penal system.

Generally speaking, according to the study's authors, such a gap between the incarceration rate and rate of probationed or paroled convicts suggests that Alabama is leaning too heavily on its prisons and confining more convicts than it needs too.

The authors of the study advocate increased funding for conditional release programs to offset the high cost of housing prisoners, whose numbers have been increasing rapidly for the past 25 years.

"Supervising a low-risk offender in the community costs a lot less than housing that offender in prison," Pew Center Managing Director Susan Urahn said in a conference call with reporters.

Alabama Department of Corrections officials, well aware of the cost savings prison diversion can present, agreed in principle with the study's criticism of over-reliance on prisons, but cautioned that the report's statistics can be misleading.

The Pew study focused primarily on parole and probation as a means of controlling prison population, programs that are administered by the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles.

The Department of Corrections oversees another type of prison diversion in the form of its Community Corrections division, which directs funds to 45 county-run programs and helps new programs get off the ground.

The programs, according to Director Jeffery Williams, provide judges with a supervised release option that's more strict than traditional probation but also keeps people out of prison.

Still, the \$6.1 million appropriated for the Community Corrections programs is a relatively small portion of the prison system's general fund, which, after several cuts in the face of the economic crisis, stood at about \$360 million for financial year 2009, according to corrections spokesman Brian Corbet.

In 2007 — the latest year addressed in the Pew study — Alabama's Community Corrections programs were supervising 1,866 convicts, Corbet said, a figure dwarfed by the 27,816 inmates incarcerated in Alabama prisons that year.

One of Williams' responsibilities is increasing the number of participants in the program by educating judges about the advantages of keeping nonviolent offenders out of prison.

Mobile County judges, he said, have a good track record of taking advantage of the existing program.

Baldwin County, on the other hand, hasn't yet put a program into place.

"We've been doing everything we can to help them get their program off the ground," Williams said.

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