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Report: State has highest incarceration rate per capita

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LAFAYETTE — Once again, Louisiana has the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the nation, with 794 inmates per 100,000 residents, according to a report from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics released in late July.

Louisiana took the lead from Texas about 10 years ago, and for the past three years the Pelican State has hovered at a rate of about 800 inmates per 100,000 residents, said Burke Foster, a UL Lafayette criminal justice associate professor and noted expert on prison populations.

In a state with about 4.5 million residents, 37,000 of whom are incarcerated in either a federal prison, state prison or local jail, about 1 out of every 121 residents is locked up.

"It's the highest rate in the universe," Foster said.

Foster said the high rate is due to long prison sentences being served by nonviolent drug and property crime offenders. By contrast, in the 1970s Louisiana had an average rate of confinement of 110 inmates per 100,000 residents, he said.

Policies by the state Department of Corrections promote incarceration, and for political reasons, district attorneys in the state push incarceration by their support of policies and mandatory sentencing legislation, Foster said.

"If you want to drive the (prison) population high, then lock up more people for property and drug-related crimes," Foster said.

By contrast, in Minnesota, which is tied with Maine for the lowest per capita incarceration rate in the nation with 141 inmates per 100,000 residents, the largest group of prisoners is locked up for sex-related crimes, Foster said.

In Louisiana, most people are locked up for drug-related crimes, he said. In 2001, the Legislature passed Act 403 which did away with mandatory minimum sentences for 21 nonviolent crimes.

Foster said it costs the state an average of \$15,000 a year to house a prisoner, while the national average is \$22,000 a year. Louisiana has a lower cost mostly because the salaries of correctional officers is the lowest in the nation.

In addition, Foster said, the state houses many prisoners in local jails, which generally provide a lower standard of care. Sheriffs can house state inmates for \$23.50 a day and still turn a profit, while it costs the state \$40 a day to house the same prisoner, Foster said.

Many local sheriffs, such as in Avoyelles Parish, have built larger jails than they need in anticipation of new inmates. To pay for the jails, sheriffs are housing inmates from outside parishes, and sometimes, as in the case of Avoyelles Parish, from other states, Foster said.

"It is bad public policy to house state prisoners in local jails when room is available in state prisons," said state Sen. Don Cravins, D-Arnaudville. "We make the parishes dependent of those resources to pay off debt. Local parish jails ought to be used for local prisoners. Otherwise, it becomes a funding stream for local government. There's no real incentive there to try and redirect lives."

The Lafayette Parish Correctional Center has a capacity for 802 inmates, most of whom are waiting for trials, but many who are state inmates. The number of people booked into the Lafayette jail has steadily decreased in the past three years, from 13,269 in 2000, to 12,525 in 2001 and 11,754 in 2002, according to the Sheriff's Office.

Cravins said the state's high rate of incarceration won't change unless district attorneys and officials with the state Department of Corrections change their attitudes about incarceration.

The state has a high incarceration rate, high crime rate and an inmate recidivism rate of

70 percent, Cravins said. Criminals who have their probations revoked stay in jail an average of 22 months in Louisiana, compared to the national average of six months, he said.

Louisiana needs more community-based programs for nonviolent criminals, such as house arrest programs, Cravins said.

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