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Middleton: Use budget crisis to become smart on crime

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Guest Columnist

South Carolina's billion-dollar budget deficit poses a crisis for decision-makers. Like all crises, it's also an opportunity. What better time to question the quality of the returns we are earning on the nearly half a billion dollars that South Carolina invests annually on corrections, probation and parole?

The last overhaul of corrections in South Carolina came in the 1960s, when Fritz Hollings was governor. It's past time for another robust initiative. The upcoming study of South Carolina's prison system by the U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Corrections is a great start, but action as well as study is required.

Unfortunately, our country leads the world in incarceration. Nearly one person in every 99 is behind bars. Between 1987 and 2007, the U.S. prison population tripled. South Carolina's incarcerated population has burgeoned to 24,000 inmates in prison and another 12,000 in local jails — among the highest rates of incarceration in the nation that leads the world. This growth has serious implications for our state budget. Last year, the Legislature set aside \$456 million, or 6.7 percent of total general fund expenditures, for corrections. Almost a tenth of all state employees work in the corrections systems.

The multiplication of our prison population is not due to an increase in violent crime. According to published statistics, the number of violent crimes has held steady since 1990. The number of murders in 2005 was 314 — exactly the same number as in 1960, when 2 million fewer people lived in our state.

Rather, policies that criminalize substance abuse and mental illness have sent thousands of people to prison for non-violent offenses. These people, and our state at large, would be far better served through greater access to treatment and other social services. Public safety improves as inmates reintegrate into society under supervision and with a job, rather than walking out of prison with addictions untreated and without the tools to find employment.

We need reforms that will not only reduce the costs of incarceration, but also help ensure our communities are safe. If we're smart on crime, we can do both.

How? For starters, South Carolina should carefully review the wisdom of mandatory minimum sentences and the enhancement of sentences for repeat substance-abuse offenses. Community-based programs, particularly those that offer substance abuse treatment and skill-training, are more effective and should be available to qualified individuals.

The discriminatory prohibition against HIV-positive prisoners participating in work-release programs should be eliminated.

Minor violations of parole or probation should not automatically return the offenders to prison; instead, authorities should be permitted to impose alternate, rehabilitative sanctions.

We also need to ensure that our young people are given opportunities to succeed.

Overly broad zero-tolerance policies and the over-use of police officers on school campuses — key components of the school-to-prison pipeline — have funneled far too many students out of schools and into prisons, many unnecessarily.

Cuts in programs for at-risk youth will deprive our children of the supports they need, and increase corrections costs later.

These are not soft-on-crime arguments; they are hard facts.

South Carolina communities need our support. We can address our budget problems without sacrificing public safety. It is possible to be both tough and smart on crime, and the state has a responsibility to take action now to become both.

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