

[<< Back](#)

New report looks at prison overcrowding in WV

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CHARLESTON - The issue of prison overcrowding can't be solved by building more facilities, according to a report released Wednesday by the American Friends Service Committee, the Partnership of African American Churches and the West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy.



The report, called "Stemming the Tide: The Radical and Economic Impacts of West Virginia's Prison System," found that despite a stagnant crime rate and population, the prison population continues to grow.

The report also found that West Virginia had the nation's second highest growth in general revenue spending on corrections between 1990 and 2010.

Some of the report's recommendations include expanding drug courts to every county and creating mental health courts, as well as increasing the use of alternative sentencing.

Rick Wilson with the American Friends Service Committee said the state spends so much on its prison budget it crowds out funding for other services.

"We think it's time for our state leaders to take a look at ways at reducing the pipeline to prison" he said. "Some people have said we should lock up the people we're afraid of, not necessarily the people we're mad at, and we think it's possible to address the situation without compromising public safety."

Wilson said his organization's focus is not on a particular piece of legislation but on the need to address the whole issue.

Wilson said more people need diverted from going into prisons in the first place, and more resources should be devoted to serves for people after they are incarcerated.

"If you look at what's happening, the people we tend to be locking up the most are the people who used to be able to find work in manufacture and mining," he said. "There's been a collapse on the demand for low-skilled labor.

"We can reduce the pipeline if we devote more to work force training, community initiatives and developing soft skills and hard skills for jobs."

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[Opinion](#)

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