

## BEHIND BARS

The report that one in every 100 adults in America is in jail or prison bothers us. It simply shouldn't be.

The Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project report showed that at the start of 2008, 2.3 million adults were held in American prisons or jails, or one in every 99.1 men and women. During 2007, the prison population rose by more than 25,000 inmates.

The U.S., with an adult population of 230 million, has by far the highest rate in the world. China, with a population of 1 billion people, was second with 1.5 million inmates, followed by Russia with 890,000 people behind bars.

Statistics among some groups are even more enlightening. One in nine black males between 20 and 34 years old is behind bars.

States are paying a high price. They spent more than \$49 billion on corrections last year--an average of around 7 percent of their state budgets--yet the national recidivism rate remains virtually unchanged, with about half of released inmates returning to jail or prison within three years. States, on average, spend about \$24,000 a year to keep someone behind bars.

In Arkansas, that figure is about \$55 a day or \$20,000 per inmate at the Department of Correction, which had a budget last year of more than \$272 million for its nearly 14,000 inmates.

The study found that during the past 20 years, spending for corrections jumped 127 percent compared to a 21 percent increase in spending on higher education. That's appalling.

Certainly violent offenders must be imprisoned. They should be punished and segregated from potential victims. And statistics generally support the idea that crime has gone down as the prison population has risen.

But for at least half of those behind bars, those nonviolent criminals, alternative punishments such as day reporting centers, community service, electronic monitoring systems and mandatory drug counseling are far less expensive and are probably just as or more effective than jail time.

"There is no question that putting violent and chronic offenders behind bars lowers the crime rate and provides punishment that is well deserved," said Adam Gelb, director of the Pew Center's Public Safety Performance Project and one of the study's authors. "On the other hand, there are large numbers of people behind bars who could be supervised in the community safely and effectively at a much lower cost--while also paying taxes, paying restitution to their victims, and paying child support."

We agree and have long sided with former Gov. Mike Huckabee on bringing about a similar approach in Arkansas, although he couldn't get the state Legislature to see the worth of it.

As money tightens with the slow economy and Gov. Mike Beebe wants to invest more in making the state more competitive economically--as he should--it may be time to take another look at alternatives to imprisonment.