

Report on New York State government funding

Money for prisons, not for schools

Fred Mazelis

12 December 1998

A report issued jointly by the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington DC policy and research organization, and the Correctional Association of New York, an advocacy group focusing on prisons and prisoners' rights issues, documents the way in which New York State government has cut back on higher education spending while expanding state prisons over the past decade.

New York's public universities have had their operating budgets cut by 29 percent during this period, while funding for prisons has increased by 76 percent.

In actual dollars, there has been an almost equal trade-off. The Department of Correctional Services has received a \$761 million increase while funding for the city and state university systems has been cut by \$615 million. The prison figures represent only operating costs, and do not include the \$300 million approved in the 1997-98 budget for the construction of 3,100 new prison spaces.

Partly to compensate for lower state aid, tuition at the city and state universities has skyrocketed during this same period. For the state SUNY colleges, it jumped from \$1,350 a year in 1991 to \$3,400 in 1997. Including books, extra fees and room and board, the cost of attending the SUNY system for an undergraduate jumped from \$7,319 in 1991 to \$11,201 in 1997, a 35 percent increase. For the CUNY system of community colleges and four-year institutions in New York City the increase in tuition was from \$1,250 to \$3,400 during this six-year period.

The tuition hikes were followed by declines in the student body. In the year following the 1995 tuition increase of \$750 a year, SUNY enrollment dropped by 10,000.

'There is no money' to fund higher education for the working class - that is the constant refrain of the big business politicians. New York Governor George

Pataki vetoed \$500 million for school construction and \$77 million for teacher salaries, and cut \$17.3 million from the SUNY budget, \$8.6 million from CUNY, and \$13.5 million from a program that would have given students a \$65 credit for textbook purchases.

At the same time the Democrats and Republicans have had no difficulty in increasing spending for prisons and prison construction. Prison operating costs surpassed higher education as a percentage of the state budget in 1995 and the gap has kept widening since. State spending on prisons has grown from \$450 million to \$1.7 billion in the last two decades, as the inmate population has tripled to more than 70,000.

This is part of a national trend that has seen the prison population of the US grow to 1.8 million, making this country second only to Russia in the number of prisoners per capita among industrialized nations. California, the most populous state, has built 21 new prisons since 1980, while tuition costs at its University of California and Cal State systems have risen 303 percent and 485 percent respectively. In Texas, the second largest state in terms of population, prison spending increased 5.7 times faster than higher education between 1977 and 1995, the highest gap between these categories in the country. Twenty other states, including California, New York and most of the other big population centers, have more than doubled their prison budgets.

The explosive growth in the prison population has been fueled by a law-and-order campaign and legislation mandating prison terms or eliminating parole through such reactionary 'three strikes' laws and similar measures. In New York the so-called Rockefeller drug laws, enacted 25 years ago, mandate harsh terms for minor drug offenses. An individual convicted of possessing four ounces of a narcotic must

receive a minimum term of 15 years to life, for instance. These laws have been used to put away tens of thousands of workers and youth.

As the report shows, both Democratic and Republican politicians have implemented the policy shifts which amount to a social counterrevolution. While the growth in prison spending has accelerated under Republican Pataki, for instance, the shift away from higher education to jails was begun under Democratic Governor Mario Cuomo in the 1980s.

Black, Hispanic and immigrant youth have been hit hardest by the cutbacks, and the human toll can be summed up in a number of stark statistics. While 4,054 black students got SUNY degrees in 1997, for instance, 4,727 blacks entered state prison on drug offenses. For Hispanics, the numbers are even worse: 2,563 graduated from state university, while 4,459 were locked up on drug charges. More than 90 percent of people jailed for drug offenses in New York State are black or Hispanic.

The targeting of minority youth is driven not only by racist motives, but more fundamentally by their position as the most vulnerable sections of the working class. The poorer sections of workers have been most immediately affected by the rise in college tuition and cuts in student aid. Furthermore, the growth of poverty and the disappearance of manufacturing and other good-paying jobs together have fueled the conditions of hopelessness in which drug use grows, and these conditions have most sharply affected the minority and immigrant communities and neighborhoods.

The nationwide statistics on prisons and higher education are another admission of moral and political bankruptcy on the part of the profit system. While Clinton and his bitter political opponents alike claim that economic and social conditions have steadily improved in the boom of the 1990s, these figures show that only the ruling class and the most privileged upper middle class layers have benefited. The consequences of the social polarization and the onslaught on the working class cannot be hidden. A system which is forced to imprison its youth while denying them the opportunity for higher education is a system which has forfeited its claim to represent progress.

For more information on state and national funding trends for higher education and prisons, see the Justice Policy Institute web site at

<http://www.cjcj.org/jpi/clearinghouse.html>

See Also:

Violence and brutality in the prison system:

Part 3 in a series of articles on Amnesty International report on human rights abuses in the US

[6 November 1998]

Giuliani and Rikers Island: New York prison administers medicine for profit

[24 October 1998]



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact