

Prison spending rises three times faster than education funding in US

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The US has increased its spending on prisons and jails to a staggering \$80 billion a year. A new government report, issued last week, contrasts this extraordinary level of funding with state and federal support for education, comparing spending from 1979–80 with that of 2012–13.

Trends in State and Local Expenditures on Corrections and Education, issued by the US Department of Education, examined state-by-state trends from the US Census, the Bureau of Justice and the National Center for Education Statistics. The numbers are adjusted both for changes in population and inflation. It shows that literally every state in America has prioritized prisons over education.

Overall during the last three decades, government financing of the prison industry has grown more than three times faster than the costs of primary and secondary education. Higher education has fared no better, in fact, worse. Funding for post-secondary education has barely treaded water since 1989, while spending on jails and prisons has increased by 89 percent.

The uniformity of the report's grim statistics throughout the US demonstrates the government policy—implemented by both Democrats and Republicans—to jettison the funding of public education while transferring vast sums to militarize the police and build prisons. It is, above all, reflective of the tremendous growth of social inequality and the yawning class gulf that dominates all social policy.

All 50 US states registered lower expenditure growth for pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 education than for the penal system. Twenty-three states increased per capita spending on corrections by more than double that for high education.

The report notes the linkage between declining educational opportunities and incarceration, indicated by the fact that two-thirds of state prison inmates have not completed high school. Young black men between the ages of 20 and 24, for example, without a high school diploma, or equivalent credential, are more likely to be in prison than working.

The depth of the growth of concentrated poverty, dramatically up under the Obama administration, recently

led Columbia University researchers to coin the term “million dollar blocks.” It refers to city blocks where so many individuals are incarcerated that the state is spending over \$1 million a year to keep them in jail.

It is notable that in West Virginia, the poorest state in the US, the increase in state and local corrections expenditures per capita was the highest in the nation. Texas, meanwhile, registered the highest overall percentage growth in prisons, with an 850 percent leap in spending.

Michigan has the distinction of having increased spending on education *the least* over the three decades (during which public school population has increased nationally by 20 percent), according to data from the report. From 1979 to 2013, Michigan increased spending on schools by 18 percent, while increasing money for corrections by a whopping 219 percent.

Kary Moss, executive director of the ACLU of Michigan, in an interview in the *Detroit Free Press* observed that the state has been on a downward spiral in terms of spending on public education for nearly two decades, a situation she said is “starving schools and creating inequities in funding from school district to school district.”

Michigan's policy to “starve schools” has included a battery of regressive “reforms” tailored to the interests of charter school business and lucrative consultants which has, in turn, further bled public schools. This has included the Education Achievement Association, which largely relied on undertrained and underpaid Teach For America young people and widespread use of computer programs as “teachers.” As of June 30, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, with the support of the Democrats and unions, has used the Detroit Public Schools' debt as the pretext to dissolve the 175-year-old district and introduce the use of uncertified teachers, among other punitive attacks on students and educators.

States across the US have been subjected to the same grotesque shifting of resources from education to incarceration. These states joined Michigan in increasing spending on jails and prisons *more than five times as fast as*

it did on public education over the last three decades.

- Idaho: 106 percent increase in education; 701 percent increase in corrections
- Montana: 43 percent, education; 296 percent corrections
 - North Dakota: 72 percent education; 410 percent corrections
 - South Carolina: 134 percent education; 245 percent corrections
 - South Dakota: 59 percent education; 566 percent corrections
 - West Virginia: 58 percent education; 483 percent corrections

As for higher education, between 1989-90 and 2012-13 state and local higher education appropriations rose 5 percent, from \$67 billion to \$71 billion, while corrections funding grew from \$37 billion to \$71 billion, a leap of 90 percent.

While states showed variation, increases in corrections funding outpaced higher education both in total funding and funding per person across the board. Forty-six out of 50 states had declines in higher education funding on a full-time equivalent student basis, with average cuts of 28 percent per student. On average, per capita spending on corrections during the same period increased by 44 percent.

These trends were partially driven by the huge increase in the prison population. “According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics,” the report states, “the number of people incarcerated in state and local correctional facilities more than quadrupled over the past few decades, rising from about 490,000 in 1980 to over 2 million in 2014, due in part to the enactment of additional, often lengthy mandatory minimum sentence laws.” With only 5 percent of the world’s population, the US now incarcerates more than 20 percent of all prisoners.

This dramatic growth of incarceration, during a period of large decreases in crime rates, reflects, above all, the rise of social inequality throughout the US.

“Budgets reflect our values, and the trends revealed in this analysis are a reflection of our nation’s priorities that should be revisited,” said US Education Secretary John B. King blandly, announcing the report.

Were he to enumerate the “values” and “priorities” of the Obama administration, King might have mentioned its full-throated support to the 1033 program which has transferred billions of dollars of Pentagon munitions to police departments, the Community Oriented Policing Services Office (which advises local law enforcement agencies on how to deploy hyper-aggressive police protocols) and, above all, the role of the “war on terror,” drone warfare and ever-expanding US imperialism on the growth of militaristic tendencies both at home and abroad.

Finally, King could “revisit” the fact that over 300,000 educators have lost their jobs under this administration, the destructive role of Race To The Top and pro-charter federal policies on the financing of public education as well as the federal funding cuts to Title I (for children from low-income families) and special education.

The education secretary really didn’t need have to flesh out those facts, however, because the report speaks for itself, demonstrating the wholly reactionary priorities and trends underway in present-day capitalist America. The systematic and downright criminal de-funding of education over 30 years has paralleled the overall decline of bourgeois democracy and the growth of a financial oligarchy.

The study’s selection of the period between 1979-2013 is significant. It corresponds with the one-sided class war waged by the ruling elites and a vast shift in the economy toward globalization and financialization. This period of widespread attacks on education and social conditions for the majority in the US began with the capitulation of the United Auto Workers union during the Chrysler bankruptcy, which led to the decimation of auto jobs, begun under Democrat Jimmy Carter.

The ignominious refusal of the AFL-CIO to defend the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981 then enabled Ronald Reagan to prosecute a broad national social counterrevolution, which he began by calling for the abolition of the Department of Education.

Democrat Bill Clinton followed with the “ending of welfare as we know it” and his infamous support to “three strikes” in the justice system, sending untold thousands to prison for long sentences. Clinton also passed a number of bills streamlining the provision of military-grade hardware to police departments, the most well known being the Defense Department’s 1033 program.



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