

Out of Control?

With both the recession and the dismal fortunes of the housing market biting into tax revenues, the next year is going to be hard for many state governments. But the problem isn't only on the revenue side. Two budget items – prisons and medical spending on the poor – are escalating at a ferocious pace, generating structural deficits and squeezing out spending on other state responsibilities ranging from education to transportation. Here, we take a quick look just at prison outlays.

Note that incarceration rates vary widely among states (as do rates among countries). Some of the figures are no surprise: Lockin' 'em up and tossing the key is apparently still a big vote-getter in Texas and Florida. But the numbers don't always mesh with preconceptions. Consider Connecticut and Vermont, seemingly peaceable states that are spending on prisons like there's no tomorrow. Or think of New York, which has apparently decided to invest taxpayers' money in enterprises more uplifting than incarceration.

PRISON BUDGETS, SELECTED STATES

STATE	PRISONERS/ 100,000 POPULATION 2008	PRISON EXPENDITURES % OF STATE BUDGET		RATIO OF CORRECTIONS SPENDING TO HIGHER ED SPENDING	
		1987	2007	1987	2007
Mississippi	765	3.9%	5.4%	.20	.30
Texas	719	4.4	8.6	.17	.51
Connecticut	593	2.4	4.4	.35	1.03
Florida	534	5.7	9.3	.34	.66
California	469	4.8	8.6	.32	.83
Wyoming	393	3.9	4.0	.13	.23
Vermont	343	4.1	9.3	.37	1.37
New York	325	7.1	5.1	.61	.73
Minnesota	184	1.7	2.7	.09	.17
Russia	632				
South Africa	348				
England	152				
Denmark	66				

SOURCES: Pew Center for the States; International Centre for Prison Studies