

Repeat inmates costly for state and families

By NANCY WEST
New Hampshire Sunday News
Sunday, Mar. 16, 2008

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Taxpayers have spent about \$1 million to house, clothe and feed West Sr. and five of his many family members at state prison. West Sr. accounted for about \$460,000 of that during the 30 years he has spent behind bars, on and off.

That doesn't count money spent on him and family members serving time in juvenile detention, in county jails, or on parole. It also doesn't count the cost of public assistance to family members on the outside. Nor does it count police and court costs to arrest and bring the West offenders to justice.

It also doesn't count the losses to victims of their crimes.



"I wish I could stay out of trouble because it would keep (family members) out of trouble," West Sr. said during a recent interview at State Prison for Men in Concord. West Sr. had seven siblings, and despite poverty and troubled circumstances growing up, they mostly stayed on the right side of the law, he said.

Like 97 percent of all inmates, the Wests interviewed by the New Hampshire Sunday News will become someone's neighbor sooner or later -- probably sooner. Most inmates serve an average of three to four years. West Sr. -- whose crimes include witness tampering, theft, multiple escapes, and, most recently, violating parole by using cocaine -- will be eligible for parole again in July.

Reducing recidivism

Commissioner William Wrenn of the Department of Corrections said almost half of all inmates return to prison for parole violations, usually for using drugs or alcohol, or for committing new crimes.

The corrections budget was \$106 million last year, breaking down to about \$32,000 a year per inmate, he said.

Wrenn is committed to cutting the 42 percent rate of return in half by maximizing the effectiveness of programs designed to help inmates become better citizens before they are released.

Gov. John Lynch said it's important to remember that on a per capita basis New Hampshire still has one of the lowest prison populations in the country, that prison costs are below the national average and that the state still is one of the safest in the country.

▶ ['I'm the bad egg,' says prison family's father](#) (12)

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Lynch, a Democrat, said his first priority is public safety.

"We are focusing on reducing the recidivism rate and making sure we keep the public safe," Lynch said. The state needs to help prisoners lead crime-free, productive lives when they are released with programs that improve their skills to help them get and keep jobs, he said.

Prison programs

Wrenn said the cornerstone of corrections philosophy today is called re-entry, planning from day one to change the drivers of the behavior that led the inmate to crime in the first place.

With 48 percent of all inmates nationally reporting having family members who have been incarcerated sometime during their lives, Wrenn sees prison programs like the Family Connections Center as offering hope of breaking that cycle.

"(Inmates from families with a criminal history) are just repeating those same mistakes their parents committed. We have members of the same family being incarcerated in our prison system, so we think it is an important area to look at," Wrenn said.

"(We want) to turn back out into the community a person that's ready to be a good member of society, a good neighbor to all of us in our communities and to take care of their families and their family issues."

Programs like the Family Connections Center, which is expected to expand to Berlin and State Prison for Women in Goffstown, are promising, he added.

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Breaking the Chain, Part One

Wrenn said the program focuses on improving inmates' parenting skills. Two other major problems being addressed behind bars are inmate addiction and mental illness, he said.

About 85 percent of inmates have some substance abuse problem, and 65 percent have some level of mental illness, Wrenn said.

Destructive influences

The courts also are responding more to what drives criminal behavior by expanding the family court system, and creating drug courts and mental health courts, according to Judge Edwin Kelly, administrative head of the District and Family Court System.



Neil West Sr. and Jr. pose for a photo at the state prison in Concord. (THOMAS ROY)

"It's pretty clear to everyone now that the influence of the family and the home is huge on children," Kelly said. "So if a child is raised in a home where there is violence, for example, and the culture of the family is not to respect the law, then it is very, very likely that child is going to end up in the system, either as a child or as an adult. And so it goes through generations."

Kelly said addictions play a big role in recidivism.

"The number of people returned to prison on parole violations that are related to the use of alcohol or other drugs is staggering as compared to those returned for recommitting offenses that put them there to begin with," Kelly said.

State Rep. David Welch, R-Kingston, serves on the committee that oversees the Department of Corrections. Welch said he often deals with people who say the state should lock criminals up and forget about them, but he tells them that just doesn't work.

"If we don't do something with them while they are under our control, they will just come back to us the way they went in," Welch said.

Commissioner Wrenn agrees the state needs to do a better job.

"Almost one out of two of our inmates comes back to us after they've been released ... I think we can do better," said Wrenn, who formerly served as Hampton's police chief.

Wrenn, who took over as commissioner two years ago, said he's always been an optimist. He believes many of the inmates will become productive citizens who are able to take care of their families.

"This quote from Helen Keller, I think, tells it all -- when she says, 'No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars or sailed to an uncharted land or opened a new heaven to the human spirit,' " Wrenn said.

YOUR COMMENTS

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I am not sure where I stand on this story. Fact is, we have people in our midst that need to be incarcerated, along with another layer of people who think a whole bunch of privileges and benefits are due the incarcerated for any number of obnoxious reasons, without any regard to the cost to the taxpayer. Given the behavior of some individuals, it is necessary to separate them from society, thus there is some cost involved albeit, the debate rages on as to how much. However, I can tell you one thing that jumped off the page of the paper is the picture of Neil Sr. and Neil Jr doing Prison together. When a picture taken is of my dad and me (Sr and Jr) or my son and me (Jr and the third), the context is a family gathering, an event like a hunting trip, or Church event. The other times one sees such pictures are usually a business, a public event, or something totally positive. Now, we see Senior and Junior "doing time" ...it puts a whole new spin on the old saying, the apple does not fall far from the tree. The whole notion of that photo disgusted me, while I cannot say specifically why.

- Rick Olson, Manchester

It is easy enough to see a majority of the comments here are from those who have never known or loved someone who does not intend to make poor decisions.. or is mentally ill. Jails are not easy, meals are high fat and unhealthy, the danger inside is real as my family member ended up in the hospital several times due to (for you Brendan) inmate beatings with skin falling off the face with pictures to prove it ... stitches and scars too... almost died of bacterial pneumonia -had to threaten the authorities for legal actions, so if you have no idea what prison/jail is like... or know someone.. mentally ill... or visited inside... don't judge. So Becky, Bob, Kerri, Bill - let me get you some orange jumpsuits.. with a little fungus packed in, Ed - now that is a joke.. most incarcerated do not have these options, Brian - most in jail are not this serious offenders, They want to stay out, society knows their issues often people they know enjoy the power of placing them back in when they are mentally ill... decisions are not really made... not having valuable friends could make the difference, yet mentally ill are unaccepted, made the brunt of jokes and truthfully law enforcement inside and out, does not know how to help them.. if you cannot see a disability it does not exist.. if you are put in the mental hospital,, you may never make it out "sane" or not again.. SO BEFORE YOU JUDGE GET THE FACTS, do your research.. meet really wonderful people who struggle with homelessness, hopelessness and heartlessness of others. May all of you find peace within yourselves.

- **Rosa, Claremont NH**

Gov. Lynch, with NH having only 185 prison inmates in 1966 and now having over times as many prison inmates by 2007 (2615), I believe think is either very ignorant or intellectually dishonest. (Source: <http://www.nh.gov/nhdoc/population.html>) Further, 80% of youth inmates locked up in the youth detention facility were denied their fathering primarily due The State of NH helping prey upon them as children. "Eighty percent of incarcerated youths came from homes where the biological father was absent. DYDS administrator Phil Nadeau told us that if a child didn't know where one of his/her parents was, it was usually the father. All of the committed female youths came from homes absent their biological father." (Source: The Status of Men in NH - Final Report of the NH Legislative Committee to Study the Status of Men, 2-15-01, located at http://www.nh.gov/csm/downloads/nh_status_of_men_2001.pdf .) The most recent biennial report pretty much said the same.

- **Mike Smith, Portsmouth**

I hope some of you can sleep at night. while some children will be awake wishing that they had a name that would let them be children and not judged by the name they were given. shame on you

- **EILENE RUSSELL, NEWPORT NH**

The State of New Hampshire invests in helping destroy two-parent biological families (ideally married) for over forty years through laws establishing so-called 'no-fault' divorce; legitimizing feminist propaganda about 'violence against women', etc. In 1966, NH had only 185 State prison inmates. Since that time, NH's State prison population has grown over 14 times larger to 2615 in 2007. (NH Dept of Corrections)

Divorce, single parenting and the like promote crime and the creation of prison inmates. 80% of NH youth incarceration inmates don't have their biological fathers in their homes. As a result, a criminal's name typically first appears in court records as a child for which this State or another State claims to be interested in that child's 'best interests' in what are fraudulently described as 'Family Courts'. The State of NH doesn't typically seek the 'best interests of the child'. It and the child's mother routinely prey upon a child by exploiting the child for vengeance and so-called 'child support'; and maltreat the child with no father there to protect them. 40% of U.S. children die from maltreatment solely due to the actions of the child's mother. (US DHHS) Youth suicide increases from 63% to 75% when one or both parents is removed. With substance abuse by youth 75% more likely in maternal single parent homes, how do these numbers compare against the rare NH female DV death.

- **Mike Smith, Portsmouth**

I have never understood why it is that our prisons are allowed to foster an atmosphere that turns petty criminals into hardened animals. We are paying these corrections officers and other professionals to ensure the safety of all who are behind bars. The only way that all of the bad things that happen in prison occur is with the implicit cooperation of the guards themselves. It may give some a sense of satisfaction to know that criminals are going through hell while they're in prison. After all, they deserve it, right? But, as the article says, 97% of these convicts will be returning to

society eventually. It is in all of our best interests that they come out with their debt to society paid, and no additional baggage. I am not saying that we should coddle prisoners. What I am saying is that doing time is the punishment. Loss of freedom is the punishment. Getting raped behind bars is NOT the punishment. Judges give sentences--not prison guards.

- **Bob, Bedford**

I think these cons need to be forced to work to pay for their own incarceration. Why not drop off all the recycling at the prison and let them sort it out. something constructive and yet unpleasant.

Prison has to be a place that makes someone think twice before making a bad choice.

- **Morgan, Manchester**

Want to break the chain? Close the sperm bank.

- **Liz, Milan**

Prison is supposed to rehabilitate, perhaps the best rehabilitation to some would be some love that has been absent from the rest of their lives. We want these people to make a positive contribution to society when they're done with their time, don't we? Hope is never a negative.

- **Melissa, Concord**

Its not hard enough judging by the # of re-offenders. These degenerates should perform manuel labor to offset some of that \$32,000 cost per inmate Either that or fire the guards and let all the inmates commit crime on each other inside the walls only monitoring the perimeter ala prison break.

- **Brendan, Manchester**

Thanks for the contribution to society, I hope you are enjoying my taxes.

- **Ryan, Manchester**

#1 I'm not a christian, #2 The only time I've been to a prison was to visit a friends child and #3 People DO choose to do things that are against the law! No one has said it was easy when you get out, if you take advantage of the opportunities given to you while in, you can make a positive change in your life. If you don't like the concequences (spell?) of what you do, don't keep doing it!

- **pita, Hudson**

Compassion? I don't believe the people on here complaining about a lack of compassion. These cons rape, murder, rob, and mutilate people and we're supposed to have compassion for them? Get real!

- **Brian, Farmington**

Prison is not "easy" the meals are not "restaurant quality." Prison is hell on Earth.

But, you'd be surprised what men can tolerate. These couch critics would beg on their hands and knees to get out after one week in Concord, the noise, smells, intimidation, drudgery, loneliness, violence and hopelessness add up to real misery.

Prisons are a failed science in this country. The punishment is there, but the real life blood of prisons are the salaries and purchasing and budgets, as it is now it's just a cash cow of a business, not a corrective institution.

- **Leslie Sprague, manchester**

the inmates also get free cable..the weight room is full of top of the line stuff,also pool tables..And dont thay pay the inmates like 1.50 a day just to hang around?..and if you work in the inderstries you get 5.00 a day..Well keep giving and thay will always come back..

- **wjc, Colebrook.nh**

I wonder how many of you people claim to be Christian. It's a good thing Jesus didn't think like you!

- **DM, Manchester**

as someone who deals with inmates and is in the prison (and jails) regularly, i can assure you that they do not get restaurant-quality meals, excellent healthcare, and gym memberships. prison is horrible. it is HORRIBLE! i don't think most of these people are choosing to go back - they truly don't have the skills to make it the way those of us non-criminals do, and imagine having the 4 year gap in your resume from your prison sentence. explain that to your prospective employer. what a disadvantage. a lot of the people in have sad backgrounds, serious substance abuse issues, and little education, but not all. the prison is not doing a good job giving people the skills they need on the outside. the prison is not doing a good job with substance abuse treatment. it is a sad system with all sorts of inherent problems, even though the new hampshire state prison is surely better than most. since everyone in prison has a mother, and not all of them were abusive or neglectful, it should be a good reminder that anyone's kid could wind up in prison. your kids might be up to no good, even if you think you raised them right. have some compassion.

- **beverly, concord nh**

Most of the quotes are clearly coming from people who have never been inside the walls of a prison. I cant think of a place where you constantly are looking over your back for fear that you will be physically assaulted or gang raped as a great place to live. But alas like most opinions coming from the mouths of boobus americanus the quotes tend to be short on facts and long on ignorance.

- **stuart, meriden, nh**

I have no doubt that many of these criminals had bad childhoods, but what I do wonder about is how many of their childhood peers, with an equally bad upbringing, have succeeded in life? I think far more have succeeded than not, and that then begs the question why? The number of inmates with substance abuse problems can be as high as 85%, and with mental illness as high as 65%, as the article states. That is something that can be treated, IF the repeat offender allows it. How many people with substance abuse problems never get into trouble? Again, I think a great many. This problem has many faces, among them mental illness, substance abuse, and I think in many cases a disregard for personal responsibility. This character has multiple family members with criminal histories. It can't all just be coincidence. There is definitely intent there, along with other causes. Just like addicts, you won't change until you really want to turn your life around. I think many of these types just don't want, or care, to change. And I still have faith that science will ultimately find a very effective treatment for this behavior. If many of these repeat offenders wind up back in jail for infractions like using alcohol, then they need to be more closely monitored, and if necessary, forced into treatment. We can find better solutions to these repeat types if we devote energy in more effective areas like treatment. It doesn't make sense to repeatedly spend tax dollars on the same individuals and get nothing in return. That's a lose/lose situation all around. I also agree that these people are treated a bit too lavishly in prison. I understand they don't have to work if they don't want to. That needs to change in order to instill some badly needed discipline in them, and maybe give them some direction in life, as opposed to allowing them to do nothing except lift weights all day long. That's about as useless an activity for them as I can imagine. All prisoners should be made to be productive in some capacity. It certainly couldn't hurt, and it just might help.

- **Ed, bennington, NH**

Just what we need. Scumbags committing crimes and then living off the taxpayers. Who says crime doesn't pay?

The get housing, clothing , food, entertainment, exercise, education, medical care and who knows what else. The only thing they can't do is leave. Not a bad life. Certainly a better life than most homeless people have.

- **Bill, Tuftonboro**

Prison is too easy, they aren't afraid of jail, they should be locked in a cell and given bread and water, instead they get restauraunt quality meals, library cards, gym memberships, excellent healthcare, free college classes and hang out with their friends all day, make jail a real jail and they'll stop going back.

- **kerri morse, hampton**

Becky, obviously the system treats the prisoners very well, why else would they "choose" to keep going back?

- **Pita, Hudson**

Really Steve - the problem is the corrections officers??? Now that's a new one. How much would you want to get paid to risk your life every day? What is your life worth? And I can assure you that "range" includes administrators, etc. The average corrections officer is NOT making any where near \$70000.

- **Elizabeth, Manchester**

Pays on the Department of Correction site range from \$30,694.56 to \$72,685.60. These professional positions have a vested interest in making sure they have a job. Repeat offenders are their bread and butter. It seems he more "professionals" we throw at the prison system, the bigger the problem gets.

Instead of "professional" therapy, maybe work 12 yours a day, 6 days a week might be in order. Once the work habit is acquired, the "repeat offender" numbers should drop. The only problem is that we'll need less high paid "professionals" in the "system", and we can't have that , can we?

- **Steve, Raymond**

The man comes out of jail just long enough to impregnate the community then goes back to prison. Takes all kinds I guess.

- **Alan, portsmouth**

Oh brother, Becky. Could you be more of a bleeding heart? These useless parasites have decided to be career criminals and need to be given a sledgehammer and some very large rocks to break. Let them spend all of their time in prison doing back-breaking labor and then you'll see how fast some of them straighten their lives out. If we--the people are going to have to pay for them then we might as well get some work out of these lazy, useless parasites.

- **Bob Hoskins, Derry**

Listen Becky we have all suffered .I grew up in projects with an abusive alcoholic dad and eventually a single mum. I went to college ..never been arrested and own my home here. Do not make excuses for criminally minded people. It is called responsibility of oneself. People like this have sociopathic tendencies and are compulsive liars. They love to run into a bleedingheart liberal to fight for their cause. They have a well earned street degree that I would put up against anyones college degree. Life is what you make it and you are doing noone any good by making excuses for bad behavior.

- **kev, Manch**

Very Sad. If only the state could invest thosr funds for our college age kids to succeed. A depressing article to see that this is what we pay are taxes for. Sigh.

- **Nancy R, Londonderry**

There is an extremely beneficial technique called the "Emotional Freedom Technique" (or EFT) that has helped prisoners in other states deal with the terrible pain that they suffered in their childhoods. It helps reduce or eliminate internal urges that no cognitive therapy can help. It would be excellent if our state were able to provide this counseling to inmates. Although it is disturbing that it costs so much to keep prisoners locked up, some investment in therapy would go a long way with many of these people. It is best to learn it from a practitioner, but the CD series is available for about \$300. Possibly someone knowledgeable in this area, with the time to donate, could start a program to help these people Also, read "Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul". It is heartbreaking to learn what some of these people have suffered. It is no wonder that they snap & end up where they are. It's hard to understand or agree with, but it's true.