

## OPINION

## Republicans, Democrats working together to reform Mississippi criminal justice system

Matt Allen, Guest columnist    Published 10:49 a.m. CT March 11, 2019



**Matt Allen** (Photo: Submitted photo)

There has been a movement underway around the nation and in Mississippi to reform our criminal justice system. The movement has gained momentum due to our mass incarceration problem in the U.S. — a reality where our prison population has grown roughly seven-fold since the 1970s and left us with highest incarceration rate in the world.

By way of comparison that helps visualize the extent of the problem, the U.S. incarcerates 655 per 100,000 people of any age, while Turkmenistan incarcerates 583, Cuba 510, Rwanda 434, Russia 415 and Brazil 324, according to data maintained by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at the University of London.

In a nation with the highest incarceration rate in the world, Mississippi has the third highest rate as a state.

If you are hearing these types of statistics for the first time and are very surprised, you are not alone. Most are very surprised. And as you might suspect, our unique incarceration habit is a very expensive one. It is a budget-busting endeavor that is eating an ever-increasing percentage of state budgets around the nation, and it is doing so at the expense of other worthwhile and necessary public investments.

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Perhaps this is one reason why even in this divisive political era, the reform movement has drawn supporters from across the political spectrum.

The Mississippi Legislature has been one such supporter, and more than that, it has been a leader on this issue nationally. In recent years it has passed two criminal justice reform measures, H.B. 585 (2014) and H.B. 387 (2018), and it is currently considering H.B. 1352, another reform measure. H.B. 1352 seeks to make it easier for people who have paid their debt to society to re-enter the workforce by removing barriers to employment. These barriers occur in various ways that are not directly or indirectly tied to fighting crime or reducing recidivism, such as through the denial of occupational licenses and the loss of driving privileges for offenses that are not related to driving.

In addition to addressing work-related issues, H.B. 1352 also addresses mental health issues, which along with addiction issues affect our criminal justice system. These issues often go unaddressed in prison. For addiction issues, drug courts have proven to be an effective tool. H.B. 1352 builds on drug court successes by allowing these courts to also offer treatments to those with mental health issues.

The cost implications are huge. Mississippi spends over \$300 million annually in a cash-strapped state to support an overly large prison system. Funds are scarce to non-existent to dedicate towards measures that would reduce crime in the first place. H.B. 1352 would create a dedicated fund to ensure that cost-savings from reforms are invested in programs that are aimed at reducing crime and making communities safer.

Criminal justice reform is an issue that garners bipartisan support because of shared goals — safer communities, fewer people in prison, more people leading productive lives, and cost savings from unnecessary overincarceration. Over 95 percent of the people currently incarcerated in our prisons will be re-entering our communities at some point. A current reality is that approximately a third of those persons will reenter prison within three years. The reasons for this can range from the commission of a new crime to violations of a parole condition. We can change this equation to some degree by ensuring that when people leave our prisons, they can go to work. H.B. 1352 will help do that.

It is difficult to combat the realities of recidivism. There is no sense in making this battle more difficult by making it harder for the recently released to find employment through the imposition of unnecessary barriers. It is imperative that we eliminate these barriers, such as the denial of occupational licensing, that make it harder for people to find work and more likely to turn to crime.

Our current incarceration system is not effective. We should be smart on crime and adopt evidence-based solutions that actually make our communities safer — policies that have demonstrated success through the numbers, not simply emotion-based actions that provide only chest beating points. A smarter approach involves offering the dignity of work to people who have made mistakes and focuses incarceration efforts on those who truly pose a threat to public safety. This, in turn, will create safer communities for the people of our state. That's something we can all agree on.

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