The politics of mass incarceration

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An inmate talks to Bossier Sheriff Deputies at the Bossier Maximum Security Facility in Bossier City. Nearly 37,000 people were incarcerated in Louisiana as of August. Per capita, more residents are behind bars than any other state.

How will gubernatorial candidates handle Louisiana’s prison population?

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The Lafayette Parish Correctional Center had 882 inmates as of Tuesday. The compound’s population is three times the size of its original capacity — 336 — when it was built in 1984.

Nearly 37,000 people were incarcerated in Louisiana in August. Even though the state’s imprisoned population is smaller than its peak of 40,000 in 2012, Louisiana still is known as the prison capital of the world.

Per capita, more of its residents are behind bars than in any other state, according to a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics report.

Civil Rights and advocacy groups have urged front-running gubernatorial candidates to make mass incarceration See INMATES, Page 9A

We asked each candidate for Louisiana’s top job about his plan to reduce prison populations. See what they said, 8A.

1st
Louisiana’s rank for number of persons incarcerated per capita.

882
Prisoners at Lafayette Parish Correctional facility.

36,975
Prisoners within the Louisiana Department of Corrections as of August.

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Inmates

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a priority and to come up with a plan to end it especially in minority communities.

So far none have.

Political analysts and experts say raising the topic in "tough-on-crime" Louisiana could be costly to a campaign. No one wants to be viewed as being soft on crime, they say.

"That would be the surest way to go down the tube by raising that in this political environment in Louisiana," said Burk Foster, a retired University of Louisiana at Lafayette criminal justice professor.

"It's not the kind of thing that you're going to win a lot of votes with — making it a primary platform of your campaign," Foster said. "People don't want to hear about it. They're generally staying away from it and certainly not making it a feature of their messages."

Given Louisiana's budgetary and transportation problems, mass incarceration may just remain on the back burner, political experts say. Addressing mass incarceration means having a long-term solution that won't immediately answer the state's budget problems, Mann said.

"It's not that the state is talking about it in the campaign," he said. "It's not that the state is taking it seriously."

The byproducts of mass incarceration will not go away just because candidates aren't talking about it.

The cost

The Louisiana Department of Corrections 2015-16 budget is $709 million. Last year, 816 people for every 100,000 Louisiana residents were locked up, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

It's no secret the state incarcerates more people than anyone else in the world. Maj. Keshia Harris has witnessed a jail population expand.

Harris has worked in corrections for the Bossier Parish Sheriff's Office for 20 years.

Harris said her work is her calling. From what she's personally witnessed, many of the people inside are there for drug-related offenses which can lead to other crimes. Jail, she said, should be a last resort.

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ROBERT MANN
LSU JOURNALISM PROFESSOR

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LGCG pays $3.50 per non-state inmate per day, Reardon said. It costs LPCC $54 to feed and care for each inmate every day.

The federal government pays Bossier $62 and Caddo $55 for each inmate per day. Because Lafayette Parish doesn't take federal inmates, LPCC does not receive inmate reimbursement money from the U.S. Bureau of Prisons.

Harris said a significant decrease in the number of state inmates would have an adverse financial impact on the parish's correctional facilities.

"If you take our state and federal inmates away it would be hard — even if the numbers dropped," she said. Bill Davis, spokesman for the Bossier Parish Sheriff, said sheriffs deputies must enforce the laws currently on the books. They do that, he said.

Lafayette's current inmate population is slightly lower than its 2014 average of 908, according to figures the sheriff's office provided. With all facilities operated by the sheriff factored in, LPCC had 1,165 inmates as of Tuesday.

According to the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office, 461 of those inmates are pretrial detainees. They haven't been sentenced yet.

Reform

It's not that Louisiana hasn't taken steps to reduce its prison population. It's just the population hasn't declined enough to rid it of the stigma it carries.

Nationally, the prison population declined in 2014. Louisiana even experienced a modest decline in the number of inmates under state and federal jurisdiction. The state has some of the lowest incarceration rates for women.

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