



FOCUS[®]

MAGAZINE

Who's Gonna Take the Weight?

Assessing the Cost of Mass Incarceration in America

By Adolphus G. Belk Jr.

America is the undisputed global leader in incarceration. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were nearly 2.2 million persons in America's prisons and jails as of 2005—60 percent of whom were black or Latino. If all persons under adult correctional supervision are included, the number of individuals under the surveillance of American criminal justice systems increases to over 7 million. What is more incredible is that, according to the International Center for Prison Studies, the U.S. alone—with just 4.6 percent of the world's total

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Let's "Tear Down the Walls" to Better Health Care

By Congressman Edolphus Towns

There are moments in history when those in leadership need to take the right course of action. That was never more true than it is today in terms of our nation's health and its health care system. Let me be clear: those of us with employer-paid health insurance most likely have access to one of the world's best systems of care. However, those without health insurance or those not eligible for coverage under Medicare or Medicaid often have no means of accessing preventive care and may seek care too late to make a difference in their lives and those of their families.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Sixteen months before the major political parties hold their nominating conventions, the 2008 run for the White House already has the feel of being in full throttle. As I see it, the longer the campaign season, the more of an opportunity this nation has to engage in thoughtful conversation on issues ranging from housing to health, from education to criminal justice, from jobs to voting rights. With this issue of *FOCUS*, we aim to further that dialogue by beginning to lay out a policy foundation for the presidential aspirants.



Several factors in this campaign cycle favor a more focused discussion of the issues. The need for each candidate to stand out in a crowded field, the ongoing expansion of online media outlets desperate for content, and the decisions of several larger states to hold their primaries early in the process and thereby diversify the pool of targeted voters—all of these will in some way push candidates and their campaign organizations toward substance.

Accordingly, I have high hopes that this campaign will have an almost unprecedented focus on policy—particularly on fundamental economic and social issues that need to be addressed. To be sure, the war in Iraq will continue to occupy center stage, precisely because the vast majority of Americans see it as the country's most pressing challenge. But voters also have a sense that something is amiss in our urban communities, many of our rural communities, and our educational and health care systems. No one wants to see another Katrina aftermath, and there is a general understanding that root causes must be confronted.

America is a "can do" society where people take pride in the ideal of opportunity for all. We know that America itself does better, and everyone gains, when all segments of society have a fair and equitable chance to succeed. We don't like the idea of forsaken communities and people left behind. We want to see these principles embodied in the daily lives of our fellow citizens.

To faithfully and effectively serve these ideals, the next occupant of the White House will have to be steeped in knowledge of the social and economic challenges we face. The Joint Center can and should be a part of the process to ensure that this happens—framing the issues to be discussed and debated in this current campaign, and helping create the necessary foundation to develop good, sound policy. For candidates from both parties, we can help identify the root causes of problems, serve as a credible and reliable source of data and analysis, and help them create, test, and further develop their policy prescriptions.

These pages of *FOCUS* provide more than just a glimpse of what the candidates ought to be thinking about as they ponder their term in the Oval Office. For example, can the next president have any hope of being regarded as a success if he or she does not address America's soaring incarceration rate and its long-term effects on black and Latino communities, particularly the consequences of the various "tough on crime" policies? Will the next president understand that national policies to improve education over the past quarter-century have not been enough and still leave far too many children behind? How will he or she address racial disparities in housing, jobs, and health care?

From a broader perspective, will the next president understand why race remains such a powerful dividing line in 21st century America, and know what to do about it?

Some may argue that knowing what to do is something that cannot be learned, but rather must be intrinsically felt. That may be true, and the American people will ultimately decide which candidate has the right stuff. But there is also a constant need—both during the campaign and beyond when the next president takes office—for credible information and analysis that will encourage a debate flourishing with policy innovations. This knowledge base is what the Joint Center will give the 2008 candidates and the nation's next president to help pave the way for America to live up to its great promise.

Ralph B. Everett
President and CEO
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES

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making EDUCATION a presidential campaign ISSUE

By Bob Wise

South Carolina has one of the nation's worst high school dropout rates. Despite Iowa and New Hampshire's status as national leaders in literacy rates, over 60 percent of eighth graders in these states are reading below grade level. And in Nevada, our country's fastest growing state, black and Hispanic students achieve reading and math proficiency at less than half the rate of their white counterparts.

What do these states have in common besides representing a cross-section of America's education challenges? Each is one of the early states in the 2008 presidential selection process. This means that education promises made by one of today's candidates could very well be in the next president's 2009 State of the Union message. However, this will not happen unless individual states use their primary and caucus processes to secure the candidates' commitment to a strong federal role in providing a quality education for all students.

National statistics certainly suggest that more attention from presidential candidates is deserved. One-third of our children will not graduate from high school; another third will not finish with the skills they need to succeed either in college or the modern workplace. And, according to the "nation's report card," the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 71 percent of eighth-grade students read below grade level in 2005.

Every school day that a presidential candidate spends shaking hands in Iowa or New Hampshire, almost 7,000 students will drop out of high school. And over half of them will be students of color.

If these chronic statistics have become mind numbing to the presidential candidates, their staff should read the recent avalanche of reports outlining the educational crisis and its social and economic ramifications for the nation. In the just-released report, *The Perfect Storm*, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) dramatically details the convergence of three significant trends: poor distribution of necessary literacy and numeracy skills in our workforce, greater demand for higher skill levels in our economy, and the changing demographics in our population. In December 2006, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, by the National Center on Education and the Economy, warned that the U.S. workforce is now competing to keep high-wage, high-skill jobs from other nations, whose skill levels are increasing, but whose wages are comparatively low. The low-skill jobs have already shifted to lower-wage countries. And, underscoring how the U.S. educational system is preparing its future workers, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2006 report ranks U.S. 15-year-olds 15th in reading skills and 24th in math performance, while U.S. high school graduation rates

rank 15th among developed nations.

These average international comparisons are only worse for students of color, since a wide "achievement gap" exists with their white counterparts. About 50 percent of African American and Hispanic students are finishing high school in four years. The average twelfth-grade student of color reads several grade levels below her white classmate. These disparities in educational achievement have consequences for future earnings, as a high school dropout in the U.S. makes 65 percent of what a graduate makes—the largest such gap among developed nations.

Seizing the Opportunity

Presidential candidates need to realize that our education crisis, especially in communities of color, is not just about civil rights equity. As recently as the 1960s, slightly more than half of our students graduated from high school, yet the economy thrived and decent-paying jobs did not require high school or postsecondary education. Today, a high school diploma is the starting point in an economy where 90 percent of the fastest growing jobs require postsecondary education. Thus, in order for our nation to achieve maximum productivity, everyone should possess the highest level of skills that will enable them to be full and productive participants in the globalized economy.

This presents one of those rare but opportune moments in our history when the interests of civil rights equity coincide with the best interests of our nation's economy. Just as the civil rights leaders fight to bring every child a quality education, now, with the baby boom generation preparing to retire, the nation's businesses are fighting for the same, dependent upon every child's ability to contribute meaningfully in an increasingly challenging workplace. If getting all children into the same schools with equal resources was the central focus of the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, then having all children finish school with the same preparation and opportunities to succeed is the battle for this century.

Some presidential candidates may shrink from supporting an expanded

federal role in education, saying that it has traditionally been a local and state activity. Yet the federal government has moved decisively in the past when confronted with the need to improve education. Following WWII, Congress created the GI Bill to give millions of returning veterans opportunities to improve their education and economic opportunities, resulting in rapid economic growth from the development of new skills and brainpower. A decade later, the searing shock from the launching of Sputnik in 1957 pushed the Congress to enact major efforts to catch up to the Soviets. Science and math initiatives for public schools headed the list of reforms.

In 1965, the president and Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which appropriated funds targeted to improve reading in public primary and secondary schools with high percentages of low-income students. This bill was the vehicle for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which pushes for standards in and demands accountability from these same schools. And recognizing that many low-income students would never be able to afford college, the Congress enacted Pell Grants and subsidized student loan programs as a means to increase the college going rate.

Given the static performance of our students as well as the fast growing economic challenges facing our nation's workforce, the federal government must now act to preserve our national economic security while strengthening our commitment to provide every student with equal education opportunities.

An Education Agenda for the Next President

There are specific areas of need that our presidential candidates should address. Research at Johns Hopkins University has revealed that 2,000 of our nation's 15,000 high schools are "dropout factories," where 60 percent or less of ninth graders finish the twelfth grade four years later. Now that we know

where to target resources, we should not hesitate to do so. Another priority should be to create a comprehensive secondary school improvement fund that would drive federal funds to these low-performing middle and high schools to help build their capacity.

Expanding support for reading and comprehension programs in our middle and high schools is also essential. The federal government currently spends \$1 billion for reading in grades K-3, yet only \$30 million last year for the entire secondary school system, even though almost three-quarters of our eighth graders cannot read at grade level.

Teacher quality is high on everyone's list. The federal government can help attract the highest performing teachers to the lowest performing schools by providing support for quality mentoring programs for new teachers, establishing incentives to attract good teachers to some of our challenged schools, and supporting initiatives that train teachers in how to be sensitive to and manage the diversity in their classrooms.

The federal government can also provide direction on how to establish integrated services that link students with services in their community. Health care, dental care, counseling, homework tutoring assistance, and safe recreation are examples of existing community services that can be coordinated through schools to reach students.

The persistent question of whether our nation should move toward creating voluntary national standards that would describe the type of education every child should receive is one final area that deserves federal attention. For example, every state currently makes its own determination of what constitutes "proficiency" for measuring progress under NCLB. Not surprisingly, most states have differing definitions and few come close to the standard set by NAEP. Do we really believe that what a child learns about math in Boise should be different from the lesson learned by a student in Brooklyn? What do differing state standards mean in an era where these students are competing directly against students in Beijing and Berlin?

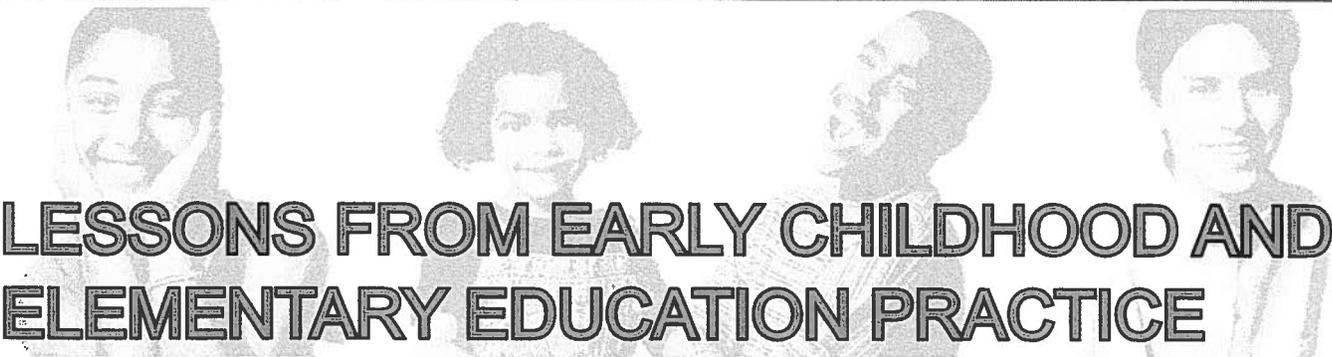
Bringing the Issue to the Table

These traditionally local issues also have national implications—they represent some of the policy areas that our candidates should be discussing in their visits to early primary states. To stimulate this dialogue, the Alliance for Excellent Education encourages interested citizens to learn the important education issues and statistics relevant to their community and state. So when a presidential candidate comes calling, these citizens are prepared to ask tough questions, such as "Our high school has a 32 percent dropout rate; what are you going to do about it?" Citizens should be prepared to share information about the economic loss that states and the nation incur due to a lack of leadership on these critical education issues. (The Alliance for Excellent Education website, www.all4ed.org, has broken down this information by state.) Finally, it is important for citizens to get local media involved by both sharing with them information about the scope of the crisis and encouraging them to ask the candidates for their views.

The goal is to launch a mass citizen advocacy effort calling on presidential candidates to share their positions on quality education at every campaign stop. Ultimately, this type of mass action should drive the candidates to develop strong education reform packages that will set the stage for a major policy announcement by the new president in the 2009 State of the Union speech.

The next president of the United States is currently on the campaign trail. This person will have the power to drive an education reform agenda that will benefit all of our students. Putting time and effort into advancing the education reform imperative in the early decision states over these next months may result in the election of a president who is truly committed to ensuring that all of our students graduate from high school prepared for success in college, work, and in life. □

Bob Wise is president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.



LESSONS FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD AND ELEMENTARY EDUCATION PRACTICE

By James P. Comer and M. Ann LeVett

In April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, formed by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, released the report *A Nation at Risk*. The most cited line of the widely publicized report declared that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

While there has been much progress since that time, too many able students continue to be left behind. They make up the bulk of the 1.2 million students a year who drop out of school, under-prepared for future education and/or training. Too few will make their way into the mainstream job market where they can earn enough to take care of themselves and their families, become positively contributing citizens, and prepare their children to do the same in the next generation. Too many are driving up the skyrocketing costs of prisons and various other forms of dependency.

Even many students from modest to affluent backgrounds who perform reasonably well academically are not being prepared to function well in a workplace that now requires good social and collaboration skills, creativity, disciplined effort, and ethical behavior—or to function well as family members and citizens. At the same time, global economic competition has increased dramatically. The under-preparation of our present and future workforce at a time of increased economic challenges threatens our economy, families, and national well-being.

Focusing on Student Development

The slow pace and small scale of school improvement, and the fact that too many students were being left behind, contributed to the creation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Its virtue is that it holds schools and districts responsible for the education of all. Its downside is that it is a punitive mandate that does not help educators identify the causes of the log jam preventing large-scale school improvement and it does not empower them to put in place a process for systematically overcoming the obstacles to good performance in a reasonable time period. In fact, by using test score levels as the single indicator of school effectiveness, the legislation has narrowed the curriculum and education experience of the students who are most in need of a rich and motivating experience, thereby contributing to unintended negative consequences such as increased problems with student behavior, teacher and student retention, narrowed curriculum focus, and more.

The nation’s experience with early education programs offers a clue to what is needed to create effective education systems nationwide. Early childhood and many child development-oriented elementary school programs promote the development of students in areas that contribute most to school success—i.e., physical, social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and cognitive. Development and academic learning are mutually facilitative and inextricably linked, yet many students do not receive the support for development that prepares them for

school. For example, Betty Hart and Todd Risley have highlighted linguistic and cognitive under-development among children who did not receive adequate support for development in these domains.

Traditional middle and high school programs are less likely to support development because they focus primarily on subject matter. The loss of a strong focus on development after the early programs is probably the major cause of diminished interest in learning, gradual detachment from school, suspension and expulsion problems, apathy, and school leaving.

Current traditional education practice uses curriculum, instruction, and assessment methods that are more often detached, abstract, and not very meaningful; it focuses secondarily—if at all—on child development. Long-standing social and behavioral science research, and now neuroscience findings and development-oriented education practice outcomes, suggest the need for pre-kindergarten through 16 grade-level approaches that promote supportive staff interactions with students and embed academic work in meaningful activities that simultaneously promote development and learning. The study of future adult tasks—political participation, health, workforce participation, and more—can be meaningful, “hands on,” and stimulating curriculum content. Because it is preparation for life, such study can be organized to enable students to take responsibility for their own learning, with teachers serving largely as guides and facilitators. While this approach can be effective with all students, it is particularly useful with middle and high

school students because it is in line with their developmental needs.

We do not disagree with some of the most commonly heard suggestions for improving education—provide high-quality early childhood education for all children; reduce class sizes, particularly in the early grades; provide tutoring and other forms of academic support; and create a core of able, well-prepared teachers to work with the neediest students early. But without reform that will intentionally focus these efforts on child development—given that underdevelopment is the underlying problem—there is little chance that they will greatly improve education.

Assessing and Applying Lessons Learned

It is possible to build on what has been learned from early education programs in order to create elementary school, middle school, high school, and college experiences tailored to the changing developmental needs of growing students. We are calling for more than developmentally appropriate teaching. What is needed is *a developmental lens for looking at and responding to every aspect of school organization and program operation*. For example, using a developmental lens, school staffing changes should take into account that continuity of positive relationships with meaningful people is important in promoting student development; thus, changes should take place with care and only when necessary. Such thinking about all aspects of schooling would require changes in the entire education enterprise—teacher and administrator preparation programs, practicing educators, parents, and relevant policymakers at every level. The litmus test of appropriate action in these influential areas should be whether what is done will support the development of students or not.

In addition to moving to a focus on student developmental needs, there is a need to evaluate the many ideas, theories, and education practices that have evolved over the last 20 to 30 years of reform—e.g., choice, charter schools, vouchers, and gender separation. It is important to nurture and promote the use of the most effective approaches

and let the others fade away. This is an almost common sense approach to problem solving. But people, practices, and programs do not easily yield to common sense. It will be necessary to create a framework that can operate at the local, state or regional, and national levels to make it possible to share, nurture, and promote successful practice; to promote educator preparation and practice that address the full needs of students; and to promote policymaking at every level that empowers educators and parents to help students develop and learn in a way that will enable them to become successful and allow the nation to remain competitive.

At the turn of the 20th century, agriculture was to the economy—and, in turn, family and community functioning—what education is to the economy today. Traditional methods of farming led to low productivity, while research-based methods languished in research laboratories and a limited number of other places. In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act promoted local, state, and federal government cooperation in assessing value and delivering demonstration or other knowledge-transfer programs on the ground through the Cooperative Extension System. It involved the private sector appropriately. This framework overcame the many resistances to change, was good for the economy, and helped to make America the breadbasket of the world.

In education, there is no shortage of research. But there is a huge shortage of systematic and effective assessments of demonstration and research findings, and an even bigger shortage of reliable support for helping practitioners apply the relevant skills and knowledge needed on the ground. These last two steps in the education improvement supply chain are weak or missing, causing the education improvement “log jam.”

Research and demonstration findings suggest that we will need to ask new and practicing educators and policymakers to change the way they practice, as well as their mind sets and attitudes. We must use knowledge of how students develop and learn as a touchstone and guide to staff preparation, school organization, and management; and, in turn, the way curricula, instruction, and assessment can best be carried out.

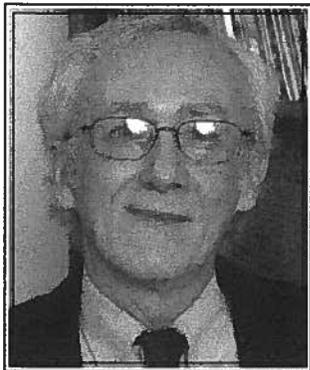
Change cannot be achieved on a large scale through simply providing more information and exhortation. Change will require a significant amount of expert-learner, face to face sharing and exchange, using methods similar to those used by agricultural agencies and agents a century ago. Modern technology can enhance and speed up this process, but cannot be a substitute for it.

The next president and his or her administration could and should use the power of the presidency to move us away from ideology, self-serving claims, adult interests, and blame, and toward a systematic review of what enables students to develop and learn and how the education enterprise can put in place what is required to support, grow, and sustain education improvement. We do not think it will be useful to spend a lot of time dismantling NCLB. Accountability is a good thing. But it can be achieved best in education by helping all the stakeholders be more effective rather than punishing schools for not doing what they would be delighted to do if they knew how and had the support that they need. With the appropriate support of educators, the shortcomings of the present legislation will become apparent and can be addressed.

While the next administration would need to provide the leadership and impetus for change, through incentives and positive sanctions, cooperation with local and state government and private entities will also be necessary. A cooperative effort will be needed to systematically determine what works and how to deliver demonstration or other knowledge-transfer programs on the ground. Again, what students need should, to the extent possible, trump the political and financial interests of the adults. Without such changes in the way we do schooling, our nation can spend much more money on education without moving our systems meter needle above mediocre and without improving our economic competitiveness or our family, community, and national well-being. □

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Do Issues Really Matter in the Presidential Campaign?



The run-up to the presidential primaries is an ideal time for candidates to focus on the issues. Some might argue it is the only time. The crowded slate of candidates vying for their party's nomination in 2008 forces the contenders to look for opportunities to distinguish themselves to voters. As the pack narrows, the surviving candidates—and the media that cover them—tend to focus on the horserace of who's up and who's down in the polls.

Getting the candidates to address the issues that affect the daily lives of Americans—health care, education, economic security—is always a challenge. And these issues hold particular significance for those who experience disparities in health, education, employment, and other areas. People of color are among those voters who have most at stake when it comes to policymaking that affects these bread-and-butter issues. But what role do issues really play in who gets elected?

Dr. David A. Bositis, senior research associate at the Joint Center and an expert on politics, elections, and voting, has authored Joint Center election analyses following each national election since 1992, and the yearly Joint Center series on black elected officials since 1997. FOCUS sat down with Dr. Bositis to discuss the role of issues in the 2008 campaign.

FOCUS: *Voters say that they want candidates to focus on issues. But how much do issues (versus personality) actually influence their voting?*

Dr. Bositis: The most important factor that determines the outcome of presidential elections is how voters in the center judge the overall status of the country at the time they vote. E.E. Schattschneider described such contests as the “ins” versus the “outs.” When Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in 1980, there was high inflation, the Iran hostage crisis, and high gasoline prices, and the voters—after first having judged Reagan an acceptable choice for president—decided they wanted a change of course and voted Carter out. Similarly in 1992, there was relatively high unemployment and inflation, big budget deficits, and the country seemed to be stagnating, and the voters decided to change direction and chose Bill Clinton over George H. W. Bush. In 2004, while neither the war in Iraq nor the economy was going especially well, the Bush campaign convinced a majority of the voters that the overall “War on Terrorism” was being fought successfully, and that turned out to be enough reason to stay the course—that is, stay with the “in”-party.

Personality does play a role in the voters' decision-making process. There have been certain candidates who have electrified large numbers of people, including John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and, among those in the 2008 contest, Senator Barack Obama. However, most nominees, as well as eventual winners, lack charisma. What the candidates do have to establish is that they are an acceptable choice for president.

In some respects, issues—what voters say they want discussed with great specificity—are more a distraction than anything else to most presidential campaigns. This is because issues, by and large, are subsumed by partisanship. After all, the majority of voters are going to vote for their party's nominee regardless of who the nominee may be. Some partisans, if they are severely disappointed in their party's choice, may stay home on Election Day or skip the presidential choice on their ballot. The Republican and Democratic parties represent different packages of choices—for example, anti-Iraq war versus pro-Iraq war or pro-choice versus anti-abortion—and so most issue choices represent a choice of which party is better on a particular issue.

FOCUS: *In the 2008 presidential campaign, who is really talking about the issues?*

Dr. Bositis: All of the candidates are talking about the issues to some degree, but few are conducting a purely issue-based campaign. Of course, all candidates occasionally discuss issues to make invidious comparisons with their opponents. Senator Obama speaks of his opposition to the war, but his campaign's theme is a new generation of leadership not caught up in the petty partisan squabbles of the past. Senator Hillary Clinton addresses several issues in her campaign, including health care, but her campaign emphasizes her experience and toughness in the face of Republican attacks. More than most of the candidates, former Senator John Edwards has spent his time discussing, often in considerable detail, issues—the war, health care, and poverty.

On the Republican side, when former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani discusses issues, it is generally to explain his social liberalism to conservative Republicans. Rather than issues, his campaign is based on his strong record of decisive and competent executive leadership—an advantage over the other Republican candidates. Mitt Romney's campaign,

in some respects, is like Giuliani's. He emphasizes his management and problem-solving experience—as governor of Massachusetts, as head of the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, and as a successful businessman. And when he speaks of issues—frequently to repudiate his previous stances—it is usually to defend the positions he adopted when his goal was to be elected in liberal Massachusetts. Senator John McCain has a detailed issue trail probably more pronounced than any other candidate in either party. But unfortunately for him, his main issue is the Iraq war, and at this time he looks to be on the losing side of that debate.

FOCUS: What issues are getting the most attention?

Dr. Bositis: The most important issue in the 2008 campaign is the war in Iraq. That fact is an advantage for the Democrats because they are the anti-war party, and the public has turned strongly against the war. Since the Democratic base is so strongly anti-Iraq war in its sentiments, this issue has been an advantage to Senator Obama, who opposed the war from the start, and somewhat less so for John Edwards, who voted for the war, but then strongly repudiated it afterward. It has represented a somewhat less comfortable issue for Senator Clinton, who voted for the war, but has been somewhat muted in her opposition because her campaign is concerned that for a woman to successfully run for the presidency, she must appear strong on foreign policy and defense. All of the top Republican candidates support President Bush on the war.

Health care, including the issue of the uninsured, is probably the second most important issue, and Senator Clinton and John Edwards strongly benefit from this. Edwards has a comprehensive and detailed health care proposal that has drawn a significant amount of attention and praise, and Senator Clinton is known for her concern about health care from her work in the White House in the early 1990s. Senator Obama speaks passionately about his commitment

to improving health care, but has yet to provide any specifics as to what he would propose. The only Republican to benefit from health care as an issue is former Governor Mitt Romney, who, working with the state legislature in Massachusetts, passed a health plan covering everyone in that state.

The third most important issue is immigration. Although President Bush, Senator McCain, and Giuliani have been strong advocates for more liberalized immigration laws, much of the Republican base has turned strongly—and somewhat mean-spiritedly—in an anti-immigration direction. Given that two-thirds of Hispanics in the country are Democrats—including New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, one of the Democratic candidates—the Democrats tend toward the more pro-immigration side in this debate, and thus far none have campaigned on this issue.

FOCUS: Historically, what are the differences in the motivations of black voters versus the general electorate?

Dr. Bositis: Since the Civil Rights movement, there have been many elections where African American voters' concerns were little different from other Democrats. That is largely true now. African Americans are strongly opposed to the war, and their concerns are health care, jobs, and education—much like other Democrats. The difference between black and white voters is that white voters have a choice between two parties, while African Americans remain committed to the Democratic party because the GOP represents an unacceptable alternative.

FOCUS: In the past two presidential elections, the campaigns were hijacked by things like Elian Gonzalez and gay marriage. What is the likelihood of that happening this time?

Dr. Bositis: There is always a chance that some random event might intrude on a presidential campaign. Jimmy Carter probably would have served a second term but for the unheard-of event of Iranian radicals seizing the

U.S. embassy and taking Americans hostage. In the 2004 campaign, gay marriage was a similar, though not as serious, event. Gay marriage was not a significant political issue because it was not thought of as a real possibility. However, at the end of its term in 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Lawrence et al. v. Texas*, struck down Texas' anti-sodomy statute and significantly expanded gay rights. And the following year, the Massachusetts Supreme Court—basing its decision on the state's constitution as well as the U.S. Supreme Court's *Lawrence* decision—established gay marriage in Massachusetts. The Republicans, having already established themselves as the anti-gay marriage party, benefited from this, while the Democrats were largely discomfited by it because many supported gay rights, including marriage, and worse, they were unprepared when the hypothetical issue of gay marriage (unimportant) became real gay marriage (much more important).

FOCUS: How much are the issues of race and gender playing a part in this campaign?

Dr. Bositis: Not as much a role as might be expected. At this point, Senator Obama is getting as much support from white voters as from black voters, and Senator Clinton is receiving significant black support. There is no evidence that Senator Clinton is losing support because of her sex, and she is benefiting from strong support from Democratic women.

FOCUS: At the end of the day, what do you think is going to be the biggest motivating issue among voters?

Dr. Bositis: I would say at this time, the major issue is dissatisfaction with the status quo, including the war, and so the goal—as it was in 2006—is regime change. That is, to throw the “ins” out. With a change of party control in the White House, the country's direction will change, and that's where a majority of voters are at this time. □

Let's "Tear Down the Walls" to Better Health Care

By Congressman Edolphus Towns

Clearly, this was the case with Deamonte Driver, a young man who died from lack of access to dental care in the nation's capital. As reported in the *Washington Post*, Deamonte's death probably was preventable and should not have happened in our nation—a nation that spends almost \$2 trillion a year on health care (or about \$6,700 per person).

Despite that huge investment, we have created a system of haves and have-nots, many of whom receive health services equivalent of a third world nation. That investment is more than twice as much per capita as many European and other nations, yet our system of care is ranked 37th in overall health system performance by the World Health Organization, barely ahead of Slovenia and Thailand. And the number of those covered is decreasing. While Medicaid covers slightly more than 40 percent of the poorest Americans, the number of working poor covered by employer-sponsored health insurance has decreased over the last 15 years. Meanwhile, the number entering the ranks of the uninsured increases by 1-3 million a year. In addition, only 55 percent of Americans get appropriate care in their doctors' offices.

This need not be the reality in America. I am tempted to paraphrase former President Ronald Reagan: "Mr. President, leaders in Congress, let's tear down these walls!" By this I mean, let us have the political will to tear down the walls preventing access to care for all Americans, urban and rural. If we can spend billions on a war in Iraq, we can do what it takes to deliver good health

care to all Americans, wherever they live and whatever their income.

We are working on parts of this process during the 110th Congress as we look to reauthorize the State Children's Insurance Program (SCHIP). I want to tear down the walls barring access to dental care for millions of American children and their families who rely on SCHIP. Let's make dental coverage a mandatory part of SCHIP. Let's make the purchase of private insurance under SCHIP part of the offerings made by all states. Let's fully reauthorize SCHIP and make sure that as many children as possible are in the program. And if their parents do not have health insurance, those adults should have access to SCHIP as well. Finally, let's define poverty realistically so as many children and families as possible qualify.

Let's also tear down the walls preventing the reform of our largest public health programs, Medicare and Medicaid. If we reform these two programs and make them work together, we probably are on the way to national health coverage—and that's really where we need to be. Part of this reform needs to be paying our physicians and allied health workers reasonable rates to encourage quality care and best practices for those who need it the most. To get there will not be easy. Hundreds of stakeholder groups will need to participate in a dialogue with Congress and the administration concerning their often disparate views on how to get the job done. But let the dialogue begin. Let's not wait any longer. Let's get started tearing down these walls to quality care for all.

Now, let's talk about reducing health disparities. For instance, how can we prevent younger African Americans from experiencing a two- to threefold greater risk of stroke, and reduce the higher death rates that stroke causes in the African American community? How can we prevent older Hispanic and African American adults from suffering more serious illness and death from influenza and pneumococcal disease than their white counterparts? How can we protect African American children who suffer from childhood lead poisoning at a rate five times more than that of white children?

Our health measures must target the reduction of health disparities among racial/ethnic groups if we are to build a system of care that is both more effective and less costly. So every piece of health legislation that comes out of Congress, and every rule and regulation—to the extent possible—that comes out of the White House, should have a component that addresses the reduction and elimination of health disparities for racial and ethnic minorities.

Finally, information technology will drastically affect our system of care. Health systems nationwide are beginning to use information technology to connect health facilities and electronically maintained health records within a secure and confidential network to guide diagnosis and treatment, and provide better health choices for all Americans. As Congress considers health information technology legislation and electronic patient records, we should expand upon the current legislative options to more fully integrate connecting health resources in medically underserved areas.

We have a great opportunity to make our health care system work for everyone. Let's work together to make it happen. □

Congressman Edolphus "Ed" Towns has represented the 10th Congressional District of New York (Brooklyn) for 13 consecutive terms. He is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Government Management, Organization and Procurement, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and a senior member of the Subcommittee on Health, the Energy and Commerce Committee.

HEALTH REPORT

Medicaid: Improving Care, Not Cutting It

By Gail C. Christopher

New research calls into question the justification for regulatory changes recently proposed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)—changes that could severely weaken the fragile safety net of health services for low-income people.

African Americans have a particularly significant stake in any proposed changes, due to their disproportionate representation among Medicaid beneficiaries. In 2005, Medicaid provided health insurance for 38 percent of low-income African American adults and 75 percent of African American children from low-income families. It covered 45 percent of African American children at all economic levels, including 51 percent of all black children under the age of six.

In the February 2007 issue of *Health Affairs*, authors Richard Kronick and David Rousseau reported that government revenues are likely to be sufficient to support Medicaid spending growth and priorities through 2045. Their research offers long-term projections of Medicaid spending and compares the anticipated growth in that program with state and federal revenue projections. Even factoring in continued declines in employer-sponsored insurance, as well as the long-term care needs of aging baby boomers, Kronick and Rousseau still project that Medicaid spending will hover around 2005 levels of 16.5 percent of national health spending through 2025, and then slowly increase to 19.0 percent by 2045.

These projections contradict the assumptions that gave rise to the recent Medicaid Commission created by Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael O. Leavitt and CMS's recommendations for regulatory reform.

The Medicaid Commission

Spending on Medicaid, like health care spending overall in this nation, has increased significantly since 1999. According to CMS, Medicaid spending totaled \$313.5 billion in 2006. As of October 2006, Medicaid spending surpassed spending on elementary

and secondary education as the top spending category for states. Concerns about program growth and related costs led Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt to establish the Medicaid Commission in 2005. The Medicaid Commission provided recommendations on options to achieve \$10 billion dollars in Medicaid savings over five years. In December 2006, the Medicaid Commission issued a final report containing longer-term recommendations on the following issues: long-term care, benefit design, eligibility, health information technology, and quality and care coordination.

In general, the Commission's recommendations strongly supported state flexibility in the design and administration of the Medicaid program and encouraged more state-level innovation. But the Commission also asserted "that the federal government should continue to have a vital role in ensuring that the Medicaid program delivers access to quality health care for the program's beneficiaries." Key principles expressed by the Commission include:

- Recognizing the long-term value of investments in quality;
- Supporting state flexibility; and
- Changing how beneficiaries partner with the Medicaid program by encouraging personal responsibility for health care decisions and promoting and rewarding healthy behaviors.

It is the last principle of "personal responsibility" that creates risks for the most vulnerable populations and the providers that serve them. Health care decisions and healthy behaviors are greatly influenced, often shaped, by the environment and contexts in which people live, work, and play. Low-income families of color usually live in areas of concentrated poverty, often in urban settings. Access to providers, healthy food, and/or exercise opportunities is reduced, while exposure to environmental toxins and stress factors is heightened.

In decision making that affects our nation's fragile health care safety net, it is critical to recognize the importance of "place" in determining capacity for "personal responsibility" in health. Epidemics of obesity and asthma, excessive premature birth and low birthweight rates, as well as chronic disease disparities are related to social determinants that reflect structural inequalities. Examples include housing segregation, minimal employment opportunities, and unequal investments in public education.

Proposed Regulatory Changes to Medicaid

The new Medicaid regulation proposed by CMS (CMS-2258-P) would significantly narrow funding sources available to states to finance Medicaid expenditures, limiting these sources to funds directly derived from tax revenues. According to the National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems, the proposed rule would cut Medicaid payments to public and other safety net providers by an estimated \$3.87 billion over five years. These cuts would severely affect America's panoply of safety net providers, the institutions that open their doors to patients regardless of their ability to pay: public hospitals, school- and church-based clinics, private physicians, nonprofit hospitals, and community and migrant health centers. A large number of their patients are uninsured, or are low-income underinsured, and many are Medicaid beneficiaries.

The new regulation will impose cost limits for public health care providers, while also changing the definition of "public" status. Historically, all public providers have been able to participate in Medicaid funding, using any source of available public funds, not just tax revenues.

County governments operate many systems that relate to the health and well-being of minority and low-income communities; for example, they own and operate over 1,000 hospitals and nursing homes. In a February 2007 letter to the congressional leadership

of both parties, National Association of Counties (NACo) president Colleen Landkamer expressed her organization's strong opposition to the proposed rule. NACo's leadership asserts that, "by capping payments to the government providers and narrowing the definition of 'public,' many of these facilities will be in jeopardy of closing their doors."

Local leaders need to push back against the "Medicaid unsustainability" argument by resisting calls for cuts and program changes that are justified by cost-savings.

The National Governors Association (NGA) also has registered its concern about the rule changes. According to the NGA's February 23rd letter to congressional leaders, its membership joined 300 bipartisan members of the House of Representatives and 55 senators in sending letters to Secretary Leavitt, urging that the proposed cuts in federal Medicaid spending not be implemented.

And the National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems (NAPH) is urging Congress to intervene and halt implementation. NAPH asserts that the proposed rule would limit Medicaid support for the mission of safety net providers by imposing a highly restrictive new limit on payment to public providers. For example, Medicaid funds could no longer be used to:

- Support care to the uninsured;
- Expand access to specialty care and other scarce health resources;
- Ensure the viability of essential community-wide services, such as trauma care, burn units, and neonatal intensive care;
- Target initiatives to reduce health care disparities among low-income and vulnerable populations; and

- Invest in public provider infrastructure expansions to improve care to Medicaid and low-income patients.

As of February, the rules are scheduled to take effect on September 1, 2007.

Medicaid Is Not the "Pac Man" that Ate State Budgets

As noted above, the rationale for the Medicaid Commission's establishment and the changes proposed by CMS—i.e., projections that Medicaid is unsustainable—may be unfounded. As Kronick and Rousseau argue, "Medicaid is not the 'Pac Man' that ate state budgets, insatiable in its appetite for more money, crowding out the ability for state governments to invest in other priorities such as education, transportation, and corrections." These authors anticipate that even in scenarios that project slower economic growth, states are expected to enjoy real revenue growth for services other than Medicaid for the next two decades.

Local leaders need to push back against the "Medicaid unsustainability" argument by resisting calls for cuts and program changes that are justified by cost-savings. Leaders should call for more specific research on short- and long-term cost implications and not sign off on short-term measures that will weaken the fragile health care safety net and increase costs in the long term.

At the same time, local community leaders should look for ways to use Medicaid revenues to effectively and efficiently help eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities. Some of the recommendations in the Medicaid Commission's final report may be helpful in this respect.

The Commission acknowledged that long-term care expenditures take up the largest portion of Medicaid costs. According to an analysis published by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2005, on a per beneficiary basis, Medicaid spending for the elderly who use institutional long-term care services is twice as high as spending for the elderly who use community-based long-term care services. State and county governments should make policy changes that encourage the use of community-based long-term care, such as increasing funding

for HCBS (Home- and Community-Based Services) waiver programs, which provide a significant source of funding for community-based long-term care service programs. This is in line with one of the Medicaid Commission's recommendations on long-term care: "Changes in Medicaid long-term policy should address institutional bias and reflect what most seniors and persons with disabilities say they want and need, which is to stay at home in their communities in the least restrictive or most integrated setting appropriate to their long-term care needs." Meeting these expressed preferences will ensure more culturally competent care and will help to address disparities in health outcomes associated with institutional factors, such as lack of diversity in the health care workforce.

The Commission also recommended simplifying Medicaid eligibility rules and guidelines, which could lead to expanded coverage for vulnerable populations, such as adult males. The Commission recommended that states have the flexibility to redefine eligibility categories without a waiver from the Department of Health and Human Services, provided that the new approach is cost-neutral to the federal government.

Finally, the Medicaid Commission recommended that all categories of Medicaid beneficiaries should participate in a coordinated system of care, premised on a medical home (homes that provide access to regular and sustained primary medical care) for each beneficiary.

Although the reasoning that undergirds some of the recent Medicaid reform proposals may be faulty, leaders should remain vigilant in efforts to reform and optimize the program as a resource to help eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities. Clearly, Medicaid is an essential health care resource for low-income African Americans and their communities, and a vital part of the health care safety net for our most vulnerable children and adults nationwide. Its usefulness must not be undermined by misguided policies or unnecessary cuts. □

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ECONOMIC REPORT

A Difficult Balancing Act: Funding Program Priorities in a Time of Budget Deficits

By Margaret C. Simms

The next president of the United States will face many challenges, but an overarching one is what to do about the federal deficit. Unless the president, working in conjunction with the Congress, can develop and implement a plan to bring the deficit under control, the chances that new program initiatives can be funded are very slim.

The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that, in the absence of strong action to change current law, the budget deficit (the gap between annual revenues and annual expenses) will reach 20 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2050. The total federal debt outstanding would reach 230 percent of GDP by that time. A deficit of this size will have a negative impact on national investment and savings and will involve greater holdings of the debt by foreigners.

Putting a Lid on the Deficit

The current Congress is trying to come to grips with this issue by re-instituting the Pay-as-You-Go (Pay-Go) principle that was part of the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985. Both the House and the Senate have introduced measures that would require them to consider the impact of any new spending or revenue legislation on the deficit or surplus for the current year and the next five fiscal years. In other words, any measure that would increase spending or reduce revenue would need to be offset by a reduction in spending or an increase in revenue in another area. This would severely restrict the federal government's ability to pay for new initiatives, especially while funding is needed for the war in Iraq.

There is strong support for the Pay-Go principle across a broad segment of the political spectrum. In a joint statement, four organizations with differing political philosophies (The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, the Concord Coalition, and the Committee

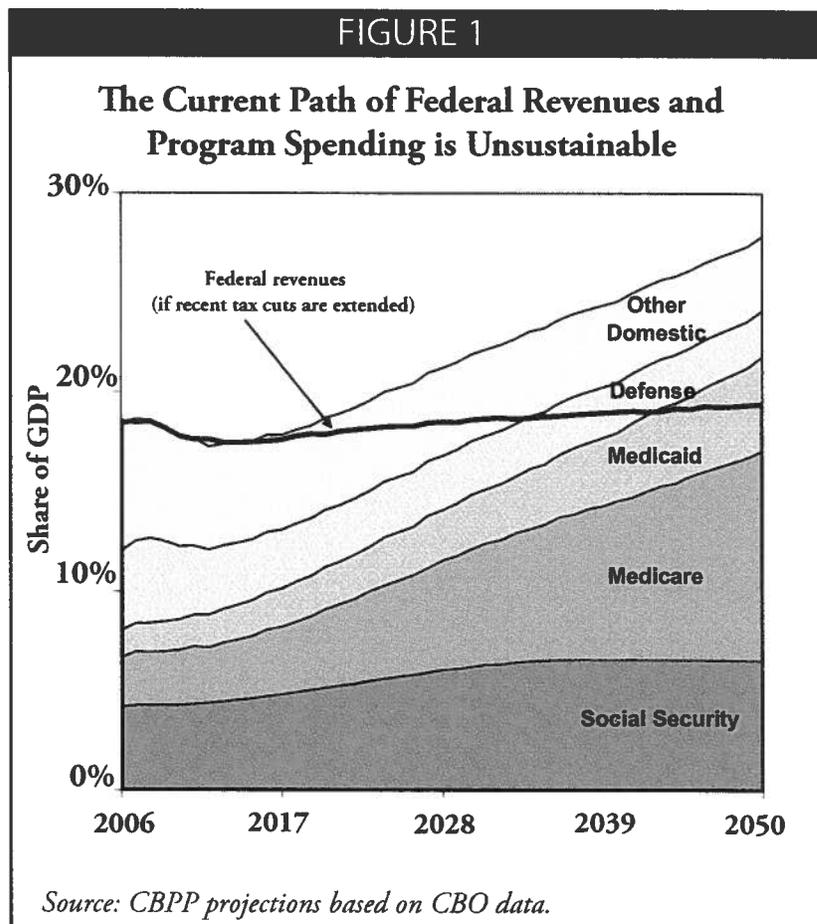
on Economic Development) strongly urged the restoration of Pay-Go. In this statement, the four organizations assert: "It is not responsible to continue to promote legislation that is supposed to improve the lot of the American people without considering the corrosive effects that the cumulative deficits and debt added by such legislation would have on current and future citizens."

In a separate analysis of the Pay-Go rule, CBPP staffers argue that even if there is adherence to Pay-Go, a substantial budget deficit will remain. Moreover, they take issue with the position that tax cuts will stimulate an increase in economic activity that will close the deficit. They side with studies that show more harm than benefit to deficit-financed tax cuts.

Alternative Approaches to Reducing the Deficit

A number of approaches have been proposed for dealing with the deficit. President Bush's FY 2008 budget proposals held non-defense discretionary spending below the rate of inflation over the next five years. This would, in effect, result in a decline in support for this area. Actual cuts were recommended for a number of discretionary programs, including education and training programs, housing initiatives, block grants, and health and nutrition programs, most of which provide services or supports to low-income children and families. Among the cuts was a reduction in the Food Stamp program, which would remove from the rolls families whose only

FIGURE 1



benefits were non-cash assistance. CBPP estimates that this cut and other reductions would have significant negative impacts on states. The largest dollar amount reductions would be in populous states such as California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas (all of which have African American populations in excess of one million). The largest per capita reductions, aside from the least populated states (such as Alaska, Montana, and South Dakota), would be in Louisiana and Mississippi.

The Congressional Black Caucus issued an alternative budget for FY 2008. The CBC proposal started with the Democratic (Congressional) budget plan and made some changes. The CBC proposed to raise revenues in several ways: by rescinding tax cuts for the top two income tax brackets and restoring the phase-out of some benefits and exemptions for this group; by rescinding capital gains and dividend tax cuts for investment income; and by altering or closing corporate tax incentives. The CBC budget would take these revenue gains and allocate them to domestic programs and services in the areas of education, health, hurricane recovery, crime prevention, housing, and community development.

A more comprehensive view is taken in a Brookings Institution paper by William Frenzel, Charles Stenholm, William Hoagland, and Isabel Sawhill. The authors, who reflect a partisan political balance, assume that bipartisan support will be needed to “tame” the deficit. In the spirit of compromise, the authors note that none of them is in total agreement with all the recommendations in the paper. But this compromise would yield benefits in the form of immediate budget relief and “breathing room” to address the longer-term entitlement programs, such as Social Security.

The authors developed a plan that includes recommendations for the short term and the long term. In the short run, they recommend a “hard” freeze on all discretionary, non-entitlement spending. This would mean no increase in this segment of the budget, although trade-offs within this section of the budget would be allowed. To emphasize the fact that discretionary is not synonymous with domestic or non-defense spending, they propose to put Department of Defense

weapons programs under scrutiny.

For the long term, the authors recommend program restructuring for entitlement programs that threaten to take over the federal budget if no changes are made. They propose several modifications for Social Security, including adjusting the retirement age, reducing benefits for the well-to-do, and taxing wages above \$97,500, which is the current maximum for Social Security taxes. They also support encouraging citizens to amass private savings for retirement.

Proposals reflecting bipartisanship and the balancing of competing interests are critical to addressing the budget needs of this nation. Proposals to curb the deficit should not preclude thoughtful consideration of the composition of federal spending.

Health care is a more complicated issue. On the one hand, the authors note the need for strategies that reduce health care costs, such as greater use of electronic records, more emphasis on preventive care, and better management of chronic disease. On the other hand, there is an urgent need to improve access to care through extended insurance coverage. Legislators would have to find revenue to fund this approach. However this is packaged, the authors observe, experience tells us that we need to pay attention to educating the public about the proposals if they are to be enacted into law.

The Brookings paper also offers proposals on the revenue side of the budget. These proposals include measures to ensure better compliance with tax laws; broadening the tax base by reducing exemptions, deductions, and credits in certain areas; instituting an energy tax; and revenue-neutral reform of the alternative minimum tax (originally instituted to ensure that high-income households pay a minimum amount

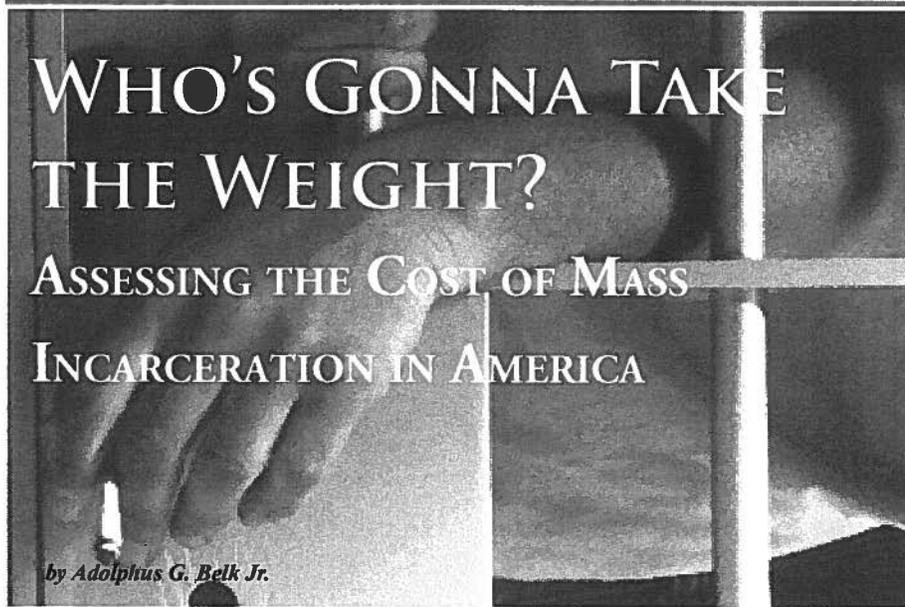
of federal taxes, the alternative minimum tax is now reaching a large number of what many consider middle-income households).

Restoring Balance: It Is Not Just About the Deficit

Proposals reflecting bipartisanship and the balancing of competing interests are critical to addressing the budget needs of this nation. Proposals to curb the deficit should not preclude thoughtful consideration of the composition of federal spending. For example, a recent paper by the Urban Institute, titled “Kids Share 2007: How Children Fare in the Federal Budget,” reports that children’s share of domestic spending has decreased from 20.1 to 15.4 percent over the past three decades. At the same time, spending for the non-children’s portions of programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security has increased from 22.1 to 45.9 percent of domestic spending. While the elderly population has increased faster than the child population, spending on the elderly has increased at an even faster pace. Consequently, the authors say, “the federal budget makes it fairly clear that children are less of a priority and more of an afterthought in the budget process.” The implementation of both expenditure reductions and revenue enhancements, as outlined in proposals above, would result in a modest surplus that could be invested in programs for children and low-wage working families.

A number of long-term budget challenges face policymakers, including how to balance the needs of children, seniors, and low-income working families; how to increase revenues to accommodate these needs; and how to restructure or enhance retirement and health programs that are of great importance to today’s electorate. Regardless of whatever changes and compromises are achieved by the current administration and Congress, many difficult choices will remain for policymakers in 2009. In weighing these choices, they should recognize that budget discipline need not preclude attention to critical social needs. □

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population—accounted for 24 percent of the world's prisoners in 2006.

The explosion in the U.S. prison population reflects the shifting politics of crime and punishment, which left an indelible mark on the formulation and implementation of public policy. During the 1960s, federal and state lawmakers began to argue that the nation's crime problem could only be solved by hardening criminal justice policy. By the 1970s, new policies emphasized deterrence, incapacitation, punishment, and victims' rights rather than rehabilitation, treatment, and re-entry. This new paradigm was fueled by the campaigns of issue-seeking politicians of both parties and commentaries from the scholarly community. The 1980s and 1990s saw the dawn of the "get tough" movement, which sparked president-led wars on crime and drugs. This movement also targeted juvenile offenders, particularly those in central cities who were young, black, or Latino. Federal—and even state—policies grew more punitive, resulting in the incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders for lengthy prison sentences (e.g., via the "100-to-1" powder cocaine/crack cocaine ratio), the diversion of juveniles to adult criminal justice systems, and measures such as "Three Strikes and You're Out" and mandatory minimum sentencing—all of which contributed to an overflowing prison system.

While crime rates have fluctuated over the years, recently increasing after a notable decline during the 1990s, one thing has re-

mained consistent: incarceration rates have continued to rise. This imprisonment binge has had particularly dire consequences for persons often labeled as the "underclass," a term almost exclusively used to describe poor, urban blacks and Latinos.

The Costs of Incarceration

Inmates, their families, their communities, and American society at large shoulder the economic, political, and social costs of imprisonment. For example, while most inmates eventually return to society, ex-offenders often have lower levels of educational attainment and poorer job skills than the general population, which inhibits their ability to find work and avoid future criminality. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, inmates enter correctional institutions with much lower levels of educational attainment than the general population. About 41 percent of prison and jail inmates had not completed high school or earned a G.E.D. as of 1997, compared to just 18.4 percent of all Americans. Among persons in state prisons specifically, 53 percent of Latinos, 44 percent of blacks, and 27 percent of whites had not finished high school or earned a G.E.D. Not surprisingly, nearly 52 percent of state prisoners and 57 percent of jail inmates reported enrolling in educational programs after they were admitted. However, as University of Missouri-Kansas City economist L. Randall Wray remarked: "With the near abandonment of attempts to rehabilitate or educate prisoners, it is

unlikely that most prisoners leave prison better prepared for employment."

Even if they are successful, a prison record adds another obstacle to securing a decent job. Upon release, ex-offenders also struggle with difficulties accessing the types of services they need to ensure successful reintegration into society. All of these challenges in finding gainful employment contribute to high recidivism rates, perpetuating a cycle of incarceration, release, and re-incarceration.

This imprisonment binge has had particularly dire consequences for persons often labeled as the "underclass," a term almost exclusively used to describe poor, urban blacks and Latinos.

The economic costs of mass incarceration also extend to the taxpayer. In 2001, the average cost of incarcerating one inmate for one year was just over \$24,000. Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that corrections spending increased by 423 percent from 1982 to 2003; the combined spending of the federal, state, and local governments was \$39.2 billion in 2003. Unlike their counterparts in Washington, however, state lawmakers must pass balanced budgets. This reality has resulted in trade-offs to balance the ballooning expenditures on incarceration. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that, from 1977 to 2003, total state and local spending on corrections increased at a far greater rate (1,173 percent) than spending on education (505 percent), hospitals and health care (572 percent), interest on debt (577 percent), and public welfare (766 percent). Thus, while state governments spend more on things such as education and public welfare, the rising cost of incarceration means that some funds will not be put to more productive uses.

Incarceration policies have significant political implications as well. Losing the right to vote is among the most obvious political costs associated with

imprisonment. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia ban inmates from voting. Thirty-five states bar felons from voting while they are on parole and 30 of these jurisdictions also rule out felony probationers. As a result of disenfranchisement laws, 5.3 million Americans have either temporarily or permanently lost the right to vote. Roughly 1.4 million of these persons are black men, a group that is disenfranchised at a rate seven times greater than the general population.

Some of the political costs of imprisonment, however, are more subtle. For instance, Census Bureau tabulations redirect federal financial aid and voting power from the cities in which offenders were arrested to the locations where they are incarcerated. While new prison construction has occurred near some metropolitan areas, a great number of the nation's newest facilities have been constructed in rural areas. Thus, inmates from New York City, for example, are counted as "residents" in far away places such as Franklin County. Because the Census Bureau calculates a community's per capita income by including the salaries of inmates (some of whom make as little as \$0.25 per hour), many prison towns are now eligible for federal assistance programs. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, the federal government distributes nearly \$140 billion in formula-based grants to state and local governments. Likewise, because legislative districts are drawn based on decennial population counts, political power in some states has flowed away from cities populated largely by blacks, Latinos, and Democrats and toward rural areas that are mostly white and Republican. While urban communities surely gain a modicum of security with the incarceration of each felon, they also lose standing when millions of federal dollars and political power leave for small town America.

Finally, there are the social costs of mass incarceration, which have shaken American families. America's inmates are more than statistics—they are sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, from 1991 to 1999, the number of children under the age of 18 with a parent in state or federal prison increased from 936,500 to almost 1.5 million. Black and Latino children (7 percent and 2.6 percent, respectively) were more likely than white

children (0.8 percent) to have a parent behind bars. Forty-nine percent of parents in state prisons were black, 28.9 percent were white, and 18.9 percent were Latino. Moreover, although men continue to comprise the vast majority of the prison population, the number of women in prison has increased at roughly double the rate for men since 1980. In 2005, black women, with an incarceration rate of 156 per 100,000 persons, were more than twice as likely as Latina women and three times as likely as white women to be in prison. About 70 percent of the women in prison—many of whom were imprisoned for drug violations—have children under the age of eighteen.

The next president must do something that his or her predecessors have mostly failed to do—move beyond overblown rhetoric and chart a policy course grounded in evidence-based practices.

These numbers are especially alarming because children living in single-parent households are more likely to live in poverty than those in two-parent households. Poverty, combined with high levels of joblessness in cities, can lead to other neighborhood problems such as crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking. Children who engage in these behaviors will ultimately come into contact with the juvenile or adult justice systems. Thus, family stability and community cohesion are severely threatened with so many black and Latino men and women behind bars.

Recommendations

While crime and incarceration have long been state and local government concerns, national leadership is needed. While some members of Congress, like U.S. Representative John Conyers (D-MI), are working to reverse these trends, the next president of the United States—as the national agenda-setter—can help determine where we go from here. Just as presidents

have supported the imprisonment binge, the next president must do something that his or her predecessors have mostly failed to do—move beyond overblown rhetoric and chart a policy course grounded in evidence-based practices. The last two decades have demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that the "get tough" approach has significant limitations. Now, the nation must get "smart on crime." In fact, public opinion data demonstrate that Americans want their political leaders to be smart on crime. According to Gallup, in 2003, 69 percent of those polled agreed that lawmakers should work to lower the crime rate by attacking social and economic problems that lead to crime.

It is time for government to reassume its obligation to rehabilitate offenders and reintegrate them into society once they are released. The next president should address the change in course on crime policy that is needed to break free of the cycle of incarceration, release, and re-incarceration, which is imposing such tremendous costs. The following recommendations may serve as a starting point for change in this critical policy area:

1. Abolish the "100-to-1" powder cocaine/crack cocaine ratio established by the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988.
2. Divert nonviolent drug addicts and offenders from the prison system.
3. Divert juvenile offenders from detention facilities and offer family therapy and parent training directed at delinquents or pre-delinquents and their families.
4. Reinvest in rehabilitation and re-entry programs that treat persons with substance abuse problems, promote job readiness skills for ex-offenders, and offer assistance with the transition from prison to the community.
5. Offer incentives to businesses to employ ex-offenders.
6. Restore voting rights to ex-offenders once they are released from prison. □

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