

Dear Chief:

Statewide data indicates a reduction in prison population from 20,000 to 17,000 over the course of the past 5 years, does this mean there is less crime and less offenders?

Dear Citizen:

My opinion is, absolutely not.

I recently attended a prison utilization study meeting in Canon City regarding this very topic and the initial justification in the power point suggested crime rates were down and there were less offenders being sentenced to prison. Interestingly, the "fact sheet" provided to attendees did not include less crime and fewer offenders. Rather:

- Fewer offenders entering prison due to statutory changes that provide alternatives to incarceration for less-dangerous, non-violent offenders.
- Some sentence lengths are decreasing due to statutory changes that have increased eligibility for time earned.
- Reduced number of parolees who are returned to prison for technical violations.
- Increased discretionary releases by the Parole Board.

A Canon City resident who attended this meeting asked a very insightful question of the presenter when he asked, do you expect us to believe that as our statewide population has increased and our economy declined that we have less crime and fewer offenders? As the citizen shared, it doesn't pass the smell test. Instead of less crime and fewer offenders, I would offer that it's quite possible that many crimes aren't being reported by citizens because our citizenry has become increasingly frustrated with systems that no longer seem to have teeth (consequences/jail/prison). Like citizens, law enforcement officers are equally frustrated.

Rural prison communities are suffering greatly from prison downsizing. Likewise, communities like Alamosa with significant offender populations and a willingness to accept/ import known offenders (without valley ties) lead to us paying a higher price for crime. The July 6th Valley Courier (VC) article written by Rudy Herndon titled "Inmate count, costs rise" depicts a sampling of the price we pay and as Sheriff Stong stated, we could add more beds but at a greater cost to our community.

Adding local jail beds and spending more money is not the direction we should take first. A good starting place might be to evaluate local programming (community corrections); something we (Alamosa) have control over and that has historically brought known offenders into our communities who have no ties to Alamosa or the San Luis Valley.

The Sheriff is right, "it's about dollars and cents". With prison downsizing, the dollars and cents **costs** have simply shifted from being a state burden to a city and county burden without remuneration. By evaluating and reforming our current local philosophies concerning non-valley offenders, we can relieve tension on our local jail while subverting unintended costs associated with offender importation.

As we continue to struggle with crime and offenders, we must be open to new opportunities and breaking from tradition. It should be concerning that because we have no place to house offenders, “someone who goes down to a local hardware store and steals \$999.99 in supplies, won’t go to jail”. I share a belief with many of my colleagues that crime is not down, and we don’t have fewer offenders, and that our prison system is vital to our public safety and should be of great interest to us all.

Craig Dodd, Chief of Police