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Prison system has failed U.S.

CHICAGO DEFENDER

by U.S. Sen. Paul Simon

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At a recent gathering of prison officials, judges and policy makers from around the nation at Dana College in Nebraska, the discussion centered on these costs: an average of \$14,000 to \$20,000 a year to take care of a prisoner, not counting the cost of prison construction.

Questions: are we dealing with crime effectively? How can we do better?

Among those at the meeting were directors of state departments of corrections, several people who have spent time in prison, Professor Norval Morris of the University of Chicago — who is probably the nation's top expert in this field — Gov. Benjamin Nelson of Nebraska, Tom Wicker of the *New York Times*, who has written extensively in this field and others.

You would probably not find agreement among them on some things, but this came through clearly: We are failing in our attempts to reduce crime — and we are failing at a huge economic and social cost.

In 1970, the U.S. had 134 people in prison for each 100,000 population. Now we have 455 for each 100,000 — far more than any other nation that records such numbers. South Africa is second with 311 and Canada has 109.

On the theory it would reduce crime, we started spending billions on building more prisons and the violent crime rate has gone up. The evidence is strong that most of our prisons are schools of crime, rather than places to prepare people for life after prison.

There is no question that people who have been involved in crimes of violence, who represent a possible threat to society, should be locked up.

It costs an average of \$14,000-\$20,000 a year to take care of a prisoner, not counting the cost of prison construction.

But in the federal system, for example, a majority of the prisoners have committed non-violent crimes like embezzlement, forging checks or minor drug offenses.

They should be punished, but I tend to think they should serve a short time in prison, to understand what that's like and then be forced to spend the rest of their time doing some type of community service: Helping in a mental hospital, planting trees in a national forest, or other constructive work. They could be paid minimum wage but most of what they earn should go to pay their room and board and in some cases to compensate their victims. It would save the nation billions and the evidence suggests that it would be more effective in reducing crime.

Our prisons do painfully little to prepare people for life on the outside, as former Supreme Chief Justice Warren Burger has pointed out again and again. The Dana College conference found judges, prosecutors and everyone in agreement that mandatory sentences in the law sound tough, but sometimes lead to great injustices. Judges should have guidelines, but if they want to sentence someone for more than the guideline or less than the guideline, they should be able to do that. But if they go outside of the guidelines, they have to explain in writing why they do it and that sentence must then be reviewed by a higher court or a sentencing commission.

If the billions we have spent to build more prisons and house more people were partially spent on creating jobs, better schools and constructive opportunities for the poor — and most people in prison are poor — my instinct is that we would do much more to reduce crime than we now do.

Building more prisons has been an expensive and ineffective way to halt crime. It has been a flop.