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Treatment, not prison

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IN BALTIMORE, nearly one in five black men 20 to 30 years old is in prison, and more than half are under the control of the criminal justice system — in prison, on parole or on probation. Those grim statistics are contained in a report released this week by the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington-based research organization. Since most of these offenders are somehow involved in drugs and the drug trade, the report serves as yet another reminder that more treatment and less imprisonment would be a better approach to the city's crime and social problems.

Unfortunately, Baltimore is no different from the country at large. With about 2.1 million people in federal and state prisons, the United States has the highest incarceration rate of any industrialized nation. And a special report by the American Bar Association last year estimated that black men have a one-in-three chance of being imprisoned in their lifetime.

According to the JPI report, nearly 4,500 of the 25,000 black men in Baltimore who are 20 to 30 years old are in prison or in jail; another 8,680 are on probation or parole. Researchers note that the major growth in the criminal justice population in recent years has been fueled by drug-related offenses. Many of these offenders would be better served through treatment rather than imprisonment.

Yet funding for Maryland's expansion of drug treatment programs, particularly in Baltimore, appears to be flattening out. For-

mer Gov. Parris N. Glendening increased funding for treatment in Baltimore through the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Administration from about \$22 million in 2000 to \$48 million in 2003. Under Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., funding rose to about \$49.5 million in 2004 and is expected to remain at about that level. At the same time, the state is spending about \$1 billion for its prisons. But its efforts to improve treatment for imprisoned offenders have been hampered by state lawmakers.

Baltimore is serving about 25,000 substance abusers in treatment programs that are funded from state, federal and private sources to the tune of about \$65 million. City officials say that \$100 million would allow them to serve about 40,000 people in a year, which would effectively provide treatment on demand.

The JPI report makes clear that imprisoning young black men who have committed drug-related crimes makes it harder for them to reclaim their lives and establish a productive role in society. It also doesn't make the neighborhoods they leave behind more stable as the social fabric unravels and the conditions for crime multiply.

The scourge of drugs has given Baltimore a dangerously high addiction rate, a dangerously high murder rate and a diminished sense of quality of life and of public safety in many communities. A larger state investment in drug treatment programs now could save money — and lives — in the long run.