

STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT

BY ROBERT DAVID SULLIVAN

DOING TIME OUTSIDE THE BIG HOUSE

One in every 24 adults in Massachusetts—or 4.1 percent—was “under correctional control” in 2007, according to recent data from the Pew Center for the States. That’s far above the national average (the center’s report is actually titled “One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections”), and only Georgia, Idaho, and Texas had a greater percentage of their populations under supervision.

What was unique about the Bay State is that we were so lopsided toward non-prison supervision—that is, the use of probation and parole as an alternative to putting people behind bars. Massachusetts ranked third in the percentage of adults on probation or parole (3.58 percent), but we were way down at 46th in the percentage of adults in prison (0.53 percent), with lower numbers only in New Hampshire, Vermont, Minnesota, and Maine. Nationwide, there were twice as many adults on probation or parole as there were prisoners; here the ratio was more than 7-to-1. (Only Oklahoma and Virginia had more people under supervision inside than outside.)

The reliance on non-prison sentencing may be one reason that Massachusetts spends only 4.6 percent of its general budget on corrections, well below the national average of 6.9 percent.

BAY STATE FARMS GET FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY

Are “buy local” campaigns helping to preserve the state’s small farming sector? New data from the US Department of Agriculture show that the number of working farms went up from 6,075 to 7,691 from 2002 to 2007—even though the amount of land devoted to farming stayed almost identical, going from 518,570 to 517,879 acres. That meant the average farm size dropped from 85 to 67 acres. From 2002 to 2007, the annual market value of the state’s agricultural output grew by 27 percent, to \$490 million.

Of the state’s 14 counties, Plymouth showed the greatest decline in farm acreage (down 17 percent), while next-door Bristol County registered the biggest increase (up 9 percent).

After the release of the USDA data, the state’s Department of Agricultural Resources proudly noted that Massachusetts ranks second in the nation in cranberry and wild blueberry production, and is also in the Top 10 for squash, maple syrup, and raspberries. One thing the state doesn’t brag about: We’re ninth for tobacco production, and Hampden County ranks 50th among all 437 tobacco-producing counties in the US.



GRIDLOCK LOOSENS GRIP ON BOSTON IN 2008

Like the rest of the US, metropolitan Boston experienced a “startling” decrease in traffic congestion last year, but we still have more than our share of bottlenecks, according to new data from Inrix Traffic Services.

The market research company, which compiles data from GPS-equipped vehicles, estimated that traffic congestion during peak travel times dropped by 29 percent in the 100 largest urban areas last year, with only Baton Rouge, Louisiana, registering more crowded roads. Inrix cited “turbulent fuel prices and a struggling economy” for the drop. Congestion in high-unemployment Detroit, for example, dropped by 47 percent.

In Boston, congestion dropped by 27 percent, a bit below the national average, and we were ranked as the eighth most congested area in the US overall. The worst “bottleneck” in the region was Neponset Circle in Dorchester. It ranked 190th in the US in 2007 but rose to 116th last year.

TROUT COMMUNITY GETS STIMULUS

The state's trout population is surging by 518,000 this spring, thanks to the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's program of restocking waterways with fish from the state's four hatcheries. The infusion of "feisty" fish includes 3,000 tiger trout measuring at least 14 inches across, but smaller brooks and streams are more likely to see fish in the 6- to 11-inch category.

The biggest trout recorded in Massachusetts was a 24-pounder caught in 2004 in the Wachusett Reservoir. Perhaps the economic advantages of fishing as a sport — when you win, you get to eat! — will inspire local anglers to do even better this year.



TAX FOUNDATION GIVES MIDLING GRADE TO MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts had the fifth highest annual state-and-local tax burden per capita (\$5,377) in the 2008 fiscal year, according to the Tax Foundation's recent ranking of the states on tax-and-spend issues. But that was largely because we were the second wealthiest state, with an annual income per capita of \$58,661.

On the measure of state and local tax burden as a percentage of tax filers' income, we were pretty near the middle of the pack, in 23rd place. An estimated 9.5 percent of our income went to Beacon Hill or City Hall. The comparable figures were 11.8 percent in first-place New Jersey, 11.7 percent in New York, and 11.1 percent in Connecticut.

As far as the Tax Foundation was concerned, Massachusetts gets high marks for its sales tax burden (ninth best, or lowest, in the US, much better than 49th-place New York). And we ranked 16th best in terms of the income tax. But we ranked 44th (or seventh worst) in terms of property tax burden; we were also 47th in the "unemployment insurance tax index" and 44th in the "corporate tax index."

Massachusetts had the third highest cigarette tax in the survey, the 40th highest beer tax, and the 26th highest gas tax. But depending on how things play out on Beacon Hill, we could vault past first-place New York, now at 41.3 cents per gallon.

BAY STATE DENTISTS REVEAL THEIR AGENDA

Both the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) PAC and the affiliated Massachusetts Dental Society Peoples Committee were among the 10 political action committees with the most money left on hand at the end of 2008, according to the state's Office of Campaign and Political Finance. The former had a balance of \$119,762; the latter had \$135,717. (The Retired Public Employees PAC was on top with \$1,162,958.)

Now we may know what the state's dentists have been gearing up for. The MDS is sponsoring legislation this year that would require every child in Massachusetts to have a dental exam by a dentist before entering kindergarten, in much the same way as children are required to have physical exams before starting school. The MDS agenda also includes "a proposal to work with the state to assist dental school graduates with tuition and loan repayment"—which may have something to do with dentists' complaints that Massachusetts is not paying them enough to treat patients with state-subsidized insurance plans, as reported in the *Boston Globe* last summer.



THE COST OF DOING NOTHING ABOUT THE HEALTH CARE CRISIS IS JUST TOO HIGH.

The health care crisis facing this country affects us all. And the financial burden it's placing on millions will only get worse if something isn't done now. AARP thanks President Obama for pledging to make health care reform a priority in 2009. We call on Congress to continue its bipartisan work with President Obama on health care solutions for all Americans.

Powered by people like you and millions of others, Divided We Fail has been leading the way to change since 2007. And AARP, together with its allies in the business community and organized labor, will continue to work on your behalf and hold our elected officials accountable for their decisions.

Our country just can't afford our broken health care system any longer.

Join us in demanding action at DividedWeFail.org.

