



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on June 23, 2014

Mississippi Is the Most Corrupt State, Says a New Study

Based on the number of convictions for violating federal corruption laws, Mississippi — a state with just three million citizens — ranks at the very top of the list of all states, according to a recent study. Two college professors [published their report](#) in the May/June issue of *Public Administration Review*.



They studied more than 25,000 convictions of public officials across the country for violating federal corruption laws, and even though Mississippi has a population of just three million, it topped the list for convictions compared to all other states.

The professors' study said the high level of corruption in the state resulted in high state spending on projects where it was conducive to make bribes — “bribe-generating” projects — such as capital improvements and highway construction, while leaving a paucity of cash for socially beneficial projects, such as schools and health facilities. It also noted massive cost overruns on “bribe-generating” projects, thanks to those bribes, as well as blatant payoffs to government officials, who are getting wealthy at the expense of the poor. Said the authors:

First, public officials' corruption is likely to increase state spending....

Second, public officials' corruption ... show that states with higher levels of corruption tend to spend more on items on which corrupt officials may levy larger bribes at the expense of others....

Public resources may be used for the private interests of the few instead of the needs of the many.

This confirms another study published by Pew Research Center just a year ago that indicated Mississippi topped its list of the most corrupt states, with almost four public corruption convictions a year for every 10,000 state employees.

Jon Moen, chairman of economics at the University of Mississippi said corruption encourages businesses to join in and even encourage corruption:

Corrupt officials will encourage activities or businesses that will also provide them with the most benefits, whether they are outright bribes or more legal benefits like campaign contributions.

Rarely are these activities ... true public goods, like elementary education, as they provide few direct monetary benefits that can be appropriated by a politician or a private interest.

A high level of corruption also discourages, or eliminates altogether, private entrepreneurial activity unless the business owner wants to play the game and build into his cost structure the bribes he must pay to operate.

Attempts to ferret out and punish public officials gaming the system go back to the 1980s when a small business owner, who was also a Pentecostal preacher, refused to give a 10-percent kickback to local officials in his bid for a public capital improvement project. When he complained, the FBI became



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interested. It set up a dummy corporation that offered to contract out bids for various capital projects, and the sting — called Operation Pretense — resulted in 57 of Mississippi’s 410 county supervisors from 26 of the state’s 82 counties being charged under federal law with corruption.

The corruption in Mississippi continues apace. Last summer Jackson County Sheriff Mike Byrd was indicted on 31 counts of fraud, extortion, embezzlement, witness tampering, and perjury. The Mississippi Supreme Court had to step in to appoint a judge to hear the case because the Jackson County judges had recused themselves.

The extensive corruption has taken its toll in Mississippi. If the state had just average corruption — equal, that is, to the corruption in the nine states at the bottom of the list — the state could have saved more than \$1,300 per person in bribes, kickbacks, and payoffs. Today Mississippi residents suffer from the lowest per capital personal income of any state, and Mississippi students score the lowest of any state on the National Assessment tests, while the state is ranked third from the bottom of the American Human Development Index.

The authors of the latest corruption study define the word “corruption” to mean the “misuse of public office for private gain.” But such corruption isn’t limited to the political realm. When the word is applied to the culture itself, however, the word means “utterly broken.” Aristotle and Cicero used the term to mean the “abandonment of good habits.” And that is the real cost of political corruption: It seeps into the wellspring of human behavior and corrupts it, resulting in what is happening in Mississippi.

In addition to the abysmal performance of students in the state’s public schools, Mississippi also has the highest teenage birth rate in the country, more than 60 percent above the national average, and is ranked last in the country for healthcare. In addition, Mississippi ranks last among the 50 states for high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity.

A few years before he died, Robert Welch, the founder of The John Birch Society, was asked what he considered to be the most pressing fundamental problem the country faced. In the early 1980s, his response was chilling: “moral decline.” Thirty years later, the harvest of corruption is most obviously being observed in Mississippi. Other states such as Illinois, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Alabama are right behind.

A graduate of Cornell University and a former investment advisor, Bob is a regular contributor to The New American magazine and blogs frequently at www.LightFromTheRight.com, primarily on economics and politics. He can be reached at badelman@thenewamerican.com.

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