

Reducing crime needn't mean building bigger prisons

By Grover Norquist

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As a taxpayer advocate, I was troubled to learn that Oregon's growing prison population will cost the state \$600 million in new spending over the coming decade.

Conservatives like me are known for being tough on crime. But we must also be tough on criminal justice spending, backing cost-effective approaches that hold offenders accountable and protect public safety. While prisons play an essential role by keeping serious criminals off the streets, they are not the most effective sanction for every offender.

Oregonians know this to be true. For years, conservatives have looked to Oregon's corrections and sentencing policies as an excellent model for other states. Under these policies, Oregon has used most of its state prison space for violent and sex offenders and has reduced recidivism rates through local community corrections programs that are based on scientific evidence about what works.

But over the last decade, the state's commitment to this sensible approach has wavered. A growing number of expensive prison beds are occupied by nonviolent offenders, while spending on local public safety programs has been cut. Now, Oregon's nonviolent prison population is expected to grow by an alarming 14 percent over the next 10 years, and state officials say they need 2,000 new prison beds to keep pace.

What does this mean for the state's taxpayers? A \$600 million tab.

While the high cost is reason enough for Oregonians to be alarmed, it is not the only cause for concern. When I look at Oregon's proposed corrections spending, I ask the question every conservative should ask of any government program: Will taxpayers get the best result for the lowest cost?

In this case, the answer is unequivocally no, and other states have the evidence and experience to prove it.

Texas is just one state where policy makers have found they can protect and even improve public safety while reducing incarceration. Like Oregon, Texas was facing the prospect of adding thousands of prison beds, just as it had for the past 20 years. Instead, state leaders took a hard look at the data, slammed the brakes on new construction and invested in a variety of local alternatives designed to reduce recidivism. These have included swift and certain graduated sanctions, incentives to promote compliance with the terms of probation, and drug courts and other problem-solving courts.

The verdict is in and Texas is reaping dividends from its decision to strengthen alternative approaches. Since Texas passed its comprehensive corrections reform package in 2007, the recidivism rate is down by 25 percent, crime rates have fallen to the lowest level since 1973, and the state has avoided nearly \$2 billion in prison costs.

Similar reforms have been signed into law in Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. In fact, all 17 states that reduced incarceration rates between 2000 and 2010 saw their crime rates fall as well.

I have joined Newt Gingrich, Ed Meese, Bill Bennett and others in supporting an initiative called Right on Crime, which brings together conservative leaders who are eager to see our criminal justice system work better. We are proud to say our group and

other conservatives have helped push innovative approaches to the forefront of the corrections debate.

Oregon's Commission on Public Safety is now engaged in a critical effort to get the state back on track by developing proposals that would hold offenders accountable, keep government spending in check and, most importantly, keep communities safe. Oregon taxpayers can hope that the commission will learn from the successes of anti-crime, pro-taxpayer reforms, and build on Oregon's past reforms.

— Grover Norquist is president of Americans for Tax Reform and signatory for Right on Crime.

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