



Sentence smarter, not longer

Measure makes careful changes to cut prison costs while making state safer

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Along with crafting a balanced budget and grappling with state pension costs, Oregon lawmakers are considering changes in sentencing rules designed to prevent \$600 million in new prison costs over the next decade. The legislation deserves support.

Oregon's prison population has doubled since 1995. Since 2,000, that population has grown four times faster than the general population and the state's imprisonment rate has increased three times faster than the national average.

What's more, the prison population is forecast to increase by an additional 2,300 in the next 10 years. A majority of those inmates will be serving time for nonviolent offenses.

Oregon already spends \$1.3 billion on prisons every two years. The projected growth will add \$600 million in prison construction and operating costs over the next decade.

Faced with this reality, Gov. John Kitzhaber appointed a public safety commission to examine solutions. The commission spent more than a year examining Oregon's prison system and those of other states, and its findings have led to a bill now before the Legislature.

The measure would make changes in sentences for carefully selected crimes and shift the system's emphasis from incarceration to community corrections, drug and mental health treatment, and post-prison supervision. Probation, which has been shown to be effective in preventing repeat crimes, costs \$12 a day, compared with prison costs of \$85 a day. But community corrections funding has been shrinking. So has funding for mental health and drug treatment.

The legislation, House Bill 3194, would make 19 policy changes designed to do a better job of preventing criminals from reoffending while spending less money. The measure would reserve prison beds for the most serious, violent offenders; reduce the time nonviolent inmates spend behind bars by using proven community corrections programs instead; carefully measure the effectiveness of those programs; and reinvest the money saved in community corrections, victims services, law enforcement and specialty courts.

The more controversial elements involve carefully targeted changes to a few mandatory minimum sentences imposed by voters under Measure 11 and lengthy sentences for some repeat drug offenders under Measure 57.

It's important to note that nothing in HB 3194 would shorten the sentence of anyone now in prison or cause them to be released. It would apply only to sentences imposed in the future.

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It's also important to know that Oregon is not breaking new ground with these changes. In fact, it's playing catch-up. Other states have successfully made similar changes, saving taxpayers money while keeping them safer by reducing recidivism.

Among those states is one with a reputation for being especially tough on crime: Texas.

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