



The Promise of Measure 57 Coalition

Individuals and Organizations Working Together to Find a Better Way to Fight Crime

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Association of Oregon Community Mental Health Programs

The Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde

Human Services Coalition of Oregon

Juvenile Rights Project

League of Women Voters of Oregon

National Association of Social Workers, Oregon Chapter

Oregon Alliance of Children's Programs

Oregon Business Association

Oregon Criminal Defense Lawyers Association

Oregon Education Association

Oregon Prevention Education & Recovery Association

Partnership for Safety and Justice

SEIU, Local 503

Self Enhancement, Inc.

Stand for Children

HB 2335

The Oregonian

Budget crisis could curtail prison boom

By Susan Goldsmith

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Excerpted

With nearly 14,000 people locked up in state prisons and another 35,000 under supervision from the Department of Corrections, criminal justice has been one of Oregon's most recession-proof industries.

The department's budget has grown at a 20 percent clip each biennium since 1995, and every household in the state pays \$1,414 every two years to fund corrections.



Adam Duckworth gets in some reading on his bottom bunk at Columbia River Correctional Institute in Northeast Portland. Growing incarceration numbers coupled with a huge state budget deficit is prompting state government leaders in Salem to debate whether to retool the way Oregon manages corrections.

Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

But with a \$4 billion state budget shortfall, legislators have tough choices to make about crime and punishment. If any real reform is to be made, however, it must pass one giant hurdle: Voter-passed initiatives.

In 1994, the public approved a measure that mandated much longer sentences for 16 crimes. That in turn drove the number of inmates in the state much higher, while keeping them there longer.

Lawmakers face either overhauling the criminal justice system or continuing down the same path, watching corrections eat up more and more revenue.

While the state's prison population has grown to nearly 14,000 people, crime has plummeted in every category. Criminal justice advocates say Oregon's model is a success, but researchers and data from here and across the nation show something different: Only a small percentage of the drop in crime can be attributed to more prisons and longer sentences.

In Salem these days, the criminal justice debates under way are philosophical: Should the state simply let large numbers of inmates walk free to balance the budget in the short term or retool the way Oregon manages corrections?

Some legislators and even the head of the Department of Corrections, a former Republican legislator, are quietly pushing for a new approach to criminal justice -- one that allows for a range of sanctions for lawbreakers so fewer people end up in prison.

“This is a structural nightmare. This is the box the Legislature is in,” said Max Williams, director of Oregon’s Department of Corrections. “If we can’t change the size of the box, we are going to be stuck.”

Ballot-box mandates

When Oregon voters handcuffed the Legislature in 1994 with Measure 11, they imposed long mandatory prison terms for 16 violent and sex-related offenses, required juveniles be prosecuted as adults for those crimes, and prohibited any earned time credit for anyone who received a Measure 11 sentence. At the same time, voters changed the state constitution to prevent lawmakers from tampering with sentences.

Then last fall, voters approved Measure 57, which mandated longer sentences for repeat property thieves and is expected to cost the state another \$74 million in the next two years alone. ...

Oregon is not alone in facing skyrocketing corrections costs. A March report from The Pew Charitable Trusts found that one in 31 people in the United States is in prison or jail, or on probation or parole.

In the past two decades, Pew found that the nation's correctional spending rose by 300 percent, outpacing every other government service from education to transportation. As correctional spending soared, crime rates fell to historic lows, even in states that put far fewer people behind bars, like New York. In Oregon, violent crime has plummeted 45 percent since 1996.

But criminal justice data show that get-tough-on-crime policies, like Oregon's Measure 11, account for a small percentage of the crime decrease across the nation. Here, the state's Criminal Justice Commission credits 13 percent of the 45 percent decrease in violent crime since 1996 to Measure 11.

Explaining the dramatic declines in crime rates is complex. No one is certain exactly why crime has fallen so low, but think tanks, researchers and Oregon's Criminal Justice Commission point to numerous factors, including demographic shifts, more people behind bars, improved economic conditions throughout the 1990s, and changing illegal drug manufacturing.

But Oregon district attorneys and crime victim advocates say the state's criminal justice template should be celebrated, not eviscerated by legislators. ...

David Rogers, executive director of the nonprofit group Partnership for Safety and Justice, would like legislators to look at what other states have done to reduce prison costs. "States all over the country have woken up and found they are dumping way too much money into incarceration, and it's the most expensive and least effective way of maintaining public safety."

Oregon's revised budget numbers, released late last week, require the Department of Corrections to reduce spending by \$77.8 million in the next two years -- a 9.3 percent cut.

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