

Oregon is smart on crime, but needs to be smart on costs

By John Foote

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I read with interest the recent opinion piece in your newspaper, authored by Grover Norquist, one of a small handful of conservative figures who have partnered with the Washington, D.C.-based Pew Center to advocate for closing prisons across the nation. Now the Pew Center is in Oregon attempting to do the same here — advocating that we deal with crime problems by allowing more convicted criminals to remain out of custody while they are treated for their behavior, in hopes that they might not continue to commit crimes. And as they have done in other states, the Pew Center has enlisted the assistance of Norquist to advocate for their position.

Both the Pew Center and Norquist point to the state of Texas as an example of the direction that Oregon should take to “get smart on crime.” Their reliance on Texas as a beacon for justice policy is oddly misplaced. For all that the state of Texas might have done to reduce its number of prison inmates, the incarceration rate in that state is still twice as high as it is in Oregon, almost half of inmates are nonviolent offenders and the state’s violent crime rate is almost twice as high as ours. Prison economization there has been achieved by turning vast segments of their prison system over to private corporations, resulting in a trail of lawsuits for the mistreatment of inmates.

We doubt that Oregonians would choose to trade our lower crime rates and our lower incarceration rates for the private prisons and greater crime that exist in Texas today. If Texas is ever to achieve the success in justice policy that we already enjoy here in Oregon, it must look forward to many, many more years of additional reforms.

The reality is that Oregon’s correction system is recognized as a shining example for the rest of the nation, and not the other way around. We have the 33rd highest incarceration rate in the nation, but nonetheless have been second in the nation in the reduction of violent crime since 1995. (Even after its reforms, Texas still has the fourth highest incarceration rate in the country.) We have the lowest percentage of nonviolent offenders in prison of any state in the nation. In Oregon only 31 percent of prison inmates are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes, whereas in Texas almost half of inmates are nonviolent offenders, even after Norquist’s trumpeted reforms. In Oregon, only a quarter of convicted felons are sentenced to prison, as opposed to a national average of 40 percent. Oregon is probably the only state in the nation that requires by statute the use of scientifically validated programs to treat offenders. In short, our state “got smart on crime” many years ago, and we did it without the help of out-of-state advocacy groups like the Pew Center, and Norquist.

Where Oregon has indeed failed to get smart is on controlling prison costs, and curiously no one in state government has shown much inclination to tackle that problem. Oregon has one of the most expensive daily inmate costs in the nation, and the American Corrections Association found that it led the nation in increased inmate costs in the last biennium. If we are spending too much money on corrections, it is not because we are locking up too many criminals; we are not. It is because our prison administrative and labor costs are much higher than in most other states. Yet the leadership of the current Commission on Public Safety has repeatedly attempted to take any discussion of prison administration and costs off the table, and has concentrated solely on saving money by sending fewer convicted felons to prison. One might have expected Norquist, who made his name as an advocate of leaner government, to have taken up this issue, rather than venturing into an area where he has no expertise and where he simply got his facts wrong.

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