

Our preoccupation with incarceration costs us in education

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Faced with high unemployment rates and crippling debt, Oregon students are stumbling under the burden of rising tuition costs. On Feb. 21, hundreds of Oregon college students lobbied lawmakers in Salem and gathered on the campuses of Eastern Oregon and Portland State

Universities to protest the rising cost of higher education. Annual tuition and fees have doubled over the last decade, and the Legislature's 2011 holdback of 3.5 percent of the education budget has exacerbated the problem.

Partnership for Safety and Justice (PSJ) joined the Oregon Student Association in its day of protest and lobbying because, as an organization committed to building safe and healthy communities, we know that education is a key factor for success. We also know that students have a difficult job lobbying the legislature to stop the increasing cost of tuition and fees. In such a challenging budgetary climate, policymakers have been looking at a decade of deficits. Because they haven't found the political will to raise revenue, their approach to budget deficits has been to simply cut funding and services. Legislators regularly ask students lobbying to protect higher education funding: Where would you like us to take the money from? Do you have an idea of where we can make smart cuts?

Well, we have an idea. Oregon is one of only a handful of states in the nation that spends more money on prisons than on higher education, a statistic that is often met with dropped jaws by students struggling for financial aid. The Department of Corrections has been one of the fastest growing state agency budgets that is eating up an ever-increasing percentage of the state's General Fund. This does not bode well for Oregon's future and represents a deeply misplaced set of priorities and an

archaic approach to addressing crime and public safety.

Why is Oregon's prison spending so out of control? Oregon can trace the trend directly back to 1994, when voters approved Ballot Measure 11. Measure 11 established mandatory minimum sentences for approximately 20 "person-to-person" crimes, and it automatically sends youth charged with any of those crimes, aged 15 and over, directly to adult court. Mandatory minimums are a one-size-fits-all approach to criminal sentencing that prevent judges from using their discretion and prevents Oregon from using smarter approaches to accountability and crime prevention.

Shortly after the passage of Measure 11, Oregon's governor and legislature approved plans for more than 8,000 new prison beds, including siting for six new prisons. Since then, the legislature has authorized more than \$1 billion for prison construction. As anticipated, Oregon's prison population exploded — from 6,000 inmates in 1995 to more than 14,000 today, and the Department of Corrections budget more than tripled.

Delusional proponents of these mandatory minimums point to Measure 11 as the reason for the 40-year lows in crime that Oregon is currently experiencing. Yet the evidence doesn't stack up in favor of Measure 11. Not only are crime rates similarly down all over America, but many states that have reduced reliance on incarceration have seen even greater overall drops in crime. These states are proving that there are more effective ways to combat crime. Notably, these states are investing in drug and alcohol treatment, re-entry support for formerly incarcerated people returning to the community, and diversion programs like drug courts.

Shifting just a fraction of the dollars now spent on prisons to drug treatment, victim's services, and other crime prevention methods would be a smarter, more cost-effective approach to improving public safety. We know that for every \$1 invested in drug and alcohol treatment, there is more

than \$7 of public benefits related to crime prevention, for example. Moving toward smart investments in programs that are proven to reduce crime and recidivism will produce long-term savings to taxpayers, and generate hundreds of millions of dollars available for areas that are desperate for funding, such as education.

Although education isn't often pinned as a core approach to crime prevention, the numbers show that students who graduate from high school are much less likely to wind up in the corrections system. A 2008 Oregon-specific report put together by state law enforcement offices and prosecutors found that increasing graduation rates by 10 percentage points would prevent approximately 1,300 aggravated assaults in Oregon each year.

The strategy of strengthening our investment in community infrastructure to reduce crime is known as "justice reinvestment." A key component of this reinvestment framework is stopping the pattern of cyclical crime and imprisonment by addressing the root causes of crime. By passing safe and sensible sentencing reform, we save millions from reduced need for prison beds which we can reinvest into smarter approaches to building safe and healthy communities.

Encouragingly, Gov. John Kitzhaber and legislative leaders are expecting a major sentencing reform package for the 2013 Legislature that will draw on a report put forth by Kitzhaber's Commission on Public Safety. Many policymakers are waking up and realizing that Oregon's future will not be found behind bars. But in order to see significant corrections reform passed in 2013, it will take a broad-based coalition to support it. Oregon's students and education advocates have joined forces with Partnership for Safety and Justice because they realize one of the biggest threats to education funding in Oregon is our state's exaggerated and antiquated emphasis on incarceration.

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JUSTICE**

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the reasons for my resistance

julie mcurdy

still we stand
ready
for the next assault
to our
dignity
to our senses
to our sustainability
locked and loaded
we stand
just because the
genocide you peddle is
now bottled
and loaded into rigs or pipes
doesn't make it any more or less
genocide
yes i am
new to the knowing
and so the knowledge imprint
is still fresh real raw
starvation
disease
assimilation didnt work
beating us for speaking our own languages
or practicing our own traditions
only further shaped our
determination
to hold sacred
the gifts our ancestors
gave us
look who's shining now
all across this nation
the nations
are reclaiming what you stole
hsssssssssss ...
rape

mayhem and murder
didn't work
because
you forgot
to kill us all
and while we remain
while even a drop
of our blood and dna

get to the next generation
we will remain
and we stand
ready
to reclaim
what
our own
ancestors
kept
for us at the cost
of their blood and their bones
yes we
still stand
just because you
now bottle up your
genocide
in prettier packages
doesn't mean
we are unaware of
the intent
just because you phrase
things in more
politically correct verbage
doesn't make the lies you tell
any more palatable
just a reminder

to the ones
who still retain
the ability to hear
the warning in the wind
yes
we still do
stand ready
locked and loaded
just like
rattlesnakes fangs
ready to strike
because
your actions
have left nothing
but
survival as an option
because
we have learned
to hope less
and pray more
from the ones
who went before

you can not kill
the heart of this land
or its people
because
our ancestors taught us
by their example
how to stand
and

some of us
remember the lesson