



JAILING KIDS

HOW PRISONS CHAIN UP MONEY FOR SCHOOLS AND OTHER SERVICES BY ALAN PITTMAN

In blowing its budget on prisons, Oregon is a world leader. Oregon spends a greater portion of its general fund on prisons than any other state in the nation, according to a Pew foundation study last year. The U.S. itself leads the world in prisons, incarcerating a greater share of its population than any other major country.

But with Oregon now closing schools and packing classrooms while teetering on a \$4 billion budget chasm, even politicians are beginning to murmur that when it comes to jailing funding for kids, enough is enough.

COST

Oregon now spends 11 percent of its general fund on prisons, ranking #1 in the nation at almost twice the national average, according to the Pew Center on the States study.

It wasn't always that way. Twenty years ago Oregon was about average in its prison spending. But after the passage of four different minimum sentence measures, Oregon's prison population has almost quadrupled in size to 14,000. State officials estimate that the state will continue to add almost 1,000 new inmates a year.

For each one of those inmates, the cost of building a prison bed is about \$323,000. Operating prisons cost about \$90,000 a year per bed, according to state estimates.

Those big prison bills compete directly for school funding in the state's tight general fund. Due to the recession, the state faces a loss of about a quarter of its general fund budget. About 42 percent of the fund is used to pay for K-12 education. Saving the yearly cost of guarding just

one inmate would be enough to reduce a crowded class size, which could reach 40 students in some districts, by about nine students. New schools cost only about one tenth as much to build as new prisons.

Locally, the 4J school district is looking at axing dozens of teachers, cutting teacher pay and closing schools to meet an estimated 15 percent budget cut of up to \$20 million from the state.

Higher education will also take a big hit with massive tuition increases for students and families already struggling to fund college in the down economy. Even before the cuts, Oregon ranked third in the nation for the highest ratio of prison spending to spending on higher education in the nation, according to Pew. Oregon now spends about 6 percent more on prisoners than on college students.

To continue to fund prisons in the face of the \$4 billion budget gap, the state is also looking at cutting thousands of caregivers for the poor, elderly, disabled and toddlers.

Meanwhile, the state is planning to spend more than a half billion dollars to build 1,800 more prison beds in Junction City.

BENEFIT?

So what does Oregon get for all the billions it spends on locking people up? Well, that's hard to say.

Prison proponents argue that higher incarceration rates reduce crime. But the U.S. has both the highest incarceration rates in the world and some of the highest serious crime rates. For example, the U.S. has eight times the incarceration rate of Germany and six times the murder rate.

In the U.S. crime has historically fluctuated up and down during years of rising incarceration rates, according to a study by The Sentencing Project. The reform group found that when comparing states in the U.S., high incarceration rates did not correspond to low crime rates. For example, Texas increased its incarceration rate five times faster than New York state, but New York enjoyed a greater decrease in crime in recent years.

Prison proponents also make the apparently opposite argument that the U.S. has more prisons because it has a higher crime rate. Ignoring the logical inconsistency (prisons prevent crime, but crime causes prisons?), the high U.S. incarceration rate appears more related to politics than crime statistics. For example, the U.S. locks up four times more people per robbery than does Germany.

In Oregon the crime rate has been

steadily dropping for two decades. Violent crime is down 28 percent and property crime is down 46 percent since 1988. But that hasn't stopped the continued political push for more and more prisons.

EFFICIENCY

If you really want to decrease crime, there are far better and cheaper ways to do it than building more and more prisons, studies show.

Because the worst offenders were jailed long ago, Oregon's economic prison benefit per dollar spent has declined from about a three-to-one ratio to about a one-to-one ratio, according to a recent Oregon Criminal Justice Commission report.

In contrast, preschool programs have a 16-to-one economic payback in reduced crime, unemployment and school dropouts, according to Pew.

A U.S. Department of Justice study of crime prevention measures in other countries found that probation spending had twice the bang for the buck at reducing crime as prison spending, parent training four times, and school programs seven times the benefit of prisons per dollar.

A RAND Corporation study found drug treatment was seven times more effective at reducing crime than incarceration.

About 75 percent of Oregon inmates need substance abuse treatment, and about 44 percent need mental health treatment, according to the Department of Corrections.

If the state had funded that treatment *before* prison rather than during prison, a lot of crime and jail cost could have been