

OPINION

A Prison Nation in the Spotlight

Money woes ease destructive policies

BY WILLIAM A. COLLINS

The United States has more citizens behind bars per capita than any other nation. No, this quirk doesn't reflect an especially felonious gene in our national DNA. It exposes embarrassing shortfalls in our public policy.

Take mental health, for example. Many states once featured large "hospitals" to warehouse the mentally ill. With an avalanche of new drugs and elevated levels of public parsimony, those facilities have largely closed. Countless heavily medicated former patients permanently impose on their weary relatives instead, while myriad others inhabit ill-

prepared nursing homes or are homeless.

Plenty more of the mentally ill — for the most part inadequately treated — fill our prisons. It's a major human rights problem.



There are more than seven million imprisoned Americans. Along with people who might have been held in a mental institution in years past, they include large numbers of low-level, non-violent offenders, commonly convicted of simple drug possession.

In other countries such crimes typically lead to fines, supervised home confinement, halfway houses, restitution payments, or other non-incarceration penalties. In many places, simple drug possession isn't a crime at all, or at least not one that the police pursue.

But in the United States, law enforcement has somewhat different goals from those of other countries: profits and jobs.

Private companies now house many of our prisoners, and such firms are understandably eager to maintain a large inventory. Softer penalties aren't on their agenda, nor do all police, prosecutors, or jailers' associations pine for reforms to reduce arrests or prison populations. Those

socially destructive scenario may now be changing, though not due to any pangs of conscience or international social pressure. It's about money. We have entered a particularly tax-resistant era, and governors are scrambling for budget items to cut. Thus, prisons have suf-

fered the well-deserved misfortune of being caught in the spotlight.

Perhaps the best-known among private prison supporters is Texas Gov. Rick Perry. His presidential campaign coffers brim with their donations, in part because Texas is a national leader in turning convicts over to shady entrepreneurs.

Prison corruption is another big problem. In Pennsylvania, a couple of judges were caught after many years in a kickback scheme to sentence minor juvenile offenders to private prisons to beef up their enrollment. Conservative ideologues are torn. Those who lobby hardest for lower taxes are often the same folks who fancy the costly war on drugs. They don't mind that expensive jails keep a disproportionate number of African Americans and Latinos away from the polls.

To spend or not to spend? That's their dilemma.

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folks have good jobs and generally prefer not to lose them, especially in this economy.

Local governments also get into the act. If your town is economically dependent on a nearby prison, you might reasonably lobby your legislature to keep it open. Scores do.

Fortunately, aspects of this

fered the well-deserved misfortune of being caught in the spotlight.

That could mean that at last there will be some progress toward fixing California's prison system, which has long attracted attention for its dramatic overcrowding and abuse of inmates.

Perhaps the best-known

Closing the Income Gap for Fairness

It's not about taking money from the rich

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Under our current tax system, the rich are getting richer while the middle class slides into poverty.

Those who were poor before the recession are still poor and have little hope of changing their situations.

We're not talking about an income gap here. We're talking about income inequality. In fact, the distribution of household income in the U.S. is more unequal today than in was three

decades ago.

According to a report released by the Congressional Budget Office, after-tax income for



America's highest-income households, the richest one percent saw a 275 percent growth from 1979 to 2007, while the poorest 20 percent experi-

enced only 18 percent growth. Those who sit in the middle experienced just under 40 percent growth.

History shows us that the wider the income gap, the more unequal the distribution of wealth, the closer a society gets to political unrest. We are seeing evidence of this in the growing

Occupy Wall Street movement, which began in September in Manhattan.

Since those first groups of demonstrators met to protest the unhealthy alliance between government, big business and the extremely wealthy, the movement has spread to over 100 cities. Marchers are working to expose — and hopefully spur a government response to change — the unequal distribution of the nation's wealth. They are frustrated that just one percent of the nation's population controls over 50 percent of the wealth and want to see that change.

President Obama proposed a plan to increase taxes on those making more than \$1 million per

year. The revenue from the increase would help balance the national budget over time, and pay for a comprehensive jobs program.

Of course, the President has his Republican detractors who have put forth their own tax proposals. Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain has his 9-9-9 plan, which proposes a flat 9-percent business, individual income and national sales tax. Republican Rick Perry, another presidential hopeful, has proposed a flat 20 percent income tax.

The plans proposed by Cain and Perry are regressive and, if ever adopted, will negatively affect the poor. Under both of

these plans, a majority of American households would end up paying more in taxes, while a great majority of millionaires would end up paying less.

We need a tax plan that is fair, but also takes into account class and taxes accordingly. This isn't about taking money from the rich — it's about fairly distributing and taxing income in a fairer manner.

No tax plan will be perfect but we must work to develop one that closes the income gap, not widen it further.

Judge Mathis is a longtime advocate for equal justice. His life story of a street youth who rose from jail to judge has provided hope to millions.

The Portland Observer Established 1970

USPS 959-680

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PUBLISHER: Charles H. Washington

EDITOR: Michael Leighton

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER: Mark Washington

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Paul Neufeldt

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