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Oregonians Report Broad Support for Policies that Could Reduce Prison Population

Research Brief

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI)

Jody L. Sundt, Ph.D.



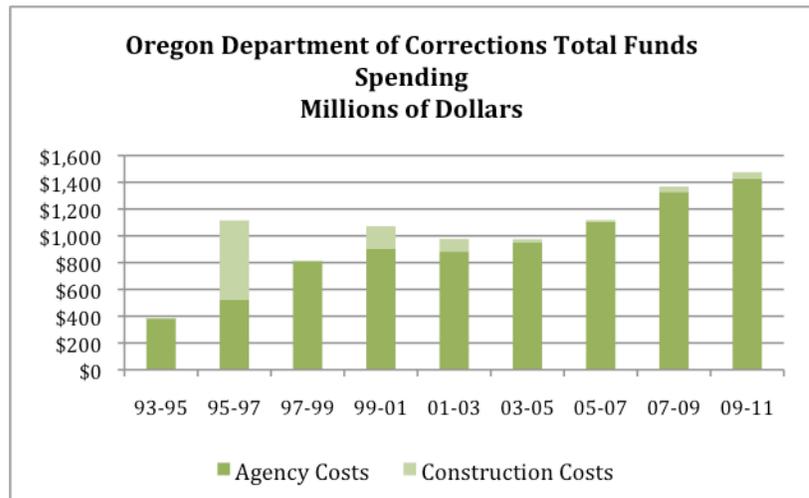
Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University

The Cost of Corrections

Key Findings

- Nine out of ten Oregonians support at least one policy that could reduce the prison population.
- Targeted policies that protect the public and maintain accountability are favored.
- Across-the-board reductions to prison sentences to reduce government spending are opposed.
- Victims of crime are no more, or less, likely to support reducing the use of prison to cut government spending.

Correctional spending is one of the largest and fastest growing parts of the Oregon budget, making it a target for increased scrutiny. According to a 2011 Legislative Fiscal Office report, the Department of Correction's (DOC) budget represented close to 9% of the combined General and Lottery Funds in the 2009-2011 biennium. Since 1993-1995, correctional spending increased almost three-fold from close to \$400 million to \$1.4 billion. Moreover, the DOC's share of the state budget almost doubled since the mid-1980s. In the context of declining revenue forecasts and increased demand for public services, state agencies are under pressure to reduce costs and operate more efficiently.



ABOUT THE SURVEY

Results for this report are based on telephone interviews conducted June 15 – July 27, 2010 among a random sample of 1569 adults 18 years of age or older living in the state of Oregon. The Portland State University Survey Research Laboratory conducted the interviewing in English and Spanish.

Racial and ethnic minorities were oversampled to obtain more reliable results from members of these sub-groups. Women were overrepresented due to their higher participation rates. The subsamples are weighted so that the results accurately reflect the proportion of women in the population of Oregon.

The error attributed to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for the sample as a whole is plus or minus 2.47 percentage points.

For more information about the research methodology contact: Dr. Jody Sundt, sundt@pdx.edu.

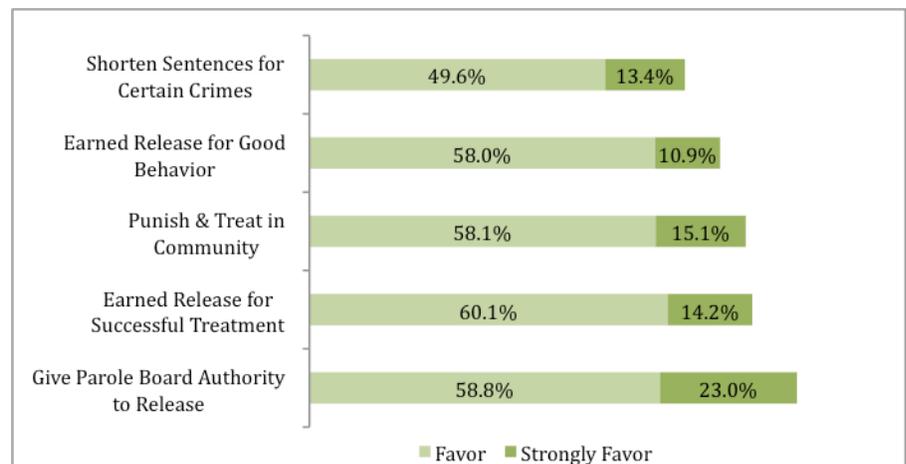
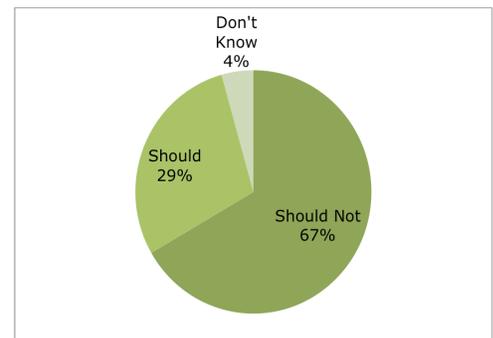
Does the public support reducing the prison population?

A statewide survey of Oregonians conducted in the summer of 2010 found little support for the proposal to “shrink the size of the prison population to reduce government spending.” Two-thirds of Oregonians rejected this idea. The survey began just days after a well publicized DOC budget proposal recommended closing three state prisons and releasing approximately 1,000 low-risk inmates to cover budget shortfalls. Amidst strong resistance to proposed prison closures, emergency reserves were used to restore \$18 million to the DOC budget.

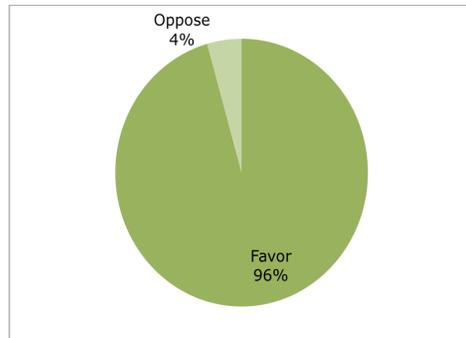
Recent experiences, as well as these survey findings, raise doubts about the willingness of Oregonians to reduce the use of prison. When asked to put aside general preference and consider support for specific policies, however, fully 96% of citizens favored at least one option that could reduce the use of incarceration.

Shortening sentences for certain crimes was favored by 63% of Oregonians. Seventy percent or more of those polled favored allowing prisoners to earn early release for good behavior or successful treatment. Three-fourths of citizens favored developing options to punish and treat offenders in the community. Finally, 8 out of 10 Oregonians favored “giving the parole board authority to keep dangerous offenders in prison longer but release other prisoners early.”

Should Oregon shrink the size of the prison population to reduce government spending?



96% of Oregonians Support at Least One Policy that Could Reduce Imprisonment



Although broad support for policies that could reduce the prison population was reported by large percentages of Oregonians, few citizens strongly favored any of these options. Policies that protect the public, either through treatment or by keeping dangerous offenders incarcerated, received the highest levels of support. Together the results indicate that Oregonians are willing to support targeted policies that could reduce the use of prisons, but oppose

across-the-board reductions in sentences to reduce spending. Any reductions to imprisonment cannot come at the cost of public safety or offender accountability.

Underlying Attitudes

- Just 14% of Oregonians believe that “punishment—such as longer sentences and more prisons” should be the top priority for dealing with crime. Prevention was favored by 42% of those surveyed, law enforcement was endorsed by 23%, and the remaining 20% selected rehabilitation.
- 87% of Oregonians report “always” or “almost always” feeling safe in their neighborhoods.
- Victims of crime are no more, or less, supportive of reducing the use of prison to cut government spending.
- African Americans, men, residents of the Portland-metro region, and those who identified themselves as politically liberal were more likely to support reducing imprisonment.

Safe Communities, Effective Punishments

Commentary

To lower correctional costs, Oregon will need to reduce the number of offenders sent to prison or reduce the length of time offenders spend locked up. Significant costs saving will likely require both. We find that Oregonians are open to these options, but favor targeted policies that protect the public and uphold offender accountability. Oregonians want safe communities and effective punishments.

Although imprisonment can reduce crime, studies show that it is one of the least cost-effective methods of protecting the public. In addition, more prison does not necessarily mean less crime. The crime savings associated with incarceration are vulnerable to diminishing returns, where less crime prevention is achieved for additional investments in prison once a saturation point is reached. Respected research indicates that the saturation point was reached in the early 2000s. Additional incarceration is unlikely to result in large increases in safety. Where cost-effective alternatives exist, these options are likely to receive broad public support. Citizens are receptive to the need for better returns on our public safety investments.

Where cost-effective alternatives to prison exist, these options are likely to receive broad public support.



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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

What's Inside

THE COST OF CORRECTIONS

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR
REDUCING IMPRISONMENT

SAFE COMMUNITIES,
EFFECTIVE PUNISHMENTS

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KEY FINDINGS

- Nine out of ten Oregonians support at least one policy that could reduce the prison population.
- Targeted polices that protect the public from dangerous offenders and maintain accountability are favored.
- Across-the-board reductions to prison sentences to reduce government spending are opposed.
- Victims of crime are no more, or less, likely to support reducing the use of prison to cut government spending.

For more information about CJPRI visit
www.cjpri.ccj.pdx.edu/

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute

The Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Division of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University. CJPRI conducts research for criminal justice and community organizations, improves the body of literature pertaining to criminology and criminal justice through independent research projects, and provides policy makers throughout the state with a forum in which issues of policy and practice may be explored, using objective, performance-based criteria.