

5 Comments

Recommend 26

Search [advanced search](#) | [archives](#)

Chron.com Web Search Businesses by **YAHOO!**

Let's make prison system accountable

By **MARC LEVIN**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
Jan. 8, 2011, 8:56PM

Share

- Del.icio.us
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Email
- Digg
- Yahoo! Buzz
- StumbleUpon

Recommend

Marc Levin and 25 others recommend this.



Reduced spending. **Limited government.** Accountability. Conservatives campaigned on these fundamentals during the 2010 election, and voters rewarded them with control of at least one chamber in 19 state legislatures and a 63-seat gain in the **U.S. House of Representatives.**

What will this mean for criminal-justice policy? In the past, these conservative principles have too often been forgotten here, with "lock 'em up and throw away the key" the default mindset.

However, prominent conservatives are charting a new course. Leaders like former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, former **U.S. Attorney General** Ed Meese and **Americans for Tax Reform** President **Grover Norquist** have signed the statement of principles for the Right on Crime campaign, which can be followed at www.rightoncrime.com. Led by the conservative **Texas Public**

Policy Foundation, this project was launched this month to offer an improved approach to criminal justice that is both tough and smart.

One reason Right on Crime is needed is that taxpayers have not been getting a good return on their investment when it comes to criminal-justice spending, and historically few have held the system accountable for that — not even conservatives. In most cases, funding for prison facilities is allocated according to volume, rather than outcomes. In other words, more prisoners mean more money.

As a result, we have created a system that grows when it fails rather than one with incentives to deliver the best public safety return for every taxpayer dollar spent. The result: One in 31 Americans is under correctional supervision and one in 100 is in prison, which means a bigger government footprint and a heavier burden on taxpayers.

A certain level of prison capacity is clearly essential for public safety, but the question is whether spending the next dollar on putting another low-risk, nonviolent offender in prison makes **us** safer than spending it on better probation supervision, drug courts or policing.

The limited data available suggests that the boom in the size and cost of prisons over recent decades has reached a point of diminishing returns. Research reveals that an increased incarceration rate - and its increased cost - does not necessarily correlate to increased public safety. From 2000 to 2007, New York achieved a 25 percent reduction in crime while its incarceration rate fell 16 percent. During this same period, Florida's crime rate dropped only 11 percent, even though it increased its incarceration rate by 16 percent.

Some states have begun to think outside the cell, transitioning to an approach of rewarding results. **Arizona** enacted performance-based probation funding in 2008 that gives a share of the savings to county probation departments when they reduce both the number of probationers revoked to prison and the number convicted of a new offense. Within a year, the Grand Canyon State saw a 12.8 percent decrease in the number of probationers who returned to prison, as both new crimes by probationers and revocations for rules violations declined.

Conservatives advocate for this kind of accountability in nearly every other area of government. Why not criminal justice?

Texas, renowned for its tough-on-crime approach, began shifting its funding paradigm and moving toward greater accountability in 2005. Essentially, the Lone Star State linked adult probation department grants to performance instead of only the number of probationers. Since then, the state's crime rate has dropped 10.8 percent, reaching its lowest point since 1973.

Through this measure and other efforts to strengthen community corrections, Texas avoided \$2 billion in prison costs. Moreover, nearly every participating department reduced the number of probationers who re-entered prison as a result of rules violations or new crimes.

Incentivizing community-based approaches to the extent they reduce reoffending is a no-lose proposition. By holding accountable and reforming amenable nonviolent offenders in the community and prioritizing prisons for dangerous and career criminals, we both limit the size of government and make it more cost-effective at improving public safety.

Conservatives earned votes last November because they stood against wasteful spending, big government and a lack of accountability. Now is the time to fight for conservative principles in the realm of criminal justice. With the right policy approach, we can cut costs, make our communities safer, and introduce accountability to a government bureaucracy that too often has gone unchecked.

Levin is a director of the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

[Marine vet battles HOA over his too-tall flagpole](#)
[New converts flocking to ancient church in Houston](#)
[Houston woman charged in slaying of witness in robbery case](#)
[AZ shooting targets US congresswoman, kills 6](#)
[Second suspect sought in Arizona shooting](#)

[Marine vet battles HOA over his too-tall flagpole\(931\)](#)
[Congressional Officials say congresswoman shot \(593\)](#)
[14 headless bodies found in Mexico resort city \(144\)](#)
[AP sources: Ariz. gunman ID'ed as Jared Laughner \(91\)](#)
[DeLay lawyer criticizes immunity offers\(87\)](#)

[Taking the lead on educating Latinos](#)
[E.J. Dionne: It's time to tone down the rhetoric](#)
[Letters to the editor](#)

[Parole, probation violators add to crowding](#)
[Hit and run](#)
[Lt. Gov. Dewhurst calling for more prisons](#)
[Clinton terror](#)
[Agency helps needy families cope with problems, rebuild lives](#)
[Life without parole among bills signed by Perry](#)
[Moonbats and Warhawks](#)
[Some Houston illegal immigrants get probation for crimes](#)
[Suspect in girl's death could have been arrested before](#)
[MADD backs plan to go easier on Texas' DWI first-timers](#)

Domino's Pizza
 2 MEDIUM 2-TOPPING PIZZAS \$5.99 EACH (2-pizza minimum)
 MAKE ONE A MEDIUM SPECIALTY PIZZA \$2.00 MORE
 ORDER NOW
 Introducing Our New Wisconsin 6 Cheese.

Read More

From Chron.com:

Powered by one spot

Judge sentences Tom DeLay to 3 years in prison

AUSTIN, Texas — A judge ordered former U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay to serve three years in prison Monday for his role in a scheme to...

Tom DeLay sentenced to 3 years in prison

Former U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay today was sentenced to three years in prison for his conviction on a charge of...

Tom DeLay's sentence: 3 years in prison

AP photoTom DeLay awaits his fate at the Travis County courthouse. This report was written by R.G. Ratcliffe of the Austin bureau....

DeLay gets 3-year sentence on conspiracy...

Former U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay today was sentenced to three years in prison for his conviction on a charge of...

US court demands WikiLeaks'...

LONDON — U.S. investigators have gone to court to demand details about WikiLeaks' Twitter account, according to documents...

From Around the Web:

Tom DeLay to Serve 3 Years in Prison

Jan 10, 2011 | TheStreet.com

Reality Star Hatch Accused Of Probation Violation

Jan 10, 2011 | W.E.N.N

Judge sentences Tom DeLay to 3 years in prison (AP)

Jan 10, 2011 | Yahoo! News: Most Popular

AP: DeLay Sentenced to Three Years in Prison

Jan 10, 2011 | The Corner

Judge: Tom DeLay to serve 3 years in prison

Jan 10, 2011 | CNN.com - Politics

ADVERTISEMENT

Related Topics:

[United States House of Representatives](#) • [Texas](#) • [Arizona](#) • [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) • [Grover Norquist](#)



Add Your Comment

New to the site?

To use commenting, you need to sign up.

Already a member?

Please log in.

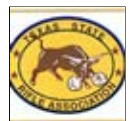
[Forgot Password?](#)

Email

Password

Remember Me

Most Popular Comments



41magisfine 10:44 AM on January 9, 2011

There is some good logic in seeking better accountability in this area. However, there are other options which also should be explored. Decrease prison costs by decreasing the level of comfort provided to the prisoners. Right now the thought of our prisons is not much of a deterrent to criminals. Look to Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Arizona for an example. His prisoners are treated humanely, but not lavishly and they are required to work to defray the cost of their confinement. A multi-pronged approach is clearly needed here.

(4) (1) POPULARITY: 3 | | [\[Report Abuse\]](#)

▶ 1 reply





deanbecker 12:56 PM on January 9, 2011

Judge people by their actions, not the contents of their pocket.

(2) (1) POPULARITY: 1 | | [\[Report Abuse\]](#)

[View Comments \(5\)](#)

<p>CHRON Home Houston & Texas Nation Business Sports Entertainment Life Travel Corrections Blogs</p>	<p>Weather Chron Commons Traffic</p> <p>TOPICS Small Business PetsHouston MomHouston HoustonBelief Gardening 29-95</p>	<p>NEIGHBORHOODS Aldine Alief Baytown Bellaire Clear Lake Conroe Cy-Fair East End Fort Bend Heights Katy</p>	<p>Kingwood Lake Houston Magnolia Memorial Montrose Pasadena Pearland Spring Tomball West U The Woodlands</p>	<p>MARKETPLACE Jobs Homes Cars Classifieds Place a classified ad Place a retail ad Contests</p>	<p>SERVICES Help Business directory Legal notices Contact us Send us tips About the company Employment opportunities Advertise with us Buy a banner ad</p>	<p>MEMBERSHIP Sign up Log in</p> <p>OTHER EDITIONS Home delivery Mobile RSS feeds Chronicle In Education e-Edition Breaking news alerts</p>
<p>LOCAL SERVICES Houston Attorneys Houston Salons Houston HVAC Contractors</p>			<p> Find Us</p>		<p> Follow Us</p>	

[Privacy statement](#) | [Terms of service](#) | [About Our Ads](#)
 Copyright © 2011 The Houston Chronicle

