

## What it means to be 'Right on Crime'

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Conservatism is not simply about slashing federal budgets or limiting the size and reach of government. Certainly, on the surface, these are the tactics right-of-center advocates use, but at their root, conservative values embrace the principles of capitalism and competition in order to produce better results on a more efficient budget for the taxpayer — all while staying within the boundaries of the Constitution.

As conservatives, we are rightfully eager to insist on these values when it comes to education, pensions, healthcare, and dozens of other government-run programs, but historically, some staunch conservatives have been wary of embracing the “Right” stance when it comes to criminal justice policy.

In 2010 — a year many states laid off teachers, police officers and others in order to fill budget gaps, the United States spent \$68 billion on corrections. With a prison population that is growing 13 times faster than the general population, these costs will only put additional strain on state bottom lines in the years to come.

We have created a system that grows when it fails, and in forming this system, policymakers, prison guard unions, and other special-interest groups have convinced many Americans — especially conservatives — that throwing more money and individuals into the prison system is the only way citizens will remain safe. This is a fallacy.

If we compare Florida and New York, for example, it becomes evident that increased incarceration does not guarantee decreased crime rates. Over the last seven years, the Sunshine State’s prison population increased by 16 percent and the Empire State’s fell by 16 percent. During that same timeframe, New York’s crime rate dropped twice as much as Florida’s. While New York spent less money on prisons than in the past, the state delivered better public safety.

We must be tough on crime, but conservatives can also be tough on the bottom line by embracing strategies that both enhance public safety and save taxpayers’ money.

In December 2010, the nation’s top conservatives joined together as members of the Right on Crime campaign — an initiative that urges states to make sensible and proven reforms to the criminal justice system by adopting policies that cut prison costs while boosting public safety results. Certainly, our communities are safer when dangerous, violent, and career criminals are kept behind bars; however, many non-violent, low-risk offenders can be transformed into contributing members of society, job holders, and taxpayers, if held accountable in the community by being required to obey probation rules, maintain employment, pay restitution, and attend treatment.

The Right on Crime initiative promotes six key principles. First, we need to create a transparent criminal justice system that holds facilities and programs accountable for their results. Second, the victim’s conception of justice, public safety, and the offender’s risk for future criminal conduct must be prioritized when determining the appropriate punishment. Third, the corrections system must emphasize personal responsibility, work, restitution, community service, and treatment during probation, parole and/or a prison sentence. Fourth, we must harness the power of families, charities, faith-based groups, and communities to reform amenable offenders. Fifth, policies must align incentives with our goals of public safety, victim compensation and satisfaction, and cost-effectiveness. Finally, criminal law should be reserved for conduct that is either blameworthy or threatens public safety, not wielded to grow government and undermine economic freedom.

We know this kind of reform will work, because the premise has proven successful in a number of states already. Most notably, tough-on-crime Texas began making these cost-cutting reforms in 2005. Two years later, the Lone Star State decided against building more prisons and instead adopted proven community corrections approaches, such as drug courts — a set of reforms that are forecast to save approximately \$2 billion.

These restructurings reduced Texas's prison population, and for the first time ever, there is no waiting list for drug treatment programs in the state. Most importantly, however, Texas's crime rate dropped 10 percent between 2004 (the year prior to the reforms) and 2009, hitting its lowest point since 1973.

If we are serious about decreasing crime and significantly reducing the probability of future offenses, we have to be serious about making smart financial decisions as well. Contrary to what Grier Weeks (a known advocate for more criminal justice spending) wrote in a [recent Daily Caller article](#), throwing more money at a broken system won't make us safer. Rather, by authorizing an unlimited stream of funding, the failed system is only perpetuated.

Instead, policymakers must take two critical steps. First, they should institute outcome-focused performance measures for all corrections programs. Second, they must overhaul corrections funding so that funds are allocated not only based on how many offenders are in prison or on probation, but in part, based on results such as recidivism, restitution payments, and offender employment rates.

Today, we have thousands of offenders — youth and adult — returning to prison after re-committing a crime, or worse, meeting more hardened inmates and evolving from a non-violent, low-risk offender into a dangerous and violent criminal. Neither the taxpayer nor society benefits when we write a blank check to a system that does not use taxpayer funds to maximize public safety. Instead, we must demand more public safety for every dollar spent and move from a system that grows when it fails to one that rewards results.

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