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Kevin P. Kane and Marc Levin: Correct Louisiana's prison system

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While Gov. Bobby Jindal's proposal to sell state-owned prisons has been the focus of much discussion, it is time to address the broader issue of criminal justice reform in Louisiana.

One in 55 Louisiana adults are behind bars, and half the state's inmates are nonviolent, non-sexual offenders. The Bayou State has the highest incarceration rate per capita in the United States — a designation costing Louisiana taxpayers more than \$665 million in corrections spending annually.

While the prisons are vital to protect the public from violent and dangerous criminals, the "lock 'em up and throw away the key" approach to nonviolent offenders is swamping taxpayers in a flood of red ink. What is more, these crippling costs are failing to deliver a commensurate public safety return for taxpayers.

In fact, Louisiana's 2008 crime rate exceeded the national average by 22 percent while the state's violent crimes nearly doubled the national average. Today's policies aren't working for the people of Louisiana — an idea Jindal echoed during a recent news conference spotlighting criminal justice reform's importance in his cost-cutting agenda.

More spending on prisons does not necessarily translate into greater public safety. Consider this: Over the past seven years, Florida's prison population increased by 16 percent. Meanwhile, New York's fell by 16 percent. During that same period, the Empire State's crime rate dropped twice as much as the Sunshine State's.

Too often, offenders leave prisons as more hardened criminals than when they entered. Louisiana prisons co-mingle nonviolent offenders, at whom we are simply upset, with violent criminals and gang leaders we are afraid of. Nonviolent offenders often can be supervised and treated in the community so they do not become the criminals we are scared of. Evidence shows that many alternatives — such as drug courts, electronic monitoring, day reporting and work restitution programs — can more cost-effectively hold many nonviolent offenders accountable and reduce recidivism.

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