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Conservatives eye criminal justice spending

Organization pushes proactive steps on prison reliance

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Newt Gingrich, Jeb Bush, Ed Meese... They're not names most Americans would associate with a criminal justice reform movement calling for fewer prisons, shorter sentences, and lower incarceration rates.

But they and other conservatives are part of a growing national organization known as "Right on Crime," a response to decades of tough-on-crime policies that have left states like California staggering under astronomical imprisonment costs.

"We are a departure from what's traditionally thought to be conservative on criminal justice," says attorney Marc Levin, the group's founder. "It's not conservative to just throw money at a problem."

A conservative variant of liberal "smart on crime" policies — as opposed to the tough-on-crime rhetoric espoused by politicians of all stripes during the past three decades — the Right on Crime movement has developed an unlikely stance based on fiscal reasoning that at times sounds like an ACLU manifesto.

"Conservatives are known for being tough on crime, but we must also be tough on criminal justice spending," read the group's Statement of Principles.

One way to save money is to reduce "our reliance on prisons, which serve a critical role by incapacitating dangerous offenders and career criminals but are not the solution for every type of offender. And in some instances, they have the unintended consequence of hardening nonviolent, low-risk offenders — making them a greater risk to the public than

when they entered."

In addition to fiscal conservatives, Right on Crime supporters include formerly incarcerated conservatives, such as former California Assemblyman Pat Nolan, who spent two years in federal prison in the 1990s after pleading guilty to a racketeering charge.

Since then, Nolan has become president of the Justice Fellowship, a Christian-based organization that works for criminal justice reform and is an affiliate of the Prison Fellowship founded by Chuck Colson, of the "Watergate Seven."

With a strong focus on reducing recidivism, Right on Crime advocates a cost-effective justice system that "protects citizens, restores victims, and reforms wrongdoers."

"We're really big on personal responsibility," Levin said. "We're not saying society is to blame for criminal activity. We reject the idea of that being an excuse, even though it's probably important to study

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the reasons why some people commit crimes."

The organization pushes for more victim involvement in the justice process, which the group says also helps the convicted, "since an offender fully recognizing and acknowledging the harm they have caused another person is often critical to rehabilitation."

And while Right on Crime maintains imprisonment is necessary for public safety, it holds that communities are better protected when law enforcement focuses on data-driven deterrence methods — one example is Salinas' Ceasefire — followed by parole and probation strategies that "emphasize restitution, work, and treatment."

For the Right on Crime crowd, California often serves as a prime example of what not to do when it comes to prison



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three-strikes policies.

"I believe there are some flaws in the law in terms of the third strike being an extremely minor crime ... it think it's appropriate to revise it," he said. "We're not minimizing the harm that been done by a lot of these defendants. The point is they did serve the sentence on previous offense."

"I think all of us want to prioritize prison space to maximize public safety."

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