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Texas an unlikely model for prison reform

Loni Hancock

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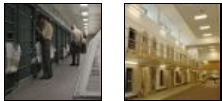
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FILE - In this Oct. 3, 2012, file photo, Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies inspect a cell block at the Men's Central Jail in downtown Los Angeles. A new federal civil rights indictment alleges that two Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies beat a handcuffed prisoner at the Men's Central Jail. The four-count indictment returned by a grand jury late Thursday Feb. 6, 2014, follows earlier indictments of 18 current and former Los Angeles County deputies on corruption and civil rights offenses. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon, File) Photo: Reed Saxon, Associated Press




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Is more money for more prisons the solution to California's prison overcrowding crisis?

For over 30 years, spending on our prison system has steadily climbed from 3 percent of the state's operating budget to 11 percent. Even during the depth of the Great Recession, spending on prisons and jails increased while

spending on education and health care was slashed. It continues to increase today.

It doesn't have to be that way. There are alternatives, and unlikely as it might seem, Texas

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seems to be leading the way. Surprised? So was I after hearing testimony before the state Senate Budget Committee a few weeks ago from [Chuck DeVore](#), a former California Republican Assembly member and conservative candidate for the U.S. Senate.

DeVore moved to Texas to become a leader of the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#), where he runs a program called "Right on Crime" (get it?). Among the members of his board of directors are national conservative leaders [Grover Norquist](#) and [Newt Gingrich](#).

DeVore testified that Texas is closing prisons, reducing its prison population and saving millions of taxpayer dollars - and its crime rate is going down.

How is this happening? Texas is investing in alternatives to incarceration that are proving to be cheaper and more effective at keeping people out of prison. It is also doing a better job of rehabilitating people to keep them from reoffending and ending up back in prison.

Texas uses risk-assessment and better probation procedures to divert large numbers of nonviolent offenders away from the prison system, keeping them away from hard-core criminals. It requires strict implementation of victim-restitution measures, while offering alternatives to prison such as civil sanctions, drug courts and drug-abuse and mental health treatment. It also offers rehabilitation programs like job training for those in prison to prepare them to re-enter society. And Texas has invested heavily in reducing the caseloads of parole and probation officers so the state can keep better track of the people it supervises and help them move in a new direction.

It's paying off. Texas has closed three state prisons, and almost two-thirds of Texas parolees are employed. In California, 80 percent of parolees are unemployed - meaning that Texas parolees are three times as likely to have a job. That's a big step forward on the path to becoming a taxpayer and living a stable life.

Texas decided to bite the bullet and put money into prison alternatives when it was faced - like California - with the need for a massive increase in funding for new prisons. Instead, the [Texas Legislature](#) decided to alter the direction of its criminal justice system by focusing on non-prison strategies for punishment and rehabilitation. As a result, there has been a 6 percent reduction in Texas' incarceration rates since 2009.

Unfortunately, California's prison system has faced costly and seemingly endless challenges. Change has been slow in coming, but Gov. [Jerry Brown's](#) promising realignment program and a proposed - and much-needed - review of sentencing rules could make a big difference. With the recent federal court order giving California two additional years to reduce its prison population, the state has a unique opportunity to make significant changes that could cut spending on prisons while improving public safety through meaningful reform.

Texas and California are two great states that often see the world differently. In this case, perhaps we have something to learn from Texas.

State Sen. [Loni Hancock](#), a Democrat, represents Berkeley in the California Senate. To comment, submit your letter to the editor via our online form at www.sfgate.com/chronicle/submissions/#1.

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We do not need more monolithic prisons along California State Prison Route 99, or any other new prison. We need criminal justice and prison reforms, and to find ways to prevent crime. We must break the school-to-prison pipeline that causes such misery for the young people convicted and the victims of their crime.

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