

Thailand is a third-world country notorious for human rights abuses and a corrupt criminal justice system. So it should not come as a surprise to learn Thailand puts more women behind bars per capita than any nation on earth.

Oklahoma, however, incarcerates women at double the rate of Thailand. Our female incarceration rate is not just the highest in the U.S, it's the highest on the planet.

How did we end up here?

“Tough-on-crime policies” of the late 20th century, meant to address rising levels of crime during that time, seemed logical: If people knew they would face long sentences for most crimes, they will stop their behavior. However, that theory does not pan out in reality.

Study after study has shown that more people in prison does not mean safer streets, and long sentences for low-level, non-violent offenders does not deter crime—and, in many cases, can have the inverse effect. It's time for conservatives in Oklahoma to embrace criminal justice reform, not because we want to coddle criminals, but because we demand effective returns on public safety when we spend public dollars. That is the idea behind the ‘Right On Crime’ initiative, and why many prominent national conservatives have signed onto the group’s Statement of Principles.

Oklahoma’s corrections system is broken and financially unsustainable. Projections show that our prison population will increase by 25% over the next nine years, even when accounting for Questions 780 & 781. The Oklahoma Department of Corrections has submitted a budget request for \$800 million to build two new prisons, with an additional \$55 million needed every year for operating costs. However, at our current rate of inmate population growth, Oklahoma will actually need three new prisons within the next nine years. The urgency for reform comes from the fact that the \$800 million must be allocated in this budget session. If the legislature fails to act, we will immediately compound our current budget crisis by an additional \$800 million.

Lawmakers can still avert disaster before the sand runs out of the hourglass, however. Five reform bills which were produced by Governor Fallin’s Criminal Justice Task Force, but ultimately not passed in 2017, would have produced a net decrease in our inmate population over the next ten years. The bills include provisions for early release of non-violent inmates, reducing mandatory sentencing for low-level drug possession and property theft, and providing alternative sentencing for non-violent crimes.

On a good note, the five reform bills ended with a “Conferees Do Not Agree” report in the House Judiciary committee, meaning the bills are eligible to be heard within the first week of the 2018 legislative session. Leadership should take this opportunity to enact policies proven to work in other conservative states such as Texas, Georgia, and Mississippi.

Texas, in particular, has implemented similar reforms, and the results have been a resounding

success. Since passing landmark reforms beginning in 2007, Texas has closed eight corrections facilities. They averted spending billions taxpayer money and public safety has improved.

These reform bills should be the first step toward criminal justice reform, not the last. Problems facing Oklahoma are systemic, and lawmakers must address issues on multiple levels if we expect a long-term solution. Reforms to Oklahoma's probation system—currently run by prosecutor's offices, who have a financial incentive to prosecute, rather than by the Department of Corrections—are greatly needed, as are necessary changes to expedite pre-trial release for non-violent defendants. By coupling these reforms with genuine community-based supervision, we can significantly reduce our recidivism rate, thereby saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

Our priority is always public safety, and is why we have a criminal justice system in the first place. But, we have a rapidly-closing window of opportunity to duplicate the success of Texas and other conservative states before painful fiscal realities begin asserting themselves. Oklahoma needs conservative criminal justice reform, sooner than later.

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