

## **Change how drug abuse is addressed to reduce prison population**

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An August report from the Cato Institute, "Freedom in the Fifty States," ranked Tennessee the sixth freest state in the country. Although a notable accomplishment, the ranking is a drop of three spots since 2012's report.

What happened? According to the authors of the report, one problem is that Tennessee's criminal justice policies are deteriorating.

From 2000 to 2013, Tennessee's prison population grew by 30 percent, while the total state population increased by only 13 percent, according to the Nashville-based Beacon Center of Tennessee.

Moreover, almost half of the nearly 5,000 inmates who leave Tennessee prisons each year are locked up again within three years. For this woeful success rate, taxpayers fund a nearly \$1 billion corrections budget.

According to the authors of the Cato report, Tennessee could reverse some of these problems if it altered the way it handles drug abuse.

Drug abuse is a serious issue — especially in Tennessee, which has tragically been one of the states most affected by the heroin crisis.

It may be better for Tennessee, however, to focus its limited law enforcement resources on property crime and violent crime rather than drug abuse. After all, police officers and prosecutors are not drug addiction specialists, and we shouldn't expect them to be. It makes more sense to divert individuals struggling with drug additions into programs where they can get help.

For instance, outside of Columbus, Ohio, local law enforcement has experimented with alternative sentencing, such as prescribing treatment instead of jail time. The success of these efforts has gained the attention of prominent media outlets like CBS's "60 Minutes."

Texas, meanwhile, has expanded its use of specialized "problem-solving courts," like mental health and veterans' courts. Since 2007, the state has avoided spending \$2 billion on new prisons. Instead, it has closed three prisons, and it enjoys its lowest crime rate since 1968.

Indeed, many states have managed to reduce both crime and incarceration in recent years by improving the treatment opportunities available to drug offenders.

Reforms of this sort save taxpayer dollars, which is obviously an important marker of freedom. But they also allow law enforcement to focus resources on actions that really threaten public safety and individual liberty. Tennessee could easily improve its ranking by making these sorts of changes.

The Cato report also includes a profound observation from the authors that certain behaviors are "more consistent than others with the preservation and security of a free society." If the Tennessee criminal justice system ignores this important linkage, it will be making a mistake.

The more than 20,000 Tennesseans in prison, and the 70,000 on parole or probation, represent a deficit of social capital. To bring these people back to their families and communities in productive ways is the goal of a broad swath of civil society, including nonprofits, churches, prison ministries, legal associations and community groups.

On this score, the Volunteer State is fortunate to have several strong organizations. One of us heads Men of Valor, a Nashville-based prison ministry, now in its 20th year, that teaches participants not only job skills but life lessons in "self-respect, dignity and purpose."

It gives men who come from broken backgrounds the skills to land and keep steady jobs or even start businesses. While national recidivism rates range from 40 to 70 percent, Men of Valor has a recidivism rate of less than 10 percent.

Tennessee may not be the freest state in the country, but it's amazingly close, and it has the necessary civil society to preserve and enhance its freedom. But getting to that point is going to require some changes to regulatory barriers, licensing rules and spending decisions. Above all, it's going to require strong criminal justice reform.

Tennessee's first state song, "My Homeland, Tennessee," refers to the state's founders as a "free and noble" band. Tennessee's combination of liberty and virtue is what makes it one of the freest and proudest states in the union. With just a dash of criminal justice reform, Tennessee may very well find itself challenging for the top spot in the rankings next time, making its "free and noble" forefathers proud.

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