

# Money wasted: Scott can save by looking at prisons

By Anthony W. Orlando

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I don't envy [Rick Scott](#).

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the new governor faces a budget shortfall of \$2.5 billion. He'll have to pay more than 10 percent of the budget by raising taxes or cutting spending. And he wants to widen that gap by *cutting* taxes.

Predictably, Scott has an answer: pay cuts.

Apparently, our state governments spend too much, especially on salaries and wages. Never mind that state and local budgets comprise the same percent of the economy as they did 20 years ago. Never mind that public workers earn *less* than private counterparts with the same level of education. And never mind that states with union bargaining rights are no more likely to have big deficits than states without bargaining rights.

During the campaign, Scott boasted he'd save \$1 billion in the Department of Corrections alone, but now he says those savings will be spread over seven years. If Scott keeps his campaign promise not to release prisoners early, that's \$143 million per year in pay cuts. All his talk about growing food in the prisons and "competitively bidding health care contracts" is just smoke. They already do a lot of that, and those expenses aren't big enough to make a difference anyway.

Since the department spends \$1.5 billion on salaries and wages, we're talking about a 10 percent cut. That's a severe loss of income.

But there's another way to cut \$1 billion from our prisons: Send drug users to treatment instead of jail.

Florida loves to incarcerate people, but it's not as effective as you might think. Despite having the seventh-highest incarceration rate in the country, Florida has the second-highest crime rate.

[President Nixon](#) declared the War on Drugs in 1971. Over the next three decades, the U.S. incarceration rate increased almost fivefold, while drug use increased *twenty-four-fold*. I believe the polite term for those results is "a staggering waste of money."

There is a better way. In 2001, [Portugal](#) stopped sending drug users to prison. Instead, they went to a psychologist, a social worker, and a legal adviser for treatment. If the words "soft on crime" are itching your tongue, the results of Portugal's new policy are going to blow you away.

After five years of the new program, teenage drug use, [HIV](#) infections caused by sharing needles, and drug-related deaths *all declined significantly*. The percent of Americans using marijuana is now *four times* that of the Portuguese.

Back in Florida, the Department of Corrections is spending a pathetic one percent of its budget on [substance abuse](#) prevention and treatment. Eighty-two percent of American prisoners committed nonviolent crimes, and 50 percent have a mental illness, according to the Justice Policy Institute. That adds up to millions of people who can be better served with medical care and therapy.

And let's not forget the darkest side of our justice system: racial discrimination. White drug users outnumber black drug users four-to-one, but black drug users *in prison* outnumber white ones. Only one-in-three crack users is black, but four of every five sentenced for crack crimes are black. We're sending black men to prison far more than whites committing the same crimes, and then we have the gall to criticize the black community for kids growing up without fathers.

Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron estimates Florida spends almost \$2billion annually on drug-related crimes, while taxing marijuana sales could yield more than \$100 million. That's a cornucopia of savings up for grabs.

Scott is open to such possibilities. He plans to cut the Department of Juvenile Justice budget by reducing jail sentences for certain offenders. Now he needs to take the same brave leadership to the Department of Corrections.

Otherwise, he's going to have to explain why firefighters and schoolteachers should take pay cuts, while Wall Street's profits grow by leaps and bounds.

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