



## *Taxpayers should demand cost-effective crime policies*

**By Julie Stewart**  
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Today is the deadline for Americans to submit their tax returns to the federal government. It is also the day that many of us wonder if the hard-earned money we send to Washington, D.C. is being spent wisely. When it comes to spending on federal anti-crime programs, the answer is increasingly clear: we're wasting millions -- and the American people know it.

Earlier this month, the Pew Center on the States released the results of a new poll that revealed: (1) American voters believe too many people are in prison and the nation spends too much on imprisonment; (2) voters overwhelmingly support a variety of policy changes that shift nonviolent offenders from prison to more effective, less expensive alternatives; and (3) support for sentencing and corrections reforms -- including reduced prison terms -- is strong across political parties, regions, age, gender and racial/ethnic groups. The sample of voters polled included more self-described conservatives than liberals.

Last year, Americans for Tax Reform President Grover Norquist, the Cato Institute's director of criminal justice, Tim Lynch, and former Republican congressman and Bush administration DEA chief, Asa Hutchinson, joined me for a briefing to discuss the dozens of ways Congress and the administration could cut millions from wasteful anti-crime programs without jeopardizing public safety. Some cost-cutting reforms, like allowing elderly and ill patients (who pose no threat to society) to leave prison early and serve out their punishment in alternate ways, are obvious and overdue.

Others, like eliminating wasteful mandatory minimum sentencing laws, are being approved by cash-strapped states across the country. Governors and state lawmakers do not love their children any less, but they realize that locking up nonviolent criminals for decades is not a cost-effective way to keep their communities safe. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R-NJ) recently announced an ambitious plan to require treatment in lieu of prison for all first-time drug offenders in the Garden State. Christie's pitch? Since

treatment is a fraction of the cost of prison, his new policy will save money and lives.

Contrast this common-sense approach with federal law, where a mother like Sabrina Giles is sentenced to 12 years in prison for allowing her abusive boyfriend to run his meth dealing business out of her New Mexico house. Ms. Giles, who had never even been arrested before, was gainfully employed and providing for her young daughter, despite struggling with substance abuse. What she needed was drug treatment, but what she got was more than a decade in federal prison. Her daughter was forced to grow up without the mother she loved and is now a teenager.

This isn't tough on crime -- it's just stupid.

Fortunately, some in Washington, D.C. are ready for reform. Two years ago, anti-tax hero Norquist and former American Conservative Union president David Keene testified before the House Crime Subcommittee in opposition to federal mandatory minimum sentences. Said Norquist, "The benefits, if any, of mandatory minimum sentences do not justify...[the] burden to taxpayers." The subcommittee's ranking member, Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) has long supported reform. More recently, Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) announced his strong opposition to mandatory minimums. Paul's position makes sense given his Tea Party roots and that coalition's aversion to excessive federal spending.

Most encouraging, the American public gets it. When asked by Pew if they agree with the statement, "Some of the money that we are spending on locking up low-risk, nonviolent inmates should be shifted to strengthening community corrections programs like probation and parole," a remarkable 85 percent of voters agreed.

It's time to stop wasting money on anti-crime programs and policies that don't keep us safe, but make our tax bills higher.

*Stewart is president and founder of FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums), a national organization working for fair and proportionate sentencing laws that protect public safety.*