



PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY & JUSTICE

Submitted to the Joint Subcommittee of Ways and Means on Public Safety
HB 5004

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Testimony by Talia Gad, Communications Director, Partnership for Safety & Justice

Co-Chairs Sollman and Gorsek and Members of the Committee,

At Partnership for Safety & Justice, we advocate for public safety and criminal justice policies that ensure accountability, equity, and healing for people convicted of crime, crime survivors, and the families and communities of both. For over 20 years, our work has promoted public safety with policies that keep families together, reduce racial disparities, and invest in communities across Oregon.

We are testifying today to support the plan put forward by Governor Brown to close three prisons over the next year.

The State's budget is a blueprint of the state's values and priorities. It is particularly important to consider this in a moment where the systemic and structural racism inherent in our criminal justice system is being widely recognized and called to account.

While a lot of attention has focused on racism and implicit bias in policing, the same attention must be paid to the carceral system, which includes the systems of pretrial detention, court adjudication, incarceration, and parole and probation. It is the historic and systemic denial of access to opportunities and resources throughout the system that have given rise to the mass incarceration of Black and brown people specifically, but also of Oregonians in general.

Since 1980,¹ Oregon's population has increased by 63%, while our prison population² has increased by nearly 350%.

This means that during the last 40 years, Oregon's prison population grew 5.5 times faster than our overall population.

There were three prisons in Oregon in 1980; today there are 14. One out of every 21 Black Oregonians is held in prison,³ a rate that is 5.5 times greater than white people, and places Oregon is 7th in the nation for our incarceration rate of African Americans.⁴

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/oregon-population>

² <https://www.oregon.gov/doc/Documents/offender-population-trends.pdf>

³ 2016 data:

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>

⁴ https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2016/06/oregon_imprisons_african_ameri.html

Governor Brown should be commended for her leadership on this proposal, which brings our state's budget into closer alignment with our values. Today, Oregon's prison population stands at just under 12,500. A year ago that number was 14,500. At a time when the moral imperative to reduce our investment in mass incarceration is clearer than ever, Oregon has the opportunity to close three prisons due to this decreased population without risking overcrowding.

We know that the rural communities where these prisons are will feel the impact of these closures, and we strongly support state efforts to provide meaningful, living wage jobs for the people displaced by this move and for the counties where the prisons reside. This moment should not be seen as a choice between maintaining rural jobs and disproportionately incarcerating Black, Indigenous, and other people of color and the destruction caused in those communities. Oregon should do better for both.

We believe that savings from these closures should be invested in communities disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration and mass victimization, in rural communities who are losing jobs, and to further the Department of Corrections efforts to make Oregon's prison system look more like Norway's.

Since 2013, Oregon has embraced Justice Reinvestment, which decreases our reliance on incarceration and invests locally. The budget note in HB 5004 addressing prison closures represents an important next step in that work.

We respectfully urge your support for this proposal.