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Cash for convicts

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It what can only be a satirical essay, UCLA Film Prof. Chon [Noriega recommends sentencing inmates to college](#). Noriega points out how prison spending has grown as a percentage of the state budget (leaving out how the prison guards' union bankrolled the campaigns for California's three strikes – spiking incarceration and spending). He suggests a “modest proposal” (surely a self-conscious reference to Jonathan Swift's satire, “[A Modest Proposal](#)”) whereby the state could save money by sending inmates to college rather than prison (paying tuition and expenses).

Noriega's suggestion is economically absurd, since such a “Cash for Convicts” scheme would create perverse incentives for young people to turn to crime as a means of getting a free ride in college. It would likewise create disincentives for young people to work hard and gain academic or sports scholarships (which might be less generous). Likewise, such a policy would send the message that “Crime does pay”, and would force taxpayers to pay for their own children's college plus lawbreakers, as well. In addition, it would do little to help disadvantaged students already sentenced to failing schools in California's deplorable government school monopoly.

If the good professor's point is that California is in need of sentencing reform, then his point is well taken. California's three strikes law is a bad policy that treats non-violent offenders the same as violent offenders. This wrong-headed policy has been a staple of GOP “law and order” politics that should be recognized for what it always was – political payback to California's prison guards' union. Now that exploding payroll and pension costs are bringing state and local government to their knees, the GOP is reconsidering its support for public employee unions (including public safety) and should reconsider its support for three strikes. Conservatives often criticize liberals for their uncritical support of government policies. The GOP should practice what it preaches and support reforming three strikes.

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