

THE ECONOMY OF PRISONS

by: Al Cunningham, California

Imprisonment is usually justified by appeals to one of two philosophies; protecting the public or rehabilitating the prisoner. By either standard, however, the evidence is overwhelming that prisons do not work.

According to the Department of Justice (Just Us), those states that have the highest budget for law enforcement - including courts – do have the highest rates of crime. If there is any empirically established relationship between crime and imprisonment, it is that prisons foster crime.

Contrary to popular belief, the seriousness of a crime is not the most crucial element in predicting who goes to prison and who does not. Prison population can be linked to poverty. In fact, the U.S. social policies of the 1980s and 1990s caused an unprecedented increase in the number of people living in poverty and widened the gap between the incomes and living standards of the rich and poor. And throughout this period, prison populations grew rapidly. With budgets slashed for every type of social service, prisons now stand out as the state's principal government program for the poor.

Most of the people behind bars have committed economic crimes. If you go back in history and plot the prison population and compare it to all the other variables you can think of, you will find a positive correlation with unemployment: the higher the rate of joblessness, the higher the rate of prison commitments. From this perspective, prisons may be seen as warehouses for people who have no place in the economic order.

Prisons, filled with unemployed people of color from the inner cities, are being sold to economically depressed rural white communities as a source for jobs. With local economies ailing in most parts of the country, local and national leaders often see a potential state or federal prison as a recession—proof economic base. In fact, prisons are the one industry next to war that greatly benefit from recession.

As noted earlier, prisons illustrate how racial and economic discrimination reinforce one another; prisoners are drawn from the ranks of the economically marginalized of all races. As an institution, however, prisons have a far greater impact on communities of color, because of our disproportionate representation in prison populations.

Prisons are about money - big money! The corporate world is extensively involved with prisons. From architects to researchers (who study prisoners and the prison system), from food service vendors to health care firms, from corrections bureaucrats like C.C.P.O.A. (the guards' union) to psychologists and social workers, there is a lot of money to be made from the proliferation of prisons.

Prison slave labor has emerged as a complement to the international movement of jobs. For decades U.S. based corporations have been moving abroad to avoid high domestic wage rates as well as labor and environmental regulations. Now, such factors as the increasing cost of overseas labor, the expense of relocation and the shipping fees involved have caused manufacturers to recognize that American prisons, with their abundant supply of labor, are an attractive alternative to foreign-based production. As a result, both private industry and prison authorities have acquired a compelling economic interest in increasing the prison population.

The real roots of crime in America are associated with a constellation of suffering so hideous that, as a society, we cannot bear to look at it in the face. So, we hand its casualties over to a system of "correction" that will keep it from our sight.

It is bitter irony that the high cost of prisons - \$20 billion a year just for California and nearly \$230 billion nationwide for the upkeep of America's prisons and county jails - cuts into the health, education and social services needed by the very people who, lacking such support, often end up in prison.

Increasing the participation of poor communities in education, social and economic institutions could fight crime. The money poured into maintaining the prison system could be used to create jobs, improve education and training and stimulate economic opportunities.

Instead, the social policies of the past two decades or so have reflected a consistent choice to abandon poor communities, especially communities of color, to increasing economic dislocation and the inevitable growth of criminal activity. As a result, "our society" is polarized further and further - not only into the haves and the have-nots, but also into the incarcerators and incarcerated.

If one views the California state prison system as a reasonable response to law-breaking, then crime, violence and drugs seem like problems that can never be solved. To gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of prisons, it is far more helpful to analyze them as a response to major recent transformations of the state economy such as capital flight, the shift to a service sector economy, the depopulation of the inner cities, an increasingly segmented labor force, the economic marginalization of communities of color, the rise in youth unemployment and the denuding of social services of every description.

In the final analysis, prisons do not protect society from crime. Instead, they avoid the far more challenging solution of economic justice by reinforcing patterns of economic and social inequality. It is only by discouraging reliance on incarceration that we can seek human and democratic ways to make our communities healthy, productive and, most of all, safe places to live.