

# American Prisons

## A Convincing Case of Failure

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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.

Those states that have the highest budget for law enforcement — including courts, prisons, probation, and parole — also have the highest levels of crime. If there is any empirically established relationship between crime and imprisonment is that prisons foster crime. In fact, if one had systematically and diabolically tried to create mental illness, one could probably have constructed no better system than the American so-called "correctional" system.

At present, the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the industrialized world. Nonetheless, crime continues to plague "our" society to a degree unknown in other countries — countries which do not come close to our rate of imprisonment.

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In this context, the image of the "bleeding heart liberal" — that universal object of scorn — is one that deserves particular scrutiny. Implicit in this characterization is an assumption that public safety and social justice are somehow at odds — that policies which protect the civil rights of prisoners or challenge racism in the prison system cannot really be effective in stopping crime.

A far more compelling case can be made that social justice is a requirement for public safety. Racism and economic bias are structural features of the U.S. prison system. Understanding this relationship can yield important insights into why that system functions so poorly to protect the public.

## Jailing the Unemployed

Across all racial groups, prisoners are drawn from the poorest sectors of society. Prisons were not designed to incarcerate rich people

for the most part. Just like the military recruits mostly poor working class people. In fact, the social policies of the 1980s/1990s caused an unprecedented increase in the numbers of people living in poverty in the United States, as well as a widening gap between the incomes and living standards of the rich and poor. Throughout this entire period, prison populations grew rapidly, with budgets slashed for every type of social service, prisons now stand out as the country's principal government program for the poor.

The reality is that most of the people behind bars have committed economic crimes. In fact, if you go back in history and plot the population of all prisons and compare it to all the other variables you can think of, you will find a positive correlation only with

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unemployment. The higher the rate of joblessness, the higher the rate of prison commitments. There is no question about it.

Ironically, in many cases prisons have been touted as a solution to economic decline, especially in rural areas like Crescent City, California. Prisons, filled with unemployed people of color (along with poor whites) from the inner cities, are being sold to economically depressed communities as a source of slave-labor.

Local and national "leaders" often see a potential state or federal prison as a recession-proof economic base. In fact, prisons are more than "recession-proof": they are the one industry that greatly benefits from recession. Prisons have become the number one industry in America after

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war. Actually, in many cases the two industries overlap.

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## Prisons and the Social Fabric

The discussion above is not intended to minimize the seriousness of crime, whether violent or not. The point is rather that swelling the prison population has failed to reduce crime. The racial and economic bias built into the prison system also works against crime victims. Poor people and people of color are also the most frequent victims of crime, and they stand to suffer the most from repressive policies that fail to stop, and in many ways fuel, criminal activities.

Prisons illustrate how racial and economic discrimination reinforce one another. As noted above, prison inmates are drawn

from the ranks of economically marginalized of all races. As an institution, however, prisons have a far greater impact on communities of color, because of their disproportionate representation in prison populations.

## Media Images

The above also plays into negative media images that depict drugs as mainly an inner city "problem". One effect of such false images is that they build support among whites for expansion of the prison system. As a result, the social fabric is damaged for white communities as well - because public resources are directed toward incarcerating the most marginalized members of society, rather than developing real solutions to the myriad problems posed by alcohol and drug abuse.

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while substance abuse may be a universal problem, it is still true that violence engendered by the illegal drug trade falls most heavily on communities of color. Prisons, meanwhile, are simply an added force for violence, despair, and community destruction. Folks of color are not the only ones by far who are abusing drugs and alcohol!

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It is a bitter irony that the high cost of prisons in America which is upwards of 200 billion dollars a year cuts into the health, education, and social services needed by the very people who, lacking such supports, often end up in prison.

Meanwhile, African-Americans and other people of color are stigmatized as criminals and drug addicts, through media images that subtly (and not-so-subtly) mask the equal participation of whites in the culture of addiction, crime, and violence.

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The deepening polarization of society thus becomes a self-perpetuating cycle - in which the image of the criminal "underclass" is used to garner support for the very policies that greatly contribute to the destruction of poor urban communities. The real roots of crime in America are associated with a constellation of suffering so hideous that, as a society, it cannot bear to look it in the face. So it hands its casualties over to a system of so-called "correction" that will keep us from its sight.

### Prisoners as Modern-day Slaves

The corporate world is extensively involved with America's prisons. Why? Big Money! From architects to academics (who study prisoners and the prison system), from food service vendors to health care firms, from "corrections" bureaucrats



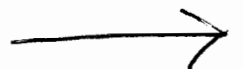
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to psychologists and social workers, there is a lot of money to be made from the proliferation of prisons.

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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 slave labor, the expense of relocation, and the shipping expenses involved have cause many manufacturers to clearly recognize that American prisons, with abundant supply of domestic slave labor, are an attractive alternative to foreign-based production.

\* My name is Troy T. Thomas, H-01001 and I'm imprisoned at Pelican Bay State Prison P.O. Box #7500, Crescent City, CA 95532 and I would like to write a book detailing my, along with other prisoners experiences. I'm in need of a typewriter. If you would like to help me please write and let me know. Or if you have observations you wish to share with me please feel free to write as well.



As a final thought let me just say that 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 America can seek humane and democratic ways to make our communities healthy, productive, and most of all, safe places to live.

P.S. You don't have to go over seas to find prison abuses. We have plenty of Abu-Ghraib's and Guantanamo Bay's right here in America! All you have to do is open your eyes to see.