

American Crime Control As Industry

By

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There are several reasons why the prison industrial complex (PIC) continues to grow in America, and I will focus on two of the most important. The first is that in punishing people we as a society attempt to appease the fearful side of our own human nature. The second is that vested interests keep ~~this~~ very unsuccessful system going. Just as steel companies need iron and timber companies need trees, so prisons use people as their raw material.

When it comes to vested interests, there are many groups who have an interest in the maintenance of the status quo of prisons. In no particular order I will nominate nine such groups. Let me say clearly and emphatically that within each group there is a minority who hold opposing views and are much more open and positive in their approach.

The vast majority of prison guards, police, judges, forensic psychologists, prison vendors of every description, prosecutors and even some criminal defense lawyers do not want to know about alternatives. The culture within each of these groupings often seems to preclude much genuine dialogue and discussion about the outcomes of the very work they are employed in doing. As I say, thankfully there are exceptions.

The media have a vested interest. Despite millions of words of rhetoric to the contrary, the media generally and the tabloid in particular keep alive all the old racist stereotypes by the way they report crime, court cases and criminal offending, often out of all proportion to other news. Where would the tabloids be without a regular front-page crime story? Or the talkshow hosts? or television (e.g., "Americas Most Wanted", "COPS", "Criminal Minds", etc.)? One evening recently on Fox News, nine of the first 10 stories related to crime, here and overseas.

The construction and subsidiary industries have a vested interest in an expanding prison network and are, by implication, happy to see a high crime rate continue. Warehousing the poor is now a worldwide trend in many industrialized countries, with the United States (especially California), Britain, Russia, and China leading the way. With huge profits being made through constructing, expanding, and providing for new prisons and old, the corporate culture has readily taken up the challenge that crime offers to make a profit out of human misery. A directory called "The Corrections Yellow Pages" lists more than a thousand vendors. While private prisons are the most lucrative, state-controlled ones are also high on the corporate agenda, providing guaranteed payment and regular income [google California Correctional Peace Officers Association].

Many academics in the fields of law, social work, criminology, psychology, sociology, and psychiatry have a vested interest. Too many sit in ivory towers teaching outmoded theories, denying students opportunities to develop creative responses to the social problems that are largely responsible for crime.

Strange as it may seem, many politicians also have a vested interest in not seeing creative options to crime and prisons researched, trialled and reviewed. Generally they believe it is perceived to be soft to be advocating alternatives. The reality is the exact opposite. Most alternative programs are a lot tougher in that they demand accountability (e.g., restorative justice), with offenders having to take responsibility for what they have done. But few politicians are prepared to promote or fund the.

The new corporate elite running prison policy were brought in to try to change the harsh macho prison culture that had been built up over generations. While to a degree some dimensions of that have been tackled, they have also brought in the culture of measured success, which in corporate terms often means wage cutting, program deletion and prison expansion. Prison numbers have been going through the roof for the past twentyfive years. All this is conducted with the glossy PR expertise so characteristic of the corporate hard sell. Prisons are now presented to the public as desirable industries to have in local communities because of the job creation and new economic spending power available. Little attention is given to the thought of what a prison is, who is locked up or why. This is a deliberate attempt to shift the public perception of imprisonment from being a scandal and a sign of failure to one that makes prisons desirable acquisition for a local community like a sports stadium, medical center or public university.

Prison slave labor is now a complement to the international movement of jobs. For decades, U.S. based corporations have been moving abroad to avoid high domestic rates as well as labor and environmental regulations. Now such factors as the increasing costs of overseas slave labor, the expense of relocation, and the shipping expense involved have caused many manufacturers to recognize that American prisons, with their abundant supply of slave labor (2.4 million prisoners), are an attractive alternative to foreign-based production.

If one had systematically and diabolically tried to create mental illness, one could probably have constructed no better system than the American prison system.

The prison industrial complex basically has a life of its own. It has become an industry, and a very lucrative one for some. Like its cousin the military industrial complex, its pernicious spirit is all-pervasive and needs plenty of crime and long sentences to maintain its financial viability. So whose truly the criminal? Is America a "Democracy" or a corporate Oligarchic police state?