Prison Town

Paying the Price
The Real Cost of Prisons Project brings together prison/justice policy activists with political economists to create workshops and materials which explore both the immediate and long-term costs of mass incarceration on the individual, her/his family, community and the nation.

Two additional comic books are part of this series: Prisoners of the War on Drugs and Prisoners of Hard Times: Women and Children. If you would like copies of these comic books to assist your group in its organizing work, contact Lois Ahrens. Or you can go to www.realcostofprisons.org and download the entire series.

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THANK YOU
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Anytown U.S.A. — Once a thriving farm community — has fallen on hard times.

The 1980’s and 90’s brought both the decline of the family farm and the loss of rural factories. Sometimes it found them first.

We need to do something! I’m telling you it’s the perfect thing. Well, I suppose there’ll always be work.

The jobs that stuck around tended to be low-wage and insecure seasonal jobs for global corporations that drain money out of the town.

So local officials of these towns started looking around for a new “growth” industry.

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Due to mandatory sentencing, three-strikes-you're-out and harsh drug laws, the prison population has grown by more than 370% since 1970. Most of these prisoners are jailed in rural America.

Between 1990 and 1999, 245 jails and prisons were built in rural and small town communities, with a new one opening somewhere every fifteen days. There are more prisons in America than Walmarts. There are more prisoners in America today than farmers.

These prisoners are now seen as an economic opportunity.

"When legislators cry 'Lock'em up!', they often mean 'Lock'em up in my district!'" - Former New York State legislator Daniel Feldman.
In the beginning of the building boom, federal and state authorities often offered rewards to towns to build prisons. Wanting to get a piece of the 49 billion dollar pie, many towns now compete for the chance to have a prison.

Federal and state officials, private-prison salesmen or, more recently, investment bankers will visit the potential host town in order to sell the idea.

While local officials charged with the task of creating jobs and revenue may want a prison or to expand their jail, the general public often needs more convincing.

Typically a PR campaign will be launched, flooding the local newspapers and TV with positive spin on the benefits of building a prison.

Such meetings are done quietly, often behind closed doors. "Premature disclosure," according to the Encyclopedia of American Prisons, can make siting a prison difficult because the public might find out before the deal is set.

Town meetings are sponsored and community groups lobbied. A Justice Dept. briefing advises "limiting the time period for decision making."

It's a non-polluting, well-paying, recession-proof industry that goes 24/7, 365 days a year.

I'm just not gonna be able to make that meeting tomorrow night.

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To be considered "competitive" in the bidding wars for prisons, some towns sweeten the deal with free land, upgraded sewer and water systems, and housing subsidies for guards.

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Reeves County, Texas issued 3 bonds over 15 years, $90 million, to build 3 facilities in the dying oil town of Pecos. Judge Jimmy Galindo, the driving force behind the deal says: "...we live in a part of the country where it’s very difficult to create and sustain jobs in a global market. (Prisons) become very clean industry for us to provide employment to citizens."

"I look at it as a community development project."

In Mendota, CA where the FBOP wanted to build a 5 prison "corrections complex," the environmental impact statement was available only in English despite the fact that 88% of the local population speaks Spanish. Eventually a Spanish-translated 10 page summary of the 1000 page document was provided.

In 1996, Oregon sited six prisons in six months under Oregon’s “super siting law” which made prisons exempt from state level environmental review.

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Many municipalities are expanding their jail facilities in order to rent beds to overcrowded federal and state prisons.

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So the PRISON is built and the prisoners arrive and the town waits to see what it will become.

“It flatly introduces money and the desire for profit into the imprisonment policy debate, because you’ve got an entity in Wisconsin, a private entity, with a strong financial interest in keeping people in prison and having them sentenced to prison.” - Walter Dickey, former Wisconsin state corrections chief.

One website, JailBedSpace.com, connects renters with sellers. “It’s a good marketing tool,” say Lt. Robert LeFever of the Putnam County Correctional Facility, which rents out an average of 60 beds per day.

Sanilac County, MI hopes it will get about $900,000 in revenue this year from renting beds.

In Stanley, WI private developers managed to site and build a $60 million, 1,326-bed prison without one elected official casting a vote or signing a bill. In 2001 the state bought the prison for $82.5 million.

Today in Mississippi, where the cell supply has outrun the criminal supply, lawmakers, local sheriffs, and private-prison interests are all competing for the scarce supply of prisoners.

In Anytown U.S.A., where prisons are seen as economic saviors, leaders find a way to approve them despite whatever reservations the locals may have.

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What is a bond? A bond is a loan made to a government. Governments pay investment bankers to make the loan attractive ('structure the deal') and find lenders ('issue the bonds'). Governments then pay lenders ('bondholders') principal and interest on the loans.

Governments issue two broad categories of bond: General Obligation (GO) bonds and Revenue Bonds.

General Obligation bonds are guaranteed by the taxing power of the state. Most GO Bonds require approval by the voters, and in many states by 2/3 of the voters. Revenue Bonds are designed to be paid off by revenues generated by the project being built, like highway tolls, bridge tolls, student tuition, etc.
Most prisons are now built with some form of Revenue Bond, even though prisons generate no real revenue and Revenue Bonds cost taxpayers more to repay. Why would a state use the most expensive way to borrow money to build prisons? Because voters have consistently voted down GO Bonds to build more prisons. Using revenue bonds to build prisons is a means of getting around the voters and taxpayers.
Hey Dad.

On average, 80% of new prison jobs go to folks who don’t live, or pay taxes, in the prison town. 

In Delano, CA the new prison created 1,600 jobs. 79 went to local residents.

Nationally, prison employees have shown little interest in buying homes in a new prison town.

In the 1990’s, an average of 25 prisons a year were built in rural America.

Cutting it close today.  Just eliminating inefficiency. Can’t argue with that.

Help you?

Coffee.

So you hear about the Dunkin Donuts going in right across from the prison?

Yea.

You can bet I told the Mayor what I thought of that.

And, as it turns out, prisons attract chain stores, which push out locally-owned business.

Hi Sam.
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According to Thomas Johnson, an economist at the University of Missouri, prisons are not very good economic development strategies because they create few links to the local economy.

We still need to have that “college” talk. Prisons generally order food and supplies from centralized state warehouses— not local grocery or hardware stores.

Community work projects performed by prisoners are very common and prison officials see them as good “community relations.” In the past, however, these jobs employed local residents who paid taxes and spent locally.

What I’m telling you is that going to community college will broaden your options. There are other, less easily measured effects.

WON’T HOLD YOUR BREATH.

Besides is that the kind of job you want? Locking people up?

SOUNDS COOL TO ME.

I wouldn’t hold your breath.

EXCUSE ME.

There are other, less easily measured effects.

GOTTA GO TO CLASS.

I hear they got good jobs at the prison.

Sounds cool to me.

Cutting it close today.

GOTTA GO TO CLASS.
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S’okay.

And social services.

"I spent 8 to 16 hours a day in solid bullshit...You hear cursing all day, and you come home and that’s all you think about. It did tragedy on my family." - Guard at Susanville prison

Another social cost is a rise in juvenile problems with drugs and violence.

Thought you’d want to know.

A common response to this problem is to expand the juvenile jail.

"I spent 8 to 18 hours a day in solid bullshit...You hear cursing all day, and you come home and that’s all you think about. It did tragedy on my family." - Guard at Susanville prison

Hey Honey, sorry to bother you.

Jean’s out so I’m going to go ahead and pull a double. Feel free to call.

One thing most towns don’t anticipate is an increased strain on hospitals.

You can call anytime, day or night.

Carol Jeldness, a mediator for the Family Court, saw her caseload, mainly child custody and divorce, jump from 167 to 320 in one year.

One thing most towns don’t anticipate is an increased strain on hospitals.

Well, we can sure use the money.

After a prison was built in Susanville, CA, Carol Jeldness, a mediator for the Family Court, saw her caseload, mainly child custody and divorce, jump from 167 to 320 in one year.
In the competition to lure prisons many rural towns have put the interests of the prison before the interests of its residents.

Reeves County, Texas found itself servicing a bond debt close to $1/2 million a month for three prisons they built on spec. When they couldn’t keep one of them filled, they paid $62,000 a month to GEO Group, a private prisons corporation, to find inmates.

Reeves County still has to service that debt as well all the operating expenses of the 3 prisons.

In Lakeview, Oregon a contract with the prison says that in event of water shortages the prison has priority.

“Wastewater management has been a major issue at every new prison we have built.”—Former Colorado DOC Director John Suthers

Social, environmental and economic problems like these may seal the fate of a prison town.

“Once you have the reputation of a prison town, you won’t become a Fortune 500 company town, or an Internet or software company town, or even a diverse tourism and company town.”
So now Anytown, U.S.A. is Prison Town, U.S.A., like thousands of towns across the country.

Over the past 25 years, most prison towns have grown poorer and more desperate.

What is unknowable is what the prison will do to the hopes and dreams of the people who live here.

Those who can leave and those who can not...
There are blocks in Brooklyn, NY, and other places, where the government is spending $1 million a year. The money is not being spent on drug treatment programs. It’s not being spent on prenatal care or health care. It’s not being spent on education or job training. It’s being spent on imprisonment.

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In the U.S., 58% of people are in prison for non-violent drug offenses.

In New York, 75% of the prisoners come from 7 African-American and Latino neighborhoods.

People of color make up 87% of the New York prison population growth since 1970's.

65% of female U.S. state prisoners have young children.

87% of prisoners in New York are caged more than 2 hours from New York City.

All right darlings - suit up - it's time to go.

Auntie!!

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There is little evidence that removing so many people from a community makes it safer.

When you turn someone into a prisoner, you put them on a road that is very hard to get off. Two in three people will end up back in prison - half of those due to parole violations, not new crime.

So what if that money was spent on other things?

With each person removed from a community, the social and economic bonds break down a little more.

With 98% of people leaving prison returning to that same, unchanged block, a place without jobs, effective drug counseling, or affordable housing, does it make sense to spend a million dollars this way?

In fact, given the huge concentration of people being locked up from targeted neighborhoods, the opposite appears to be true.
In Oregon and Ohio programs are attempting to change this by rechanneling money back into the high crime areas. In Deschutes County, the state turned over the cost of locking up youth, $50,000 per youth per year, to the County.

By making local officials and parole officers responsible for specific communities, they have provided a direct incentive to make the streets safer.

The County had the less violent youths serve their sentences by performing community service, which reduced the youth imprisonment by 72%. This also saved $17,000 per case that they could reinvest in schools, libraries, drug treatment, and other programs.

Research shows that quality education is one of the most effective forms of crime prevention, and drug treatment programs cost much less than imprisonment.

So instead of removing people, the community seeks to help them stay out of prison.

Where they belong.

Please visit the Real Cost of Prisons website at www.realcoastofprisons.org
Coercive Migration: The movements of people from their neighborhoods, through the courts and jails to prison and back. The concentrations of large numbers of prisoners in certain rural prisons and the fact that their former homes are concentrated in relatively few neighborhoods of urban poverty leads to huge impacts for the urban neighborhoods who deal with constant turnover of their population and disrupt the unity of family and neighborhoods.

Community Reinvestment: The alternative to "Million Dollar Blocks." A program that redirects money spent on prisons to investment on the blocks where current or formerly incarcerated men and women live, spending money on health care, job training, education, drug treatment and other services instead of incarceration.

Corrections: (as in Department of Corrections) Term used with no apparent sense of irony to describe government departments in charge of prisons and the prison industry as a whole.

Criminalization: the process of making behaviors illegal or of radically increasing the severity of the punishment. Also used to describe the populations targeted by these policies, for example, the criminalization of the homeless or of Black youth.

Development Subsidies: the opposite of mitigation funds. Subsidies are money paid by local or state governments to attract or retain businesses. They can include city or state tax breaks, tax-advantaged financing, investment in roads, housing or transportation funds for industry employees. Such subsidies, often called "Corporate Welfare," rarely pay off for the town.

Industry of Last Resort: those industries who have trouble attracting or retaining businesses. They can include city or state tax breaks, tax-advantaged financing, investment in roads, housing or transportation funds for industry employees. Such subsidies, often called "Corporate Welfare," rarely pay off for the town.

GLOSSARY

Footnotes:

6. Issues in Siting Correctional Facilities, Department Of Justice, pg. 17
9. Issues in Siting Correctional Facilities, Department Of Justice, pg. 17
10. Sasha Abramsoy, "Incarceration Inc," The Nation, 7/19/04.
17. Peter Wagner, The Prison Index, 2003, pg. 35
20. Tracy Huling, "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America," pg. 7.
25. Ibid
30. This chapter is heavily indebted to the work of Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear, "From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Renty on Children, Families, and Communities," 12/01
32. Peter Wagner, The Prison Index, 2003, pg. 27.
34. Peter Wagner, The Prison Index, 2003, pg. 35.
35. Ibid, pg. 31.
36. Ibid, pg. 26.(PI)
the cost of a cage

NATIONAL AVERAGE COST TO IMPRISON A PERSON FOR ONE YEAR: $29,041

NATIONAL AVERAGE COST OF ONE YEAR OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE: $1,518