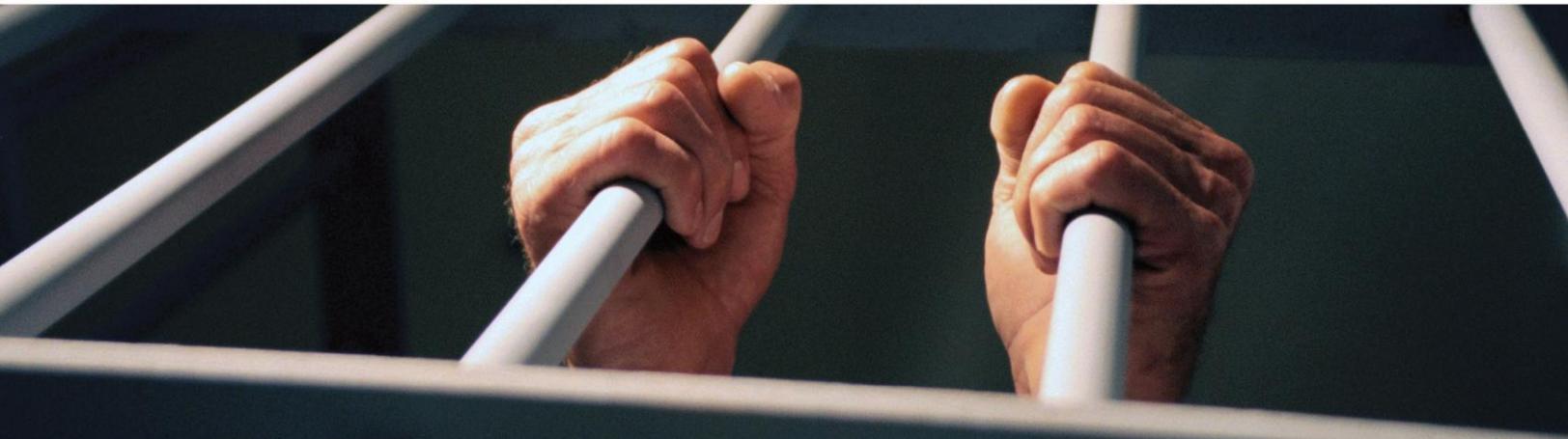


Prison Communities: From Low-Income Urban to Low-Income Rural—and Back



ADLER SCHOOL

Institute on Public Safety & Social Justice



ICIRR

Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

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The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) is dedicated to promoting the rights of immigrants and refugees to full and equal participation in the civic, cultural, social, and political life of our diverse society. In partnership with member organizations, the Coalition educates and organizes immigrant and refugee communities to assert their rights; promotes citizenship and civic participation; monitors, analyzes, and advocates on immigrant-related issues; and, informs the general public about the contributions of immigrants and refugees.

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Introduction

The explosive growth of prisons since 1980 is in many ways a story about struggling urban and rural communities, and how their fates are intertwined. The number of prisons in the U.S. has more than doubled since 1980, due mainly to stricter sentences meted out as part of the “war on drugs.” Facing declining jobs and growing income inequality, many small towns turned to prisons as an economic development strategy. Prior to 1980, the majority of prisons were located in metropolitan regions. During the subsequent boom, over half of all new prisons were constructed in rural areas.¹ In order to secure new prisons, rural communities competed with neighboring localities by providing economic incentives such as land, tax breaks, and other subsidies, all at the expense of taxpayers.

The Reality of How Prison Towns Have Fared

The promised economic benefits of these rural prisons, however, have been elusive. Although new prisons do provide some new jobs, empirical studies find that the larger economic benefits are negligible to the counties that sell the farm to build the prison. For instance, there do not appear to be discernible differences in the employment rate of counties that host prisons vs. those that do not. And, prisons do not spur any new economic growth in their surrounding communities, making them totally dependent on this one industry.² There is some evidence that new prisons have a positive impact on the per capita income of very poor rural communities, but these gains are contingent upon full prisons.³ Reductions in crime and subsequent prison sentences present a threat to any economic gains that rural communities have witnessed; again, leaving these communities dependent on incarceration. However, in the U.S., overall crime—especially violent crime—has been decreasing steadily since the 1990s. Although this is an inherent positive for the nation, it represents a threat to economies built entirely on prisons.

Please Send Us Your Prisoners

Rural communities have an economic incentive to keep their prisons full, and those prisoners have to come from somewhere. In large part, many do come from a specific place: low-income African American urban communities. The explosion of incarceration has disproportionately affected African Americans, due mostly to war on drugs policies that are enforced primarily in poor urban areas of color. Black people account for 39% of the total prison population but just 14% of the U.S. population.⁴ A disproportionate percentage of U.S. prisoners come from a very small number of neighborhoods in some of the country’s largest cities.⁵ These poor urban areas have suffered from years of disinvestment, poverty, failing schools, and a general lack of resources. Yet, ironically, there are large investments being made to incarcerate people from these neighborhoods. Scholars have noted the existence of “million dollar blocks” in places like New York City and New Orleans, where large percentages of the population have been incarcerated. On some city blocks, upwards of \$1 million in tax-payer funds are being spent to imprison residents. Although this represents quite an investment in poor urban areas, none of this money actually goes into the area; it goes to prisons in largely rural areas.⁶

¹ Glasmeier, A.K. and Farrigan, T. (2007). The economic impacts of the prison development boom on persistently poor rural places. *International Science Review*, 30(3), 274-299.

² King, R.S. Mauer, M., and Huling, T. (2003). Big prisons, small towns: prison economics in rural America. The Sentencing Project.

³ Glasmeier and Farrigan, 2007

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Justice (2009)

⁵ Spatial Information Design Lab (2006). *Architecture and Justice*

⁶ Spatial Information Design Lab (2006).

You Have to Spend Money Now to...Spend More Money Later?

With all that money being spent on incarceration in urban neighborhoods, one might be tempted to think that perhaps areas are being improved by weeding out the criminal elements. Unfortunately, evidence has shown the opposite is true. Prisoners eventually return to their home communities, meaning that the same areas sending the most people away are also receiving the most re-entrants. Formerly incarcerated individuals return to places with few resources, high poverty, and high unemployment. The revolving door has been shown to disrupt social networks and create more community disorder. Incarceration itself independently produces many of the social ills that are precursors to crime and incarceration in the first place. This includes family instability, stress, violence, trauma, high drop-out rates, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and so forth. Many urban black communities are stuck in a cycle of incarceration, re-entry, and re-incarceration, where the only investments being made are for more incarceration.⁷ The logic seems to be: invest money up front to lock people up and you will reap the rewards of...spending more money to lock the same people up again later.

How About Your Huddled Masses?

If prison communities don't necessarily benefit from a new facility, someone must be benefiting from this addiction to incarceration. The answer is that some are benefiting, and increasingly it is private corrections companies like Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). Hoping to capitalize on state budget shortfalls and ensure guaranteed profits, CCA recently offered to buy prison facilities from 48 states.⁸ In exchange, states would have to guarantee a 90% occupancy rate even if crime continued to decline. Falling crime rates present a real threat to the industry—so much so that private corrections companies have turned to immigrants as a new revenue stream. Detention and deportation of immigrants by the U.S. has been on the rise in recent years, creating more profit opportunities for private companies. Many states have passed strict legislation written by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which has ties to private corrections companies. The next detainable frontier is immigrants. The message is clear: If not all of your urban poor, how about your huddled masses?

Stuck Communities and the Crisis of Creativity

Both rural prison communities and poor urban communities share a similar fate: both are stuck because of incarceration. Prisons fail to generate new economic development, and rural communities become dependent on a declining industry. Having sold the farm to build the prison, they face increasing difficulty tapping into new and emerging economies, and instead must lobby for policies that continue locking up residents of poor urban areas, or more recently, immigrants. Meanwhile, the recession has issued in an era of state and federal deficits, and crime is declining, making it increasingly difficult to continue spending millions per block on incarceration. Without a creative alternative, poor urban and rural communities are both stuck on incarceration.

⁷ Clear, T.R. (2007). *Imprisoning Communities: How Mass Incarceration Makes Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Worse*. NY: Oxford.

⁸ USA Today, 3/8/2012. *Private Purchasing of Prisons Locks in Occupancy Rate*