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Building a Prison Economy in Rural America

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We struggled, myself and a brother, two sisters, my mother there, to keep the farm in the family and keep it going. And we barely made a living. So that's what made me appreciate the job so much, that it was a lot easier and the money was secure. Before I even started the job, they was always telling me, the worse things get out in the world, the better things get in jail. You'll always have a job.

Ted Flegel, family farmer and retired prison guard, Coxsackie, New York[1]

In the United States today there are more prisoners than farmers.[2] And while most prisoners in America are from urban communities, most prisons are now in rural areas. During the last two decades the large-scale use of incarceration to solve social problems has combined with the fall-out of globalization to produce an ominous trend: prisons have become a "growth industry" in rural America.

Communities suffering from declines in farming, mining, timber-work, and manufacturing are now begging for prisons to be built in their backyards. The economic restructuring that began in the troubled decade of the 1980s has had dramatic social and economic consequences for rural communities and small towns. Together the farm crises, factory closings, corporate downsizing, shift to service sector employment, and the substitution of major regional and national chains for local, main-street businesses have triggered profound change in these areas. The aquisition of prisons as a conscious economic development strategy for depressed rural communities and small towns in the United States has become widespread. Hundreds of small rural towns and several whole regions have become dependent on an industry that itself is dependent on the continuation of crime-producing conditions.

Ironically, while rural areas pursue prisons as a growth strategy, whether this is a wise or effective strategy is far from clear. Increasing evidence suggests that by many measures, prisons do not produce economic growth for local economies and can, over the long term, have detrimental effects on the social fabric and environment of rural communities. Moreover, this massive penetration of prisons into rural America portends dramatic consequences for the entire nation as huge numbers of inmates from urban areas become rural residents for the purposes of Census-based formulas used to allocate government dollars and political representation.

A RURAL GROWTH INDUSTRY

Since 1980, the majority of new prisons built to accommodate the expanding U.S. prison population have been placed in non-metropolitan areas, with the result that the majority of prisoners are now housed in rural America. By contrast, prior to 1980, only 36 percent of prisons were located in rural communities and small towns. Calvin Beale, a senior demographer with the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, reports that throughout the 1960s and '70s, an average of just four new prisons had been built in rural areas each year. During the 1980s that figure increased to an annual average of sixteen, and in the 1990s, it jumped to twenty-five new prisons annually.[3] Between 1990 and 1999, 245 prisons were built in rural and small town communities—with a prison opening somewhere in rural America every fifteen days.[4]

Some of the most depressed rural areas in the United States have had significant infusions of prisons and prison work:

- On the west Texas plains, where both farmwork and oil field jobs were in full retreat in the 1990s, eleven rural counties acquired prisons, where earlier only one prison existed. Overall, one of every five new rural prisons in the 1990s opened in Texas, which had the largest number of new rural prisons by far, with forty-nine.
- The Mississippi Delta picked up seven prisons in the 1990s, added three in 2000–2001, with two more underway as of 2001.
- Nine prisons opened in the Southern coal fields region (Appalachia), and three new federal prisons were underway as of 2001.
- South-central Georgia has a contiguous string of fourteen rural counties with new prisons, and twenty-four altogether in the state.

The new rural prisons of the 1990s had about 235,000 inmates and employed 75,000 workers at the end of the decade—averaging thirty employees for every one hundred prisoners. All in all, about 350 rural counties have aquired new prisons since the start-up of the prison boom began in 1980, and more than half of all rural counties added prison work to their available employment mix during the final two decades of the century just past.[5]

PRISONS AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: BOOM OR BUST?

Despite a lack of studies documenting the effects of prisons on rural areas and small towns over time, prisons are now heralded by economic development professionals and politicians of all stripes as beneficial economic engines for depressed rural economies. Along with gambling casinos and huge animal confinement units for raising or processing hogs and poultry, prisons have become one of the three leading rural economic enterprises as states and localities seek industries that provide large-scale and quick opportunities.

The county economic development director in the small New York town of Romulus, for example, states that economic development experts throughout the state consider correctional facilities to be positive contributors to local economies, providing good-paying jobs and benefits in communities where employment is scarce.[6] Ernie Preate, a former

Pennsylvania attorney general and member of the advisory board for northeastern Pennsylvania's economic development council, says, "It is policy in Pennsylvania to pursue prisons as economic stimulation for depressed rural areas."[7] When announcing the potential siting of a federal prison in Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, in August 2001, Congressman Paul Kanjorski called the prison "the single largest public works project in the history of Northumberland."[8]

Prison officials go to great pains and often great expense to convince rural communities of the economic benefits of prisons. It is common for local officials to sponsor town meetings where prison officials and their supporters are invited to extol the benefits of prisons to communities. When proposed prisons are on the table, local newspapers are filled with articles reporting grand claims for economic salvation, and flyers flood into local coffeeshops, general stores, and mini-marts. The purported benefits are described by a California Department of Corrections official who states that "Prisons not only stabilize a local economy but can in fact rejuvenate it. There are no seasonal fluctuations, it is a non-polluting industry, and in many circumstances it is virtually invisible. . . . You've got people that are working there and spending their money there, so now these communities are able to have a Little League and all the kinds of activities that people want."[9]

As a result of such claims, the competition for prison "development projects" has become fierce and political. In order to be considered competitive in the bidding wars for public prisons, rural counties and small towns give up a lot in order to gain what they hope will be more: offering financial assistance and concessions such as donated land, upgraded sewer and water systems, housing subsidies, and, in the case of private prisons, property and other tax abatements.

In the all-out contest spurred by New York governor George Pataki's 1996 proposal to build three new maximum-security state prisons, the rural town of Altamont set aside one hundred acres of land to entice the state to locate a prison there. Antwerp, another small community in northern New York, applied for a $600,000 federal grant to rebuild their water supply system to increase their chances of winning a state prison.[10]

States also compete fiercely with one another for federal prisons. In 1997, Pennsylvania offered up to two hundred acres of prime state-owned farmland in rural Wayne County to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) for a dollar. When a rural citizens group legally challenged the sale, the land—also evaluated as eligible for status as a National Historic Register District because of the historic remains on the site—was again transferred by the state to the FBOP as part of a "friendly condemnation." That transaction was also sealed for a dollar.

Despite the prevailing wisdom regarding prisons as economic panaceas, evidence suggests that prison boosters in rural America should be careful what they wish for.

The majority of public prison jobs, for example, do not go to people already living in the community. Higher-paying management and correctional officer jobs in public prisons come with educational and experience requirements that many rural residents do not have. Seniority (and, in some cases, union rules) in public corrections systems means that these prisons are typically activated with large cadres of veteran correctional personnel from other prisons. In addition, competition for jobs in depressed areas is fierce, so rural residents compete in a wider than normal market for available positions. The distances people drive to work at prisons are quite great, in most cases nearly double the average commuter range, according to Ruth Gilmore, a professor at UC-Berkeley. Gilmore's study of prison towns in California shows that less than 20 percent of jobs on average go to current residents of a town with a new state prison. Although that percentage increases over time, it is below 40 percent for all of California's new rural prison towns.[11]

The findings of Gilmore's study in California are echoed in reports from disappointed local officials in prison towns across the country. The 750 jobs that a state prison opened in 1999 brought to the tiny rural town of Malone, New York, went mostly to people from outside the town because of prison system seniority rules. According to the village's director of the Office of Community Development, "Did we get seven hundred fifty jobs? We didn't get a hundred."[12]

A significant development in rural incarceration is the advent of pri-

vate prisons, which accounted for one-sixth of nonmetro prisons built in the 1990s.[13] Although private prisons do fill most jobs with new recruits when they open, and they sometimes give a hiring preference to local residents, they fail to provide a stable employment base in their host communities because they suffer extremely high rates of job turnover—three times higher than the rate for public prisons. Correctional officer turnover rates in for-profit facilities are 40.9 percent (compared with a turnover rate of 15.4 percent in government-run prisons), mostly because of poor training and low wages. This rapid turnover can create staffing problems that play out in understaffed shifts, low morale, and a sense of instability in the facility and the surrounding community.[14]

According to Thomas Johnson, an economist and professor of public affairs at the University of Missouri, prisons are not very good economic development strategies because they generate few linkages to the economy, failing to attract significant numbers of associated industries, as an auto plant might spark the development of delivery companies, radio assemblers, and electronic harness makers.[15]

Prisons may also fail to foster significant retail development. Because prisons, as a large-scale enterprise, attract chain stores, there is a "replacement" effect, with giants such as McDonald's and Wal-Mart pushing out locally owned enterprises. In Tehachapi, California, home to two state prisons, 741 locally owned businesses failed in the last decade of the 1990s, while retail and fast food chains absorbed the local markets. As a result, there may be no net increase in tax revenues, and, because profits made by chain stores are not locally reinvested in the way that locally owned profits may be, the circulation of dollars within a community may drop in absolute terms.

Anticipating that prisons will attract new people to live in the host community and that locals with prison jobs will be able to afford better housing, developers build new housing. But because today's prison employees often choose not to live in small rural towns, opting instead to commute from urban and suburban areas, speculation in housing devel-

opment can end in disaster both for the speculator and for the town, as happened in the California prison towns of Corcoran and Avenal.

The impact of prisons on housing can also cause economic hardships for the poor and elderly in rural communities. Both land and rental values generally increase when a prison siting is authorized by a governmental or corporate entity; however, land values fall once the actual (low) number of locally gained jobs, and associated homeowners, becomes clear. This has the effect of placing additional burdens on poorer members of the community, particularly renters and elderly homeowners, since rents generally rise when real property prices rise, but landlords rarely reduce rents during economic downturns. As a result, renters, who are often the poorest members of communities, are made even poorer because their fixed costs increase while income does not change. This happened in Crescent City, California, when a state prison opened in 1989. For elderly homeowners, the rise and fall in prices during the period of speculative development ultimately devalued their homes.[16]

Prisoners themselves may also displace low-wage workers in struggling rural areas. One researcher assessing the impacts of prisons on host communities noted that "Prisons as industries do have the added plus of a captive workforce available for community projects."[17] Work projects performed by prisoners for local government, churches, hospitals, libraries, and many other kinds of organizations are very common in prisons located in rural communities and small towns, and prison officials tout them as good "community relations." This can lead to competition within the community for the services of inmates working both inside and outside the prison. In Coxsackie, New York, home to two state prisons and 3,000 prisoners, work performed for the community varies widely according to the prison guard coordinator of the inmate work crew: "We've done a lot of painting this year, painting a community center building in Athens, painted the inside of a church parish hall, put a roof on the town of New Baltimore town hall, had them sealing blacktop . . . just about everything. They get an industrial rate which

amounts to 42 cents an hour."[18] Although local governments and other organizations save money on work they would otherwise have had to contract out to workers at a prevailing wage, prison labor may result in displacement of workers in these communities and can deepen local poverty.[19]

The "hidden" costs of doing prison business can be high for small communities. Local court and police systems are often the first to feel the impact. In many states, county or district public defenders are responsible for defending indigent inmates charged with committing crimes (e.g., assaults on guards and other inmates) within state prisons. In low-population counties with large numbers of prisoners, the prisoner share of a defender's caseload can be quite high, and the much higher rate of inmate assaults on staff and inmates at private prisons as compared with that in government-run facilities means this is a particular burden for towns with private prisons. Since private prison guards do not have the same police powers that state or federal correctional officers do, many disciplinary infractions in private prisons are handled by district or county courts. In Bent County, Colorado, filings in the county court increased an astonishing 99 percent after the opening of the privately operated Bent County Correctional Facility in Las Animas.[20]

The increasing practice of importing inmates from other states can exacerbate these costs. This poses serious problems since, in the event of a disturbance or escape, state and local law enforcement personnel can be left with the task of "cleaning up" when there is a problem. This happened in 1999 at the Correctional Service Corporation's Crowley County Correctional Facility (CCCF) in Olney Springs, Colorado, when inmates from Wyoming protested inadequate food service and state employees were called in to restore order. State investigators found that CCCF employees were not trained to detect possible problems, handle disturbances, or even properly use their radios.[21]

Though boosters claim that prisons are "recession-proof," in fact they are subject to downturns in the economy, and expected booms can change to busts for small towns. Bonne Terre, Missouri, chosen in 1995 as the home for the state's largest and costliest prison, learned that lesson

the hard way. In 2001, six years after the announcement, the city was in debt, and new businesses nearly broke because state budget shortfalls delayed the opening of the prison. As with many small communities trying to replace dead or dying industries with prisons, Bonne Terre, once one of the nation's top lead-mining towns, gave a lot to get what they hoped would be more. The town purchased the land for the prison and issued bonds to help pay for $14 million in improvements that included new roads, and sewer and water lines. But the town has been forced to pay back the debt on these loans without the expected increases in revenue from the prison. Businesses such as a Texaco convenience store and gas station, car washes, and fast-food outlets that opened in anticipation of the prison found themselves in a similar bind. One local land developer, unable to get more than one business to commit to a 240-acre site that he bought and cleared, estimated that businesses in Bonne Terre lost millions of dollars.[22]

The effects of the recession begun in March, 2001 also show that Bonne Terre's experience may look good compared with that of other prison towns in such states as California, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois, which have announced their intentions to close existing prisons. States faced with choices between spending on corrections and spending in other areas are now up against a wall, shelving prison-building plans for the near future and laying off hundreds of prison employees. As one North Dakota legislator put it, "For every dollar that you're spending on corrections, you're not spending that on primary and secondary education, you're not spending it on the colleges or tourism. It's just money down a rat hole, basically."[23]

Prisons can also discourage other kinds of economic development. The lack of amenities in a town, coupled with the dominance of a prison on its social and economic horizon, may discourage other industries from locating in the town that might, for all other purposes, be perfectly suitable. In California, all new prison towns have had great difficulty attracting other industries. Explanations for this difficulty range from the "spectre" of prison as an undesirable neighbor, to the fact that prisons are not necessarily required to conform to all environmental and other

controls. Thus, in California prison towns Tehachapi and Avenal, water quantity and quality have become major issues.[24]

The town of Malone, New York, is another small community in the throes of realizing its future as a prison town. Despite having three state prisons, a hoped-for food processing plant to serve the prisons hasn't materialized, and a $4.5 million expansion of the sewage-treatment plant, paid for by the state to accommodate the third prison opened in 1999, has increased the amount of nitrates dumped on a daily basis into the Salmon River, a beautiful trout stream treasured by the community. Because the loans to build the sewage plant and a new water system for the prison were based on the village's, not the state's, borrowing capacity, taxes have gone up, and the payments were estimated to be more than $1 million in 2000.

Boyce Sherwin, the town's industrial recruiter who was born and reared in Malone, deplores the prison boomlet. "It will institutionalize a degraded environment and quality of life," he states. "Is this our legacy to our children?" The executive director of Friends of the North Country, a community development group that has opposed prison-building, believes "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." Sherwin sees a dream that has gone sour: "It was get a prison and your community is set," he says. "But look around, is this heaven?"[25]

NORMAN ROCKWELL MEETS QUENTIN TARANTINO

In response to increased difficulty in attracting other industries, local officials in towns with one prison often opt or are forced to lobby for more prisons, creating a "one-company town" scenario over time. The tendency of states—including Texas, Arizona, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, Colorado, Florida, and California, among many others—to "cluster" prisons in distinct rural regions has created dozens of rural penal colonies where prisons dominate the community's economic, social, political, and cultural landscape with myriad and profound effects.

In the small town of Ionia, in a rural region of Michigan, a sixth state prison was due to open in 2002, tying it with Huntsville, Texas, for most lockups in a U.S. city. The prisons cover two square miles and comprise a third of the city's size. They hold 5,094 prisoners and have 1,584 workers. According to a *Detroit News* reporter, "When this world of servitude collides with that of freedom, Ionia takes on the look of a Norman Rockwell painting defaced by Quentin Tarantino." He noted that prison supervisors belong to the chamber of commerce and are regulars at Rotary. One warden serves on the city council, and another was president of the city's fair association. It's not uncommon to come across an inmate in his prison blues pruning bushes at police headquarters or, during the winter, shoveling snow for seniors. Teams in city leagues drive into lower security prisons to play softball against inmates.[26]

Although the local government and business leaders of Ionia express contentment with its prison-town identity, there's no shortage of anecdotal evidence of increased rates of divorce, alcoholism and substance abuse, suicide, health problems, family violence, and other crimes associated with multigenerational prison communities, suggesting that below the surfaces of local power structures, people in these communities are suffering.[27] The stress of work in prisons, though not a subject of open discussion in most prison towns, is well documented and most recently made the subject of popular discussion with the publication of journalist Ted Conover's book, an account of a year working as a prison guard inside one of America's most famous prisons.[28] A quick perusal of the letters Conover has received from prison guards and their family members from across the nation speaks to the dehumanization of both prisoners and guards that inevitably takes place behind bars and to the toll on the loved ones, neighbors, and friends of correctional officers.[29]

The impact of this process of soul-death on a small community is suggested in remarks made by Richard Purdue, a former mayor of Ossining, New York, the prison town that changed its name from Sing Sing in an attempt to alter the perceptions of the town by outsiders. In a letter

written in 1997 addressing New York's proposal to locate a maximum-security prison in the tiny town of Tupper Lake in the state's Adirondack Mountain region, Purdue says, "A state prison is a disadvantage to a small community. A maximum security prison in particular drags on the public perception of a town and quietly injures a town's perception of itself. The State Legislature still can turn back the Tupper Lake proposal. For Tupper Lake and for the Adirondacks, this could initiate a period of progress, rather than a dismal retreat into the industry of incarceration."[30]

PERPETUATING RACISM

Racial hatred behind and beyond prison walls is another deeply troubling consequence of the increasing dependence of rural communities on prisons. While racism is not a new feature of the U.S. prison system, efforts to address the problem are undermined by the trend toward building prisons in rural areas where the work force is predominantly white and prisoners are predominantly people of color. Calling racism pervasive in rural prisons, author, researcher, and former corrections officer Kelsey Kauffman has gathered extensive documentation on both individual and organized acts of racist activity in rural prisons throughout states as diverse as Indiana, New York, Virginia, Florida, New Jersey, Illinois, Colorado, California, Maine, and Michigan.[31]

Individual acts of racism in prisons include the wearing of Klan-style robes or hoods at work and the wearing or displaying of Confederate or skinhead flags or insignias by employees inside prisons. The problem becomes one of organized or organizational racism when excuses like "Hey, it was just a joke," or, "That's my heritage" are accepted and translated by prison management as, "White boys will be white boys."[32]

In at least six states, guards have appeared in mock Klan attire in recent years. Guards have also been accused of race-based threats, beatings and shootings in ten states. Lawsuits have been filed in at least thirteen states by black guards alleging racist harrassment or violence from white colleauges. And uncounted settlements have been reached in civil cases filed by guards or inmates, where damages are sealed by court order.[33]

The Florida NAACP has joined more than a hundred black employees in filing suit against the state Department of Corrections for harboring and condoning overt racism in the state's prisons. Black officers and prisoners have accused white officers of carrying so-called "nigger knots" (small knotted nooses on their key chains worn as symbols of solidarity); of wearing and displaying racist symbols (such as Klan tattoos) at work; of routinely using racist epithets; and of retaliating against employees—black and white—who challenge these practices.[34]

In the late 1990s, two separate lawsuits by African-American correctional officers were filed against the Department of Corrections in Washington, where individual and organized racist activity among white prison guards has been a widely reported problem in rural prisons throughout the state. In 2000, the Washington Department of Corrections paid $250,000 in an out-of-court settlement to black officers who had accused it of condoning racist behavior at the Clallam Bay Corrections Center located in a remote northwest corner of the state, where most of the prison guards are white, formerly unemployed loggers.[35]

"The people we work with out there are ex-loggers," said former guard Doris Washington, a plaintiff in the Clallam Bay suit. "They have never come into contact with the outside world per se. They don't know how to deal with us because they've never been around us." Though Clallam Bay's prisoner population is 48 percent minority, only 4 of of its 326 employees are black. The lawsuit stated that black officers were denied promotions, subject to threats and racial epithets like "coon," and that minority prisoners were harassed and set up for beatings. Some white guards had taken to calling Martin Luther King, Jr., Day "Happy Nigger Day" and a handful of guards openly bragged about associations with hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. A similiar lawsuit filed in 1999 by black employees of Washington Correctional Center in Shelton also included complaints about organized neo-Nazi activities, including "Heil Hitler" salutes among some white officers and distribution of hate literature inside the prison.[36]

In other instances, prison officials would like to sanction employees who are prominently associated with white supermacist organizations outside the prison but can't because these employees have clean records inside. And although there have also been cases where correctional officers who are leaders in their local white supremacist organizations have been fired when they openly recruited at work, others who flaunt their white supremacy at work keep their jobs.

"Such situations are highly corrosive for those who work in rural prisons, for those who live in them, for the communities around them, and ultimately for the nation as a whole," says Kauffman, who recommends the first course of action to address this problem is to stop building prisons in rural areas: "Beyond the obvious parallels that we are once again using black bodies to sustain white rural economies, we are setting ourselves up, over the long term, for greater racial tensions in this country. Prison walls cannot and will not contain the racial hatreds generated within them."[37]

REDISTRIBUTING WEALTH AND POLITICAL POWER

The shock waves of the prison-building spree in rural America are now penetrating the inner core of our nation's large cities and threatening dramatic and troubling changes in the way the nation allocates resources and political representation. The near-doubling of the prison population and the rural prison boom during the 1990s portends a substantial transfer of dollars from urban to rural America because prison inmates are counted in the populations of the towns and counties in which they are incarcerated and not in their home neighborhoods. The result? Inner-city communities, home to large numbers of prisoners, will lose out. The prisoner "share" of the nearly $2 trillion in federal funds tied to population counts distributed nationwide during this decade will go to the mostly rural hometowns of their keepers.[38]

Ironically, it is prisons that are reversing long-standing trends of population loss in rural counties. Sussex County, Virginia, a 496-square-mile

patch of peanuts, cotton, and hog farms, was recently declared the fastest growing county in the United States. The reason? Between 1998 and 1999, two new maximum security prisons increased its population by 23 percent. As rural communities gain inmates, they harvest federal cash. In Coxsackie, New York, prisoners make the community more "competitive" for federal antipoverty funds distributed on a per capita basis. Because they earn little or no money, prisoners in the town's two correctional facilities—who made up 27.5 percent of Coxsackie's 1990 population—drove down its median income on the census and made it eligible to receive more funding from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Since that time, the number of Coxsackie's prisoners has continued to grow, and local officials acknowledge that Coxsackie will benefit even more from the final 2000 census count.[39]

As the cutoff for that census approached, localities rushed to get their piece of the pie. In 1998, an Arizona law permitting municipalities to annex prisons set off a bidding war between the towns of Gila Bend and Buckeye for neighboring adult and juvenile prisons. Buckeye won, and as a result expects to reap $600 per inmate every year, amounting to over $10 million in Census-tied subsidies in this decade.[40] Florence, Arizona, with five prisons, employed an even more novel approach when it paid the Census Bureau thousands of dollars for mid-decade population tabulations to adjust for new prisons built there—assuring that its "fair share" of Census-tied federal and state dollars would flow into the town before the results of the 2000 Census were in.[41]

The big losers in this shift will be urban communities of color. Half of all U.S. prisoners are African American, and one-sixth are Latino. The vast majority are from places like East New York and South Central Los Angeles. As a result, these neighborhoods—which have already sustained years of economic and social crises and loss—stand to lose more money in coming years.

These communities also stand to lose political representation and power as a result of the prison boom in rural America. Political districts are based on population size and determine the number of Congressional, state, and local representatives. When political boundaries are redrawn to

conform with Census figures, the huge numbers of urban people imprisoned will be reapportioned to the rural areas hosting their prisons.

We are thus on the verge of a national crisis, particularly in situations where the communities that "win" are predominantly white, and the communities that "lose" are predominantly minority. In Florida, for example, including the state's growing inmate population could greatly affect political boundaries in sparsely populated North Florida counties, where prisons have cropped up like mushrooms over the past decade. Gulf County has two new prisons accounting for a significant percentage of its 13,000 residents; a prison built in Gadsden County could help move state legislative boundaries that affect Tallahassee and other Big Bend counties. Opinions issued by Florida's attorney general in August 2001 said county commissions and school boards must include prisoners when redistricting.[42]

So, while they can't vote, Florida's 82,000 prison inmates may figure heavily in the state's redrawing of political boundaries. Therein lies another major dilemma: because prisoners in forty-eight states are disenfranchised, if prisoners are allowed to be counted in the region of their imprisonment for the purposes of political representation, then their votes are effectively given to those who happen to live near a prison, thus diluting the voting power of the predominately black, Hispanic, and urban prison population and giving it to mostly white, rural regions.[43]

Among political gatekeepers, concerns about these potentially significant impacts are growing. In 1999, Republican Congressman Mark Green of Wisconsin introduced a bill that would allow states to count for Census purposes the state and federal prisoners exported to other states. The congressman was concerned that Wisconsin could lose one of its nine Congressional seats after the 2000 census count.[44]

CONCLUSION

Although the growth in prisoner populations and new prisons slowed somewhat in the late 1990s, without other interventions such as changes

in mandatory sentencing laws and parole policies, or more extensive use of alternatives to incarceration, prisoner populations and prison-building may climb upward again.

As well, the use of prisons as moneymakers for struggling rural communities has become a major force driving criminal justice policy toward mass incarceration of the urban poor regardless of policy rationales like rising crime and prison overcrowding. As former New York State legislator Daniel Feldman observed, "When legislators cry 'Lock 'em up!' they often mean 'Lock 'em up in my district!' "[45] Indeed, the rural prison boom during the decade of the 1990s occurred at a time of falling crime rates, and experience shows that the federal and state governments are reluctant to pull the plug on the many interests that now lobby for and feed off prisons. Allowed to continue, this cycle will have catastrophic consequences for the health and welfare of individuals, families, and communities in urban and rural areas, and indeed for the nation.