

Outside the Prison Walls: Prison Towns

The majority of America’s prisons sit in rural areas, a change from before the 1980’s.⁴¹⁹ When talk turns to closing prisons, we often hear the objection, “But what about the people who work there?” This is, indeed, a problem: entire communities have grown up around rural prisons, and the shuttering of the prison can create unemployment. The benefit to these communities, however, is not so open-and-shut.

A 2003 report by The Sentencing Project did a rigorous statistical analysis of economics in seven rural counties in New York State that are the sites of state prisons, as compared to seven equivalent counties that did not have prisons.⁴²⁰ Their major findings were that the counties with prisons gained neither employment nor per capita income. The authors suggest a number of reasons for this, including residents lacking the skills or education for the job, local businesses not being set up to provide the resources needed by the prisons, and people already working for the Department of Corrections wanting to transfer to work upstate.

Beyond a lack of benefits, prison construction can leave small towns in the lurch, especially when it comes to private prisons. According to a researcher at the ACLU, “A private prison company promises this very attractive deal and then towns take on financial risks they don’t fully understand. [They] only figure out what they’ve signed when something goes very wrong and the town is left holding the bag.”⁴²¹

In addition to no discernible economic advantage and potential for risk, there are also emotional and communal deficits. The New York Civil Liberties Union report *Boxed In* offers this portrait:

*Monsignor Dennis Duprey, pastor of St. Peter’s Church in Plattsburgh, served as Upstate’s chaplain from the day it opened in 1998 until 2003. He knows the toll that extreme isolation takes on COs: “A system that asks Correctional Officers to walk into a place for eight hours a day at a minimum, where the people they look after ... do not trust a single word they say, or a single action they do – that’s not a wonderful way to conduct human relationships. When they go home, officers have trouble with their own relationships, with their sons and daughters; they treat them like inmates.”*⁴²²

Distressed rural counties deserve government assistance to help them flourish, both economically and as communities, but not on the backs of the people incarcerated in those prisons or the communities they leave behind.

Facts and Figures ⁴²³

- There are about 500,000 corrections officers in the United States.
- One study found that 34% of corrections officers suffer from PTSD. Among military veterans, the number is 14%.
- Corrections officers have a suicide rate twice that of police officers and the general public.
- The national average wage for a corrections officer is \$44,910.

⁴¹⁹ <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/building.html>

⁴²⁰ http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/inc_bigprisons.pdf p. 2-3

⁴²¹ <http://fusion.net/story/115888/texas-town-strikes-private-prison-deal-then-it-all-goes-wrong/>

⁴²² http://www.nyclu.org/files/publications/nyclu_boxedin_FINAL.pdf p.6

⁴²³ <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/20/corrections-officers-ptsd-american-prisons>