

# America's Internal Colony

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*“Neo-colonialism is...the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress.”*

—**Kwame Nkrumah**

The U.S. has developed a hidden colony within its boundaries into which 2,000,000 people have disappeared. It's a colony dispersed geographically into thousands of separate communities, all bounded by rolls of razor-wire. Inside this colony is a population that is overwhelmingly poor, young, and of color.



Impact Visuals

Empires need colonies to provide the raw resources that make empire possible. The American empire is no exception, but we have developed our own late 20th century twist on colonialism. Through the prison industrial complex, the United States has built an internal colony of 2 million prisoners held in state and federal prisons. Our prison population provides the usual benefits of a colony — a large source of cheap labor to serve government and corporate interests, and a rapidly growing internal market for corporate goods and services. The prison

industrial complex provides the added benefit of social control. By criminalizing the behavior of certain groups — people of color, youth, the unemployed, and the mentally ill — and attaching stiff penalties to non-violent drug and property offenses, we've created an effective system for disappearing vast numbers of already marginalized people into the penal colony.

The growth in the prison population over the last 20 years has been astronomical. From 1930-1980 the rate of incarceration in the U.S. held steady at about 150 per 100,000 residents. But from 1980-1990 the rate skyrocketed to 450 per 100,000 residents. And during the “punishing decade” of the 1990s, our incarceration rates reached over 700 per 100,000 (as of December, 1999). The result: nearly one in every 150 Americans is incarcerated today.

## Public Mania or Economic Strategy?

The U.S. has become a world leader in locking up its own population. Across the country harsher sentencing guidelines have been enacted. California enacted the “three strikes you're out” legislation that gave it one of the fastest growing incarceration rates in the country, and resulted in a series of Kafkaesque convictions. One person was given a sentence of 25-to-life for shoplifting vitamins after two prior non-violent convictions more than a decade before.

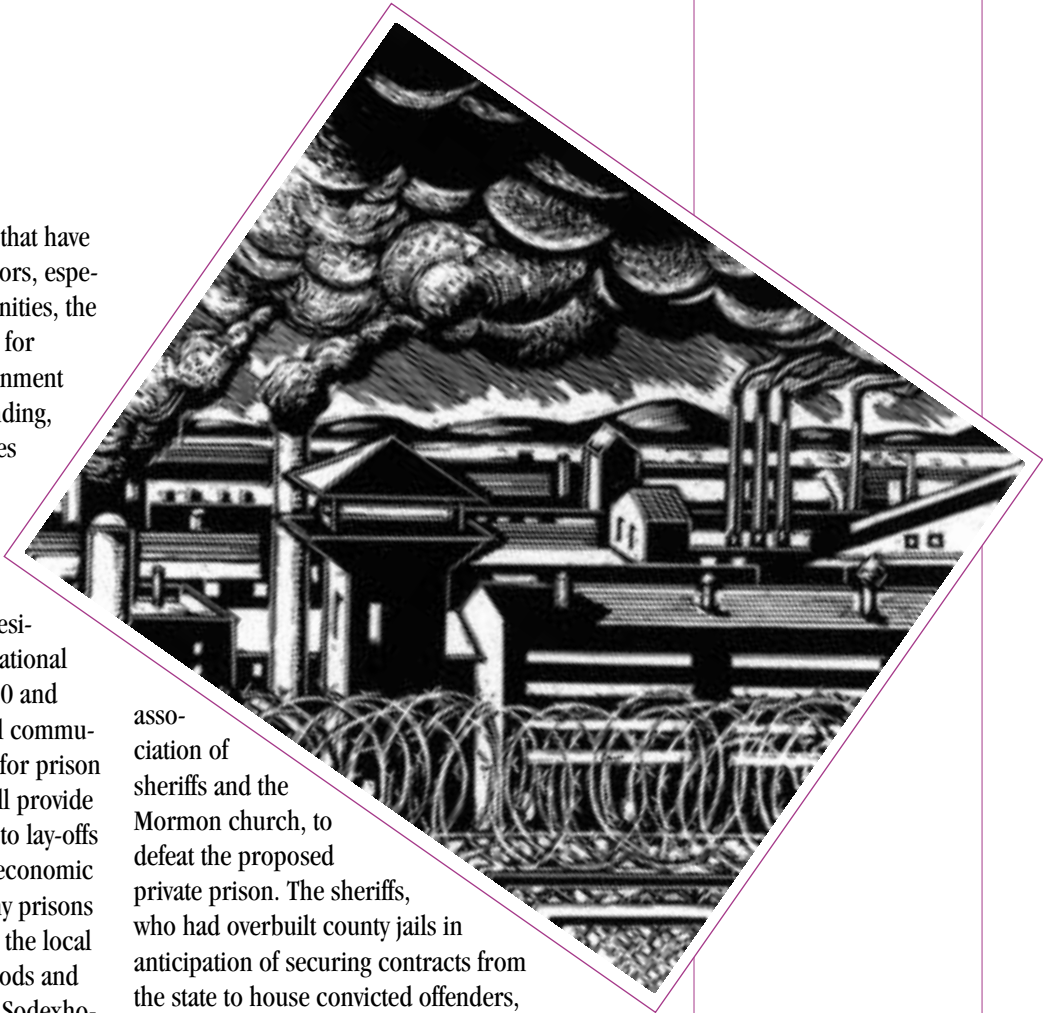
Oregon's “one strike and you're out” Measure 11 (1994), was supposedly enacted to lock up violent repeat offenders. Five years later, a full 60 percent of those sentenced under Measure 11 are first-time offenders, many of them young, and they're being sent away for a long, long time. Last spring a protestor in a Eugene, Oregon demonstration (which reports say became unruly and resulted in some property damage) threw a rock at a mounted police officer who was charging him. He was convicted of Assault II (a Measure 11 crime) and Riot, and sentenced to over seven years in prison.

What's behind the sweeping movement to lock 'em up, and throw away the key? Certainly, a few high profile and truly horrific crimes have been furiously promoted by both the news media and politicians to instill fear and panic in the population. But the reality is that less than 5 percent of crimes committed are of this kind, and we are filling up our prisons with nonviolent offenders. Yet the federal government encourages states to enact harsher sentences under “Truth in Sentencing” laws, and provides half a billion dollars each year

in prison construction financing to states that have enacted such legislation. For state legislators, especially those from depressed rural communities, the prison industry is often seen as an engine for economic recovery. And the federal government uses the carrot of prison construction funding, along with a heavy stick that requires states to enact harsher legislation in order to access that funding.

Incarceration has come to be perceived as a leading rural growth industry. The 1980s saw so many urban residents incarcerated that 5 percent of the national increase in rural population between 1980 and 1990 is accounted for by prisoners. Rural communities throughout the West are clamoring for prison construction in the belief that a prison will provide a base of secure jobs that are not subject to lay-offs during a recession — but the hoped for economic boom has been uneven at best, since many prisons import personnel rather than hiring from the local community and contract for necessary goods and services with major national vendors like Sodexo-Marriott. This year, Census 2000 has raised another important issue for rural communities seeking more government resources. Prisoners will be counted in the census as residents of the towns in which the prisons are located, rather than their home communities. This will result in a marked transfer of federal resources from the impoverished urban communities where the vast majority of prisoners come from, to the rural communities where prisons are sited.

In Utah, construction of a private prison by Houston-based Cornell Corrections in Tooele County was much anticipated by local government and some residents. However, a strong organizing and lobbying effort by the Utah Citizens Education Project (UCEP) over the past year has kept a contract from being signed with Cornell Corrections, and at this time it looks like the prison will not be built. According to Steve Erickson and Rob Jensen of the UCEP, they were able to garner the support of unlikely allies, including the Utah



association of sheriffs and the Mormon church, to defeat the proposed private prison. The sheriffs, who had overbuilt county jails in anticipation of securing contracts from the state to house convicted offenders, clearly saw that a private prison was in direct competition for state resources. The Mormon church, on the other hand, came out against prison privatization on the moral grounds that it represented a “commerce in souls.”

### Prisoners as Commodities

*“Prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings. And the practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities has literally become big business.”*

— **Angela Y. Davis**

Rural communities are not the only ones seeking to benefit from the growth in incarceration rates. Corporate interests are deeply entrenched in the prison boom. Throughout most of the 1990s, private prison operators like Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and Wackenhut Corporation saw their stock prices soar. Between 1987 and 1996, the number of inmates in private prisons jumped from

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3,122 to 78,000. As of December, 1999, private prison beds in the U.S. numbered over 122,000.

While most private prisons in the U.S. are located in the sun belt, there are three CCA prisons in our region (the new Crossroads Correctional Center in Shelby, Montana, the new Idaho Correctional Center, and the Southern Nevada Women's Correctional Facility). Correctional Services Corporation, a private prison operator specializing in youth prisons, operates the INS Detention Center in Seattle. And Correctional Medical Services (CMS) has a private contract with the state of Nevada to provide all inmate medical care in the maximum security Ely State Prison. This is the same company that made

promoted by Nevada Governor Guinn to privatize all inmate medical care was defeated in the legislature. But privatized medical care of prisoners at Ely remains.

In addition to the private prison companies, some of the leading lights of America's corporate community are deeply entrenched in the prison boom.

For example:

- Wall Street firms like Goldman Sachs, Smith Barney Shearson, and Merrill Lynch compete to underwrite prison construction with enormous bond issues. Prison construction budgets for the U.S. are close to \$7 billion per year. Financial intermediaries buy bonds and securities from private prison companies or state agencies and resell them to investors, a market niche worth about \$2 to \$3 billion per year.
- Communications giants like AT&T, MCI and Sprint make a killing running prison phone systems, charging rates up to six times free world rates (plus an automatic "connect fee" of \$1.50 to \$3 per inmate call). In addition to the high charges per call, MCI was recently forced to admit that it had been improperly charging California inmates an even higher rate than its contract called for. The state of California, like most states, receives a kick-back from the phone companies on the prison phone system. Profits from contracts with MCI and GTE netted the state of California \$16 million in 1998.
- Sodexho Marriott Services, a subsidiary of the Paris-based Sodexho Alliance, is a major provider of food services to both prisons and colleges throughout the U.S. In addition, the Sodexho Alliance is a major stockholder in Corrections Corporation of America and private prison companies in Australia and the United Kingdom.



Impact Visuals

the pages of the Journal of the American Medical Association for gross medical neglect when providing inmate care in Washoe County, Nevada's women's detention facility. A CMS doctor removed a 40 year old, diabetic woman inmate from insulin. She died as a result. In 1999, an effort vigorously

## The New Plantation

*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.*

— U.S. Constitution, Article XIII, Section 1

After the Civil War, southern states hungry for the slave labor that was now abolished enacted a series of laws designed to lock up as many African Americans as possible. Convict labor was then used to work the plantations once worked by slaves. The later use of convict labor to block unionization of free workers resulted in state laws prohibiting private businesses from using prison labor. In 1935, it became a federal offense to transport prison-made goods between states.

All that has changed in the late 20th century, as Congress and the states have enacted legislation to free up a new pool of prison labor.

Presented as employment training programs, most prison employment mirrors the kind of jobs U.S. companies have been shipping overseas. In our region, companies like Microsoft and Starbucks use prison labor for product packaging, while Redwood Outdoors (a supplier to Eddie Bauer, among others) uses prison labor for garment work. States, too, are cashing in on prison labor with their own in-house industries. According to the Deputy Director of the Nevada Department of Prisons, this year will be the most profitable in their prison industries program, with total sales projected at \$6 million.

The benefits to private enterprise are enticing: low wage workers (with no right to organize or strike), no benefits to pay, no unemployment or workers compensation insurance to pay and rent-free facilities provided by the state. And while prisoners may

receive minimum wage, up to 80 percent of their wages are deducted to pay for the costs of incarceration and restitution.

## The Ranks of the Disappeared

*“There is a paradox at the core of penology... It is that not only the worst of the young are sent to prison, but the best — that is the proudest, the bravest, the most daring, the most enterprising, and the most undefeated of the poor. There starts the horror.”*

— Norman Mailer

Behind prison walls in the U.S. are nearly 2 million people: each one of them an individual, each with family and loved ones outside. Contrary to high profile stories of deranged mass murderers and school-aged killers, over seventy percent of people being sent to prison today are nonviolent offenders. At least 15 percent of inmates are severely mentally ill, a result of the dismantlement of the mental health system over the past three decades. People of color make up about 25

percent of the U.S. population, but 70 percent of all new prison admissions.

In the Western States Center region, people of color represent about 15 percent of the population. Yet almost 35 percent of people in our prisons are people of color. Washington and Nevada lead the region: both states have prison populations that are 44 percent people of color.

And while women are still a relatively minor percentage of all prisoners, they are the fastest growing sector of the prison population. This isn't due to increases in violent crime rates among women. In 1979, about half of the women sent to prison were non-violent offenders. In 1991, a full 70



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percent of women sent to prison were non-violent offenders. Eight out of ten imprisoned women have children, and the vast majority of these are single mothers. There are now 1.4 million children in foster care in the U.S. because they have an incarcerated parent.

*"[Youth are] the predators out there, they're not children anymore. They're the most violent criminals on the face of the earth."*

— **Representative Bill McCollum (R-Fl)**

America saves the greatest part of its wrath for the young, especially youth of color. We are a country afraid of its children, and more and more, we choose to lock them up. While violent juvenile crime has dramatically decreased by 25 percent since 1994, more and more states are passing legislation that will lock up more kids, at a younger age and for longer periods.

Youth of color are disproportionately affected by harsher juvenile justice legislation. While they are approximately one-third of the youth population in the U.S., 7 out of 10 youths in secure confinement facilities (youth or adult prisons) are youth of color. And African American youth are twice as likely to be arrested and seven times more likely to be held in a detention facility than white youth.

Since 1992, 41 states have passed laws making it easier for children to be tried as adults for violent crimes. The federal legislation pending will allow federal prosecutors the discretion to try children as young as 13 as adults for certain offenses, including some drug offenses. It will also impose harsher mandatory minimums on children, in some cases, harsher sentences than they would receive as adults.



Crime, Law & Justice

### Cracks in the System

Around the region and the country, people are coming to the conclusion that there is something horribly wrong with our criminal justice system. Mainstream media are beginning to question the wisdom of our mania for incarceration. A half dozen major books on the crisis in America's prisons have been published in the last two years. Over 3,000 activists converged in Berkeley in September, 1998 for Critical Resistance, a conference on the prison industrial complex. The internet is alive with information and activism around prison issues. Even the private prison industries are feeling the pinch. Corrections Corporation of America (now a subsidiary of Prison Realty Trust), a top stock pick in the mid-90s, has come under increasing scrutiny for its history of mismanagement and abuse in its facilities. Its stock price has plunged as a result, from approximately \$30 per share in mid-1997, to just \$3.38 in early April, 2000.

This is the best opening we've had in over a decade to organize against the prison industrial complex. And yet there is great investment by politicians, government agencies, major corporations and others in maintaining the prison boom.

Look around you. Chances are someone in your family, among your friends, or in your neighborhood is in prison. Look around, not for who is there, but who isn't. Confronting the prison industrial complex is a new kind of decolonization struggle — a struggle to liberate over 1.2 million non-violent prisoners and billions of tax dollars and return both the people, and the money, to the communities that have been robbed of both.



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