Arizona sheriff introduces female chain gangs

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A recent newspaper item provides a horrifying glimpse into an aspect of modern life in the US that is not generally publicized. It describes the phenomenon of female chain gangs. This practice occurs not in a rural southern American town, but Maricopa County, Arizona, which covers an area that includes the 3 million residents of metropolitan Phoenix, one of the country's largest urban centers.

According to a report by Reuters correspondent Alan Elsner, "At 6 a.m., 15 women assembled for chain gang duty, padlocked together by the ankle, five to each chain. They were marched to a van and taken to their work site—a county cemetery in the desert. The women had to bury the bodies of indigent people who had died in the streets or in the hospital without family and without money to pay for a funeral. The first body was that of a baby, in a tiny white casket, who did not even have a name.

"A Catholic priest said a prayer for the baby and recited the 23rd Psalm while some of the women silently wept. Then they filled in the grave and moved on to the next body. Altogether, the women buried six people, including two babies."

According to the press account, one of the women in the chain gang, Defonda McInelly, was serving eight months for check forgery. She said, "I was thinking as they lowered that casket into the ground, 'Where is the mother of this child?' I think about my son, Chaz. He is 3. I miss him immensely. I don't have him come and visit me in here. He knows that Mommy is in jail and I don't want him to see Mommy for half an hour through a glass window and then be dragged away."

The conditions of the inmates are so unbearable that the women described at the burial site all volunteered for chain gang duty to get out of lockdown. This is a punishment in which prisoners are shut in an 8-by-12-square-feet cell for 23 hours a day. If they spend 30 days on the chain gang, picking up trash, weeding or burying bodies, they can get out of the punishment cells and live in ...tents.

More than 2,000 of the 8,000 inmates in the county jail live in "Tent City" under the Arizona sun, in temperatures which last summer often reached 100-120 degrees Fahrenheit.

The sheriff who runs the entire county jail operation is Joe Arpaio. He was elected in 1992 promising to be tough on crime and intends to seek a fourth term next year. One of his many projects includes the organizing of a 3,200 member vigilante-type posse force.

The official Maricopa County web site solicits for the volunteer posse force and simply requires that "Posse members who wish to carry a firearm must undergo seventy-three (73) hours of firearms training, undergo psychological testing and consent to a urinalysis in order to qualify to be a Qualified Armed Posseman. ... Posse persons interested in joining the Sheriff's Posse must be at least eighteen (18) years old, a United States Citizen, possess a valid Arizona drivers license, be a resident of Maricopa County, and pass a background investigation and drug test."

The inmates in the Maricopa County jail system are required by law to work six days a week. They eat only twice a day, get no coffee, cigarettes, salt, pepper, ketchup or organized recreation. They must pay $10 to see a nurse, and if they want to write to their families, they have to use special postcards with the sheriff's picture on them. If their loved ones visit, inmates see them through thick plate glass or over a video link.

Most inmates are serving sentences of a year or less for relatively minor infractions, or are awaiting trial because they could not make bail. They must wear pink underwear and black and white striped uniforms.

"It feels weird being seen in public, chained up together, wearing stripes. People honk their horns or shout at you," said Tylisha Chewning, who was jailed for violating probation after renting a car and failing to

return it for two months.

During a recent tour of his tent city, Arpaio boasted, “I got meal costs down to 40 cents a day per inmate. It costs $1.15 a day to feed the department’s dogs. Now, I’m cutting prisoners’ calories from 3,000 to 2,500 a day.”

Several prisoners reported they often received rotten food. “The cheese is old. The meat has green spots. And the heat kills you,” said Tom Silha, 42, serving nine months for fraud.

Recently, Arpaio told an interviewer on Amsterdam radio (Radio Netherlands) that by January or February of the coming year, he was planning to add juveniles to the chain gangs. “In my jail, I am going to teach them [juveniles] how to run a trash company. ... They will be up and down the streets of Phoenix, hooked together cleaning trash.”

Arizona began using chain gangs in 1995; officials in Alabama and Florida soon followed suit. Last used in the United States more than forty years ago, chain gangs are making a comeback and are being hailed by their supporters as an effective anti-crime deterrent, even though there is no evidence of this. Many states find the practice a lucrative one, since it provides free labor.

According to Amnesty International, “the use of chain gangs constitutes cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, in violation of international standards on the treatment of prisoners.”

The resurgence of increasingly brutal methods used in prisons is yet another demonstration of the decay of democratic rights in the United States and the treatment of social problems as police matters.

Already, a record 2.1 million people are incarcerated in American state and federal facilities. The US has a higher percentage of its citizenry in prison than any other country in history, and accounts for an astonishing 25 percent of the world’s prison population, but only 5 percent of the world’s population. The prison population—made up primarily of non-violent offenders—consists predominantly of the poor, juveniles and the mentally ill.