

US prison boom creates an Orwellian world

Peter Daniels
13 May 2004

A recent study by the Urban Institute, a nonprofit policy research and education organization, sheds important light on the growth of prisons in the US over the past two decades, and on some little-noticed social and political ramifications of this phenomenon.

The report, issued in late April, is entitled, “The New Landscape of Imprisonment: Mapping America’s Prison Expansion.” Its focus is a very narrow one. It does not address any of the reasons for the expansion of prisons or the fact that the US, with more than 2 million people in prisons and jails (2,019,234, according to a Justice Department announcement in April 2003), now occupies first place in the entire world in the percentage of its citizens behind bars—702 per 100,000.

The report deals only with the prison population, leaving out those in local jails awaiting trial or serving brief sentences. Its figure for this prison population in 2000 is 1.3 million, a number that has skyrocketed from 218,000 in 1974. The exact numbers are 315,974 in 1980, 739,980 in 1990, and 1,321,137 in 2000.

More than 40 percent of state prisons in operation today were opened in the last 25 years. The number of such facilities has jumped from 592 in 1974 to 1,023 in 2000. Back in 1923 there was a grand total of 61 prisons in the entire country. The population has tripled since then, but the number of prisons has increased 17-fold.

The report focuses on the 10 states with the largest growth in the number of prisons in the last 20 years. These include most or all of the states with the largest population—California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois and Michigan and Ohio—along with Georgia, Colorado and Missouri. Sixty-three percent of the additional prisons opened in the past two decades have been in these 10 states. The number of prisons in these states more than tripled between 1979 and 2000, from 195 to 604. Texas is in a class by itself, with 120 new prisons, for a growth of 706 percent over the 21 years. Not surprisingly (although not dealt with in this report), Texas also leads in the number of executions carried out since the legalization of the death penalty in the mid-1970s.

Several aspects of the prison-building boom are highlighted. First is what is called the “pervasiveness of prison growth.” The proportion of counties in the 10 states studied that include at least one prison increased from 13 percent in 1979 to 31 percent in 2000.

The second theme of the study is the impact of prison expansion in rural and “non-metro” counties, defined as those lacking “a large population nucleus, together with adjacent communities, having a high degree of social and economic integration with that core.” The growth of prisons in these more sparsely populated areas has led to a situation in which a growing number of counties have 5, 10 or 20 percent or more of their residents behind bars.

A third aspect studied is the growing disconnect between the largely urban areas most prisoners come from and the counties of imprisonment where they serve their time, often hundreds of miles away from their homes and families.

One of the authors of the study, Jeremy Travis, explained the development of what he called “a prison construction advocacy position.” This phenomenon has been studied elsewhere (*Going Up the River*, by Joseph Hallinan, Random House, 2001; “The Prison-Industrial Complex,” by Eric Schlosser, *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1998). Rural legislators on the national as well as local level have lobbied intensively for locating new prisons in areas which have lost jobs in both industry and agriculture and are plagued by high unemployment. This is advanced as a jobs program, although according to one study cited by the Urban Institute report, there was little difference in economic growth between counties that had prisons compared to those without them.

As a result of the influx of prisoners into sparsely populated areas, 114 counties out of a total of 1,052 in the ten states in the study, or more than one out of ten, have more than 5 percent of their population in prison. Forty-seven counties have 10 percent or more of their population in prison, 13 have 20 percent or more, and two counties, one in Florida and one in Texas, have 30 percent or more. Concho County in Texas, with a population of

just under 4,000, had 33 percent in prison. Union County, in Florida, with a population of 13,400, had 30 percent behind bars.

Five states were studied to compare where prisoners are from with where they are imprisoned. In Ohio, for example, it is no surprise that most prisoners (58.7 percent) come from counties in which the major cities are located: Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), Franklin (Columbus), Hamilton (Cincinnati), Montgomery (Dayton), Summit (Akron) and Lucas (Toledo). Only 4.6 percent of prisoners were serving their sentences in these counties, however. Most (78 percent of the total) were being held in prisons in smaller counties, far from their homes. This same pattern held, in varying degrees, in the other states in the study.

The report ends by posing the question, “Why are prisons located in counties that are different from prisoners’ home counties?” without providing an answer. It notes that “spatial mismatch between prisoners and their homes not only impacts the communities that host prisons, but it also impacts family members and friends of prisoners,” a complicated way of stating that an enormous hardship is imposed on many thousands of poor and working class families, while adding to the burdens of those in prison in preparing for release by obtaining jobs and making living arrangements.

The prison building program documented in this report reflects the unrelenting right-wing law-and-order frenzy that has been waged by both Democratic and Republican parties and lawmakers on every level of government. The consequences of this decades-long buildup in state repression are not mysterious. The locating of many new prisons in rural areas has several related aims: First, it is designed to provide low-paid jobs and take advantage of a plentiful supply of labor in some of the poorest sections of the country. Second, it serves the purpose of transferring federal funds from cities and urban areas, with larger populations of minority workers, trade unionists and other sections of the working class, to rural areas which are usually under the control of the extreme right. Third, it provides direct political benefit for these areas, since the prisoners, while denied the right to vote, are counted in the population figures which are used not only in the allocation of federal money for Medicaid and a whole variety of social services, but also in determining the allotment of legislative seats on a state and federal level.

The report does not tabulate the number of workers employed in the record-setting prison expansion, nor does it examine the related issues of prison privatization and

the use of prison labor by a wide variety of industries. It is not an exaggeration, however, to say that there are numerous counties in the US where the local prison is the biggest “industry,” and the total of those behind bars plus those who are paid to guard (and in some cases brutalize) them adds up to between 20 and 40 percent, or more, of the total population.

As the author of the study explained. “This study shows that the prison network is now deeply intertwined with American life, deeply integrated into the physical and economic infrastructure of a large number of American counties. This network has become a separate reality, apart from the criminal justice system. It provides jobs for construction workers and guards, and because the inmates are counted as residents of the counties where they are incarcerated, it means more federal and state funding and greater political representation for these counties.”

All of these developments merge into a growing nightmare of forced labor, the disenfranchisement of millions of workers, and the use of the instruments of state repression to isolate and atomize large sections of the working class while building up the most reactionary forces to repress the working class. There are substantial areas of the country where the population is increasingly made up of the jailed and their jailers. It is certainly no accident that many of those caught up in the torture scandals against Iraqi prisoners received their training as prison guards in the US. It is in the rapidly growing prison system that they learned the traits of brutality, callousness and indifference to human life that were displayed in the photos sent around the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact