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# Plantations, Prisons and Profits

By CHARLES M. BLOW

“Louisiana is the world’s prison capital. The state imprisons more of its people, per head, than any of its U.S. counterparts. First among Americans means first in the world.

Louisiana’s incarceration rate is nearly triple Iran’s, seven times China’s and 10 times Germany’s.”

That paragraph opens a [devastating eight-part series](#) published this month by The Times-Picayune of New Orleans about how the state’s largely private prison system profits from high incarceration rates and tough sentencing, and how many with the power to curtail the system actually have a financial incentive to perpetuate it.

The picture that emerges is one of convicts as chattel and a legal system essentially based on human commodification.

First, some facts from the series:

- One in 86 Louisiana adults is in the prison system, which is nearly double the national average.
- More than 50 percent of Louisiana’s inmates are in local prisons, which is more than any other state. The next highest state is Kentucky at 33 percent. The national average is 5 percent.
- Louisiana leads the nation in the percentage of its prisoners serving life without parole.
- Louisiana spends less on local inmates than any other state.
- Nearly two-thirds of Louisiana’s prisoners are nonviolent offenders. The national average is less than half.

In the early 1990s, the state was under a federal court order to reduce overcrowding, but instead of releasing prisoners or loosening sentencing guidelines, the state incentivized the building of private prisons. But, in what the newspaper called “a uniquely Louisiana twist,”

most of the prison entrepreneurs were actually rural sheriffs. They saw a way to make a profit and did.

It also was a chance to employ local people, especially failed farmers forced into bankruptcy court by a severe drop in the crop prices.

But in order for the local prisons to remain profitable, the beds, which one prison operator in the series distastefully refers to as “honey holes,” must remain full. That means that on almost a daily basis, local prison officials are on the phones bartering for prisoners with overcrowded jails in the big cities.

It also means that criminal sentences must remain stiff, which the sheriff’s association has supported. This has meant that Louisiana has some of the stiffest sentencing guidelines in the country. Writing bad checks in Louisiana can earn you up to 10 years in prison. In California, by comparison, jail time would be no more than a year.

There is another problem with this unsavory system: prisoners who wind up in these local for-profit jails, where many of the inmates are short-timers, get fewer rehabilitative services than those in state institutions, where many of the prisoners are lifers. That is because the per-diem per prisoner in local prisons is half that of state prisons.

In short, the system is completely backward.

Lifers at state prisons can learn to be welders, plumbers or auto mechanics — trades many will never practice as free men — while prisoners housed in local prisons, and are certain to be released, gain no skills and leave jail with nothing more than “\$10 and a bus ticket.”

These ex-convicts, with almost no rehabilitation and little prospect for supporting themselves, return to the already-struggling communities that were rendered that way in part because so many men are being extracted on such a massive scale. There the cycle of crime often begins again, with innocent people caught in the middle and impressionable young eyes looking on.

According to The Times-Picayune: “In five years, about half of the state’s ex-convicts end up behind bars again.”

This suits the prison operators just fine. They need them to come back to the “honey holes.”

Furthermore, the more money the state spends on incarceration, the less it can spend on preventive measures like education. (According to Education Week’s State Report Cards, Louisiana was one of three states and the District of Columbia to receive an F for K-12

achievement in 2012, and, this year, the state, over all, is facing a \$220 million deficit in its \$25 billion budget.)

Louisiana is the starkest, most glaring example of how our prison policies have failed. It showcases how private prisons do not serve the public interest and how the mass incarceration as a form of job creation is an abomination of justice and civility and creates a long-term crisis by trying to create a short-term solution.

As the paper put it: “A prison system that leased its convicts as plantation labor in the 1800s has come full circle and is again a nexus for profit.”

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