

Rural Prisons: An Update

During 1992-94, nonmetro counties continued to acquire prisons at a rate dramatically out of proportion to the percentage of the Nation's population that lives in such areas. Whether through unsought placement of facilities or aggressive local bidding for them, prison construction and employment have become economically important for many rural areas.

THREE years ago, I reported on the boom in prison building and the fact that this trend was occurring disproportionately in rural and small town locations (Beale). Given the continued high profile nature of the issue of criminal punishment and the economic significance that new prisons have attained in rural development, it seems useful to provide an update of the earlier article.

The previous article showed that during 1980-91, 213 adult correctional institutions (generally limited to those with at least 150 inmates or 50 employees) opened in nonmetro counties. These prisons held 53 percent of all prisoners confined in new facilities nationwide. By contrast, only 38 percent of inmates in older facilities were located in nonmetro places, and only 23 percent of the total U.S. population lived in nonmetro places. Thus, new nonmetro prisons had well over twice the proportion of inmates that might have been expected on the basis of the size of the nonmetro population, and the propensity to locate prisons in rural and small town areas was distinctly greater than it had been in the past.

Rapid Pace of Nonmetro Prison Openings Continues

Using information from the directory of penal facilities compiled by the American Correctional Association, I looked into more recent prison openings during 1992-94, including a few previously unreported facilities opened in 1991. In these three years, 83 State, Federal, and private prisons opened in nonmetro counties and 56 opened in metro areas. (These numbers exclude several additional facilities for which no data on inmates or employment

were reported.) The new nonmetro prisons amounted to 60 percent of the total, even though nonmetro areas now have only 20 percent of the U.S. population under 1993 definitions of metro and nonmetro boundaries. The pace of construction was 26 facilities per year, the same as in 1987-90 when the prison building boom first exceeded 20 nonmetro openings annually, and double the pace of 1980-86. Moreover, the 1992-94 data refer to a smaller territory, for more than 90 counties were transferred to metro status after 1990.

Nonmetro Counties With the Largest Prison Populations

Some States and the Federal Government put multiple prisons in the same county or are building large prisons (especially in California). As a result, a number of nonmetro counties now have very substantial prison populations. In 1994, there were 26 counties in which at least 3,000 inmates were being held. The three largest are in a class by themselves. Walker and Anderson, TX, and Kings, CA, now house a total of nearly 36,000 prisoners (from 11,200 to 12,700 each), with over 11,000 persons required to guard and administer them. Listed below are the top nonmetro counties in number of inmates in facilities with at least 150 prisoners or 50 employees.

10,000 inmates or more—Kings, CA; Anderson and Walker, TX.

6,100 to 9,999—None.

4,000 to 6,099—Imperial, Lassen, and Tuolumne, CA; Fremont, CO; Union, FL; La Porte, IN; West Feliciana, LA; Chippewa and Ionia, MI; Sunflower, MS; Cole, MO; Ross, OH.

3,000 to 3,999—Amador and Del Norte, CA; Baldwin, GA; Allen, LA; Clinton, Franklin, Ulster, and Wyoming, NY; Marion, OH; Union, PA; Bee, TX.

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The new nonmetro facilities opened during 1992-94 housed 64,800 inmates by 1994. All but a few were State or Federal institutions. In addition, about 34,000 inmates were added to existing nonmetro prisons (exclusive of Alaska, Delaware, Georgia, Maine, New Hampshire, and New Mexico, for which such data are not available). More than a third of the need for new space has been accommodated through enlarging existing facilities and/or placing more prisoners in existing space.

As might be expected, the increase of prisoners in pre-existing facilities was greater in States that had no new prisons than it was in other States, although the overall difference was not exceptionally large. States that did not open new facilities during 1992-94 had a collective increase of 19 percent in number of persons held in nonmetro prisons, whereas the other States had an increase of 12 percent in prisoners in pre-existing nonmetro facilities.

Uneven Distribution of New Facilities

The new prisons prove to be very unevenly distributed among States. Not all States need additional facilities within a given period, and some may have pursued other strategies to cope with an increased prisoner population by enlarging existing facilities, retaining prisoners in county jails, paying other States to house prisoners, or alternative sentencing procedures such as home confinement. During 1992-94, 15 States did not build any facility

of the size reviewed here, either in metro or nonmetro areas. This group includes States as large as Mississippi, Oregon, and Wisconsin. Twenty of the new nonmetro prisons, one-fourth, opened in Texas, and 17, one-fifth, opened in Georgia (fig. 1). Texas and Georgia show an exceptional nonmetro emphasis on prison siting, for although both States are now highly metro in population (Texas 84 percent and Georgia 68 percent), three-fourths of Texas' new prisons and nearly nine-tenths of Georgia's are in nonmetro counties. But most other States with new prisons have also built in nonmetro locations to an extent greater than expected on the basis of population distribution, even if not to the degree found in Texas and Georgia.

Prisons Bring Employment Opportunities

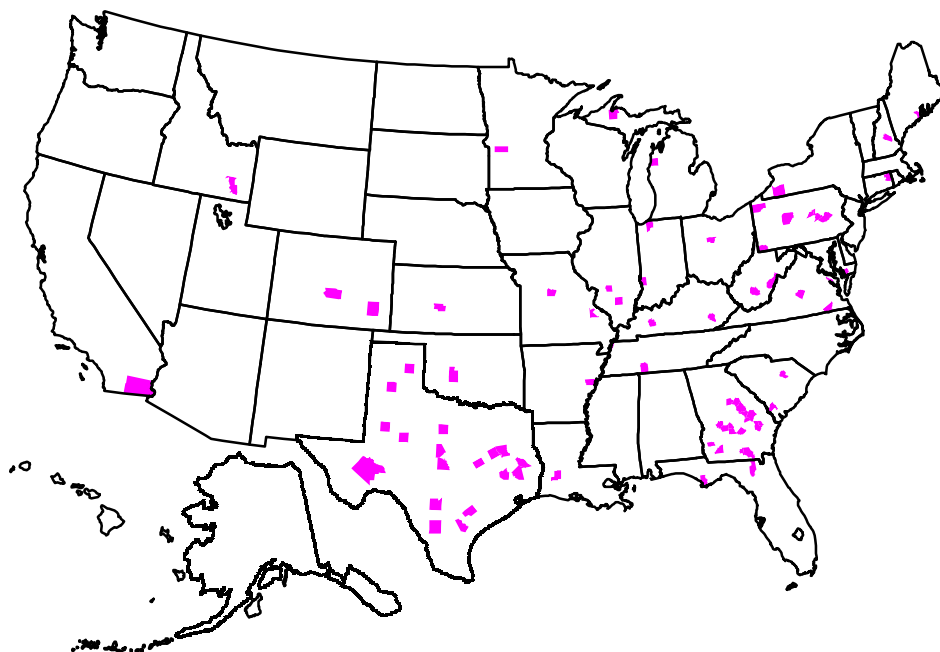
New nonmetro prisons provided 23,000 jobs in direct employment, a mean of about 275 workers per institution and 35 jobs for each 100 inmates. With the extensive commuting that characterizes rural areas today, the workers are typically drawn from surrounding counties as well as from the host county.

About 3,000 positions were added in nonmetro prisons opened before 1992. (Data are unavailable for five small States.) Jobs in these pre-existing facilities increased by just 3 percent, only one-fourth as rapidly as the increase of prisoners in the same institutions. In some cases, the more rapid prisoner increase simply reflected the phasing

Figure 1

Nonmetro counties with newly opened prisons, 1992-94

Texas and Georgia were the most active in prison construction



Note: A few counties opened more than one prison during 1992-94.
Source: Mapped by ERS using data from the American Correctional Association.

Municipally Sponsored Prisons

It has become common for rural communities to compete for new State prisons. But, in recent years, a few towns have taken matters into their own hands by building and operating prisons for economic development. Appleton, MN, and Hinton, OK, are examples. Both are small places—Appleton with 1,552 people in 1990 and Hinton with 1,233—the populations of which had been declining. The financial risks of going into the prison business are high, with the Appleton facility estimated to have cost \$21 million.

The start-up periods were slow and costly for these two town prisons, which opened in the early 1990's, but both are now full. As of November 1995, Appleton had 515 inmates, all from Colorado, and 175 employees. Hinton had 755 inmates, all from North Carolina, with about 165 employees. Neither had obtained in-State prisoners. The lengthy interstate shipment of prisoners in these cases is a stark reflection of the extent of the current crisis in crime and incarceration. Both Colorado and North Carolina have repeatedly built new prisons in the last 15 years, yet have still needed to rent space elsewhere to handle their caseloads.

Hinton has already built an expansion to its prison and Appleton hopes to double its capacity. Both facilities are medium security institutions and both have attained accreditation from the American Correctional Association, a status that many State prisons do not have. In each case, a number of prison employees have located in the towns, thus bolstering housing construction and adding to local spending, tax rolls, and school enrollment.

in to full capacity of a prison that had been staffed but not fully occupied at the beginning of the period. More commonly, however, it stemmed from increasing the prison population without a comparable increase in staff or, in the case of nine States, housing additional prisoners while reducing staff.

New nonmetro prisons are somewhat smaller than those built in metro counties (an average of 781 inmates versus 996) and thus typically have smaller staffs (an average of 276 employees versus 409). Some of the new nonmetro facilities are very large institutions, however. Two in California house 2,000-3,000 prisoners each, as do two in Texas where the largest will have over 4,400 inmates at full occupancy, providing more than 1,000 jobs.

Impending Growth of Age Group at Highest Risk of Imprisonment

The number of persons confined in all State and Federal institutions rose from a little more than 750,000 in 1990 to more than 1 million in 1994. A somewhat ironic feature of the rapid growth in the number of prisoners in very recent years is that it has come at a time when the population of prime crime-committing and prison-entering age has been declining. Births in the United States were at

their post-World War II lowest from 1972 though 1978, fluctuating between 3.1 and 3.3 million annually, whereas they had been above 4 million in each year from 1954 through 1964. Thus, beginning in 1990, the number of youth reaching age 18, the age at which incarceration starts to accelerate, has been at a low level. This will continue through 1996. Currently, and for a few years to come, the demography of the population is at its most favorable point in recent history for a reduction in first-time offenders and limited need for additional facilities.

The current growth of prison population flows, then, solely from changes in the rates of crime commission, apprehension and conviction, and stricter sentencing policies. However, population trends will soon start to add an additional source of growth to the prison population. From 1995 to 2010, the Census Bureau projects that the population aged 18-24 years will grow by 21 percent. The population aged 25-29 will not increase until about 2005, but then it too will grow at a pace comparable with that for ages 18-24.

When this impending increase in the young adult population is coupled with (1) the great current concern over high rates of crime, (2) the rise in laws mandating longer sentences for certain crimes or for repeated convictions ("three strikes and you're out"), and (3) the movement to curtail granting of parole, the likelihood of continued rapid increase in prisons, prison population, and correctional jobs seems ensured. The disproportionate preference to locate facilities at rural sites away from population centers also seems likely to continue.

Conclusion

Many rural and smalltown communities actively bid for prisons, but not all are eager to acquire them or to add to them. Economic need is the driving force behind acceptance. Examples are appearing of communities that have voted down prison acquisition or the acceptance of additions to those already in place (*Governing*). Opposition is often greatest in amenity-favored areas that have been attracting new residents who do not need the prison jobs and who look with disfavor on the presence of a penal institution in their chosen community. Still, as long as the symbiosis continues between widespread need for additional jobs in rural locales and compelling State and Federal need to find places to put more prisons, the growth of a nonmetro penal economy should persist.

For Further Reading

C. L. Beale, "Prisons, Population, and Jobs in Nonmetro America," *RDP*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 16-19.

"Taking No More Prisoners," *Governing*, Vol. 8, July 1995, pp. 43-5.