

Prisons, Population, and Jobs in Nonmetro America

Has the punishment of urban crime become a rural growth industry? The prison population has more than doubled since 1980, and nonmetro areas are receiving more new prisons and housing more inmates than are metro areas. Government preference to build new facilities in campus-like settings with ample acreage, combined with the willingness of rural communities to accept prisons for their employment, has produced this trend.

THE United States has had a major and widely publicized growth in its inmate population. State and Federal prisoners numbered 196,000 in 1970, after only modest increases in the previous three decades. The number of prisoners rose to 316,000 by 1980, then more than doubled to 739,000 in 1990.

Much of the initial increase in prisoners could be viewed as demographically driven, as the "baby boom" generation came of age and greatly enlarged the population at ages where criminal activity leading to imprisonment is most common. The importance of this effect lessened after 1980, with inmate growth increasingly related to the rise in serious crime rates, especially drug-related crime, and to stiffer attitudes and laws concerning sentencing. The number of inmates per 100,000 population doubled from about 145 in 1980 to 290 in 1990.

Nonmetro Prison-Building Upswing

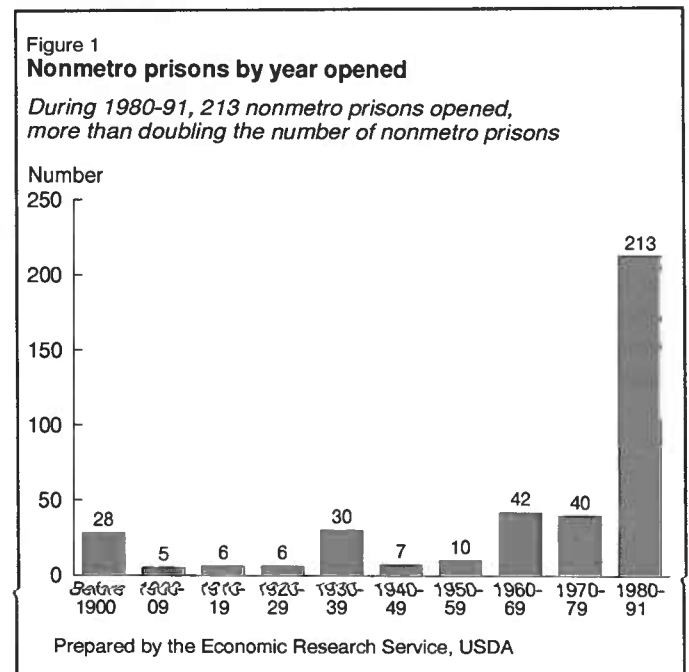
In 1991, 390 prisons were in nonmetro areas, housing 317,000 inmates or 44 percent of all State and Federal prisoners (see "About the Study" for definition of prisons). This is clear confirmation of the disproportionate role of rural and small-town areas in housing the prison population, for only 23 percent of the total U.S. population was nonmetro.

Prisons tend to be long-lived and some very old ones are still in use (Litchfield, Connecticut, built 1812; Auburn, New York, 1817). However, the extent of recent prison construction is remarkable, with 213 nonmetro prisons opened from 1980 through July 1991 (fig. 1). By contrast, only 82 nonmetro prisons were opened in the 1960's and 1970's combined. Some pre-

1980 prisons have recent additions, but these cannot be separately measured. All told, 55 percent of nonmetro prisons have been opened since 1980, compared with 39 percent of metro prisons.

As a result of this pattern, a slight majority of the new U.S. prison capacity built since 1980 has been placed in nonmetro communities, and by 1991 the new nonmetro prisons housed 53 percent of all inmates confined in new facilities. By contrast, in prisons built before 1980, only 38 percent of the inmates are in nonmetro locations. Thus, the relative role of nonmetro prisons has grown substantially in recent years.

The new (1980-91) nonmetro facilities had 154,000 prisoners in 1991 (fig. 2). Some facilities are comparatively small, but others are very large. At the upper extreme, California State Prison in Kings County,



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About the Study

All facilities located in nonmetro counties were identified from directories of State and Federal prisons. In an increasingly euphemistic and jargonistic age, only a small minority of them are still officially called prisons or penitentiaries. The most common terms are correctional facility or center or institution. For simplicity, I have used prison.

Some specialized facilities known as farms, camps, work centers, prerelease centers, community centers, or restitution centers are often small, with little local economic or demographic impact. They were omitted from this research except where they had at least 150 inmates or 50 employees. County jails are excluded, because detention in them is typically brief, and jail prisoners are allocated back to their homes for census purposes, unless they have no fixed residence.

which opened in 1988, had 5,321 inmates in 1991, and Avenal State Prison (1987) in the same county had 4,705 inmates. Because inmates are treated as local residents for census purposes, new prisons added greatly to the population count of Kings County and other prison counties in the 1990 Census.

The population of new prisons accounted for 5 percent of the national increase in nonmetro population from 1980-90. In nonmetro counties acquiring a prison, the new inmate population amounted to nearly half of all 1980-90 population growth. This growth was supplemented by inmovement of new employees and their families and by retention of local people who would have moved away in the absence of the new jobs and their stimulus to local business.

Nonmetro prisons employed 116,000 people in 1991, of whom 56,000 worked in the facilities opened since 1980 (fig. 2). Some of the prisons were so new that they were not fully occupied or staffed at the time these data were obtained. Direct employment in the new prisons is just 2 percent of the total growth of nonmetro employment since 1980, but it is often of major importance in the affected labor markets.

A rural prison is a classic "export" industry, providing a service for the outside community. Unlike some other rural services, such as recreation, the employment is year-round. The salaries are not high, but adequate, and employee insurance and other benefits are typically good, especially for rural and small-town work. Both nonmetro and metro prisons employ an average of about 37 people per 100 prisoners, although this ratio varies considerably among States and by type of prison. For example, New York's post-1980 nonmetro prisons average 49 employees per 100 inmates, whereas California's average only 29 per 100. Women's prisons and medical centers are highly staffed.

Minimum-security facilities tend to be more lightly staffed.

Location Patterns Vary

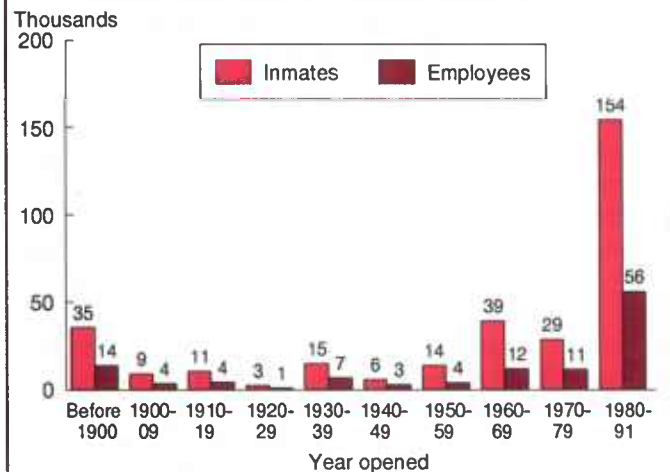
States have dispersed their new prisons into nonmetro areas to different degrees. For example, Illinois built new prisons of at least 250 inmates each in nine different nonmetro counties in the 1980's, whereas neighboring Indiana added only one (fig. 3). New York has concentrated a number of its new prisons in the five counties that wrap around the Adirondack Mountains in the north, adding 3,500 jobs to an area that has been hard-pressed for work. Michigan has built several prisons on the grounds of a former Air Force base in the Upper Peninsula. Texas has put large prison complexes in several nonmetro counties that radiate out from Huntsville, the headquarters of the system. In California, where less than 5 percent of the population lives in nonmetro counties, 60 percent of the new prison capacity has been placed in such areas; in Illinois, the corresponding percentages are 17 and 80. Only eight States were exceptions to the pattern of disproportionate location of new prison capacity in nonmetro areas.

County Population Growth and Composition Are Affected

Nonmetro counties that obtained new prisons during 1980-89 had an overall population increase of 8.8 percent from 1980 to 1990, well above the 4.2-percent average for all nonmetro counties. Many of the counties with new prisons were having such serious economic problems from declining agricultural or industrial employment that even the opening of a medium-

Figure 2
Inmates and employees in nonmetro prisons by year opened

Prisons opened in the last decade hold half of all nonmetro inmates and employ half of nonmetro prison employees

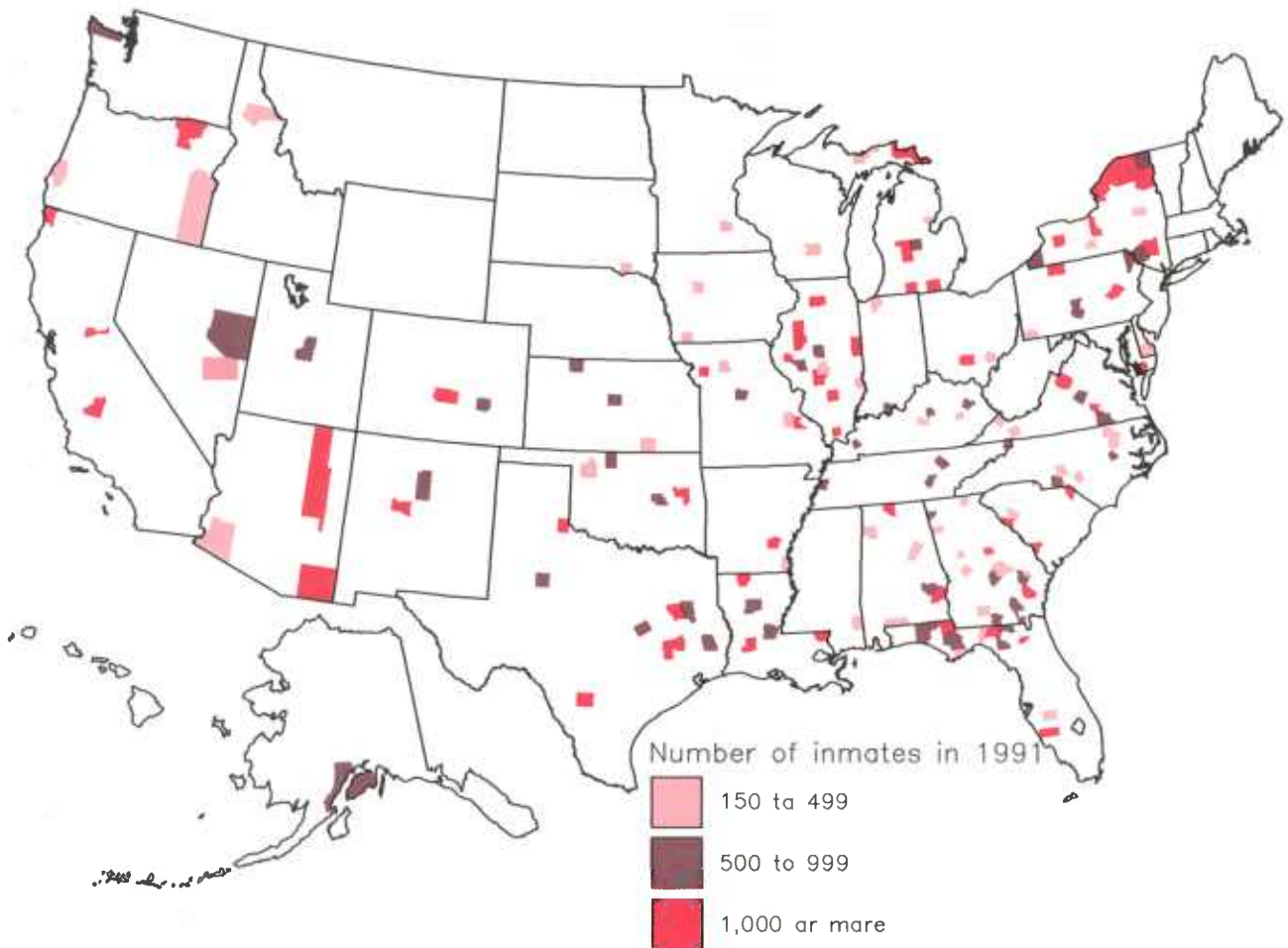


Prepared by the Economic Research Service, USDA

Figure 3

Number of inmates in nonmetro prisons built between 1980 and 1991

New York and Illinois have several new nonmetro prisons housing 1,000 or more prisoners.



Excludes nonmetro counties with fewer than 150 inmates.

Source: Data from the American Correctional Association, map prepared by ERS.

to large-sized prison failed to halt net outmovement of people. Forty-five nonmetro counties with new prisons of 500 or more inmates declined in total or nonprisoner population from 1980 to 1990. In a dozen of these counties, the population fell despite the presence of a new prison with 1,000 or more inmates.

In the North, where the nonmetro population is heavily white, the large increase in nonmetro prison inmates of primarily urban origin explains many cases of unusually high growth of nonmetro black and Hispanic population counts. In upstate New York, for example, three counties that acquired prisons saw their total black population rise from 529 in 1980 to 4,413 in 1990, and their Hispanic population rose from 973 to 3,146. Most of this increase was prison-related, including staffing. Perhaps the most extreme example is that of Brown County, Illinois, a small Corn Belt farm county where the black population rose in the decade from 1 person to 547 after a large prison opened.

In Summary...

It seems fair to say that in the not-so-distant past, few small-town and rural areas included prisons in their development plans. The institutional plum from the late 1950's to the early 1970's was to acquire a State-supported 2-year college or vocational-technical school. In the 1980's, however, the need of the States (and the Federal Government) to build more prisons complemented the urgency felt by many rural areas to obtain new sources of employment. It is clear from accumulated news reports that rural communities with new prisons have typically sought them, although not without some local dissent. So, in responding to two needs at once, the provision of sites for prisons has increasingly shifted to rural and small-town communities.

The general preference by governments to build new facilities away from major cities in rural and small-town locales probably ensures a continuation of this

New Prisons Have Varied Impacts in Two Great Plains Counties

Crowley County, Colorado, is one of the most rural and thinly settled counties that have obtained prisons. It is a Great Plains ranching county, east of Pueblo. The county had only 2,988 residents in 1980, just half its historic peak, and had declined in population in every decade since it was organized in 1911. During the 1980's, the State invited communities to bid on a new medium security prison, and Crowley County was the successful bidder. The prison was placed in the countryside, about 5 miles from the county seat, and opened in 1987. By 1991, there were 972 inmates and 274 employees. As a result, the county population rose to 3,946 in the 1990 census, an increase of 32 percent in a decade.

Interviews in the county in 1992 revealed both pluses and minuses from the coming of the prison. There was general disappointment with the number of prison employees who chose to live in the county and with the number of jobs that went to local residents. What the community had apparently, and somewhat naively, not foreseen was that most of the State employees sent to operate the prison would prefer to live in Pueblo or other urban places and commute to work, rather than live in a completely rural county that has no town larger than 1,000 people. Colorado permits prison employees to reside within a 55-minute commuting range, which is

just enough to make a Pueblo residence feasible in this case. Some local people were said to have lost money by investing in mobile home parks that did not attract enough prison workers. In addition, the prison created an overload on the county's sewage disposal system, and because of the frequent crimes committed by prisoners against one another, the county court now has to be in session much more often than before. On the beneficial side, county sales tax receipts rose significantly in each of the last 3 years, reflecting a stimulus to the business economy, and the percentage of local people working at the prison is believed to be increasing.

A similar prison opened in 1991 in Lincoln County, 75 miles from Crowley. Lincoln is too remote from a city to permit urban worker commuting. Therefore, more of the prison employment has accrued to the county than is true in Crowley. But the Lincoln County social services system reports a distinct increase in case load because of domestic problems among the families of prison personnel, perhaps stemming from the stressful nature of prison work. In short, the two new prisons have provided economic benefits, but have also entailed costs that have not always been anticipated beforehand. And that is probably to be expected.

trend. In a wry and sad commentary on the times, the proliferation of crime has led to one of the few real growth sectors in the rural economy during a period of contraction or stagnation in traditional rural extractive and manufacturing industries.

For Additional Reading...

American Correctional Association, *Directory: Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies and Paroling Authorities*, Laurel, MD, 1992.

Katherine A. Carlson, "Doing Good and Looking Bad: A Case Study of Prison/Community Relations," *Crime and Delinquency*, vol. 38, no. 1, Jan. 1992, pp. 56-69.

Janet M. Fitchen, *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1991.

U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, *Facilities 1991*, 1991.



Federal Correctional Institution under construction in Schuylkill, PA in 1990 now houses inmates.

Federal Bureau of Prisons