



# PRISON BAIT

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You've seen the recent headlines. "One in a hundred Americans in prison". Yet another crack in the media silence about the corporate profiteering that is causing breakdown in all parts of our society. Why are we putting everyone in jail?

Incarcerations have risen 42% just since 2000. Now more than 2.3 million Americans are locked up, at a cost of over \$55 billion/year. That's expensive. Oregon now spends more on prisons than higher education.

The United States has locked up more people than any other country: a half million more than China, which has a population five times greater than the U.S. The United States now holds 25% of the world's prison population, but only 5% of the world's people. Is there possibly something wrong here?

Ninety-seven percent of 125,000 federal inmates have been convicted of non-violent crimes. It is believed that more than half of the 623,000 inmates in municipal or county jails are innocent of the crimes they are accused of. Of these, the majority are awaiting trial. Two-thirds of the one million state prisoners have committed non-violent offenses. Sixteen percent of the country's 2 million prisoners suffer from mental illness.

Some people need to be in jail for public safety. But only a small percentage. What about the rest? What caused them to end up there? What is it doing to them? What alternatives are available that work better, and cost less? Are there ulterior motives to why so many people are in prison?

Inadequate slave-labor wages, dead-end jobs, lives with nothing to live for, lack of fulfilling employment, a society without a soul. Enough to put any sane person over the edge. We can do better. What about community supervision, counseling, electronic monitoring, a society worth being part of? Why draconian minimum sentences?

Ulterior motives? How about politics, for one. Why is recreational drug use treated differently than other addictive recreational drugs such as alcohol or coffee? My memory (what there is of it) from the 60s is it was because people began to think for themselves. We legalized alcohol after prohibition, when we found it didn't work.

Secondly, prisons are profitable. For corporate prison industries even more than prison operators. Slave labor makes money. At least 37 states have legalized the contracting of prison labor by private corporations that mount their operations inside state prisons. The list contains the cream of U.S. corporate society: IBM, Boeing, Microsoft, AT&T, Wireless, Dell, Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Nordstrom's, Revlon, Macy's, Pierre Cardin, Target Stores, and many more. California exports prison-made clothing to China. Your airline reservations may be handled in jail.

Oregon State Representative Kevin Mannix urged Nike to cut its production in Indonesia and bring it to Oregon, telling the shoe manufacturer that "there won't be any transportation costs; we're offering you competitive prison labor (here)." Great.

The specifics here are bad enough, but it's the pattern emerging that is important. In this column, we've looked at similar situations in housing costs, health care, education, and how we've subtly set up systems to bankrupt other countries through blatantly fraudulent development plans.

Homeowners are not the primary beneficiaries of the "homeownership" structure we've refined since the 1950s. Banks benefit the most (30% more than the homeowners), then energy companies, finally homeowners. Giving energy companies "depletion allowances" rather than taxing depletion underpriced fossil fuels so people didn't build efficient homes. Different structures for developing home-ownership, putting the homeowner first, can cut housing costs in half.

Setting up healthcare so insurance companies "sell" virtually identical products doubles the cost over an identical program paid directly. Taking them out of the loop can give far better health care, to *everyone*, for way less than we pay now. Two-thirds of high-school graduates now go to college, then often leave college with \$40K-\$50K student debt loads. This usually means they have to start purchasing everything on credit, plus paying back \$80K-\$100K. Higher education costs could be cut in half simply through public support, from generation to generation, that we had until the '80s.

These are all carefully planned systems for maximizing corporate profit, not public wellbeing. I think Iraq has shown the pitiful reasoning behind our current public policy and a culture based on greed rather than compassion. Far better alternatives are available, and it's time to change this whole system to something with heart and soul, and that really works.

With a current public deficit exceeding \$175 billion each month, it's time for change.