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Cell Block Boom: The Impact of Texas Prison Expansion

by

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In recent years, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) has emerged as the largest state agency and, with approximately 40,000 jobs, probably the largest employer of any type in Texas. Most of its employees are correctional officers guarding 144,000 felony offenders—the result of the Texas prison building growth industry. The TDCJ payroll of \$91 million translates to \$3 million spread across the state each day, with another \$3 million per day in operating expenses. TDCJ operations range from contract monitoring for the largest private prison presence in the United States to ranching and farming 145,000 acres around the state.

In the midst of massive prison expansion nationwide, Texas has overshadowed its peer jurisdictions at times. In fiscal years 1994-1995, Texas was building 43 of the 75 new institutions under construction in all states and in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Of the 137,000 beds added nation-wide during this period, Texas, with 71,864, accounted for more than half.¹ From 1988 to 1995, more than 90,000 state prison beds were funded and built in Texas, at a construction cost of approximately \$2.3 billion; this cost will double over 20 years of debt service. During the same period, the number of local jail beds increased by more than 36,000, and, under a legislated agreement to alleviate jail crowding caused by the backlog of convicted felons, the state paid approximately \$675 million to counties for holding state-ready inmates.

What are the implications of this rapid expansion? Several ramifications of the Texas prison-building boom merit the public's increased awareness and may be of particular interest to the Texas business community.

The Effect on Crime Reduction

The obvious first question is "how much crime reduction has been obtained with the major increase in prison space?" The prison construction response to criminal justice has produced mixed but generally positive results for Texas. Between 1989 and 1995, the state system tripled in size. During that period, Texas showed the largest percentage increase in incarceration rates and the largest percentage reduction in crime rates in the country. However, the violent crime rate increased slightly in those years, while states with lower rates of incarceration experienced decreases in violent crime.²

Texas prosecutors, judges, police, and victim advocates prefer the state of criminal justice in Texas today to the "revolving door" of the late 1980s. Currently,

a violent offender will serve a guaranteed 50 percent of his sentence, with no allowance for good conduct time, before even being considered for parole. The actual rates (18?20 percent) of parole approval have remained at historic lows. For inmates with violent offenses who are being released from prison, the average "percentage of sentence served" has increased from 29 percent in 1991 to 68 percent in 1998.³

Whether the citizen or business owner feels safer or less at risk is another question. Fear of crime may be more closely related to the extent and type of media coverage than to the "reality" represented by reported crime data.

The Effect on Communities

At the local level, one clear and intentional result of the prison boom has been the proliferation of prison units in small communities throughout Texas. In the late 1980s, towns began to compete in a "prison derby," vying for the jobs that accompany prison expansion. In 1990, the Texas Comptroller calculated that the addition of a large prison payroll (800 jobs), and its multiplier effect, would generate \$59 million in communities such as Abilene (Robertson Unit) and Beaumont (Stiles Unit). Smaller units, sited in towns like Childress and Dilley, would add 260 jobs and a \$20.4 million total spending effect.⁴ The building boom in this new political environment created diversification from the traditional East Texas (Sugarland-Huntsville-Palestine) concentration of units.

Some communities have been particularly inclined to attract the "correctional-industrial complex," as it has come to be known. Beaumont/Jefferson County stands out for its recent commitment to this approach to economic development and stability, siting a 300-bed juvenile facility run by the Texas Youth Commission, the largest federal correctional complex in the nation with 4,200 total beds; three different state prison facilities for a total of approximately 6,000 beds; and two county correctional facilities for a total of 2,000 beds.

At the same time, the increased ability of the state to impose prison sentences has had a countervailing impact on inner city communities in Texas. Current research suggests an unintended social impact of incarceration:

Concentrated within certain communities, high levels of incarceration undermine social, political, and economic systems already weakened by the low levels of human and social capital produced under conditions such as high rates of poverty, unemployment, and crime. . . . The result is a reduction in social cohesion and a lessening of those communities' capacity for self-regulation. ⁵

In other words, increased use of state-level penal sanctions as a way to exert control may have a corrosive effect on the ability of those communities to exert more intangible controls. This may be another, albeit negative, impact of the prison boom that small business owners in the affected communities could validate.

Conclusion

While the state's prison-centered response to the crime problem has had the positive effects of helping to lower crime rates, increasing the symbolic and deterrent capability of law enforcement and prosecution, and providing a substantial

boost to prison communities, it is a costly social strategy and has not been an unqualified success.

One interesting issue is the local impact of correctional officer employment in this tightest of employment markets. Another is the employment market impact created by a growing class of ex-offenders who are subject to the "collateral consequences" of a felony conviction, such as the ineligibility to practice many professions. Finally, by spending state dollars on the most expensive possible response to crime, state government may be draining resources from education and other preventative efforts that are advisable from a longer-term perspective.

The logical response to frayed community ties in those neighborhoods providing a disproportionate number of the incarcerated is a community-centered approach to policing and to dispensing justice sanctions. One of the most hopeful signs in the criminal justice business is the movement toward "restorative justice" and "community-based" responses that invite more grass-roots participation and ownership of the problem of crime and justice.

County	Average Number of Employees	Total Salaries
Walker	7,639	196,437,734
Anderson	3,051	79,154,885
Coryell	2,523	66,735,186
Brazoria	2,162	55,484,673
Bee	1,684	42,737,898
Jefferson	1,397	35,332,425
Fort Bend	1,212	32,823,729
Harris	1,214	31,579,385
Jones	1,219	30,820,892
Potter	1,174	29,917,900

Source: Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Notes

1. "Prison Construction Part One: DOCs Make Room for the Largest One-Year Population Increase in History," 21 *Corrections Compendium* 9 (January 1996).
2. "Criminal Justice Policy Council Biennial Report to the Governor and the 75th Texas Legislature: The Big Picture in Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice," January 1997, p. 9.
3. *Sourcebook of Texas Adult Justice Population Statistics 1988-1998*, Criminal Justice Policy Council, November 1999, p. 55.
4. "Communities Vie for Prisons," *Fiscal Notes*, January 1990, Comptroller of Public Accounts, p. 12.
5. "Interaction, Social Capital, and Crime: Implications for Social Disorganization Theory," Dina R. Rose and Todd R. Clear, *Criminology* 36:3, August 1998, pp. 441-80, 467.

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