Tabitha Corley May 1, 2015

Re¢idivi$m: Prison as a Business

A study by The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that nearly 70 percent of the tracked 404,638 released prisoners were rearrested within three years. Within five years that number rose to about three quarters. As of the 2010 Census, there were nearly 2.3 million inmates serving time, and the U.S. has the highest number of inmates in the world. In fact, that population alone could be the size of the fourth largest city in the U.S. following New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Although, there are studies that depict the crime rate as decreasing, the Prison Policy Initiative reported that there has been a 343 percent increase in the incarceration rate from 1965 to 2000.

According to the FBI, the top crimes on a national level that deem arrest are related to drug abuse, driving under the influence and larceny. Drug related offenses are of the highest committed crimes reported in state and federal prisons beating robbery, manslaughter and rape/sexual assault on a state level; immigration, weapons, and fraud on a federal level.

Attorney Everett Chandler, who is a criminal defense attorney in Aiken, SC, said drug users have a high recidivism rate because, “obviously they have a drug problem.” From 1980 to 2010, the number of drug offenses that led to incarceration rose from 41,000 to 498,600 according to The Sentencing Project.

He also said there is another crime that repeat offenders commonly commit, but is overlooked. “I would say driving under suspension is not sexy in the way people would think. They (along with domestic criminal offenders) are like a revolving door,” Chandler said.

The prison system thrives on the recidivism rate. So taxpayers are paying to house these inmate and pay the staff’s salaries.

Some see these prison facilities are job opportunities for communities. “Small communities have welcomed bringing in these prisons as a source of income because, especially on the federal side, they pay good money. They hire me for different things and they buy services all throughout the county. So not just the penal system, but I think the entire economic system benefits,” Chandler said.

On the other hand, recidivism puts a heavy strain on our country’s pockets. Each year a substantial amount of taxpayer dollars are poured into correctional facilities on a federal, state, and local level. A study by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that costs are now four times higher and have been on the rise for two decades. The study noted that with a minimum $50 billion budget, 41 states could save more than $635 million annually if they decreased their respected recidivism rates by 10 percent.

Corrections is the second fastest growing area of state budgets following Medicaid according to Pew Charitable Trusts. In California, inmates go through 680,000 pounds of beef, 400,000 pounds of chicken products, and 3 million eggs each month according the article “What Do Prisoners Make for Victoria’s Secret.” Literally, that’s tons of food being cycled throughout the system to feed the inmates.

These funds could be allocated to other key economic areas if there wasn’t such an alarming incarceration rate stemming partly from recidivism. Just this past fiscal year The Department of Justice’s federal prison system’s budget was close to $7 billion. Back in 2012 it cost on average $79.31 a day, per inmate. The average cost to run a state prison was over $30,000 an inmate in 2012.

A report by the Urban Institute showed state prison populations are decreasing while federal populations are increasing. As of February, there were nearly 21,000 people in state prisons according to the article “South Carolina closing 2nd minimum security prison,” by Meg Kinnard. The articled mentioned that due to lowering recidivism rate in South Carolina, the state will save more than $450,000 by closing the Coastal Pre-release Center, a minimum security correctional facility for males.

Lawmakers in South Carolina are looking to continue to lower the recidivism rate and lower costs with the use of different tactics. During Governor Nikki Haley’s 2015 State of the State address, she said South Carolina’s prisons are “running at the lowest cost,” with the price being more than $16,000 per inmate. She said serving the cheapest meals made this possible, and she then introduced the idea of serving fewer meals.

Haley emphasized that South Carolina spends more taxpayer dollars each year on inmates than students. An article in the Washington Post by Christopher Ingraham said there are more jails and prisons in the U.S. than colleges and universities. In the South, there are more people living behind bars than on college campuses.

Prison, according to the recidivism statistics, is highly unsuccessful while siphoning millions of dollars away from education. According to Haley, education is of more importance and it would have an immeasurable impact.

“If you are thinking about $16,000 per inmate maybe think about $5,000 that you could commit to give to a small business person as an incentive to hire the person,” Chandler said. In fact, according to the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, if a business grants a job to an ex-convict within a year of release, the establishment is eligible for annual tax credits.

Prison as a corporation is a much more successful venture, recidivism rates allow the prison to thrive off of the government by receiving money from state and federal institutions. This happens while increasing its clientele and prisoners are required to work while incarcerated.

According to the article “What Do Prisoners Make for Victoria’s Secret,” while in prison, offenders produce a variety of things such as brooms, brushes, bedding, toilets, as well as other things that could translate into gainful employment outside of a state or federal facility if given the opportunity. Often labor while in prison is underpriced as the average wage is 93 cents an hour for non-industry work according to Prison Policy Initiative.

For many ex-convicts it’s difficult to check the box on applications asking them if they’ve ever been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor. Some employers are often skeptical of hiring ex-convicts because of their criminal background, regardless of the person’s expertise, outstanding resume or relevant experience. According to the book “Jobs for Felons” by Michael Ford, 80 percent of employers use some type of background check to screen potential employees.

“Just because someone has a felony conviction does not necessarily make him or her a bad person. Unfortunately, most employers do not understand this distinction. There are many reasons, many valid reasons, someone can be convicted of a crime which can even result from them standing up for their rights or being in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Ford said in his book. Being labeled an ex-convict damages the ability of offenders to be able to support themselves after release, accidentally contributing to them finding themselves back behind bars.

Chandler didn’t deny that some offenders simply don’t want to find better employment. “I’m not going to make excuses for them. Some people don’t want to work at the car wash when it’s 50 degrees outside. People want their cars washed, but these guys don’t want to do it, not when they could sell (drugs),” Chandler said.

Chandler talked about a family member of his whom he represented on two drug cases. He said he questioned him about why he didn’t join a program to help him find a job. His client responded by saying he went through with the program, but it only lasted for six months and he had other responsibilities such as child support to pay. In order to make some quick money, he took up his old “paper route” to sell drugs because he said there was nothing else out there for him.

There are different programs/jobs that offer opportunities like pardons and employment for offenders that have nonviolent felony offenses; some of these are in various fields like HazMat Chandler noted.

“Some of these guys can start off making $25 an hour. That would get them off the street unless they just love the streets so much and then of course let them go back to jail because they’ve chosen to be there, but, if given the opportunity I know a number of young men who would choose the $25 and hour,” Chandler said.

Prison is not always the answer, which is why the ideas of alternatives to prison should be further developed. The Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM) reported that alternatives such as probation, restitution, community service and/or rehabilitative services for nonviolent crimes “are proven to confront the underlying causes of crime: drug addiction and mental illness) and helps prevent offenders from committing new crimes.”

The report also mentioned that these alternatives save tax dollars, strengthen families and communities and reduce crime. These concepts are often favored by the public with FAMM reporting that nearly 80 percent of people believe alternatives are appropriate, depending on the crime of the offender.

The type of consequence an offender gets should reflect and address the crime committed. Chandler spoke of an instance where his church had nearly $50 worth of of copper stolen. It ended up costing the insurance company $13,000 to replace three major units. The offender was a drug user and used the copper to get a fix. Chandler said the judge had the offender to do something innovative by having him do community service. Later the man ended up dying from a drug overdose. “So again, you have your community service, but where are the treatment services,” Chandler said.

Ultimately, Chandler said the consequence depends on the crime. “I mean there are some violent offenders that need to be locked up, and while they are locked up I’d hope they get some anger management classes. I believe that drug addicted people need drug counseling.”

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice reports that there are 7.3 million children who have at least one incarcerated parent in the U.S. and that almost 70 percent of those children will end up following in their parent’s or parents’ footsteps. In severe cases, the child may end up emotionally traumatized and not reach his or her full potential because of the lack of stability.

“With recidivism if you take certain people out of the household, structure is going to hurt. There are a number of men who have children and they are not helping. They are not contributing to their lives; they are not contributing to their basic needs. To that extent it is detrimental to them,” Chandler said.

According to the Department of Social Services, the primary reason why children end up in foster care is due to cases involving drugs and/or alcohol, which is one of the main reasons why people end up behind bars. In 2014 the department in South Carolina found 592 children entered foster care because of drug abuse by parents and 90 entered because of alcohol abuse by parents. Eighty-eight children entered foster care because they had incarcerated parent(s). Since these children are often shifted around between family members and child services, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice said feelings of depression and abandonment harvest in these children and they go through a period of grieving that spills over into the child’s daily life, especially in social and academic settings.

Along with the effects on the family structure, another issue is whether or not probation actually reduces these rates. This is inconclusive. No one can prove that probation is a resourceful tool when it comes to repeat offenders. According to Federal Probation, recidivism rates are affected somewhat by the probation officer and his or her involvement in the rehabilitation process.

Federal Probation also stated that recidivism rates decrease from 58 percent to 26 percent when the probation officer is more experienced. All things considered, the probation officer’s role in recidivism is grossly under appreciated however, according to The National Institute, “supervision after release did not seem to lower the likelihood or re-arrest.”

Ultimately, the question we must all ask ourselves is does prison actually work. Currently, the system in place has many flaws in addition to inadequately rehabilitating inmates. Prison does not prepare inmates for life outside bars inadvertently contributing to their return and subsequent overcrowding. Needless to say prison is not always the answer, and more beneficial alternatives should be implemented in order to lower the recidivism rate and cut cost, strengthen destroyed family structures which ultimately makes for a better and safer society.

Multimedia: <http://tabithacorley.weebly.com/multimedia-project.html>