

In Chains We Trust: Mass Incarceration in Pennsylvania

This story is in part a report on the Sept. 25, 2015 teach-in on Mass Incarceration organized by the Lancaster County Re-Entry Management Organization (RMO), a collaborative group of over 50 Lancaster County organizations to provide support and services for returning citizens.



In response to increasing public discussion about our broken prison system, there are some signs of change – but much more yet to be done:

- In Congress a bipartisan group of senators led by Chuck Grassley (R) and Dick Durbin (D) have just introduced a bill^[1] that would make modest changes to US criminal justice law, such as scaling-back (but not yet eliminating) mandatory minimum sentences.
- John Wetzel, Pennsylvania Secretary of Corrections, speaking this summer at the invitation of the Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce, focused on the high recidivism rate for PA prisoners – 60% of the people coming out of prison are rearrested or re-incarcerated within three years of release. Wetzel described state initiatives to support reentry and urged business leaders to make jobs available to returning citizens.
- The for-profit prison industry has also taken note of the conversation shifting from incarceration to alternative sentences – alternatives to incarceration and more community supervision. Companies that have made their money largely by running for-profit prisons are now starting to buy up or open up community corrections facilities and to market electronic monitoring equipment, so that they can continue to cash-in on this trend – moving away from incarcerating people to keeping them under long-term criminal justice supervision. They have become for-profit probation companies that charge individuals for the privilege of being under criminal justice supervision.

GEO Group - Reentry Service Centers

The GEO Group, the second-largest for-profit prison operator in the world, has opened a Reentry Service Center in Lancaster County, one of ten Pennsylvania facilities operated by GEO under contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to provide reentry services for people coming out of state prisons. Now GEO is lobbying county officials to start sending people from Lancaster County Prison to the GEO facility. GEO agreements typically stipulate that offenders will be required to attend the centers for a minimum number of days per week, and for a minimum length of time. In other counties where GEO operates reentry centers, parolees must go to GEO Centers six days a week for a minimum of six months.

Prisons operated by the GEO Group have a history of mismanagement, inhumane conditions, and abusive behavior by staff; there have been dozens of wrongful death lawsuits

Crime and Accountability

Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. ... The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' ... When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' ...

– John 8:2-7ff

For the woman caught in adultery, there is curiously no mention of her partner in crime. How often do we pass judgement on someone else while excusing our own complicity in inappropriate behavior?

Our culture holds individuals accountable for bad behavior, even when it results from mental disability or various forms of victimization (e.g., girls forced into sex trafficking) or behavior that is the inevitable outcome of our public policies and community practices (e.g., the “school to prison pipeline”). The rapid growth of the U.S. prison population that began in the 1970s and propelled the U.S. to become the world’s leading jailer reminds us that much of what is called “*criminal justice*” has little in common with the biblical concept of justice, that is “*distributive justice*,” which invites everyone to share in the abundant fruits of God’s creation.

and sexual assault charges. From 2005 to 2008, for example, eight inmates died in the George W. Hill Correctional Facility in Delaware County, PA, operated by GEO. Responding to six wrongful-death lawsuits, Delaware County cancelled the contract with GEO, but then hired another for-profit company to manage the prison -- Community Education Centers (CEC), which has its own long list of problems. CEC, where New Jersey Governor Chris Christie once worked as a lobbyist, now operates several facilities in Pennsylvania and in many other states.



Prison Phone Service

Prison phone rates vary widely across the state depending on how each local contract is negotiated. Two years ago the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) imposed upper limits on what phone companies can charge for interstate calls (\$0.21 per minute for direct-dialed calls and \$0.25 for collect calls), but those limits don’t apply to in-state calls. Last year Lancaster County commissioners renegotiated a

1. *The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015*

phone company contract that resulted in families paying something like 48% more for phone calls to their loved ones locally, and the county gets what is politely termed "a commission" from the phone company--a guaranteed minimum of over \$33,000 per month.

Typical phone charges for several PA prisons.

Prison or County Jail Securus Technologies*	Cost of a 15-min. Direct-Dialed In-State Phone Call
PA State Prisons (all)	\$ 0.89
Columbia County Prison	\$ 6.25
Erie County Prison	\$ 3.25
Greene Country Prison	\$ 4.25
Tioga County Prison	\$ 6.52
Union County Prison	\$10.25
Wyoming County CF	\$ 9.50

*Note that GTL provides phone service for about half of Pennsylvania’s county jails, but does not make its rates public.

Prison Health Care

PrimeCare Medical has provided medical services for Lehigh County Jail since 2004, headed by physician Dr. Dennis Von Kiel, until he was arrested last year for social security fraud and tax evasion. Lawsuits have identified at least five incidents of inmate deaths due to inadequate or inappropriate medical care under PrimeCare management.

Lancaster County also contracts with PrimeCare, and staff of Lancaster County RMO report what they often hear from returning citizens who are part of their reentry program is: “When I went into prison, I had these mental health diagnoses, ...” or “I had these health diagnoses,” and “I was on these medications, but PrimeCare doctors evaluated me and said, 'Oh, you don't need those medications.' and took me off those medications, and here's what I struggled with as a result, but they put me on a cheaper medication or something that was completely different.”



Three years ago Tracy Lewis, who suffers from mental illness, was following the instructions of voices in her head. She was arrested, charged with a \$67 theft from Walmart, and spent 30 days in jail. She reports that she was



stripped naked, put in solitary confinement 23 hours a day with the lights always on; no blanket or pillow, so very difficult to sleep; and without medication, she continued to hear voices in her head. It was two weeks before she finally saw a doctor; and when she was finally released from jail, noone asked whether she had proper medication at home. Fortunately Lancaster Country RMO was subsequently able to help Tracy recover from the trauma of incarceration, but her experience is far from unique. According to Corrections Secretary John Wetzel, 24% of our state prison residents (12,000 people) are mentally ill; 70% are drug-addicted, and

neither our state prisons nor county jails are appropriately designed and staffed for effective treatment. Wetzel is moving the state corrections system to performance-based contracts for prison medical care and reentry services, but county jails don’t report to Wetzel.

CCA and the Church of Christ, Right Now

There is a church in Washington, DC, called "The Church of Christ, Right Now" (CC,RN) -- one of the congregations affiliated with The Church of the Savior – made up almost entirely of returning citizens and their families. Many of those people were incarcerated in prisons that were controlled by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) the largest private corrections company in the U.S.

Several years ago the church bought a few shares of CCA stock and ascribed ownership of them to the church’s returning citizens. Ex-offenders are now part owners of the privatized prison that held them, and the church sends them to the annual shareholders meetings in Tennessee to speak with CCA's board about reforming the privatized, for-profit prison system.

CC,RN members have been so vocal at Board meetings that the President of CCA now meets their bus when they arrive and invites them to a luncheon. CCA’s contracts with government agencies for the prisons it manages generally provide a financial incentive for keeping its prison beds filled, but the CC,RN delegations are asking for new provisions that are consistent with restorative practices that should lead to a shrinking prison population.

FCC imposes new limits on prison phone charges

October 22, 2015 – The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has voted to impose new limits on what prisons can charge for local and in-state phone calls as well.

- New caps reduce the average rates for the vast majority of inmate calls substantially, from \$2.96 to no more than \$1.65 for a 15-minute intrastate call for most calls, and from \$3.15 to no more than \$1.65 for most 15-minute interstate calls.
- A tiered rate structure accounts for the relatively higher costs ICS providers face in serving jails (especially small jails) as opposed to state and federal prisons. The rate caps are as follows:
 - 11 cents/minute for debit and prepaid calls in state or federal prisons. Approximately 71% of inmates reside in state or federal prisons
 - 14 cents/minute for debit and prepaid calls in jails with 1,000 or more inmates. Approximately 85% of inmates reside in institutions with populations exceeding 1,000
 - 16 cents /minute for debit and prepaid calls in jails with 350-999 inmates.
 - 22 cents /minute for debit and prepaid calls in jails of up to 349 inmates.

Rates for collect calls are slightly higher in the first year and will be phased down to these caps over a two-year transition period