

INSIDE AMERICA

Louisiana's profitable prisons

Long jail sentences for trivial offences enrich local sheriffs' and police departments in the state of Louisiana — and keep the local economy going.

by Maxime Robin

The number of people in US prisons fell in 2012 by around 30,000, the third consecutive fall in as many years: budget difficulties mean that states can no longer afford incarceration for every offence, and at local level Republicans and Democrats are, unusually, unanimous on the need to decongest prisons. In California — which accounted for half of the fall in 2012 — and Texas, there is a drive to reduce sentences and find alternative punishments.

In Louisiana, however, writing a cheque that bounces still carries a sentence of up to 10 years in prison, and the minimum sentence for a repeat burglary offender is 24 years without parole. The incarceration rate has doubled in 20 years, rising to a level unmatched in the world; more than 44,000 people are behind bars (one in 86 adults) — double the national average and 13 times more than in China.

The economic survival of entire areas depends on this high rate of incarceration. In the early 1990s Louisiana had a choice of solutions to the overcrowding problem; it could either reduce sentences or build more prisons. It chose to build more prisons but, owing to a chronic budget deficit, could not afford to. So it encouraged the sheriffs of rural counties (known as parishes in Louisiana) to build and run their own prisons — or parish jails. Building a jail is a major investment for a rural parish. The state pays the sheriffs \$24.39 per inmate per day, to cover detention costs, whereas a prisoner in a state prison costs the taxpayer \$55 per day. Louisiana has 12 state prisons (reserved for very long sentences), but 160 local jails scattered across remote parishes with Cajun-sounding names such as Acadia, Bienville, Beauregard and Calcasieu.

Incarceration creates jobs, and the rural population, which has suffered severely from the cotton crisis, is directly dependent on them. "In rural parishes, where the economy is depressed, it has become a business," said Burk Foster, criminologist and visiting professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. For many local people, the best chance of work is as a prison guard. It's poorly paid, at \$8 an hour, but the pension is good.

'The sheriff needs to keep beds occupied'

Bed occupancy needs to be high to maximise return on investment. Otherwise,

the jail will cease to be profitable and will have to lay off guards or even close. "It's almost like building a hotel. To keep a jail profitable, the sheriff needs to keep beds occupied," said Cindy Chang, formerly a journalist with the Times-Picayune. Every morning, parish jail wardens have their staff phone around to secure a few prisoners from overcrowded penitentiaries in big cities such as New Orleans or Baton Rouge. The system relies mainly on personal connections among the wardens; for some jails, it works so well that phone calls are unnecessary. "I hate making money off the back of some unfortunate person," said former sheriff Charles McDonald, owner of the jail in Richland, a parish with a population of 20,000. "The fact is, somebody's got to keep them, and it might as well be Richland Parish."

Louisiana has built no prisons in 25 years, and these low-cost country jails currently hold more than half of all the state's prisoners. Spending is kept to a minimum, and conditions are deplorable. "After maintenance expenses, staffing and profits for the sheriff, there is not much left for the inmates," said Foster. "They sleep in 80-man dormitories. The food is cheap and medical care is poor."

Parish jails were intended for prisoners serving less than 12 months, but the average stay is eight and a half years, and nearly one in five prisoners is serving a sentence of more than 11 years ([1](#)), with no access to occupational training. In state prisons, inmates have access to psychological and medical care, leisure activities and work-based rehabilitation programmes. The Avoyelles Correctional Center organises a rodeo every year that is open to the public; the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, where the majority of inmates are serving life sentences without possibility of parole, offers training as a car mechanic or heating engineer. None of this is available in parish jails. "Ironically, in Louisiana, rehabilitation is for people who will never get out," said Dana Kaplan, director of the not-for-profit law office Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana.

Sheriffs — elected by popular vote in the US — use the money they make to buy new equipment for their police officers: vehicles, weapons, computers and bulletproof vests. Given meal costs of less than \$1.50 per inmate per day and the meagre spending on facilities, the daily cost per inmate is certainly less than the \$24.39 state allowance. Even if you count the gift of a bus ticket and \$10 each prisoner receives on release, there's got to be quite a profit margin.