Prisons Should Implement the Use of Inmate Labor.

In today’s tight economy many states are in deep financial trouble. Some are even unable to balance their budgets. If the taxpayer dollars used to fund correctional facilities can be effectively reduced by using inmate labor, those dollars saved can be put to work in other areas the state is obliged to fund, such as education, emergency services and law enforcement which are all at risk of further budget cuts. Therefore, prisons should implement the use of inmate labor programs because they help offset incarceration costs, reduce recidivism rates and promote inmates’ successful re-entry back into society.

However, there are two main factors motivating the opposition to the use of prison labor. First, there are those who say that making prisoners work is exploitative (Atkinson 2) and that they are only being taught antiquated processes on outdated equipment (Wignall 4) which will be of little value to them in the free world. The second source of opposition comes from those who fear that civilian business and labor will be displaced (Atkinson 2).

Dr. Charles Scott and Dr. Frederick Derrick, both professors of Economics at Loyola University, define prisoner labor as inmate employees producing goods and services for sale and use outside of the prison (540) and is distinguished separately from prisoners performing prison institutional jobs, such as laundry or kitchen work (549). One method for alleviating the incarceration cost burden to taxpayers is by using revenue generating prison labor. Positive cash flow is provided from the economic activities these prisoners undertake and helps fund the prisons (540). For example, in 2004 Ohio Prison Industries generated $31.6 million in revenue and paid out $10 million in employee wages and $1.5 million in prisoner wages (544) which partially offset the incarceration costs of the participating prisoners by five to ten percent (540).
Similarly, Prison Rehabilitative Industries and Diversified Enterprises (PRIDE), a non-profit company operating prison industries in Florida, boasted annual sales for 2000 that exceeded $95 million (Wignall 2) and as a result, returned money to the state to pay for incarceration costs (Wignall 3). Robert Atkinson, vice president of the Progressive Policy Institute, states that it costs approximately $40 billion annually to incarcerate prisoners, which works out to about $20,000 per year per prisoner. His view is that prisoners should work and contribute to their upkeep to lessen taxpayer costs (5). Prison labor opponent Professor Gordon Lafer, from University of Oregon, states that inmates who work in prison industries are exploited because “they have no right to organize or strike”, receive “no health insurance, no unemployment insurance, no vacation time” (qtd. in Atkinson 3) and that “prison labor is analogous to slave labor” (qtd in Atkinson 3). Atkinson counters that Lafer is missing the fundamental point: “These are criminals who are serving time in prison for illegal activity and, as such, are deprived of some of the rights free people enjoy” (3).

Furthermore, Bob Wignall, training manager at PRIDE, states that the fundamental objective of prison labor is to transform unskilled and uneducated inmates into productive workers. Approximately 5,000 inmates work in PRIDE’s 55 industries located in 20 Florida state prisons. Industries include traditional license plate and furniture manufacturing as well as sophisticated industries, such as denture, optical and print industries (2). Wignall assents that there is some validity to one prison industry criticism of training inmates using outdated processes and equipment however, these inmates are given an opportunity to develop skills that will be beneficial and can cross over into other fields. For example, an ex-offender who worked in PRIDE’s sugar cane industry, gained experience in equipment operation. After release he obtained employment operating heavy equipment for a land development company. In addition,
PRIDE’s optical and dental industries are very sophisticated and have high placement rates. In fact, inmate workers are often recruited and hired prior to leaving prison (4). Wignall gives an example of another inmate, who worked at PRIDE’s optical training laboratory in Broward County. Upon release she was referred to an optical lab in her community and was hired immediately in that highly demanding field (7). In addition, Wignall states that of the 500 PRIDE workers released each year, 75 percent of these inmates have been placed into jobs upon release, many in positions directly related to their training (2). Furthermore, Atkinson states that limiting prison labor would reduce the effectiveness of the prisons to release productive and law-abiding citizens (5) and rather than being exploited, many inmates volunteer for the work because it is more interesting and financially rewarding than watching TV all day (3). Scott and Derrick concur that prisoners view the prison industry work as desirable and as a result, they become more cooperative and conform to guidelines in order to qualify for this work (541).

As well as providing the inmates with potentially marketable skills, Atkinson writes that research suggests that failure to maintain employment may contribute to high recidivism rates and studies have shown that inmates who work in prison industries have better outcomes once released (1). For example, the Federal Bureau of Prisons conducted a study of 7,000 program participants over the course of two years and concluded that the offenders who received work experience in prison had fewer conduct problems and were less likely to be arrested during the first year after release. Another study by the National Institute of Corrections found that up to 40 percent of all offenders were unemployed or marginally employed at the time of arrest and a New York State Department of Labor study found that 83 percent of probation and parole violators were unemployed at the time of violation (Atkinson 1-2). Lower recidivism rates are good for society by reducing crime and in addition, helps keep prison populations smaller.
therefore, saving taxpayers money (Atkinson 2). Wignal concurs and states that recidivism rates are estimated between 40 and 70 percent and that it is essential to support ex-offenders during the reintegration process (1). Consequently, PRIDE incorporates comprehensive prerelease and post-release components to their work program (6). Scott and Derrick also conclude that effective job and educational programs result in fewer inmates returning with some returning later than previously expected (541). Opponents of prison labor use the fact that some prison laborers are incarcerated for life and therefore to focus on reduced recidivism is a sham (Atkinson 5). Atkinson counters this and states “The fact is that requiring a life-inmate to work and contribute a portion of his/her pay to room and board is consistent with the notion of a prisoner’s responsibility to give something back to society as payment for his/her crimes…” (5).

There is no doubt that there are cases where companies have lost contracts and workers have lost their jobs because of prison industries (Atkinson 4). However, Atkinson writes that resources laid off in the private sector do not remain that way permanently (4). Wignall states that part of PRIDE’s mission is to “produce goods and services that do not seek to unreasonably compete with private sector firms” (2). In fact, market access is severely limited by state and federal laws and local labor is not displaced if the goods and services produced would have been produced out of state or internationally. In addition, proponents also argue that prison labor is actually repatriating unskilled and semi-skilled jobs currently being exported internationally (Scott and Derrick 541). Even the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) are supportive of prison labor with the caveat that “prison labor never should be used to compete with free labor” (qtd in Scott and Derrick 549).
Because the prison labor debate is usually anecdotal rather than quantitative (548) Scott and Derrick conducted their own study on the implications of prison labor on a local economy and the potential crowding out of private sector labor and industry.(540). They cite the first study they conducted in 2004 which concluded that employment of 100 prison inmates crowded out between 13 and 20 unskilled private sector jobs nationally. They state that the jobs crowded out are thought to be localized and focused in the industries in which prisoners participate. However, countering these negative effects is the economic expansion resulting from the fact that prisons hire private sector labor as managers and purchase more from the local economy. In turn, this spending on private sector labor and goods and services leads to more spending by the private firms and their employees, which generates additional private jobs, income and tax revenues (540-541). In addition, the supervisory jobs created have a higher average salary than the jobs displaced (548).

Finally, if the prison labor issue is resolved effectively, the effects on a local economy could be economically positive and more inmates may be successfully integrated back into society as permanently productive citizens. Because it makes both practical and fiscal sense to use each taxpayer dollar as efficiently and responsibly as possible, having prisoners contribute, in part, to the cost of their incarceration is an integral part of this process. Although each state has a form of prison labor as part of their correctional system, it is imperative that each institution be as self-sustaining as possible, therefore concerned citizens should contact their senators or congresspersons to ensure that continuing effort is directed toward a feasible solution to this contentious issue.
