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Rural Prison Siting: Problems and Promises

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Abstract

Building prisons in rural areas is not a new phenomenon, though it has been increasing significantly in recent decades. During a massive boom to prison building in the 1990's and early 2000's, many of those new prisons were built in rural areas. Once these prisons had been built, many promises about the benefits of the new prisons were not realized. Promises of mass employment were false because of the number of people transferring from other institutions, promises of a larger tax base were false because many of the newcomers lived outside of the area and commuted in. This paper analyzes the promises made to rural areas and the realities that followed, as well as the impacts that rural prisons have on inmates, as well as analyzing private prisons specifically. This paper will lastly discuss solutions for rural prisons, communities, and inmates and ways to make the promises the reality.

Rural Prison Siting

Prison siting is the practice of deciding where to locate, or site, prisons (King, Mauer, & Huling, 2004). This requires an in-depth analysis of the advantages and disadvantages to building and maintaining facilities in that area, as well as comparing these advantages or disadvantages to other regions (Courtright, Packard, Hannan, & Brennan, 2010; Eason, 2010). This paper focuses on prison siting in rural areas. Unfortunately, there is no single consensus on what constitutes a rural area. For this paper, rural areas are defined as having lengthy commute times to large cities, as this separates them from the larger economy (Hart, Larson, & Lishner, 2005). Additionally, this paper will also consider those with less economic activity to be rural. Combining these considerations allow for an analysis of rural areas that lack significant economic structures themselves and are also too far removed to easily access urban areas (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2014).

Prison siting in rural areas is nothing new, but it has become more and more common in the previous decades (Courtright et al., 2010). In 1980, only 36% of prisons were located in rural areas, but in the 1990's there was a new prison built in rural areas once every 15 days (Hatt, 2011). Between 2000 and 2005, this rate increased even more, with a new prison being built in a rural area once every 12 days (Hatt, 2011). This paper will analyze the impacts that rural prisons have on inmates, the expectations and realities of rural prisons, and how to address issues that come from building prison in rural areas.

Rural communities used to be fully against bringing prisons into their areas, often afraid of how they would impact the region. It is not uncommon for individuals to consider prisons as locally unwanted land use, meaning they do not want the facility in their area. Other prominent

examples of locally unwanted land use include power plants, homeless shelters, and toxic waste dumps (Courtright et al., 2010). However, when prisons were touted as economic boons that could save a failing economy, rural areas became much more receptive to them (Eason, 2010). Rural areas were in desperate positions when prisons promised to help their economies, as they had suffered significant economic decline as larger industries and companies left rural regions, and prisons were often considered as a last resort to save their economies (Genter, Hooks, & Mosher, 2013). However, the promised benefits rarely to fruition resulting in further damage to these communities and the inmates and civilians in them.

Literature Review

Inmate Impacts

Most inmates indicate their pre-arrest address to be in urban areas, but most prisons are in rural areas (Hatt, 2011). On average, inmates are held 100 miles away from their pre-arrest address, with 90% being held at least 40 miles away (Mitchelson, 2012). Three quarters of inmates are held more than 75 miles away, and some (only .2%) are held more than 300 miles away from their pre-arrest address (Mitchelson, 2012). While a distance of about 40 miles may not seem very far, it may be difficult for visitors to get to the inmates, especially if they do not have vehicles and/or access to public transportation.

Greater distances understandably increase the difficulty that people will experience in attempting to visit inmates, as trips will require more time, money, and planning (Mitchelson, 2012). Additionally, some respondents to the study could have been held in processing centers when they responded, and they would be moved shortly after, likely even further away from their pre-arrest address (Mitchelson, 2012). Some have argued that inmates are intentionally put in

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prisons further away from urban centers, in order to maximize difficulty in getting legal help or emotional support through their support systems (Eason, 2010; Hernandez, 2011). However, Mitchelson (2012) uncovered no evidence of this and showed that, instead of being a deliberate goal, long travel distances were instead simply not considered an issue that correctional officials should worry about addressing.

Immigration law research does allow for some analysis of how the significant travel required to reach the prison impacts the inmates. Hernandez (2011) makes the argument that detaining inmates in isolated rural regions violates their 5th amendment right to counsel, since the travel makes some lawyers reject those cases. It also makes it harder for attorneys to meet with them and gather relevant information about the court case (Hernandez, 2011). Furthermore, since the inmates have a more difficult time accessing the social support structure that they may have near their pre-arrest address, it is hard for them to contact legal sources easily or to get others to do so for them. It is reasonable to assume that the issues illustrated by research in the impacts of being detained in facilities far from an inmates pre-arrest address are similar for other incarcerated individuals.

Lastly, inmates in rural regions do not have reliable access to care services, such as mental health or addiction counselling (Deslich, Thistlewaite, & Coustasse, 2013). This is not particularly surprising, as rural regions in general suffer from difficulties in accessing these types of care (Staton-Tindall, Harp, Minieri, Oser, Webster, Havens, & Leukefeld, 2015). The relatively limited access to health or mental care services in these rural areas additionally reduces the services available for rural prisons (Staton-Tindall et al., 2015). Many individuals entering rural prisons score highly on need assessments, showing that they need to be able to receive help

for issues such as drug abuse histories, mental health problems, or traumatic incidents. Those with higher score on need assessments have a greater need for services, meaning that the lack of available services does have a serious impact on the inmates (Staton-Tindall et al., 2015). On a similar note, the distance from urban centers reduces the ease of access to medical care, which could have serious consequences if an inmate suffers from a severe incident requiring emergency care beyond the ability of the correctional facility to provide (Courtright et al., 2010).

Community Consequences

As mentioned earlier, there used to be a heavy resistance from rural residents to the building of prisons in rural regions (Courtright et al., 2012). The shift from arguing against the building of prisons in rural areas to actively campaigning for them relied heavily on the misconception of the benefits of prisons and beliefs in how they can save a failing economy (Courtright et al., 2012; Genter et al., 2013). After industries left rural regions in the late 1980's, rural communities struggled to find and attract other businesses or industries to their regions (Hatt, 2011). As rural communities would soon discover, many of the promised benefits of the prisons as engines of economic development were exaggerated at best.

Construction and labour.

One of the first expectations for the economy is that the prison will be built by local firms, with local labour, and local sources. However, prisons quite frequently hire larger firms from outside of the rural region to handle the task of building a prison, skipping over local firms entirely (Genter et al., 2013; Whitfield, 2008). Local firms are ignored because they often lack the experience in building large structures or projects, which is often required to be hired for the construction (Whitfield, 2008). The big construction companies that have the experience to get

hired for these jobs typically have large supply chains, meaning that they do not need to utilize local supply chains or resources, further bypassing the local economy (Whitfield, 2008). Even if a local construction company is able to bid, larger companies often underbid them, winning the contract.

Once construction is complete, rural areas often assume and hope that local residents will make up most of the employees, and those brought in from out of state will live in the community, increasing the tax base. Unfortunately, up to 70% of new prison jobs will be filled by individuals who transfer from other institutions (Hooks, Mosher, Genter, Rotolo, & Lobao, 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Partly, this is because the workers have unions that ensure them preference in where they go to work, and they will receive higher consideration for new jobs than those coming from outside of correctional facilities (Hooks et al., 2010). For those who live in the rural region who wish to work in the facility, it can be harder to get the job because they do not have experience in corrections. While they could be sent to a training facility, a new prison cannot train them as easily and there would often be no educational facilities to help train these individuals (Whitfield, 2008). Additionally, individuals in rural regions generally have less education and job training than those in urban regions, and face significant difficulties in accessing job training and education (King et al., 2004).

Those who are fortunate enough to be hired are often relegated to low wage and low ranking positions within the correctional facility. Many transfers from other facilities will get administrative and better paying jobs, and will often be first in line for promotions (Courtright et al., 2010). Those relocated from outside areas will often not move into the local area, so there is not an increase in the tax base. They will usually move to nearby regions and opt to commute

into work instead of living in the local community and participating in the economy (Courtright et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Even worse than the locals not getting the new jobs that a prison brings in, inmates may be required by the government to perform low wage and low skill duties. These are often jobs that could employ local workers, such as janitorial or landscaping jobs, often for local government or community groups (Genter et al., 2013; Whitfield, 2008). However, many of these rural regions show higher rates of poverty, with significant unemployment, and these jobs could be useful to the locals (Genter et al., 2013).

Stigma and services.

After the construction and hiring, there are the more direct impacts on the community to consider. Proponents of rural prison siting argue that there is no stigma to living in a prison town. In reality, the evidence shows that people consistently move out of rural communities after a prison is built there, and there is proof that people try to avoid moving to prison towns (Hooks et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). In one instance, a town went from a population of 1,898 to 3,389 in seven years after building a prison (Whitfield, 2008). While this sounds good, 1,500 individuals counted were inmates who had been moved to that facility, as inmates are counted as part of the region's population. Without including inmates, the population actually went from 1,898 to 1,889, showing a small decrease, as opposed to the increases in population promised (Whitfield, 2008). Those 1,500 inmates technically do increase the population, but they obviously cannot interact with the economy as participants or spenders, and do not increase the tax base.

Another common expectation is that prisons will start using locals as suppliers for necessary goods for the prison, especially regular orders which would allow for greater stability and income in the local economy (Courtright et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). However,

government prisons are often required to order their supplies from a main distributor who supplies all other prisons run by that government agency. Additionally, both government and private prisons will often pursue the cheapest supplies, which may not be from locals (Courtright et al., 2010). Since locals would have to pay to get supplies from national or regional suppliers, and then raise prices to make a profit, it would be easier and less expensive for the correctional facilities to cut out the middleman (local businesses) and order directly from the supplier.

However, there are things that the prisons need to use the local services for, namely utilities such as water, waste disposal, or power (Courtright et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Prisons must utilize the systems that are in place, but often do not discuss with local utility officials or government to ensure that the systems that exist in rural areas can feasibly support the increased load of a prison. In some instances, the population has a significant proportion of inmates, and it is not uncommon for counties to have 10%, 20%, or even 30% of their populations consist of inmates, representing a significant burden on the utilities in the region (Whitfield, 2008). This results in instances where prisons dump waste into nearby rivers because they failed to perform due diligence and ensure that the local infrastructure could handle their needs (Whitfield, 2008).

Engines of economic development.

Proponents of rural prisons will argue that prisons have value as engines of economic development, beyond the direct economic impact of the prison itself. Simply put, their argument is that the presence of a prison will bring along other facilities or industries into the community (Courtright et al., 2010). Therefore, while the direct impacts of a prison may be negative it can

still be positive for the community as it encourages other growth. Unfortunately, as with many of the other promises of economic growth from prisons there is little evidence to support this.

While it is accurate that some companies will follow prisons into local areas, they typically do not do much to help the economy grow. To start, many of these companies are gas stations, motels, or restaurants (especially fast food). While necessary in a thriving economy, these are typically low wage positions that are not adding much to a small local economy that is already struggling (Hooks et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Big box stores such as Walmart are another low wage group that follow prisons. Big box stores and chain restaurants are typically able to provide goods or services at a much lower cost than local or family stores in the area, taking away business from locally owned businesses (Hooks et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). These local businesses cannot operate and must shut down (Hooks et al., 2010). These national companies send the profits outside of the area, so money spent in these stores is not recirculated in the local economy.

Rural prisons also end up costing rural areas much more than just the initial costs of investment to get them to build in the region. As mentioned, utilities are often strained by the added load of the inmates, and so the utilities must expand in order to be able to comfortably handle the needs of the community and the prison (Courtright et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Additionally, prisons often require roads to be improved to handle the increased demand on them from the prison (Whitfield, 2008). These updated roads also require significant maintenance. There is also a need for expansion of the local law enforcement and judicial systems to match the increased correctional load, since any criminal issues that arise in prison are dealt with on a local level (Whitfield, 2008).

Lastly, prisons are commonly assumed to be recession proof as there is supposedly always a need for the increasing numbers of prisons to hold inmates that were being rapidly incarcerated during the war on drug (Genter et al., 2013). This assumption of stability is another selling point of prisons, that they, unlike manufacturing plants, would not shut down when the economy got tough (Genter et al., 2013). During economic troubles in the late 2000's, many prisons began shutting down, as they could no longer operate (Whitfield, 2008). This revealed that the claims of invulnerability to economic troubles were false and that prisons were no less likely than other industries to failing.

Prisons at every step of their development and day-to-day operations fail to include local rural communities that they are supposedly there to support economically (Courtright et al., 2010). Considering that many rural regions significantly invest in getting these prisons to build in their region, offering subsidies on land or necessities, they may actually be hurting their economic stability when prisons to come to their area (Courtright et al., 2010; Hooks et al., 2010). Additionally, prisons are just as vulnerable to recession as other industries (Whitfield, 2008). Prisons are not an economic savior for rural communities and need adjustment in order to be able to be functioning part of a local economy rather than just a separate entity.

Private Problems

Private prisons represent additional problems for rural communities. They have similar issues as state run correctional facilities, but often have stronger negative impacts (Genter et al., 2013; Whitfield, 2008). Private prisons often tout cost savings at no reduction in safety or efficiency. Private prisons argue that they are a more financially conservative option that allows

for effective incarceration without bureaucracy slowing it down or costing more (Genter et al., 2013). Again, the research does not support this view of private correctional facilities.

Private prison corporations frequently take advantage of the subsidies that are offered by local governments. These corporations often require the local government to pay for a part of the construction or giving the prison the land to build (Genter et al., 2013). This further exploits the already cheap land in rural regions (as compared to urban areas), allowing for private prison corporations to build prisons for much cheaper than if they were to do so in urban areas. Having the government pay for the land or construction puts further burden on those in the local communities, as the money for the subsidies come from local tax dollars.

After the prison is built, there is little proof of cheaper operation. Studies show that private prisons may save approximately one percent of cost compared to government facilities (Genter et al., 2013). The costs saved are typically labor costs, done by reducing the number of employees on a shift, cutting total hours, and cutting benefits for employees (Genter et al., 2013). Private prisons also typically employees pay less than similarly situated government facilities. With lower pay, their economic impact is even less helpful than it is for state run facilities (Whitfield, 2008). Furthermore, the cost difference is only apparent in medium security facilities (Genter et al., 2013) suggesting that state run minimum and maximum-security facilities are already operating effectively without privatization.

Private prisons have less responsibility to the people of a community. Instead, they are more responsive to their shareholders (Kyle, 2013). This leads to a focus on profit instead of rehabilitation, which in turn leads to the fact that private prisons do not show any noticeable decrease in recidivism for an offender (Kyle, 2013). This focus on profit also explains why many

private prisons have contracts that require the state to ensure that the prison has at least a certain number of inmates. This shows that private prisons care more about profit, as well as raising questions about the requirement for the government to prosecute and incarcerate people in order to fill the private prisons (Kyle, 2013).

Private rural prisons exacerbate the issues with rural prisons and include additional problems for rural communities. Their cost savings are minimal and show no increase in efficiency, whether cost or recidivism (Genter et al., 2013; Kyle, 2013). Additionally, private prisons may require the government to send inmates to private prisons so that the prisons can make a profit (Kyle, 2013). Private prisons take advantage of rural areas in even more significant ways than government facilities, doing more damage and helping the economy and region less.

Solutions

There are clearly a myriad of issues with rural prisons, all of which deserve addressing in order to ensure that they support inmates. Additionally, there needs to be a focus on doing as much good for the communities as possible. Some of these issues are easier to address and solve than others. Some require large scale planning and change. Beneath all of this is a different discussion of how to best actually help save rural local economies. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. This solution section of this paper will attempt to tackle the issues facing rural prisons and different solutions that could be used to properly address them.

Community Involvement

The simplest solution is to begin building connections between rural prisons and local communities. There are a number of important ways to do this. Manufacturing plants that are

located in rural areas often have much stronger connections to the community than prisons. Closer connections allow them to (and is partly because of their ability to) participate in the local economy (Whitfield, 2008). Prisons may have difficulty connecting to their communities because they may not be needed in the area. When building the prison, upper level staff should introduce themselves to the community and local government leaders in order to establish themselves somewhat in the community (Courtright et al., 2010). This trend should continue whenever the upper level administration in the prison changes. This also helps beyond just establishing themselves in the community but they can build bridges between the prison and the community before the prison is constructed.

These early connections can also help create open discussions about the consequences, both good and bad, that come from bringing a prison into the rural community. With community input and cooperation, the positive consequences could be maximized while reducing the negative consequences (Courtright et al., 2010). Implementing community advisory groups that include influential community members could further enhance relations between the prison and the community, as well as increase communication. This communication could allow for the prison to ensure that the utilities in the region (roads, waste disposal, water services, and energy services) are capable of handling the increased load from the prison to ensure the most productive building and start of the prison (Courtright et al., 2010).

There could also be a discussion between these groups of how to possibly include the local economy in the prison operations. From hiring more local individuals on a more permanent basis to purchasing relevant supplies (Courtright et al., 2010). These discussions may also need to include those who oversee regions of the government correctional system (Courtright et al.,

2010). While it may be difficult to ensure that government prisons have the ability to work with local supplies in all areas, it would be a useful strategy to strengthen ties to the community. Individualizing supplying plans per institution would help in combating not just the negative impacts of prisons on rural areas, but also a general negative decline in rural economies (Courtright et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008).

Encouraging workers to volunteer where they can and attempt to help the community would show that those who are there for the prison also care about the community (Courtright et al., 2010). It could also help for the prison to make regular donations to critical services such as fire fighters, EMS, or the local government, as it shows a direct investment (Courtright et al., 2010). This would show that investments are mutual between the community and the prison rather than the prison just taking advantage of the generosity of the community. The prison could also try to donate to local small businesses in order to help them stay afloat if big box stores or low wage industries come in and threaten their business. (Hooks et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008).

Hiring locals before a prison opens in a new area would allow the prison to send them away for training so that they have the experience and training to be effective workers when the prison opens (Eason, 2010). Prison officials could also encourage those who are being transferred from other facilities (since it is necessary to have experienced individuals there) to move into the county or community that the prison is located, which would then make some of the promises of a larger tax base or greater community spending come true (Genter et al., 2013).

In terms of private prisons, they are in a position where they can use their profit in order to benefit the community even more so than government facilities (Kyle, 2013). However, their intrinsic need, as a business, to make maximum profit and their requirement for the government

to fill them with as many inmates as possible make their likelihood to do so slim. They are not obligated to follow evidence-based practices as government agencies are, and may not follow best practices to help inmates and the communities in which they are based. The best option concerning private prisons and rural communities is for the government to stop awarding contracts to private prisons unless they change how they treat communities they build in. If private prisons make significant commitments to the communities they build in and follow best practices to help inmates and lower recidivism, then they may be able to receive contracts again. (Genter et al., 2013; Kyle, 2013; Whitfield, 2008).

Tele-conferencing

For inmates in rural areas, many of their issues can be helped, though maybe not fixed, through tele-conferencing technologies. These tele-conferencing technologies are beginning to be used more in psychiatry or other health screenings, as they allow for professionals to interact with patients that are geographically distant (Batastini, King, Morgan, & McDaniel, 2015; Staton-Tindall et al., 2015). This tele-medicine has been used to some effect in rural regions in helping those with drug abuse problems or mental health problems, and has some promise for use in a correctional setting.

Drug offenders, individuals with mental health problems, or those who are dealing with significant trauma could utilize tele-health techniques in order to address said issues. This would allow professionals to provide services to inmates in rural prison sites and allow inmates access to treatment and therapy quicker, easier, and cheaper (Batastini et al., 2015; Deslich et al., 2013). This allows professionals to practice in a far larger area than they may otherwise normally be able and makes their services available not just to inmates but to many people who would

otherwise be unable to get their services (Batastini et al., 2015). Since many who are entering prison do require help with mental health problems or addiction, this could be a critical issue that helps to address inmates' needs (Staton-Tindall et al., 2015.). Additionally, there is evidence that tele-medicine is just as effective as in person treatment, so there is no worry about inmates receiving lesser quality care (Batastini et al., 2015).

This can also go beyond just tele-medicine issues, but also help to handle difficulties rural inmates may have in contacting their attorneys (Hernandez, 2011). Attorneys would be able to meet with their clients regularly without dealing with the problems of travel (Batastini et al., 2015). While much of the research on this has focused on issues facing those who have immigrated illegally, ease of communication is important for all inmates, especially when attempting to talk to their lawyers. This would also ensure continuous care even if the inmates were to be transferred to other, more distant facilities, as it would not impact ease of communication.

Future Development

The last solution to be discussed is possibly the most difficult; moving prison locations. While this paper does not advocate for suddenly moving prisons to new locations and building new prisons again, it does recommend a change in regional focus when building new prisons. Prisons do not create economic growth or development, and they require a lot of changes in rural communities that could be met without structural changes by building near urban areas (Whitfield, 2008). These areas have well maintained roads, strong and tested utilities, a large workforce, and an opportunity for easy local housing for individuals who transfer to work at the facility.

Building prisons near urban or metro areas could also help to address many of the issues facing inmates, such as difficulties meeting their attorneys or family members (Hernandez, 2011), as well as reaching necessary mental health, drug abuse, or mental trauma care professionals (Deslich et al., 2013; Stanton-Tindall et al., 2015). While tele-medicine is effective and useful, being closer to providers could only help. Tele-medicine could still be used when necessary (Batastini et al., 2015). Lastly, prisons in urban or metro areas would not place as much strain as prisons do in rural areas.

Conclusion

Prison siting in rural areas is not a new phenomenon, though it has increased significantly in recent decades (Eason, 2010; Genter et al., 2013; Hatt, 2011; Hooks et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Prisons were touted as saviors of rural economies with plenty of economic benefits being promised to rural areas that built prisons in their counties (Genter et al., 2013; Whitfield, 2008). As a result, a significant number of rural areas started campaigning to attract state run or private prisons to build in their areas. In attempts to attract prisons, some areas promised subsidies and free land to the prisons, expecting the prisons to help revitalize their economies after other industries had left (Genter et al., 2013; Hooks et al., 2010).

Unfortunately for those rural communities, the economic benefits that were promised were largely false and did little to save their economies (Courtright et al., 2010; Eason, 2010; Genter et al., 2013; Hooks et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). This left the communities abandoned and often in a worse economic situation than they started (Whitfield, 2008). However, these promises can be realized if prisons begin to focus on improving relations with the communities that they are based in and start to provide opportunities and funding into the community to help

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actually fulfill the promises and revitalize local rural economies (Courtright et al., 2010; Whitfield, 2008). Future prisons should be built with the issues identified in this paper in mind and seek out ways to truly connect with their community and build with them, creating economic growth alongside the prison.

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