

# Prison Work

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration of any country in the world. In the United States over 1.6 million people are in prison.<sup>1</sup> Many states make use of work prisons. In these facilities, prisoners process foods, manufacture products, engage in hard labor, and more. These prisoners volunteer to work and then receive a wage. The Constitution prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, but it also permits indentured servitude if it is part of punishment for a crime.

Opponents of private work prisons often compare them to slavery.<sup>2</sup> They argue that prison is inherently coercive, and that prisoners cannot really freely choose to work if their only other option is isolation. Many opponents also argue that private work prisons exploit prisoners since prisoners are not permitted to unionize, are often paid less than a dollar per hour, and are unable to earn a profit from their labor<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, since prison workers earn much less than non-prison workers, some opponents also worry that the use of private work prisons will mean that fewer jobs are available to non-prisoner workers.

Advocates of private work prisons point out that by working during their imprisonment, convicted offenders gain skills that can improve their chances of gaining employment after they return to their communities. Advocates also argue that working helps inmates escape boredom and improves their mood and morale. Additionally, advocates argue that private work prisons can reduce the high cost of the criminal justice system, and the burden on state budgets.

Another important factor is that over sixty percent of male prisoners are Black or Hispanic<sup>4</sup>. These populations remain economically disadvantaged – in part, in the case of Black prisoners, because of the history and legacy of American slavery – and this background context makes questions about the negative and/or positive impacts of work prisons even more pressing.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. If prisons give prisoners a choice between work and isolation, is this really a free choice or is it a coerced choice? And what, if anything, follows about the moral permissibility of this practice?
2. Is it ethical for a private company to pay workers in prison less than workers outside prison? Why or why not?
3. Is it ethical for a private company to earn a profit from prison labor? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p10.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/10/prison-labor\\_n\\_2272036.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/10/prison-labor_n_2272036.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/prisonlabor.html>

