



The hidden subsidies of rural prisons: Race, space and the politics of cumulative disadvantage

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Abstract

This paper links the rise of a punitive punishment regime that disproportionately targets poor, urban minorities and the increasing use of rural spaces to warehouse prisoners. Preliminary evidence from a unique dataset across three states suggests that housing large, institutionalized prison populations inflates population counts in otherwise shrinking rural areas and operates as a hidden subsidy for rural counties with prison infrastructure. Prisons contribute to the immediate economic viability of predominantly white, lower class rural areas, despite devastating costs borne elsewhere.

Keywords

criminal justice, political economy, rural prisons

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the nation's prison population has increased more than 600%. The US is not only the world's largest jailer but also among the most racially biased: young black and Hispanic men are significantly over-represented within the nation's prisons and jails (Alexander, 2010; Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008; Drake, 2011; Mauer, 2003; Western, 2006). Given the stark racial disparities that characterize the nation's penal system, scholars have long sought to uncover the adverse effects of the criminal justice system within black and Hispanic communities.

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As this research reveals, increasing levels of incarceration coincided with the decline of manufacturing, divestments from the urban core and state-sponsored suburbanization of jobs since the 1970s. These economic shocks had devastating effects on urban communities comprised of low-skilled black men locked out of the formal labor economy (Sugrue, 2005; Wilson, 1997). While many scholars argue that prisons replaced state-sponsored welfare programs as a principal mechanism to combat urban poverty (e.g., see Bonds, 2009; Parenti, 2008; Peck, 2003; Wacquant, 2009), the emphasis on urban marginality eclipses the role of prisons in declining rural communities. The outsourcing of production, increasing competition from transnational markets and sharp reductions in social welfare also contributed to deep poverty within rural communities.

Political elites responded to patterns of economic restructuring and dislocation by investing in rural prison development. Although prisons were historically considered blights on local economies, political and business elites faced with sharp economic declines eagerly lauded correctional facilities for their potential to bring economic development to depressed rural regions (Bonds, 2013; Lynch, 2009). Earlier campaigns of “Not in My Backyard” (NIMBY) were replaced with the antithetical notion that Anne Bonds (2013) terms, “Yes in my background”. However, Bonds (2013) argues that much like the political motivations for NIMBY, recent justifications for rural prison development also maintain geographies of racialized privilege. Her case study of Madras, Oregon illustrates that while simultaneous developments of upscale housing and a prison were cast in the neutral language of economics, they nonetheless created exclusionary white spaces and further marginalized impoverished people of color within the community (Bonds, 2013).

Since the 1980s and 1990s poor urban areas have experienced aggressive surveillance and criminal punishment, while the growth of rural poverty created politically expedient spaces to warehouse prisoners. Many lawmakers and business leaders throughout rural communities aggressively bid for new prison construction (Gilmore, 2007; Huling, 2002; King et al., 2003; Schlosser, 1998; Thompson, 2012), while state actors provided tax breaks and other incentives to encourage prison growth (Lynch, 2009). Consequently, states not only built hundreds of prisons in an unprecedented prison boom but also concentrated these facilities in predominantly rural spaces (Drake, 2011; Lawrence and Travis, 2004; Lynch, 2009). Although prisons have not appreciably improved the economy in host communities and are often drains on state revenue streams (Gilmore, 2007; Hooks et al., 2004; King et al., 2003; Lynch, 2009), many under-developed rural spaces lacking other viable employment options have grown to rely on prisons as a principal source of jobs and revenue (Gottschalk, 2014). In her case study of Arizona’s proliferation of rural prisons, Mona Lynch (2009) argues that this growth was a consequence of social, economic and political factors having less to do with crime than with a need to restructure otherwise flailing local economies. As prisons became increasingly politicized as economic investments in these regions, their corrective and rehabilitative functions were de-emphasized. The core objectives of the penal system

gradually shifted from addressing sources of criminality to stabilizing economically vulnerable regions by warehousing economically superfluous populations (Lynch, 2009). In Michigan's Jackson State penitentiary, for example, lawmakers eagerly allocated prison jobs and contracts to bolster their own political power, and inadvertently fueled a rural prison economy beyond what was initially intended (Bright, 1996).

More recently, many scholars have speculated that drawing prison-heavy districts—a term often referred to as prison-based gerrymandering—negatively impacts minority communities by diluting black and Hispanic voting power and shifting resources from urban to rural areas (Huling, 2002; Kelly, 2012; Short, 2009; Taormina, 2003; Wagner, 2012). Yet, policy analysts documenting empirical evidence of systematic deprivation in black and Hispanic urban neighborhoods tend to characterize these disadvantages as aberrations or unintended consequences. For instance, Peter Wagner (2012) contends that most lawmakers engaged in prison-based gerrymandering do not do so deliberately. Rather, he portrays it as a “historical accident” that results from outdated methodology employed by the Census Bureau coupled with an unprecedented change in incarceration rates and a constitutional mandate to draw districts on the basis of equal population (20–21).

Rather than assuming that policies compounding racial and geographic inequalities are an unfortunate historical accident, we conceptualize these outcomes as a consequence of a historical and legal framework that continually reproduces racial, class and geographic hierarchies through the criminal justice system. Notably, “colorblind” criminal justice policies use racially neutral language to perpetuate a framework that leads to racially oppressive outcomes. These policies legally codify racial biases and solidify the economic and political benefits that whites accrue at the expense of non-whites (Bonds, 2013; Brewer and Heitzeg, 2008; Harris, 1993; Marable, 1983; Murakawa, 2014).

This paper interrogates a core, but largely neglected, economic underpinning of the criminal justice system that continues to perpetuate racial hierarchies and compounds disadvantage: the diversion of social welfare resources from minorities in urban cities to rural communities with predominantly white residents. While scholars have documented hidden economic, social and political deprivations endemic in poor urban communities disproportionately targeted by criminalization strategies, the consequences for poor rural communities that host prisons are not well understood. Such negative consequences include diminished political power due to felon disenfranchisement and denial of public goods and services to ex-felons (Drake, 2011; Manza and Uggen, 2006; Mauer, 2003; Pager, 2003; Roberts, 2011; Short, 2009; Taormina, 2003; Travis, 2003). Yet, just as mass incarceration disproportionately affects poor, urban neighborhoods, white, rural poverty also creates a viable space for less desirable businesses, including prisons (Beale, 1993, 1996; Lawson et al., 2010). Although prisons span metropolitan and rural spaces, prisoners are disproportionately incarcerated in non-metropolitan counties (Lawrence and Travis, 2004). Consequently, large numbers of poor minorities are routinely shipped from urban areas to rural regions to serve out their prison term.

Recent work explores the ways that the practice of relocating prisoners and counting them as residents of the regions where they are incarcerated reshapes electoral and partisan strategies. For instance, Jason Kelly's (2012) work shows that legislators routinely draw districts with large numbers of prisoners—"phantom populations" who are barred from civic and political life—in order to free their partisan base for more competitive districts. Although large imprisoned populations are unlikely to influence political representation at the national level, scholars argue that they potentially influence state legislatures and local elections (Kelly, 2012; Wagner, 2002, 2012). Perversely, the result is that empowered rural whites "speak for" the interests of urban minorities and their political representatives consistently support harsh sentencing laws and militate against penal reform (Bright, 1996; Thorpe, 2015).

Despite heightened attention to mass incarceration, racial inequality and urban deprivation, scholars have not systematically examined whether mass imprisonment also redirects state resources in ways that compound racial, class and geographic hierarchies. To address this question, we build on scholarship showing that the US Census practice of counting prisoners as residents of their correctional institutions concentrates political clout and resources within rural communities (Huling, 2002; Wagner, 2002). The population counts in the decennial census not only establish the number of local representatives serving in state and federal legislatures but also influence formulas determining funding that state and local governments receive for various programs (United States General Accounting Office, 1991; Wagner, 2002). Examples of programs where population counts influence disbursements include Medicaid and Medicare, funding for public safety, and substance abuse and prevention programs (Bird and Hayes, 2013; County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, N.D.; Hicks et al., 2010; United States General Accounting Office, 1991; Wagner, 2002). Additional funding streams may be indirectly impacted insofar as they account for poverty and unemployment, which themselves are themselves affected by counting prisoners where they are housed (County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, N.D.; Hicks et al., 2010). It is difficult to identify the precise funding streams that are affected by prison populations since funding formulas vary by state and the paths by which funding accrues to the geographic space of the county are widely disparate. Yet, there is a general consensus that a large, institutionalized population can substantially alter state funding allocations, particularly in rural areas with an otherwise shrinking population. This leads researchers to speculate that resources and representation have shifted from urban areas inmates leave behind to the rural communities where they are incarcerated (Hooks et al., 2004; Huling, 2002).

Yet, despite the short-term gains associated with prison investments research suggests that prisons fail to draw long-term economic or social benefits to host communities. Instead, they deter alternative business ventures, generate civic distrust and offer dubious economic and public safety returns (Blankenship and Yanarella, 2004;

Gilmore, 2007; Glasmeier and Farrigan, 2007; Hooks et al., 2004; King et al., 2003; Setti, 2001; Spelman, 2009). Although evidence suggests that lawmakers support punitive policy that keep their prisons full (Bright, 1996; Thorpe, 2015), researchers have not examined whether rural communities accrue public benefits by hosting prisons, independent of spending allocated for the prison itself. Scholars theorize that counting prisoners where they are housed may inflate expenditures in prison communities, but data limitations have precluded systematic examination (e.g., see Huling, 2002; Wagner, 2002).

We argue that the shift toward rural prison development has subtle, but pernicious consequences that render the carceral state particularly intractable. Using a unique dataset across three states including measures of the incarcerated population and state revenue data, we show that hosting prisons skews state funding allocations toward rural counties with large incarcerated populations. Consequently, prisons operate as a hidden subsidy for budgets in rural counties, creating an added benefit of prison growth for a core subset of lawmakers. Although prisons fail to generate positive externalities or spur a self-sustaining tax base, they link the fiscal standing of lower class rural whites to punitive crime policies that disproportionately harm urban minorities.

By leveraging unique budget data, we offer new evidence that state fiscal transfers favor rural counties where higher portions of the overall population are incarcerated. Although rural areas routinely benefit from state legislative and budgetary politics (Gamm and Kousser, 2013), we hypothesize that rural counties *with correctional institutions* will consume an even greater share of state resources than their rural counterparts without prisons. Moreover, while correctional spending is expected to flow to counties with prison infrastructure, we expect that rural prison counties will consume outsized shares of state resources *independent of correctional spending for prison upkeep*.

In the following analysis, we offer the first empirical test systematically examining whether hosting large, institutionalized populations increases the fiscal standing of rural whites. We test two primary mechanisms that may privilege prison communities in state fiscal allocations: First, if communities that developed their economies around prisons absorb the bulk of correctional resources and lack a viable tax base, then these places will incur a greater fiscal advantage than other economically disadvantaged areas without prisons. Second, if counting large institutionalized populations as residents systematically skews formulas used to determine state funding allocations for non-prison-related functions, then warehousing incarcerated populations will increase a county's fiscal standing independent of spending for prison upkeep. Preliminary evidence suggests that imprisonment shifts state resources from urban to rural counties where prisons are located even after excluding correctional spending. These findings suggest that predominantly white, rural prison counties which host prisons routinely accrue budgetary benefits, while the most severe costs of incarceration are systematically de-emphasized and de-politicized.

Data and descriptive statistics

We examine the impact of hosting a prison on the net state spending a county receives relative to state revenue collected. We hypothesize that counties with a larger institutionalized population will receive higher levels of state expenditures than other counties after accounting for taxes. We also expect that this fiscal subsidy will disproportionately benefit rural counties, which typically face shrinking populations and a limited revenue base. While rural counties generally receive greater expenditures from the state than its residents pay in taxes, we show that this fiscal advantage is greater in rural counties with prisons. Moreover, this fiscal stimulus exceeds the costs of running correctional facilities.

We introduce two models in our analysis to test whether rural prisons confer fiscal advantages by (1) redirecting funding for the operation and maintenance of prisons and (2) artificially inflating census counts and distorting funding formulas, increasing various funding streams *independent of public safety/corrections*. To test this, we first present a model where the dependent variable includes all state expenditures, including correctional spending. Second, we explore a revised model that removes spending on public safety/corrections from our measure of state spending.

Case selection

We test our theory using a unique dataset of three states: New York, Indiana and Washington. These three cases vary regionally, as well as in penal histories, crime rates and racial composition. While each state experienced unparalleled rates of violent crime in the 1970s, each pursued different imprisonment strategies and distinct patterns of prison construction. Thus, they offer an ideal opportunity to test the impact of prison populations on state spending across a variety of contexts.¹

While New York's incarcerated population falls below the national average (530 per 100,000 adults, including those in prison or local jails),² it increased more than fivefold since the early 1970s (Glaze and Kaeble, 2014). At the same time, state leaders pioneered investments in rural prison construction. The number of prisons more than doubled from 32 facilities in 1982 to 79 facilities in 2010 (Thorpe, 2015). All 40 new state prisons were constructed in predominantly rural, upstate regions. Most of New York's imprisoned population is housed in counties that are disproportionately white compared to overall state demographics (83.2%, Wagner and Kopf, 2015). At the same time, New York has one of the largest racial disparities in imprisonment in the nation with vastly outsized numbers of blacks behind bars relative to whites (10th nationwide, The Sentencing Project, 2014). However, while an early national leader in prison construction, state leaders have closed 13 prisons since 2009 in an effort to curb unsustainable imprisonment rates (Thorpe, 2015).

Indiana's incarcerated population also increased since 1970 and is currently among the highest in the nation (910 per 100,000 adults including those in

prison and local jails, Glaze and Kaeble, 2014). Like New York, the majority of inmates are imprisoned in disproportionately white counties (77.7%, Wagner and Kopf, 2015). Unlike New York, black residents are imprisoned at a rate more reflective of the national average (20th nationwide). Indiana lags behind New York's prison boom, and the population in state and federal prison has continued to grow, peaking in 2013 (The Sentencing Project, 2015).³

While Washington experienced a net increase in imprisonment since the 1970s, its incarcerated population falls well below the national average (550 inmates per 100,000 adults including those in prison and local jails, Glaze and Kaeble, 2014). Unlike New York and Indiana, state leaders have historically placed lower emphasis on both penal measures and prison building, instead instituting prison alternatives like probation and waiver programs. Of the 33 prisons currently located in Washington, 15 are small, privately contracted work release programs. Washington's share of inmates held in disproportionately white counties reflects the national average (60.5% in WA compared to 61% nationally), as does its racial disparity in imprisonment (25th nationwide) (The Sentencing Project, 2014). However, the state maintains relatively few prisons and relatively low levels of inmates within counties.

Measuring state fiscal effort

Our dependent variable is a measure of a county's total *state fiscal effort*, or net expenditures allocated by the state to the county coffers. We calculate this variable by dividing the total annual state expenditures per county by the total amount of revenue that residents in each county contributed to the state budget.⁴ A ratio greater than one indicates that the county received more financial support from the state budget than it contributed to the state in taxes. For example, in our dataset, the mean expenditure/revenue ratio is 1.3, represented by Montgomery County, New York. This means that for every dollar Montgomery County contributes to the state budget, the state returns \$1.30 to Montgomery County through various funding streams. After testing our primary hypotheses, we proceed to test secondary hypotheses designed to tease out the mechanism influencing state fiscal transfers. To do this, we modify the dependent variable by removing expenditures on public safety/corrections from the expenditure/revenue ratio.

Complete data on state expenditures and revenue at the county level are difficult to access if the state does not collect these data and make them publicly available. Unfortunately, state budget data concerning county-level funding streams are not well documented, and we experienced prohibitive difficulties identifying accurate information on state expenditures to counties across a number of states.⁵ In several states, including New York, the State Comptroller keeps detailed records on tax receipts and disbursements disseminated annually at the county level but does not parse state revenue streams from local or federal funding sources or make this information accessible. Therefore, we drew on secondary data sources, including information collected and verified by independent research organizations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for distribution of state fiscal effort, by county

Method 1: Expenditures including spending on public safety/corrections					
	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
New York	58	1.467	0.407	0.699	2.761
Indiana	92	1.297	0.369	0.602	2.303
Washington	39	1.338	0.407	0.42	2.18
Method 2: Expenditures excluding spending on public safety/corrections					
New York	58	1.26	0.249	0.854	2.05
Indiana	92	1.189	0.427	0.529	2.585
Washington	39	1.265	0.390	0.382	2.074

To analyze state fiscal transfers in New York, we consulted with the New York City Independent Budget Office and obtained the raw data used to compile a fiscal report on the local tax and spending efforts across the state.⁶ The available data consisting of expenditure and revenue efforts at the county level cover the 2005–2006 fiscal year.⁷ To capture state fiscal allocations in Indiana, we draw on a report compiled by the Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute, an independent, non-profit governmental research organization. The report includes both the total revenue collected and expenditures issued from the state to each county for the 2008 fiscal year (Hicks et al., 2010). Finally, in Washington, we draw on data published by the Washington State Office of Financial Management for the 2011 fiscal year. These data allow us to construct an identical measure of the expenditure/revenue ratio across all three states.

Table 1 displays basic descriptive statistics for the distribution of the dependent variable, *state fiscal effort*. The mean value across all three states exceeds one, but the minimum value in all three states is less than one. This indicates that a few counties subsidize the vast majority of counties.

Percent incarcerated

Our key independent variable of interest is the size of the incarcerated population within a given county. To measure this, we employ the percent of the population housed in a correctional facility at the time of the prior decennial census. In New York and Indiana, our measure of county fiscal effort was collected for the 2005 and 2008 fiscal years, respectively. Therefore, we draw on the 2000 census for data on the correctional population per county. In Washington, the county fiscal effort was collected for the 2011 fiscal year, so we draw on 2010 census figures.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for percent incarcerated, by county

	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
New York	63	0.014	0.023	0	0.108
Indiana	92	0.007	0.014	0	0.095
Washington	39	0.006	0.009	0	0.041

Data used to construct the variable *percent incarcerated* come from the US Census Bureau. The Census compiles data on the total population in a geographic unit living in group quarters. Subcategories of group quarters include adult correctional facilities, juvenile detention centers, skilled nursing facilities and colleges and dorms. We included only individuals living in correctional facilities for adults, which includes federal detention centers, federal and state prisons, county jails, halfway houses and military disciplinary barracks (2010 Census Summary File 1, 2012). The inclusion of those housed in military disciplinary barracks and halfway houses overestimates the incarcerated population in a given county. To the extent that this skews our findings it likely biases them against our theory, since halfway houses are disproportionately located in urban environments (Thorpe, N.D.). We theorize that rural communities benefit from large incarcerated populations. This impact should be diluted by large incarcerated populations located in densely populated counties.

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for percent incarcerated by state. The mean across all three states is approximately 1%. In New York and Indiana, the maximum percent of the overall county population residing a correctional facility is 10 percent, while Washington has a maximum of 4% of the population incarcerated in a given county. Thus, the data are skewed to the right. Only seven counties have no incarcerated people living there: one in New York, three in Indiana and three in Washington.⁸ The distribution of imprisonment across counties in Washington is generally lower than that in New York and Indiana.

Modeling techniques

To examine these trends systematically, we include socio-demographic data that might affect both the placement of prisons in certain rural counties over others, and state taxation and disbursements to counties. Scholarship on the location of rural prisons identifies prisons as undesirable economic and public structures, noting that prison communities are largely devoid of alternative means to boost struggling economies (Eason, 2010; Hoyman and Weinberg, 2006; Huling and Mauer, 2003, King et al., 2003). High unemployment, poverty and economic insecurity are endemic within prison communities nationwide (Hooks et al., 2004; Hoyman and

Weinberg, 2006). To control for these factors, we include the *percent living below the poverty line* and *percent unemployed*. In contrast, the rural communities most likely to resist a prison are high-amenity locations, characterized by a robust agricultural sector and high levels of human capital (Gilmore, 2007; Hooks et al., 2004; Lawson et al., 2010). Following Hoyman and Wienberg's (2006) construction of high-amenity communities, we include controls for *percent of the population with a college degree* and *percent owner occupied housing*. Following Lawson et al., (2010) and Gilmore (2007), we include a control for *percent employed in agriculture* to control for economic stability.

Scholars further identify political factors that matter both for spending on corrections and social services. In certain states, Republican lawmakers actively lobbied state leaders to locate prisons in the communities they represent, while white, wealthy communities often actively opposed the construction of prisons in their locales (Hooks et al., 2004; Hoyman and Weinberg, 2006; Thorpe, 2015). In order to control for the likelihood of political resistance to prison sightings—wealth, productivity and capital—as well as accrued disadvantage, we include *population density* and the *racial composition* of each county (Eason, 2010; Hoyman and Weinberg, 2006). Lastly, we include *crimes per capita* and *percent of vote in support of the democratic candidate in the last presidential election* to control for other institutional and political factors that might impact prison location or funding allocations (Hooks et al., 2004; Thorpe, 2015).

The demographic data are accessed from the 2000 census for counties in New York and Indiana and from the 2010 census for Washington counties. We consult the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program for crime data. To capture citizen ideology, we employ the percent voter support for the Democratic candidate in the presidential election closest to the year for which the budget data were collected. In Washington, we include the outcome of 2012 presidential election. In New York and Indiana, we draw from the 2008 presidential election.

To gauge the precise effects of rural prisons, we apply a measure of *population density*. Lower population density indicates more rural geography, less industrial diversity and greater economic vulnerability. We calculate the overall county population divided by area per square mile based on 2000 and 2010 US census figures. We also calculate the inverse of population density (one/population density) to measure *low population density*, where higher values indicate more rural geography. We expect that more rural counties with prisons receive a greater net fiscal benefit, even compared to suburban and urban counties with a comparable prison sector.

Since the dependent variable (expenditures/revenue ratio) is a continuous measure, we use ordinary least squares regression analysis. We first present the results of an analysis of the impacts of percent incarcerated on state fiscal effort, controlling for relevant covariates. We then interact the incarcerated population with low population density (*incarcerated population* \times *low density*) to test the hypothesis that rural counties with high prison populations incur additional fiscal benefits. After concluding tests of our primary hypotheses, we turn to testing our secondary hypotheses that concern the mechanisms by which state funding is diverted to rural counties with prisons.

Results: Testing the primary hypotheses

Table 3 displays the effect of percent incarcerated on state fiscal effort, controlling for relevant demographic factors. Despite distinct geographic contexts, racial configurations, criminal justice practices and incarceration rates, in New York and Indiana counties with a larger prison population systematically receive more money in state spending than they pay in taxes ($p < 0.05$). In Washington, however, the percent of the population that is incarcerated has no effect on state fiscal effort.⁹ As noted above, Washington has one of the lowest incarceration rates in the country. Moreover, the spatial configuration of prison infrastructure is geographically dispersed such that the share of the population that is incarcerated within a county never exceeds 5%. This suggests that the fiscal impact of hosting prisons varies with level of punitiveness, voracity and spatial concentration of the prison sector.¹⁰

To illustrate the magnitude of this relationship in New York and Indiana, we calculated the expected value of a county's fiscal effort given high and low levels of percent incarcerated. As displayed in Figure 1, New York counties with no incarcerated residents exhibit an expected state fiscal effort of 1.32. That is, they were expected to receive \$1.32 from the state for every dollar they contributed. In contrast, counties where 10% of the population is incarcerated have an expected state fiscal effort of 2.25. In Indiana, counties where 10% of the population is imprisoned are predicted to gain an additional \$0.52 for every dollar they contribute in revenue compared to their low-incarceration counterparts (\$1.78 compared to \$1.26). While the overall effects appear relatively modest, housing a large institutionalized population increases a county's share of the state budget relative to its tax effort more than 50% in both states.

In order to examine whether rural counties accrue an outsized fiscal benefit by hosting prisons, we interacted low population density (one/population density) with the number of prisoners per county (*low population density* \times *incarcerated population*). As shown in Table 4, in New York and Indiana, the practice of counting prisoners where they are housed has an especially potent impact on state expenditures in low-density counties. In both states, low-density counties with (*incarcerated pop* \times *low density*) and without (*low density*) prisons receive more money from the state than their urban counterparts ($p < 0.05$). However, hosting correctional institutions consistently amplifies this rural bias. Alternatively, in Washington, neither the interaction term nor either of its components reaches statistical significance.

We explore the relationship between population density, incarcerated persons and state fiscal effort graphically in Figures 2 and 3. These figures display the expected value of a county's state fiscal effort given variation in the incarcerated population within both rural and urban counties. As displayed below, in New York (Figure 2) and Indiana (Figure 3), hosting large incarcerated populations only increases a county's fiscal advantage within low-density counties.¹¹ For example, among low-density counties in New York, the state fiscal effort increases 160%, from about 1.5 in places with no incarceration to about 2.5 among counties with maximum incarceration. While the rural disparity is not as pronounced in Indiana,

Table 3. The impact of percent incarcerated on state fiscal effort at the county level

	New York	Indiana	Washington
Percent incarcerated ^a	0.0926*** (0.0184)	0.0512** (0.0209)	0.00603 (0.0499)
Population density ^b	-0.0000237 (0.0000186)	-0.0000374 (0.000190)	-0.000111 (0.000312)
Percent non-white	-1.388* (0.737)	-0.841 (0.899)	0.508 (0.810)
Percent with a college degree	0.0155 (0.0104)	-0.0217*** (0.00606)	-0.00828 (0.00956)
Percent owner occupied	0.00214 (0.00831)	-0.000235 (0.00863)	0.0147 (0.00956)
Percent employed in agriculture	0.0223 (0.0211)	-0.00486 (0.0223)	-0.0228 (0.0148)
Percent poverty	0.0737** (0.0278)	0.0274 (0.0196)	0.0425* (0.0232)
Percent unemployed	0.120*** (0.0370)	0.0652 (0.0510)	0.180*** (0.0495)
Crimes per capita	1.399 (1.890)	-8.825*** (3.220)	-10.77** (4.107)
Percent democrat	-0.807 (0.779)	0.911* (0.546)	-0.838 (0.597)
N	58	92	39
R ²	0.731	0.544	0.709

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

^aAll variables that are percentages of the overall population are measured as decimals, as opposed to whole numbers.

^bCoefficients in thousands per unit.

the expected fiscal subsidy increases by nearly 140% when the incarcerated population changes from minimum to maximum. In contrast, among high-density urban counties in New York, a larger incarcerated population corresponds with a *decreased* fiscal subsidy. In Indiana, the size of the incarcerated population has no effect on state fiscal effort in high-density urban counties.

Results: Testing the mechanisms

Thus far, the analysis suggests that counties in New York and Indiana hosting prisons accrue more fiscal support from the state than counties without prisons. At the same time, rural counties are principal beneficiaries of this dynamic.

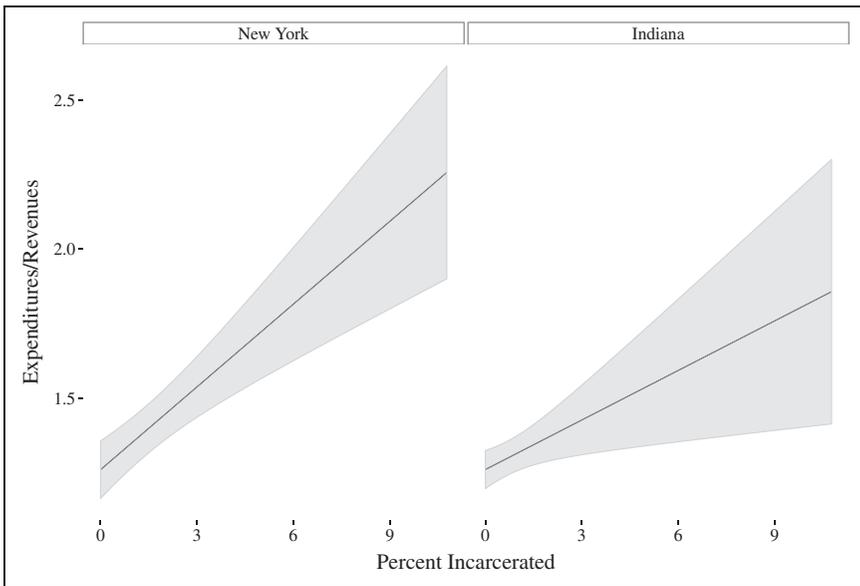


Figure 1. Impact of percent incarcerated in a county on state fiscal effort.

These findings raise additional questions concerning *why* counties—and particularly, rural counties—with prisons receive disproportionate shares of state resources relative to the local tax effort. On the one hand, these counties may receive more funding in order to operate and maintain their correctional institutions. On the other hand, counting incarcerated inmates as residents may also boost funding in other areas unrelated to prison upkeep where funding streams are linked to population counts, such as economic development, transportation or anti-poverty efforts.

In order to test these mechanisms, we reconstructed the dependent variable. In the preceding analysis, we used a comprehensive measure of a county's expenditure/revenue ratio, including all money the state spends within a county (Method 1). For comparison, we omit state spending on public safety/corrections from the dependent variable (Method 2). We use this latter approach to examine whether observed fiscal advantages from prisons reflect correctional funding distributed to operate the prison, or if counting incarcerated populations as residents also artificially inflates spending in other parts of the budget. If counties with large institutionalized populations incur fiscal benefits independent of correctional spending, this suggests that counting prisoners where they are housed is itself a source of funding inflation.

The results of the basic model are displayed in Table 5. The analysis indicates that counties with large incarcerated populations incur additional fiscal advantages independent of correctional spending in Indiana ($p < 0.05$), and the relationship approaches statistical significance in New York ($p < 0.1$). In keeping with the initial

Table 4. The impact of the incarcerated population on state fiscal effort, among rural and urban counties

	New York	Indiana	Washington
Incarcerated population ^a	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Low density	2.511** (0.795)	12.956** (6.185)	-0.385 (0.827)
Incarcerated population × low density	0.007*** (0.001)	0.015** (0.006)	0.000 (0.004)
Percent non-white	-0.933 (0.684)	-0.519 (0.735)	0.125 (0.888)
Percent with a college degree	0.003 (0.009)	-0.022*** (0.005)	-0.007 (0.010)
Percent owner occupied	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.003 (0.008)	0.016 (0.010)
Percent employed in agriculture	0.035* (0.019)	-0.049 (0.029)	-0.017 (0.016)
Percent poverty	0.033 (0.023)	0.020 (0.019)	0.048* (0.023)
Percent unemployed	0.073* (0.037)	0.057 (0.049)	0.184*** (0.051)
Crimes per capita	2.952 (1.798)	-5.933* (3.375)	-12.245** (4.881)
Percent democrat	-1.040 (0.834)	0.673 (0.553)	-0.984 (0.654)
N	58	92	39
R ²	0.7636	0.5696	0.7111

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

^aCoefficients in thousands per unit.

analysis, the size of the incarcerated population has no impact on state fiscal effort in Washington.¹²

Table 6 displays the influence of a large incarcerated population across urban–rural counties using Method 2. Consistent with the results in Table 4, rural counties in New York receive an added fiscal benefit over their urban counterparts regardless of the size of the incarcerated population. However, rural counties with prisons receive an even greater fiscal subsidy than do their non-prison counterparts ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, rural prison counties in Indiana receive heightened state fiscal subsidies, even while their non-prison rural counterparts receive no advantage over more densely populated counties ($p < 0.01$). Importantly, this analysis

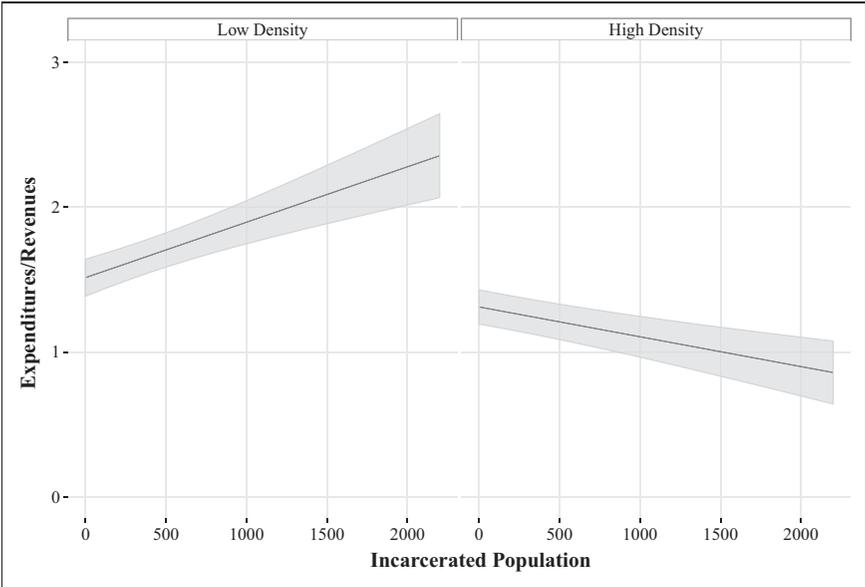


Figure 2. The impact of the incarcerated population on state fiscal effort, by population density in New York.

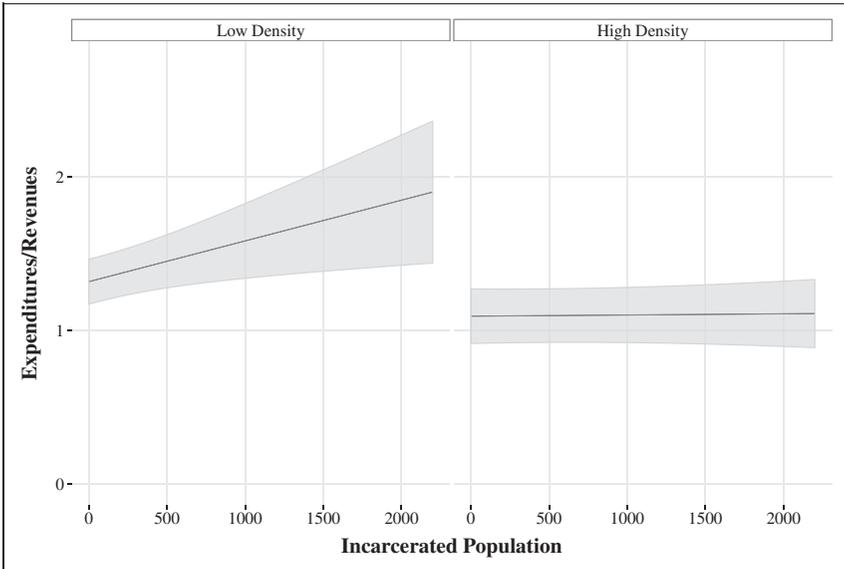


Figure 3. The impact of the incarcerated population on state fiscal effort, by population density in Indiana.

Table 5. The impact of the incarcerated population on state fiscal effort, without spending on public safety/corrections (Method 2)

	New York	Indiana	Washington
Percent incarcerated ^a	0.0281* (0.0147)	0.0858*** (0.0232)	0.00566 (0.0472)
Population density ^b	-0.0000103 (0.0000165)	-0.000235 (0.000210)	-0.0000907 (0.000295)
Percent non-white	-1.508** (0.719)	-1.744* (0.997)	0.500 (0.766)
Percent with a college degree	0.0222** (0.00939)	-0.00610 (0.00672)	-0.00803 (0.00905)
Percent owner occupied	-0.00353 (0.00883)	-0.0314*** (0.00957)	0.0142 (0.00904)
Percent employed in agriculture	0.0369** (0.0166)	-0.00795 (0.0248)	-0.0215 (0.0140)
Percent poverty	0.0574** (0.0227)	0.0560** (0.0217)	0.0415* (0.0219)
Percent unemployed	0.0846*** (0.0289)	0.0971* (0.0566)	0.171*** (0.0468)
Crimes per capita	0.247 (1.452)	-12.07*** (3.571)	-9.822** (3.887)
Percent democrat	-1.457** (0.631)	1.365** (0.605)	-0.821 (0.565)
N	52	92	39
R ²	0.594	0.581	0.716

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

^aAll variables that are percentages of the overall population are measured as decimals, as opposed to whole numbers.

^bCoefficients in thousands per unit.

demonstrates that both states accrue meaningful fiscal advantages *even independent of state correctional spending*. Counting prisoners where they are housed systematically inflates funding streams for non-prison-related functions.¹³

Discussion and conclusion

The results from the analysis suggest that counting prisoners where they are housed distorts non-correctional spending, at least in states where incarcerated populations are geographically concentrated. At the same time, the fiscal advantage of hosting prisons is most pronounced in rural spaces. The longstanding census practice of counting institutionalized populations as residents of the communities where they

Table 6. The impact of the incarcerated population on state fiscal effort without spending on public safety/corrections, among rural and urban counties (Method 2)

	New York	Indiana	Washington
Incarcerated population ^a	0.001 (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)
Low density	2.331*** (0.508)	7.651 (6.974)	-0.391 (0.781)
Incarcerated population × low density	0.003** (0.000)	0.027*** (0.006)	0.000 (0.003)
Percent non-white	-1.263** (0.585)	-1.932** (0.828)	0.128 (0.839)
Percent with a college degree	0.017** (0.007)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.009)
Percent owner occupied	-0.010 (0.007)	-0.033*** (0.009)	0.016 (0.009)
Percent employed in agriculture	0.041*** (0.012)	-0.034 (0.033)	-0.016 (0.015)
Percent poverty	0.047*** (0.015)	0.050** (0.021)	0.046** (0.022)
Percent unemployed	0.044* (0.024)	0.091 (0.056)	0.176*** (0.048)
Crimes per capita	1.256 (1.147)	-10.240*** (3.806)	-11.327** (4.611)
Percent democrat	-1.393** (0.565)	1.298** (0.624)	-0.969 (0.618)
<i>N</i>	52	92	39
<i>R</i> ²	0.7566	0.5911	0.719

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

^aCoefficients in thousands per unit.

are housed at the time of the census—rather than as residents of their communities of origin—systematically distorts funding formulas used to determine state spending at the county level. The funding allocations that result provide an additional economic bulwark for non-incarcerated residents of prison communities, even independent of correctional jobs and revenue that the prison provides. Our analysis is limited to three states on account of various data limitations involving state fiscal transfers. The findings are consistent in New York and Indiana, but we find no effects in Washington—a state that invested far less heavily in prison development.¹⁴

While criminalization strategies and prison growth were repurposed as an expedient socio-economic solution to urban marginality and rural poverty, recent evidence of prison closures in New York's upstate, rural counties belie the myth that prison investments promote the long-term economic health of host communities. Rather, prisons are typically located in the most economically depleted, rural communities that subsequently depend on prison-related jobs and revenue as well as outsized state subsidies in order to stave off economic collapse. For instance, citing a \$10 million budget gap and unsustainable costs, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo closed 13 state prisons since 2009. However, many prisons in remote regions of the state were spared where lawmakers warned of economic devastation if prisons were closed (Kaplan, 2011).

Local officials and residents in upstate Franklin, Oneida, Schoharie and Clinton counties, where towns developed their entire economies around prisons, all forecasted economic crisis and lobbied (unsuccessfully) to keep their prisons operating (Eklund, 2011; Haverty, 2014; Mann, 2008; Prison Legal News, 2014). Now-empty state prisons in the remote counties of Oneida, Franklin and Schoharie have failed to attract private investors (Kaplan, 2012). Dannemora Village (Clinton County) has become a ghost town following the 2011 closure of Lyon Mountain Correctional Facility, where over 70% of residents were prison inmates at the time of the 2010 Census. In short, while prisons may provide a short-term economic boon, they ultimately deter alternative forms of development, instead fostering cycles of base subsistence and dependence on continued incarceration rates.

New evidence presented here demonstrates suggests that warehousing imprisoned populations inflates the amount of state aid host counties receive relative to their tax effort. The fiscal subsidy is most pronounced in rural counties that typically face otherwise shrinking populations and a depleted revenue base. However, prisons rarely confer meaningful, long-term benefits for these communities. Rather, lower class, rural communities are also routinely exploited as expedient "dumping grounds" to warehouse prisoners (see Lawson et al., 2010) for only limited, transitory economic relief. Meanwhile the aggressive use of surveillance and harsh criminal punishments ravage poor, urban communities that face disproportionate levels of incarceration and displacement. The next step in this research should focus on understanding how poor populations are leveraged against one another in the evolving economic and political landscape of the American criminal justice system.

Authors' contribution

Authorship is listed in reverse alphabetical order. All authors contributed equally to this article.

Notes

1. Research indicates that penal regimes and their impacts vary by region, where the South in particular is distinct due to its racial history and demography (Eason, 2010). Data limitations prohibited the inclusion of a southern state, and our analysis is accordingly limited.

2. The 2013 national average is 910 per 100,000 adults.
3. Data on the incarcerated population by state come from the Bureau of Justice Statistics “Correctional Population in the United States” series, and numbers cited here reflect the total population confined in state and federal prison and in local jails. In addition, we cite data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics “Prisoners in [year]” series, which includes the total population confined in state and federal prisons, and excluded those confined in local jails. We primarily cite data from the Correction Population series because our measure for the incarcerated population is also inclusive of the jail population. We include statistics on the prison population because this series allows us to examine change over time, which gives a fuller picture of the development of the prison system in each state.
4. Measuring expenditures alone can be misleading, since this fails to account for overall population, need, or revenue output. We therefore employ an expenditure/revenue ratio in order to specifically assess wealth distribution across counties. We ran additional analysis using an alternative construction of the variable, total state expenditures while controlling for total population, and note where the findings support those derived from models presented here.
5. For example, we attempted to collect data on expenditures and revenues in Texas and California. To create an approximate measure, we calculated each county’s sales, use, property and income taxes separately and compared these figures with the state’s overall budget data. Our numbers did not match the state budget figures. Moreover, many of the sources that we used contain large amounts of missing data. Therefore, we focused on states where we could access reliable data.
6. We thank David Belkin for generously sharing these data. To access the report, see New York State Independent Budget Office Fiscal Brief, “Tax and Spending Effort Across New York State,” October 2011, available at: <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/tnydec2011.pdf>
7. New York passed a law in 2010 that mandates using corrected census counts (i.e., including prisoners as residents of their communities of origin rather than where they are incarcerated). However, the available 2005–2006 data predates the 2010 reform.
8. While our data indicate that only seven counties have no incarcerated population, this most likely reflects an expansive definition of *percent incarcerated* including people in county jails and halfway houses.
9. An alternative analysis, where the dependent variable is reconstructed to measure total state expenditures while controlling for total population, supports the findings presented in Table 3.
10. Alternatively, Rubin’s (2015) neo-institutional theory may explain why prison placement in Washington fails to generate fiscal benefits. Rubin argues that certain regions of the United States may set precedent, establishing particular penal practices to resolve local problems. Other regions subsequently adopt these practices on account of their perceived “success” rather than their applicability to regional difficulties. It may be that New York established a norm of rural prison placement that Washington subsequently mimicked in the 2000s.

11. Low-density counties have a population density that falls one standard deviation below the mean; high-density counties have a population density that falls one standard deviation above the mean. The interaction term reflected in Table 3 includes all counties in the analysis. This one standard deviation cut-off allows us to display the effects large prison capacity across rural versus urban contexts graphically.
12. An alternative analysis, where the dependent variable is reconstructed to measure total state expenditures while controlling for total population, supports the findings presented in Table 5.
13. One area of spending that should not be impacted by prison population counts is education, where spending is determined by number of pupils rather than population counts. To further scrutinize our theory, we performed a placebo test examining the impact of the incarcerated population on education spending. These results are consistent with our theory, where incarcerated population has no impact on state expenditures. This analysis is available upon request from the authors.
14. John Eason's (2010) work suggests that prisons in the South are located in predominantly non-white rural towns. This may also limit the generalizability of our findings.

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