

# Jailbreak Out Of History: Exploring the Evolving Relationship Between American Prisons and the Underground Economy

The American prison system has long been plagued by the presence of an underground economy, where contraband and illegal activities flourish behind the walls. This shadowy world has evolved over time, mirroring the broader changes in American society and the criminal justice system. From the early days of smuggling alcohol during Prohibition to the current prevalence of drug trafficking and gang violence, the prison underground economy has been a persistent feature of the American penal landscape.

## The Prohibition Era: Smuggling and the Birth of the Prison Black Market

The Prohibition era of the 1920s marked a turning point in the relationship between prisons and the underground economy. The nationwide ban on alcohol created a vast illicit market, and prisons became a major hub for the smuggling and distribution of contraband liquor. Inmates, guards, and outside visitors alike participated in this illicit trade, forming networks that extended beyond the prison walls.



## Jailbreak Out of History: the Rebiography of Harriet Tubman & "The Evil of Female Loaferism"

by Paulo Cezar da Rosa

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The smuggling of alcohol into prisons led to the rise of prison gangs, which emerged as powerful players in the contraband trade. These gangs

controlled the distribution of liquor and other illegal goods, often resorting to violence to maintain their dominance. The prison underground economy became a source of significant profit for these criminal organizations, laying the foundation for the more organized and sophisticated black markets that would develop in later decades.

## **Post-War America: Mass Incarceration and the Escalation of Violence**

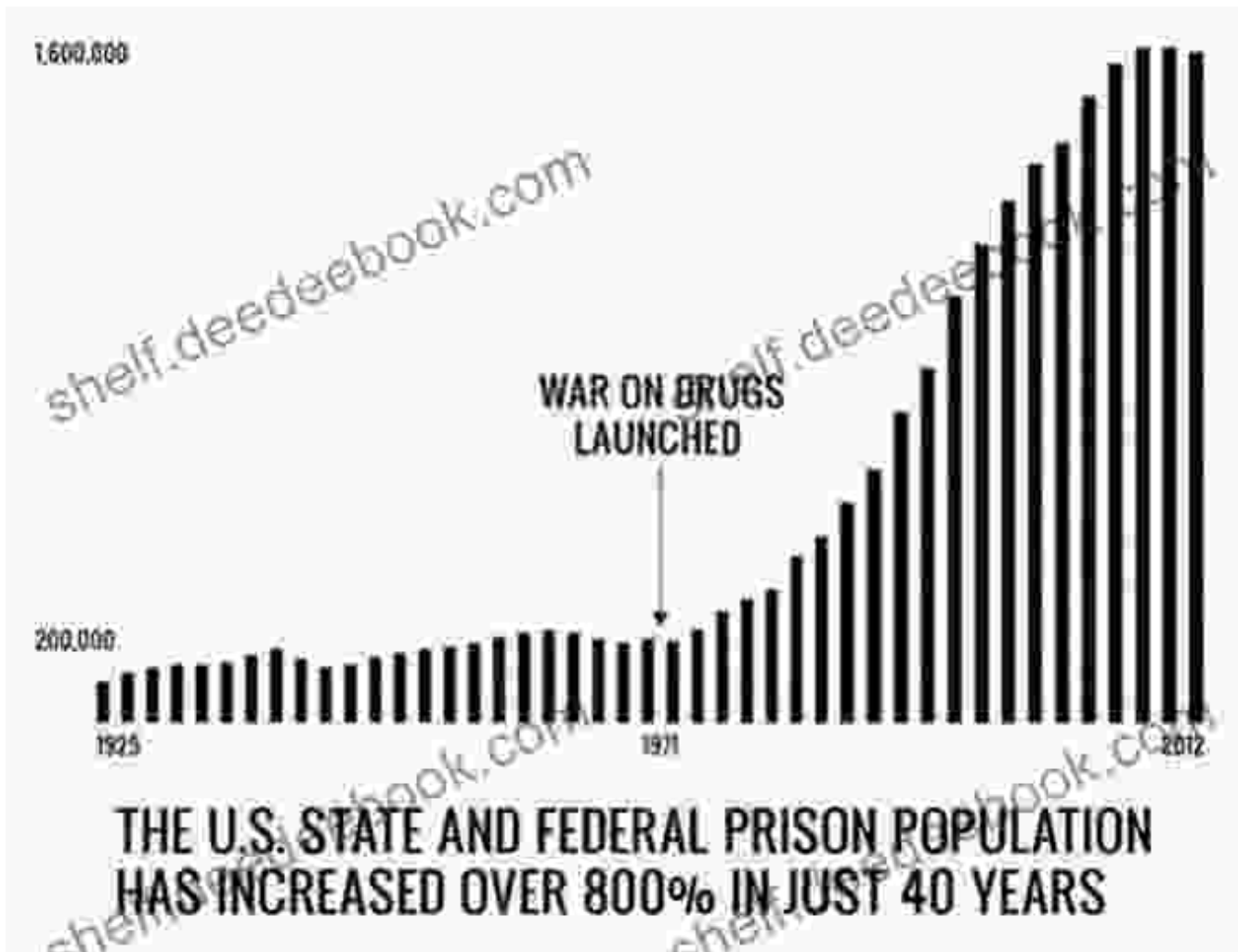
In the decades following World War II, the American prison population began to swell, largely due to the implementation of harsh drug laws and the rise of mass incarceration. This influx of prisoners created a fertile ground for the underground economy to flourish. Overcrowding, understaffing, and lack of resources made it difficult for prison authorities to control the flow of contraband and prevent violence.



The underground economy in post-war prisons was characterized by increased violence and the proliferation of illegal drugs. Gangs became more powerful and sophisticated, engaging in turf wars and other forms of criminal activity. The smuggling of weapons into prisons became common, leading to a rise in assaults and homicides. The prison underground economy evolved into a dangerous and destabilizing force, posing a significant threat to the safety and security of inmates and staff.

### **The War on Drugs: A Fuel for the Prison Underground Economy**

The War on Drugs, launched in the 1970s, had a profound impact on the prison underground economy. The crackdown on drug offenses led to a massive increase in the number of drug-related arrests and incarcerations. This influx of drug offenders into prisons created a ready market for illicit substances, fueling the growth of the drug trade behind bars.



The drug trade in prisons became a major source of revenue for gangs and other criminal organizations. Inmates smuggled drugs into prisons using various methods, including concealed in clothing, food, and mail. The presence of drugs in prisons fueled violence and corruption, undermining the rehabilitative goals of the criminal justice system.

### **Contemporary Era: Technological Advancements and New Markets**

In recent decades, technological advancements have had a significant impact on the prison underground economy. The proliferation of cell phones and other electronic devices has made it easier for inmates to

communicate with the outside world and facilitate illicit activities. Social media platforms have also emerged as a new avenue for contraband smuggling and gang recruitment.



Furthermore, the growing demand for prescription drugs in society has created a new market for illicit prescription drug sales in prisons. These drugs are often diverted from legitimate sources outside the prison and sold at inflated prices to inmates. The prescription drug trade has added a new layer of complexity to the prison underground economy.

### **Consequences of the Prison Underground Economy**

The presence of an underground economy in American prisons has far-reaching consequences for inmates, staff, and the broader criminal justice system. Here are some of the key impacts:

## **Increased Violence and Corruption**

The underground economy in prisons promotes violence and corruption. Gangs and other criminal organizations use violence to control the contraband trade and maintain their dominance. Inmates may resort to violence to protect their access to contraband or settle disputes. Guards and other staff may be bribed or coerced into participating in illegal activities.

## **Undermining Rehabilitation**

The presence of an underground economy undermines the rehabilitation goals of the criminal justice system. Inmates who are involved in illicit activities are less likely to participate in educational or vocational programs that could help them reintegrate into society. The underground economy perpetuates a cycle of crime and incarceration.

## **Increased Costs for Taxpayers**

The underground economy in prisons imposes significant costs on taxpayers. The smuggling of contraband into prisons requires increased security measures, such as body scans, searches, and surveillance. The violence associated with the underground economy can lead to injuries and deaths, resulting in lawsuits and compensation claims. The costs of managing the prison underground economy divert resources away from other essential services.

## **Addressing the Prison Underground Economy**

Addressing the prison underground economy requires a comprehensive approach that involves multiple stakeholders, including law enforcement,

prison administrators, inmates, and community organizations. Here are some key strategies that can be implemented:

### **Strengthening Security Measures**

Prisons can strengthen security measures to prevent the smuggling of contraband and illegal activities. This may include installing body scanners, increasing surveillance, and conducting regular searches. Improved security measures can make it more difficult for inmates to obtain illicit goods and weapons.

### **Expanding Rehabilitation Programs**

Providing inmates with access to meaningful rehabilitation programs can reduce their involvement in the underground economy. These programs should focus on education, vocational training, and substance abuse treatment. By giving inmates the opportunity to develop skills and rebuild their lives, they are less likely to turn to crime after their release.

### **Reducing Overcrowding**

Overcrowding is a major factor that contributes to the underground economy in prisons. By reducing overcrowding, prisons can improve safety and security, and make it easier for staff to detect and prevent illicit activities.

### **Community Involvement**

Community organizations can play a vital role in addressing the prison underground economy. They can provide support to inmates after their release, helping them to find jobs and housing, and reduce their risk of recidivism. Community involvement can also help to reduce the stigma



associated with incarceration and promote a more positive view of former inmates.

The underground economy in American prisons has evolved over time, reflecting the broader changes in American society and the criminal justice system. From the Prohibition era to the contemporary era, the prison underground economy has been a persistent feature of the American penal landscape, fostering violence, corruption, and undermining rehabilitation. Addressing this complex issue requires a comprehensive approach that involves strengthening security measures, expanding rehabilitation programs, reducing overcrowding, and engaging community organizations. By working together, we can create a safer and more just prison system that promotes rehabilitation and reduces the reliance on illicit activities.



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