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## **Collateral Damage (follow up)**

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Prisons and the War on Drugs have become a public dole dependent on human misery. A misery designed by politicians to exploit both felons and ex-felons whose disenfranchisement makes them safe targets in a continuously escalating cycle of exploitation and abuse.

About sixty percent of the felons are the necessary but expendable foot soldiers of the drug world. These are men and women who are in prison as a result of drug related or drug motivated crimes.

They link the assorted drug cartels to the professionals that roam the halls of our universities, businesses, hospitals and government. These professionals are largely unaffected by the consequences of their 'responsible recreational' use of illegal drugs.

Fines, civil forfeitures and prison sentences have been constantly ratcheted up over the last two decades to combat the distribution and crime associated with the supply and delivery of illegal drugs. There is not one statistic, trend line or shred of evidence showing that any of these measures have reduced the supply, weakened distribution nets, lowered demand or preserved the integrity of our way of life.

What has happened our state and federal government have developed the largest and most successful money laundering operations and both law enforcement and government operations have been corrupted beyond anything known in history. Not to mention that the United States now has the highest incarceration rate and ratio in the world.

As sad as all of this may be, they are all correctable if there is the political will to do so. The saddest and most tragic aspect is that this corruption has started to unravel the very fabric of our society. We are, if we have not already, becoming dependent on the economic and social distortions created by the misery and suffering associated with the war on drugs.

State agencies, governors, legislators and local chambers of commerce have long recognized the ability of prisons to rejuvenate and stabilize rural economies. Prisons provide high paying jobs from an industry that is invisible and non-polluting.

Nowhere is the significance of a county state prison more visible than the efforts of Suwannee County to get their own prison. A word search of "Suwannee Prison" in the Gainesville Sun's archive of stories over and less than 90 days makes the case with great clarity. The most startling revelation is the county raised and paid \$200,000 for the land required for the new prison and then donated it to the state.

Union county is an example of social and economic statistical distortions taken to its extreme. According to the 2000 census over 30 percent of the residents are prisoners.

This obsession with prisons needs some perspective. There are two ways of looking at prison populations: numbers and ratios. The numbers show the United States has 5 percent of the world population and twenty-five percent of the jail and prison population.

A good perspective on ratios is that of Western Europe, which has an inmate ratio 85 per 100,000 and Florida prison ratio is 475 per 100,000 population. These numbers may seem irrelevant, academic and distant. So, let's make them local, Last year, the Alachua jail population ratio average was 470 inmates per

100,000 population. Then again, Alachua County sent 670 men, women and children to state prisons last year.

Paralleling the growth of prisons is a decline in programs to reduce recidivism. We have truly become a society where prisons have become institutions of higher forms of criminality.

Prisons populations translate into political clout from census data: Inmates are counted as local residents when it comes to divvying up government grant money and laying out legislative districts. We are talking about federal grant money for road construction, schools, general budgets, rural development, social programs etc.

Within the city limits of Gainesville is a state prison, prison road camp, prison work release center and a county jail with an annex under construction. Close to 1,700 men and women put their heads down on a pillow each night in one of these facilities. These inmates benefit not only the census data for the city of Gainesville but they get counted again for Alachua County.

What has never been mentioned is the number of residents in Gainesville that commute daily to the prisons surrounding Gainesville. Then there are the businesses that satellite on the prison system with American Institutional Services (AIS) being a case in point.

The economies of prisons have a few other aspects that are seldom discussed. Upon release, most inmates have a period of parole that can vary from one to ten years. This is a drug tested docile labor force that operates under the supervision of the state. In many cases, they come with tax incentives and will be bonded by the state. There are some 2,300 such men and women in the county of Alachua.

The other feature of prison labor is community service or free labor. In 2005 the courts awarded 80,000 hours of community service to Alachua County. Think in terms of the downward pressure this puts on wages in the county.

There is another aspect of the War on Drugs and sentencing that is greatly ignored. This is called the civil forfeiture proceedings where the economic proceeds from crime are laundered through the Department of Justice or Homeland Security as well as corresponding agencies at the state level. These funds find their way into municipal coffers as well as grants that support many of the non-profit social services and cultural icons at the local level.

The war on drugs and the prison culture have woven themselves into the very fabric of our society. Lowering the prison population and the cessation of the war on drugs would destabilize the political status quo, create economic chaos and destroy a host of social services.

If you think base closing create fights in Washington are contentious, wait until you see the infighting associated with closing state prisons. Can you imagine Bradford, Union and Alachua without their prisons?

Lost in the infighting to maintain and expand the prison system is the needless human tragedies of lives and families trashed in the process of filling our prisons. Prisons whose main purpose appears nothing more than to act as a rural poverty program designed to garner votes for politicians who have lost their moral compass.