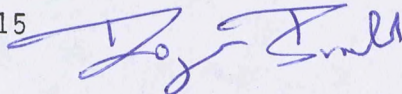


The Economics of Gouging PA Prisoners  
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About 50,000 prisoners are currently in custody of the PA corrections system, and among those many thousands, the single most common factor is poverty. A vast majority of prisoners are destitute. Some might dismiss prisoners' poverty as an irrelevant factor: after all, the state is obligated to house, feed and clothe all prisoners, isn't it? Sure it is. But in today's reality, most states (including PA) operate prisons like an industry, and view prisoners as a commodity to be used and gouged for profit. Prisoners are now charged fees for everything imaginable. Prisoners must pay for basic services and necessities. States award multi-million dollar contracts to corporations to manage prisoner accounts, to operate prisoner commissaries, to serve prisoner meals, to provide prisoner health care, to supply basic needs, and various other services. States receive millions in "commissions" from each such contract, and commission costs, together with profit mark-ups, are passed on to prisoners. It matters little that most prisoners have nothing: even a destitute prisoner serves as a hostage to extort financial support from family and friends. For those having no support whatsoever, the prisoner will be billed, his account garnished.

Most prisoners are saddled with "official" debts even before reception in the state corrections system. Many sentences include imposed fines, court costs and a multitude of PA statutory fees. Some of those fees --the \$60 crime victims fund fees, for example-- must be paid before prisoners may be paroled. Many prisoners must also pay restitution, after fines, costs and fees are paid. Fines, costs and fees together commonly total to five- or six-figure debts, putting most prisoners deep in "the red" from the very first day in the corrections system.

An institutional account is assigned to every prisoner upon reception, where all his money and wages must be deposited. Prisoners must draw from this account to buy commissary items, to make outside purchases and to co-pay for health care, mail, photocopying, clothing, phone calls and all sorts of other essentials. No PA prisoner ever receives interest earned on funds in his account. PA corrections officials do, however, garnish accounts of prisoners who owe court-imposed debts, or any other official debts, including medical copay, misconduct assessments, etc. Prisoner accounts are garnished at a rate of 20 to 50 percent; in some instances, 100% is seized. An assessment rate of 20 percent is typical, requiring a deposit of \$50 to net a \$40 account balance. All deposits are garnished, even the paltry

prison wages. Prison employment wages average 19¢ per hour, totalling about \$15 per month. Without outside support, prisoners subject to 20% deductions may net about \$12 from the monthly wages. That's woefully inadequate.

Each prison has its own truncated economy which provides a marketplace where selected (state-contracted) corporations can gouge captive customers to extract a profit. Every corporate product and service offered PA prisoners is marked up by 50 to 200 percent over standard prices. For example, sneakers priced at \$29.99 by one prison catalog vendor are sold to PA prisoners for \$48.99 by PCI, the state-run company. Televisions priced at \$89 outside go for \$242 in PA prisons. Other items offered in PCI commissary are commonly sold at double standard prices: a 45¢ bag of mackerel sells for 89¢, a \$1.79 toothpaste goes for \$2.79, a \$2.33 t-shirt is \$3.71, and so forth. Food items offered to PA prisoners via Access Securepak are even more outrageously priced! Anyone wanting to help a PA prisoner in making such high-priced purchases must send funds to the JPay company which, of course, charges a fee. It costs \$6 to send \$100, or \$9 to send up to \$200, to a prisoner. The key for these corporations is exclusive access: PA policy expressly restricts prisoners to purchases from approved (i.e., state-contracted) corporate vendors. Any prisoner attempting to buy the \$29.99 sneakers from the prison catalog vendor will not receive approval, but will be directed to purchase the same sneakers for \$48.99 in PCI commissary. Anyone attempting to mail funds to a PA prisoner will get that letter back, along with JPay deposit instructions. Prisoners must shop at the "company store" and pay exorbitant prices, or go without: there is no free-market competition, no shopping around!

Each prison also has a black market. Newport cigarettes and Kite pouches are the common prison currency. One pack of Newports (\$8.67) exchanges for three Kite (\$2.57) pouches. A pouch of Kite buys a "green & white" (pepper & onion), or two rolls of toilet paper, or a real haircut, or one pound of cheese, or three pairs of socks, or a half-ream of paper, or thirty ibuprofen, or any of a multitude of other items. A pair of used sneakers or sweatpants might cost five or six Kites, depending on condition. For some, tobacco is more than prison currency: it is an addiction. Such prisoners are driven to sell everything --their monthly postage allotment, their basic-issue underclothing, their main-line meals-- for tobacco. Other prisoners provide services --artwork, laundry, tailoring, usurious loans and even sex-- which are usually paid for in tobacco currency. The highly skilled and riskier services (such as paralegal work, gambling and sale of illicit items) are more costly, but are also paid for in tobacco currency. Fees for paralegal work

range from \$25 to over \$500, depending on the jailhouse lawyer's "rep" and type of work required. Gambling debts can be any amount. Larger fees and debts are paid with Newports, or sometimes with a JPay deposit.

It is truly impossible for a totally impoverished prisoner to survive the PA corrections system with health, sanity, well-being and dignity intact. Sure, PA provides daily main-line meals, uniforms, basic-issue clothing, toothpaste, a bar of soap and even a roll of toilet paper. But these state-provided essentials are simply insufficient. For example, most main-line meals are cheap and nasty --and must be supplemented by purchased food items to maintain health. (During my last 30-day stint in the hole --where purchased food is prohibited-- my weight dropped by 15 pounds.) Another example: basic-issue underclothes are flimsy, issued only once annually, but must be replaced after a few months --with purchased clothing. Prisoners who cannot purchase replacements must either go without, or wear dingy, disintegrating rags. Another essential which must be purchased is toilet paper. Only one roll is issued each week and when it runs out, another must be scammed, borrowed --or bought. Toilet paper is not sold in commissary, but it is a prison black-market commodity, costing between 80¢ and \$1.25 per roll. Conditions favor the seller, when the alternative is sticky, smelly swamp-ass.

People unfamiliar with the PA corrections system have no clue how surviving prison can be costly, not only in physiological or psychological terms, but also financially. Dignity and health and well-being are luxuries in PA prisons, which come at a high cost. How great a cost varies from prison to prison, and depends on a particular prisoner's abilities, strengths and stability. Much also depends on the resources, patience and understanding of family and friends: it can be very disheartening having to spend \$6 to deposit \$100 on a prisoner's account, knowing it will net an \$80 account balance, \$48.99 of which may be spent to get a \$29.99 pair of sneakers. Incredibly, even after surviving imprisonment, prisoners face new, different costs upon release: parole and probation supervision fees, urine-testing costs and more. It's all enough to make one question who, exactly, are the real criminals?!