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The Consociative Value of Work:  
What Homelessness-To-Work Programs Can Teach Us About Reforming and Expanding Prison Labor

By: Christopher Angevine

“A man’s work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self; indeed of his fate in the one life he has to live.”

The crisis in the American prison system is well known. At this moment, American jails and prisons hold 2.3 million people inside their walls. Millions more are on probation or parole and thus in danger of incarceration if they violate the terms of their release. Tough anti-crime measures, such as mandatory minimums and three strikes laws, have taken more criminals off the streets. Yet, for all the political attention paid to crime, politicians and voters have demonstrated comparatively little consideration as to what will become of convicts once they leave prison and return to society. This debate has been far from productive, as it is torn between litigation by prisoners’ rights activists seeking to constitutionalize prisoner access to amenities, and the more populist “tough on crime” politicians seeking to deny prisoners any such privileges.

A new discussion is necessary.

Sometimes the best approach is an indirect one. Valuable lessons for reforming America’s prisons can be found through an examination of an analogous group of social outcasts: the homeless. Homelessness in America is a very real crisis. Three-quarters of a million people are homeless on any given night. Yet, over the past several years, there has been real success in combating homelessness. Spurred by increased federal intervention and private charitable ventures, numerous homelessness-to-work programs have succeeded in reintegrating former homeless men and women back into society. These homelessness-to-work ventures reveal a promise that could serve America’s prisons well: the social value of work. They demonstrate that work can be a consociative process serving to promote an individual’s connection to his fellow citizens and to society as a whole. By expanding on homelessness-to-work programs’ success and instituting a reformed system of prison labor based on consociative punishment, America’s prisons can more successfully reintegrate offenders back into the community and thereby reduce recidivism, crime, and strain on the prison system.

Part I has served as a brief introduction to the topic at hand. Part II will explain the importance of work to the American consciousness and modern American society paying particular attention to a consociative concept of work. Part III will then provide an account of American prison labor from the earliest penitentiaries to the present, explaining how prison labor’s past failures have often been a result of these programs’ conflicted and incomplete goals. Part IV will discuss homelessness in America, examine past failures in combating it, and expand upon a few successful modern anti-homelessness ventures. Part V will then demonstrate how lessons learned from homelessness-to-work programs can help overcome prison labor’s historical baggage and provide an avenue for creating a revitalized prison labor system in America. Part VI will conclude.

Work and American Society

America is a nation obsessed with work. Americans work longer hours than workers in any other industrialized nation. People often self-identify through their profession. Entrepreneurship is regarded as a civic virtue; small businessmen are commonly lauded as the foundation of the economy. This is neither a mere historical anomaly, nor a product of recent changes in the economy. It is a continuation of a long-lived trend in the American work ethic: the idea that work brings with it something intrinsically valuable, in addition to the instrumental value of a wage. Americans’ devotion to work may have manifold causes – among them a tax structure that does not disincentivize extra work, social concern for material wealth, and a culture of self-sufficiency and raw individualism – but that commitment has deep roots in the very fabric of the nation’s history.

Irrespective of the hours an individual American might spend on the job, work is a vital part of social existence. There, of course, exists “no one work ethic” that fits all Americans. Different people approach work in different fashions. Yet, work is of great importance to American society as a whole; the need to work helps define the cultural milieu in which all Americans live. It is through work, paid or unpaid, that individuals are able to connect with their fellow citizens and form a social bond extending beyond kinship or ethnicity. Work is a fundamentally social endeavor. Thus, those Americans who eschew work have a much more difficult time forming such bonds and risk becoming alienated from modern society.

A Brief Thematic History of Work in America

Work has played an “integral part” in American history from the earliest days of the nation. As with many things in the American social order, much about the American ideology of work derives from the colonial period. The colonial era created a framework, the Protestant Ethic, upon which modern American society’s relationship to work is largely dependent. Though the American idea of work has changed in the past three centuries, the colonial ideals of individualism and the obligation to work have remained constant to the present day. Intervening American history, most notably the frontier experience and continual immigration, has served to reinforce the importance of work to the social fabric. Of course, no single conception completely encompasses work’s role for all of American society, particularly when considering the entire history of the nation. Yet, today just as in colonial times, work serves as a valuable social anchor through which Americans strive to gain not only income, but also a sense of self-worth and respect in their community.

The Protestant Ethic

Any discussion of the importance of work to the American self conception should begin with the insights brought by Max Weber’s seminal study on The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism. For our purposes,
Weber’s most important contribution is his identification of the Calvinist inspired belief in work as a “calling” with an intrinsic moral value. Under this ideal, work is not simply instrumental in the process designed to acquire wealth or support one’s family. For the Calvinist-inspired Puritans, “striving for worldly goods” was certainly not “an end in itself.” Rather, they valued “life as a task to be accomplished” and glorified a pursuit of one’s calling as a means by which to “labor in the service of God’s glory.”

The impact of the Protestant Ethic and the colonial experience on American society has been a significant and long lasting one. In her formative years, America was indeed an experiment. She was a new nation, largely removed from the social strictures of Europe and confronted with the hard challenges inherent in not only surviving, but also flourishing in a new world. More fertile ground for the Protestant Ethic could hardly be found. Confronted by harsh conditions and sometimes hostile natives, Puritan and other settlers could not tolerate those among them who would not work. As the colonial period progressed, security became less of a concern to the colonists. Yet, the religious devotion to work, reinforced by the early colonial experience, remained strong.

Early in the American experience, many religious Protestants placed “a religious value . . . on ceaseless, constant, systematic labor in a secular calling.” In combination with strictures against over-consumption, the Protestant Ethic provided a religious justification for the acquisition of capital. In a young nation in which a man’s social status was determined by his profession rather than his ancestry, the concept of religious morality quickly became a strong influence on American social morality. To be more precise, the conception of work as the fulfillment of a duty to pursue one’s calling has become an “essential element” of the “social ethic of capitalist culture.” In so doing, the Protestant Ethic helped to “build... the modern economic order” that encapsulates America today. It is this economic order that determines “with overwhelming coercion” the lifestyle of everyone who lives within the capitalist system. Americans living in a capitalist society have little choice but to embrace, at least partially, the Protestant Ethic. Work is a vital link between the individual and society. Those who refuse to work risk being marginalized. As Weber himself put it, “Puritans wanted to be men of the calling – we, on the other hand, must be.”

Over the course of American history, two major trends have served to reinforce the social structure crafted by the colonial experience and the Protestant Ethic: the frontier and immigration. Both have reproduced the colonial understanding of hard work as a prosocial endeavor, thereby maintaining the consociative importance of labor in American society.

For “three-quarters” of American history, the frontier played a vibrant role in the development of the nation’s social structure. America was a frontier society.
and factories toward more mobile careers spent moving from one office job to another. Yet, the rise of the service economy has done little to decrease the emphasis Americans place on work. Americans continue to work long hours, with many white collar workers working longer hours than blue collar workers. Long hours are no longer the exclusive province of society’s lowest paid; investment bankers, lawyers, financiers, and executives all work incredibly long hours. For the vast majority of Americans, irrespective of social station, work remains an invariable part of social existence. Offering “discipline, identity and worth,” work serves a vital purpose beyond the simple earning of income. Thus, those who do not work lose more than mere wages.

Societal Outcasts and the Consociative Potential of Work

A capitalist society relies, to a significant degree, on economic inequality to drive creativity and economic production. This requires that some people be relatively worse off than the average individuals in a capitalist society. The relative gains enjoyed by those who participate in America’s capitalist system are beyond the scope of this Note. Of greater concern are two groups of people: the homeless and the incarcerated. They are not simply poor but, have rejected, explicitly or implicitly, the American economic and social structure or been rejected by it.

These two groups, the homeless and the incarcerated, obtain their status through a variety of means. There are a multitude of reasons why someone might end up sleeping on the streets: substance abuse, loss of family ties, mental illness, lack of job skills, poverty, lack of affordable housing, irresponsible spending, laziness, or simple wanderlust to name a few. Individuals might turn to crime for very similar reasons: poverty, a lack of job skills, mental illness, substance abuse, poor impulse control, a lack of respect for the rights of others and poor choices are all possible causes. Once imprisoned or homeless, individuals become further disaffected with and disassociated from society. This leads them to continue on the outskirts of the community, physically and psychologically, making it more difficult to repudiate crime or overcome destitution.

The multitude of reasons that a man might find himself in prison or without a roof over his head portend that no “one size fits all” policy exists for reducing homelessness or decreasing criminal recidivism. Indeed, “no single category of treatment [is] likely to be successful” for all convicts or all homeless individuals. However, the social disaffiliation implies that there might be a useful common ingredient in the fight against homelessness and criminal recidivism: work. Recent success in fighting homelessness suggests that this common link between the homeless and the incarcerated can be exploited to improve America’s prisons, better reintegrate convicts into society and reduce crime.

Work has a negative correlation with crime: when an ex-convict starts a new job, he becomes less likely to commit a crime, while his chances of offending increase if he is fired. Work helps prisoners and the homeless overcome their disaffiliated world view, by providing a “regular and regulating force” in their lives. Prison labor is useful to both inmates and society not simply because it can help impart job skills.

For prison labor programs to be successful, they must help create a sense of self sufficiency and societal worth in the mind of the convict. Work is a vital anchor in social existence, and it “satisfies various psychological and social needs such as discipline, connectedness, regularity, and self-efficacy.” By providing these needs, work serves to provide the convict, or the homeless individual, with the means to make a lifelong connection with society. Work holds the potential to give the worker both the capacity to survive in the American economy and to create in him a sense that, by doing so, it is possible to become a self sufficient, fully engaged member of society. A man who thinks that the rules of society are stacked against him often refuses to play by those rules, to the detriment not only of himself but also society as a whole. An individual with a job is more likely to conceive of himself as a full member of society. Successful homelessness-to-work programs do not simply make the homeless better employees; they help create citizens. Prison labor programs have it in their grasp to achieve the same. In so doing, labor programs seize not simply upon the rehabilitative potential of work, but, more importantly, its consociative promise.

In practice, creating a successful prison labor program is much more complex than this short theoretical discussion might make it seem. Locating the goal is quite different from achieving it. Throughout the history of the American penitentiary, prison labor has achieved mixed results, with its rehabilitative contributions checked by prisoner abuse and harm to the interests of free labor. Reformers cannot institute a functioning prison labor system without reference to prison labor’s muddled past.

The History of Prison Labor in America: Early Developments

Early prisons developed along two models, often known respectively as the Auburn and Pennsylvania systems. Both sought to reform prisoners through an environment of self-examination created by “silence and labor.” In the Pennsylvania system, prisoners were held in isolation from other inmates whereas in the Auburn system, prisoners were allowed to mingle together throughout the course of the day. For a number of reasons, the Auburn system won out; modern prisons largely use isolation as a means not to rehabilitate, but to punish prisoners.

The Rise of Prison Contracting and the Convict Lease

In these early penitentiaries, labor was designed to affect the moral reform of prisoners. “Work itself was prayer.” Labor would keep prisoners busy and away from the evil that invariably followed idleness, but would also provide skills enabling them to become self-supporting on release. These prisons operated on a “state-account” model, in which the state controlled the prisoners and their production and then sold the goods produced by their labor on the open market. This simple model soon fell victim to cost considerations. States, hoping that prison labor might make prisons self-financing, began contracting prisoner labor out to private companies in an effort to make production more efficient. Under the contract system, the state retained “responsibility for inmate custody, care and discipline,” while private firms oversaw the production of goods. By 1867,
contracting was the dominant form of prison labor, at least in the northern United States.\(^{56}\)

In the South, the Civil War ravaged Southern infrastructure and destroyed the plantation economy. After the war and emancipation, many Southern industries soon found themselves lacking a captive labor force. To make matters worse, the Southern states were effectively bankrupt; prisons were just one of many things they could not afford.\(^{57}\) As Southern plantation owners and industrialists confronted the prospect of a free market in labor, many landowners were only too happy to pay for prisoners to work their land.\(^{58}\) Prison labor seemed to be the perfect replacement to newly prohibited human bondage; the Thirteenth Amendment itself had exempted “punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted”\(^{59}\) from its general prohibition against involuntary servitude. The convict lease system, which had begun before the Civil War, soon exploded in popularity. Unlike the contract system, convict leasing gave lessees physical control over prisoners. In addition to managing the production of goods, landowners and industrialists were responsible for a leased prisoner’s upkeep and for preventing escape.\(^{60}\) States were thus absolved of nearly all costs associated with prisoner upkeep, while earning money from the lease fee. Lessees received a cheap source of labor to help support Reconstruction. State governments cut costs, thereby making punishment profitable.\(^{61}\) Everyone benefited. That is, everyone except those whom prison labor had been instituted to help in the first place: the prisoners.

### The Decline of Prison Labor

By the Second World War, both contracting and convict leasing had been largely eliminated nationwide.\(^{62}\) This decline, particularly with respect to convict leasing, was doubtlessly motivated by concerns about the welfare of prisoners.\(^{63}\) Yet, the driving force in this shift was largely economic.\(^{64}\) As the Industrial Revolution progressed and organized labor achieved greater political power, many free laborers began to view prison labor as a menace to their livelihoods and as a degradation of their trade.\(^{65}\) Southern coal miners alone launched twenty strikes between 1881 and 1900 in protest of leased prisoners working in coal mines.\(^{66}\) In rare moments of concordance, both manufacturers and laborers agreed that prison labor posed a threat: labor unions feared that prisoner labor would drive down wages, while manufacturers forced to compete with companies using contract prison labor risked going out of business if they were unable to extract concessions from their own workers.\(^{67}\)

State governments had little interest in ending the system; contracting reduced prison expenditures and convict leasing was profitable for the state. In the end, union pressure forced the end of the contract system in the North.\(^{68}\) In the South, an economic slowdown in the early 1900s soon made convict leasing unprofitable for the lessees; employers with production slowdowns were forced to pay for prisoners’ upkeep even if they could not put them to work. Thus, the system lost the support of its biggest backers and soon became unfeasible. By the middle of the 1930s, no state retained the convict lease system,\(^{69}\) though there were remnants of it at the county level until the Civil Rights era.\(^{70}\)

The decline of the contract and lease systems did not mean the end of prison labor, merely its diminution. In the South, where leasing was no longer profitable, states soon turned to chain gangs.\(^{71}\) Though they were expanded after the decline of the convict lease, chain gangs, in which prisoners worked long hours under brutal conditions to build roads, had existed since the Civil War.\(^{72}\) Once again, humanitarians raised concerns about brutality toward prisoners, but it was the economy that ended the chain gang system. Seeking to create jobs in the midst of the Great Depression, the federal government prohibited the use of prisoners to build federally financed roads.\(^{73}\)

Meanwhile, those interested in the reform of prisoners continued to exalt the virtues of work for the incarcerated.\(^{74}\) Yet, concerns about the impact of prison labor on the larger economy remained, forcing those prisons that retained prison labor to switch to a “state use” system.\(^{75}\) As with the state account system used before the advent of the contract and lease systems, “state use” prison labor allows the state to retain physical control over prisoners. However, prison industries no longer sell their products on the open market. Instead, as the phrase “state use” implies, products of prison labor are reserved for government consumption. Two Depression-era federal laws, the Hawes-Cooper Act\(^{76}\) and the Ashurst-Summers Act\(^{77}\) enable states to prohibit the interstate transportation and sale of prison made goods, thereby forever sealing the fate of the contract and lease systems.\(^{78}\) By 1940, “almost all prisoners worked for the state.”\(^{79}\)

The “state use” system remains the dominant model of prison labor today.\(^{80}\) However, prison labor has changed dramatically over the years, largely depending on the purposes for which it has been employed. The history of prison labor demonstrates that the various ends of prison labor are often in tension with one another. Any attempt to understand the modern incarnation and possible future of prison labor must take as its analytical starting point the purpose for which prisoners are put to work. Almost invariably, the objectives of prison labor systems have led directly to factors, such as prisoner abuse or political opposition, that have caused the demise of prison labor. A clear hierarchy of purpose must exist in using prison labor to achieve various penological goals. A house divided cannot stand; no system of prison labor can succeed if it is employed to pursue multiple, sometimes contradictory, objectives.

### To What End?

Prison labor can have multiple objectives. Taking a purposive account of prison labor is thus all-important, for prison labor programs are invariably shaped by the objectives society uses it to achieve. Historically, prison labor programs have sought to achieve one or more of six general purposes: (1) deterrence, (2) retributive punishment, (3) administrative control, (4) shaming, (5) revenue generation and restitution, and (6) rehabilitation and job training. To date, these models have largely proven lacking. Some have led to serious prisoner abuses. Others have prompted political backlashes that have greatly circumscribed the scope of prison labor programs, threatening to destroy the entire system. Those that have been successful have focused on limited aims. In choosing their objectives, these programs have emphasized the wrong
aspects of work and largely ignored its consociative value. In so doing, they have sown the seeds of their own failure.

### Deterrence and Retributive Punishment

Retributivism and deterrence are two very different philosophies of criminal law, which often call for very different treatment of prisoners. With respect to prison labor programs alone, however, they have a similar impact. Self-evidently, prisoners are only forced to labor in prisons after being sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Thus, if prison labor is to have any deterrent value, this must come on top of the deterrence caused by incarceration. Likewise, if prison labor is used to punish prisoners for their crimes, it must punish above and beyond the punishment of incarceration alone.

Any prison labor program based on deterrence or retributivism will necessarily require harsh labor conditions, almost certainly without parallel in the outside world. Criminals do not fear being forced to build office chairs or make license plates in a state owned facility; they fear the loss of liberty inherent in being imprisoned. At the same time, prisoners are not forced to make license plates or clean up streets out of a sense of punishment. Convicts are forced to do so to help defray the state’s costs or to prepare them for release. It is not prison labor that acts as a deterrent or as retributive punishment, but the harshness of that labor that does.

Hard labor for its own sake can dissociate work from any concrete purpose and thereby eliminate its meaning. Meaningful prison work can be done in harsh circumstances, but this is different from forcing prisoners to labor at a task simply because that task is difficult. Prison chain gangs working for long hours under a hot summer sun to maintain public roads may be difficult work, but these gangs are accomplishing a defined and useful purpose. This is quite different from forcing prisoners to break rocks with a sledgehammer underneath the same sun, when the resultant gravel is not put to any use. When ascendant, deterrent, and retributivist impulses inevitably lead prison labor programs toward the latter, prisons begin to focus their efforts on making labor punishing rather than productive. This dissociates work from production and dilutes its ability to link the laborer with society as a whole, thereby vacating labor’s greater social meaning. Labor that is designed to punish (or deter) becomes, for the prisoner, nothing more than punishment. If society hopes to reintegrate prisoners back into the workforce upon their release, little could be more counterproductive.

Ideals of retributivism and deterrence must inform the construction of any prison labor program, but they cannot become prison labor’s primary goals. Convicts might prefer a life of total idleness in prison to one of forced labor. For these prisoners, any work program will make prison less enjoyable and therefore help punish crime and deter recidivism. The need for deterrence and punishment counsels against the total elimination of prison labor, but deterrence and retributivism need not be the driving forces behind prison labor. In creating work programs, policymakers should rely on other aspects of prison, including loss of liberty, separation from home and family, and strict supervision of day-to-day activities, to ensure that prison both punishes and deters. They can then employ prison labor to further other objectives.

### Labor as a Shaming Punishment

Shaming punishments stigmatize and debase offenders not only to express society’s condemnation of an act, but also to induce contrition on the part of the offender. Such penalties come in many forms – from forcing adulteresses to wear signs labeling themselves as such, to billboards naming men convicted of soliciting prostitutes - but, occasionally, shaming punishments involve labor.

Widespread in the early 1900s and growing in popularity in recent years, chain gangs are the most famous example of prison labor as a shaming punishment. Chain gangs can fulfill a number of penological goals. Working outside on a hot summer day might deter some criminals from committing crimes in the first place. If inmates must work outdoors to help defray the societal cost of their imprisonment, chains might be necessary to prevent escape. Wardens might also employ chain gangs to punish those inmates who behave badly while in prison. However, much of chain gangs’ efficacy in achieving these goals relies on their larger shaming function. Prisoners assigned to chain gangs often do not labor in anonymity; they work on public roads in uniforms clearly demarcating them as offenders. Using labor to shame prisoners in such a way can inhibit prison labor’s ability to achieve rehabilitative or consociative goals.

In theory, chain gangs enable prisoners to labor outside prison walls while perhaps also inducing contrition for wrongful acts. It is not the work that chain gangs do that is shaming, but the manner in which they do it. The distinction between security precautions and shaming can sometimes be a fine one. Chains may be necessary to prevent prisoner escape. Uniforms are likely necessary to allow officials to monitor prisoners and to prevent them from blending in with the public. Yet, emphasis on chain gangs’ shaming function, rather than their ability to enable prisoners to provide needed services outside prison, will inevitably have untoward consequences for inmates’ conception of work. If work does have consociative potential, its prosocial effects are directly threatened by the use of labor to shame offenders.

Shaming punishments work through a combination of inclusionary and exclusionary social controls on offender behavior. Inclusionary controls work to reinforce the bonds between individual offenders and wider society, while exclusionary controls reinforce society’s bonds by excluding offenders against societal norms. Exclusionary controls, which stigmatize and scapegoat the offender, are “symbolically much richer” and easier for society to sustain than are inclusionary, or re-integrative, controls. Thus, instead of inducing criminals to obey the law and reintegrate into society, shaming often achieves expressive condemnation of an offender through social exclusion.

Chain gangs fall into this trap. As a result, the shaming aspect of prison labor often works at cross purposes with its consociative goals.

### Administrative Control

Wardens have long realized the administrative benefits of having prisoners spend part of their day at work. In addition to the “correctional value of work,” prison labor programs hold “administrative advantages in terms of security and discipline, not to mention inmate and staff morale.” Work requires
obligations, such as child support, onerous should pay for their room and board and fulfill social constructive objective of a prison program. It is one of the direct

have several motivations: (1) prison labor might enable prison-enforced idleness of a substantial percentage of able-bodied men and women in our prisons...militates against every con-structive objective of a prison program. It is one of the direct
causes of the tensions which burst forth in riot and disorder.”

To be sure, prison labor can make the day-to-day administration of prison substantially easier. Yet, it can do more. If the object of prison labor is simply to keep convicts busy, prisoners “will have learned nothing” at the end of the day. With imagination on the part of prison administrators, menial tasks might be made meaningful for prisoners. Nearly any type of structured activity will bring administrative benefits to prison life. Prison labor programs with grand ambitions, rehabilitative or otherwise, do not have fewer institutional management advantages; they simply cost more than programs directed at “busywork” alone. Thus, policymakers should judge the efficacy of prison labor by whether a program’s benefit to society, over and above administrative control, exceed the cost of giving prisoners nothing more than time-consuming menial tasks.

Defraying Crime’s Cost to Society

Economic considerations have long been a driving force in the development of prison labor. These considerations have several motivations: (1) prison labor might enable prisoners to earn money to make restitution to their victims; (2) prisoners should pay for their room and board and fulfill social obligations, such as child support, just as those who have not committed crimes must do; and (3) prison work might make prisons self-supporting or, as with convict leasing, profitable. Each of these motivations affects prison labor programs differently.

Using prison labor to help convicts pay their debt to society springs, in part, from an idea of restorative justice, a concept of justice predicated, “to some extent, on making right the wrongs done.” Under a restorative system, offenders use mediation, community service, and financial restitution to help restore their victims, as best as possible, to their condition prior to the offense. Prison labor, by providing convicts with a source of current income and skills for future use, can assist in achieving restorative goals.

Prison labor can also do much to offset the state’s substantial costs in housing and feeding inmates for long periods of their lives. Demands to reduce imprisonment costs through inmate labor stem from two distinct rationales: a belief that it is fundamentally unfair for criminals to be excused from their basic social obligation of self-support and a simple desire to reduce government outlays on prisons. Significant public support exists for forcing inmates to do some kind of work while in prison. Many citizens simply want prisons to ensure that offenders behave responsibly; a program forcing inmates to work to help support themselves comes across as a good first step.

Given the large amount of untapped human capital available in American penitentiaries, it is no wonder that prison self-sufficiency through inmate labor has “proved irresistible to policymakers.” Yet, any prison labor program whose main focus is making punishment less costly to the state, or perhaps even profitable, should “be greeted with concern.” Punishment, the legitimate use of force, is a monopoly belonging to the state. For a self-interested state, making punishment profitable incentivizes more punishment. Inexpensive imprisonment could also lead to the further expansion of prisons, as opposed to alternative forms of sanction, something with which many Americans would be rightfully concerned.

As the convict leasing era makes all too clear, history should give any politician pause before proposing a cost-driven prison labor program. Problems caused by a desire to use inmate labor to cut costs are readily apparent. Whether through convict leasing or state operated prison farms, the cost-cutting impulse has led to prisoner abuses “worse than slavery.” These abuses, though surely influenced by racism and the legacy of slavery, were a direct result of the cost saving impulse. States abdicated responsibility over prisoners to save money, and lessees, in possession of prisoners for a set period of time, sought to get as much work out of them as humanly possible. Inevitably, this led to abuse. To be sure, modern prisoners, largely under state rather than private control and endowed with a much wider range of constitutional rights than their leased predecessors, would not face conditions nearly as harsh. Yet, the impulse to increase prison labor profitability will increase the likelihood of prisoner abuse or exploitation by providing incentives to overwork inmates.

History demonstrates that cost-driven prison labor systems also lead to conflict between prisons and free workers. Prisons seeking to raise funds through inmate labor will seek to compete on the largest possible market. Inevitably, prison-made goods begin to compete, in price and quality, with regular goods. Prisons seeking profit thus seek to compete with, and displace, goods or services provided by free labor. This unavoidably prompts political conflict and may lead to widespread restrictions on prison labor.

Almost any inmate labor, even if its products are reserved for “state use” alone, will have an impact on the wider market for goods and services. Most work done by prisoners is work that others could have done. Prison labor programs that seek to maximize their return will leave a much larger footprint on the wider economy, in particular on the labor market.

The risk becomes inciting a backlash against prison labor, leading to restrictions on inmate labor that might impede prison work programs’ ability to accomplish penological, as opposed to budgetary, goals.

Rehabilitative Labor and Vocational Training

“Rehabilitation is the central premise of the modern prison as an institution.” Rehabilitation programs come in many forms, built to combat the various social and psychological problems common to criminals. These include education programs, substance abuse treatment, psychiatric treatment, faith-based programs, and work or vocational training programs. Here, I examine only the use of labor as a means either to rehabilitate inmates, or to provide them with the vocational training necessary to make them employable outside prison. Rehabilitative labor programs have a great deal of practical overlap with vocational training, but the distinction between the two is meaningful. From its very conception, penal labor was designed to prepare prisoners for a return to society on the outside as better men. Work as inmates, it was
Prison Labor Today: Conflicted Goals, Limited Promise

Prison labor did not end with the fall of the contract system and the convict lease. Four broad categories of prison labor remain. First, many prisoners work in “institution work programs”129 to support the day-to-day operation of prisons, in cafeteria, laundry or janitorial positions. Second, some states now use prisoners to complete public works projects, most notably cleaning highways.130 Third, “state use” labor remains legal despite the Ashurst-Sumners and Hawes-Cooper Acts.131 Many states retain state use prison labor to produce license plates, office furniture and other goods for state government consumption.132 The federal government’s state use program, known as Federal Prison Industries (FPI) or UNICOR, is by far the largest of any state use program, employing 17%133 of the two hundred thousand federal inmates.134 Lastly, in 1979 Congress created a pilot program, called the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP), which reintroduces contract prison labor.135

Institutional work assignments are a useful means of administrative control, as they give prisoners something to fill their days and provide a means of incentivizing good behavior. These jobs, which include janitorial and food service work, generally do not include a significant degree of vocational training.136 Using inmates to complete these jobs forces prisoners to contribute to their upkeep and allows prisons to operate with a leaner payroll, saving the taxpayers money. Many states and the federal government require labor from all inmates who are medically able to provide it.137 However, day-to-day operation of a prison cannot possibly require enough labor to fully employ every prisoner, or even the majority of them. Thus, most prison labor consists of “busywork”138 designed simply to keep prisoners occupied.139 Even then, the average American prisoner’s workday consists of a mere 6.8 hours.140

In addition to working inside prison walls, some states employ inmates outside of prisons as part of public works or community service programs.141 Prisoners are able to help repay their debts to society by providing a service, such as cleaning public highways, that the public might not otherwise be able to afford. Such projects may include the use of chain gangs. The use of prisoners to complete public works projects is generally limited by the logistical problems involved in supervising significant numbers of inmates outside of prison grounds. Managing prison labor is decidedly easier inside the prison walls.

“State use” labor programs are more formal than the simple tasks expected of all prisoners; they offer inmates steady work, extra income and “marketable job skills” that are useful upon release.142 They are more popular than institutional work assignments and often have long waiting lists filled with inmates looking for jobs.143 These programs assist in administrative control; misbehaving inmates quickly lose the opportunity to work for FPI or its state counterparts.144 They also further restitution goals. Prisoners’ wages can be garnished to fulfill outstanding financial obligations, such as child support or victim restitution.145

Mandatory source status requires the government to purchase their products, as long as their prices are competitive.146 Yet, these labor programs occupy only a small number of prisoners. However, 17% of federal prisoners work for FPI,147 a much smaller percentage of state prisoners are similarly employed, meaning that only 6% of American prison inmates are employed in prison industry.148 The fact that these labor programs can only be used to produce goods for government consumption is fatal to their expanded growth. Whereas, under the contract system prison labor could be used to produce an extremely wide variety of goods and services, the state use system constricts inmate labor to a small subset of industries common to government procurement, most notably office furniture. This concentrates prison labor’s impact on a small subset of the...
American economy. Though the current inmate work force is very small, at 0.02% of the national work force,149 “state use” policies concentrate their impact on a small group of industries, increasing the likelihood of economic damage to the private sector.

FPI, like its state counterparts is, “first and foremost, a correctional program.”150 It is not a business, but instead seeks to help offenders transition into becoming law-abiding members of society.151 Yet, the vast majority of prisoners do not participate in formal labor program. They thus fail to reap the rehabilitative benefits. Prison industries cannot achieve their rehabilitative aims without expanding their operations. “State use” policies largely prevent inmate work programs’ expansion into new industries. Existing prison industries cannot expand their operations in “state use” industries without placing an undue burden on certain sectors of private industry.152 Thus, the “state use” system is caught between the proverbial rock and hard place; it must increase the number of inmates involved but cannot do so without damaging the private sector.

Perhaps recognizing this dilemma, Congress created the Prison Industry Enhancement (PIE) program. The PIE program enables up to fifty jurisdictions to obtain certifications from the federal government exempting them from restrictions on the interstate sale of prison-made goods.153 As of early 2008, thirty-seven states and four county-based correctional institutions have received certifications allowing inmates to work for private companies.154 Prisoners are paid a market wage, up to 80% of which is deducted to pay for prisoner upkeep and to fulfill the prisoners’ financial obligations.155 However, despite its widespread nature, the PIE program employs a minute number of inmates: approximately four thousand prisoners participate in PIE certified programs nationwide.156 This is an extremely small percentage of the over two million people currently incarcerated in the United States. Thus, even if the PIE system does effectively reduce recidivism, its impact is greatly limited by the low number of contracted inmate employees. America’s modern prison labor system is far from successful. The product of conflicting penological goals and economic forces, modern prison labor manages to do little more than improve administrative control while harming America’s office furniture industry. The use of labor to deter crime and shame or punish prisoners reduces the rehabilitative efficacy of prison labor and prompts prisoner rights litigation and activist backlash that could threaten the entirety of American prison labor. “State use” policies multiply prison labor’s economic harm by concentrating its impact on a few sectors of the economy. Using work simply to keep prisoners busy relegates most inmates to menial tasks with little productive meaning or rehabilitative value. Significant reform is required.

Prison labor is a political hot button issue, affected by prisoners’ rights litigation, populist “tough on crime” movements and entrenched interest groups. When few prison labor programs have proven themselves unequivocally successful, this makes policy experimentation quite difficult. Rather than cabin their work inside the prison labor rubric, policymakers would be wise to look to an analogous situation: homelessness-to-work programs. Though sometimes politically controversial, many anti-homelessness ventures have been able to avoid the political hurdles facing prison reform. They are thus able to take a more experimental approach. By so doing, they shed new light not only on the fight against homelessness, but also on a new path for prison labor.

Homelessness: A Prison Without Walls: The Homeless in America

Though it strikes many as a uniquely modern problem, homelessness has been a part of American society since the colonial era.157 In the decades between the Civil War and the Second World War, homelessness emerged as a national problem.158 To describe this phenomenon, new words entered the American lexicon. The “hobo” was a migratory worker, bouncing across the country from job to job.159 “Tramps” wandered from town to town, but rarely worked.160 Meanwhile, “bums” settled in to skid row and neither worked nor traveled much.161

World War II marked a significant turning point. Economic changes concomitant with the end of the Great Depression, combined with the aging population of many homeless men, soon brought an end to widespread wandering. The rate of homelessness declined substantially. Tramps and hobos became a fixture of the past; those that remained homeless settled down in major urban centers.162 Ever since, homelessness has been an urban, rather than a national, problem. “Mass homelessness”163 in major cities appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, as urban poverty expanded, deinstitutionalization left more mentally ill living on the streets.164 Vietnam veterans failed to readjust to life on the home front, drug abuse increased, and the federal government cut social benefits.165 Though the rate of homelessness amongst Americans has not approached that of the early Twentieth Century, these “new homeless”166 have seemingly become “a permanent feature of postindustrial America.”167

Viewed as a local problem confined to large cities, homelessness has not attracted the government resources that a national problem of similar gravity might. Yet, it is a problem of immense proportions. In 2005, federal researchers determined that over seven hundred and fifty thousand people were homeless on a given night, 45% of whom were unsheltered.168 The number of people who have experienced homelessness at some point in the past year might be several times higher.169 Nearly 25% of the homeless population is under seventeen years of age.170 In some places, families may constitute as much as half of the homeless population.171 This often comes as a surprise to the public, as homeless families, who spend more time in shelters and less time on the street than do individuals, remain largely out of the public eye.172

Not Simply ‘Lazy or Crazy’: The Many Causes of Homelessness

Like criminality, homelessness comes in many forms and is a result of many factors. Homelessness itself is best divided into three general patterns: temporary, episodic and chronic.173 Temporary homelessness is nothing more than a brief period of homelessness, likely caused by unexpected circumstances such as a house fire or a sudden and severe loss of income.174 Episodic homelessness, on the other hand, encapsulates brief periods of homelessness occurring repeatedly in the life of an individual.175 Women or adolescents periodically fleeing from bad home environments are likely to experience episodic homelessness, as are the underemployed and others who are on the borderline of self-sufficiency. The third category, chronic
homelessness, is more in line with the popular view of homelessness; it incorporates those who are homeless for a year or more and are much more likely to be mentally ill, abuse drugs, and be disconnected from society. The chronic homeless, though they are the minority of homeless Americans, consume a significant amount of anti-homelessness resources. It is the chronic homeless, and those that run the risk of becoming chronically homeless, that will be the focus of this Note, for it is they who most closely mirror the social condition of the incarcerated.

Why Do Individuals Become Homeless?

In his seminal examination of the hobo, sociologist Nels Anderson declared that “no single cause can be found to explain how a man may be reduced to the status of... homeless.” Over eighty years later, this remains the case. As with the debate over what might lead a person to turn toward (or away from) crime, the debate over the causes of homelessness can be divided into two broad categories: (1) structural problems and (2) individual choices and vulnerabilities.

Structural, or sociological, explanations emphasize that aspects of American social structure as a whole, rather than of individual homeless persons, lead to homelessness. Common points of emphasis for the structural argument include: a dearth of low-cost housing, cuts in welfare benefits, the weakening of family structures, economic downturns, and the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. Mirroring those who emphasize poverty as a causal factor in crime, structuralists argue that homelessness in America is best addressed by focusing policy on meta-issues rather than the individual behavior of the homeless. Combating homelessness thus requires measures to increase employment and wages, improve welfare, and subsidize housing. Since the homeless are in such a condition through little fault of their own, to focus on their individual behavior is to blame the victim.

Yet, for those concerned with the individual causes of homelessness, it is precisely this behavior that is of the utmost importance. To be more precise, they seek to focus on a combination of individual vulnerabilities and poor decision-making among individuals who become homeless. Many homeless individuals abuse drugs and alcohol. Others need psychological treatment. Still, more simply cannot manage their personal finances – they cannot support themselves. Some suffer from physical disabilities are or simply unable (or unwilling) to keep a job. They are alienated from friends and family. In other words, the homeless are simply “frustrated and angered by personal lives out of control... entrapped by alcohol and drug addictions, mental illness, lack of education and skills, and self-esteem so low it was often manifested as self-hate.”

No Panacea, but Perhaps a Treatment

The myriad causes of homelessness make combating homelessness difficult. Here, I make no effort to discern the victor in the structural problems versus the individual vulnerabilities debate. Surely, it is only a matter of emphasis, as both structural and individual factors have some impact on homelessness. I make no judgment on the effects of housing policy or welfare on homelessness. Instead, it will suffice to point out that those anti-homelessness programs that have focused on individual behaviors have achieved a significant level of success in reintegrating homeless individuals into society. This success relies on one overarching concept: an effort to use the consociative impact of work as a means to overcome homeless individuals’ disaffection with society.

For the homeless, the path to redemption is rife with a litany of social, psychological and physical problems. Exactly how the homeless might attempt to overcome these hurdles is beyond the scope of this Note; the topic has filled countless books and policy memoranda. Yet, for those homeless individuals who are able to kick a drug habit, earn a G.E.D. or receive needed psychological treatment, there remains the issue of holding that ground which they have gained. In order to stay off the streets, the homeless must (1) become self-sufficient and (2) reconnect with society as a whole. Anti-homelessness success stories demonstrate that work is the lynchpin to both of these processes.

Putting the Homeless to Work: Punishment or Empowerment?

At a Salvation Army run homeless shelter in New York City, a sign reads “Your Way of Life Does Not Work. If It Does Work, What Are You Doing Here?” Anti homeless programs reject sociological explanations for homelessness; “housing alone is not the solution.” The individual choices and actions of the homeless individual remain paramount. However, these programs seek to correct, not simply punish, these choices and actions. They do so by focusing on the impact that social disaffiliation has on the actions of the homeless.

Disaffiliation from society “is the most universal characteristic of homelessness.” The homeless are not “just like us.” Many people suffer economic crises or drug abuse without losing their homes. The homeless are in a fundamentally different position, and “homelessness is a metaphor for profound disconnection from other people and institutions.” The homeless are disengaged from their social support systems; they are disaffiliated from family, friends, church and community. Like the convict, they bear the stigma of being societal outcasts. Their disconnectedness results in “a set of behavioral and attitudinal stances” best termed “drift.” Though they lack discipline and direction, “most... want to live self-sustaining lives.” Homelessness-to-work programs seek to enable the homeless to do exactly that.

A Useful Model

By emphasizing the importance of self-sufficiency to successful societal reintegration, homelessness-to-work programs use the consociative value of work to help the homeless improve their station in life. Done correctly, work programs can provide both discipline and direction. Work enables the homeless to reconnect with society, to regain self-confidence, and to build new social support systems. This, in turn, serves to prevent them from backsliding into homelessness.

The Doe Fund is a New York City based charity that, through a program entitled “Ready Willing and Able” (RWA), seeks to help formerly homeless men and women become self-sufficient members of society. By focusing on the importance of work, RWA has been able to help more than 3,000 men and women live drug-free, self-sufficient lives, secure employment at any one of dozens of private companies, and obtain self-supported housing.

By using the consociative impact of work to reconnect
the homeless to a community “they once felt apart from.” RWA overcomes the disaffiliation that many homeless individuals feel. Through a series of tough requirements for its participants, RWA has been able to achieve a level of success unequaled in larger anti-homelessness programs. As a first step, participants agree to give up any entitlements they receive and live for a month in an RWA facility, working four hours a day under close supervision in exchange for room, board and a small stipend. After one month, participants secure full time employment in one of RWA’s paid employment and work training programs. Working as garbage men, street cleaners, apartment repairmen, and in the culinary arts, RWA participants earn a wage of $7 to $8 per hour and are forced to contribute both toward their upkeep and toward a personal savings account. If they demonstrate a work ethic and an ability to remain clean and sober, participants enter the third and final phase of the program. Here, participants participate in a six-week job preparation program, learning computer skills and other tools useful for full time private sector employment. Upon obtaining independent, unsubsidized housing and earning a full time position, participants may graduate from the program. On average, RWA participants spend ten months in the program and earn $9.45 per hour upon graduation.

Throughout the process, RWA does more than simply impart job skills. Rather, the program works because it uses work as a means by which to break down barriers between the homeless and society as a whole. Case managers work closely with participants to reconnect with family and loved ones, pay past debts and fulfill overdue obligations such as child support. Rather than flee from their past problems, participants are forced to confront these issues and are given the support necessary to work their way toward a new life. The opportunity to keep a job does more than simply provide income; it enables participants to reconnect with society, to gain a sense of self-worth and societal importance through work. As a case in point, RWA graduates continually cite the “respect” given to them as a result of their work and the sense of community inherent in the program as major reasons for their success.

RWA is not alone. Other anti-homelessness ventures have created similar programs, emphasizing the consociative value of work to varying degrees. Homes for the Homeless and Project Renewal, both New York charities, run similar programs. New Directions, Inc. has a similar program for homeless veterans in Los Angeles. These efforts have not put an end to homelessness in America, but they have provided a blueprint useful for reintegrating society’s downtrodden. If this model can work for the homeless, it might also serve to reintegrate a similarly disaffiliated population: the 2.3 million inmates in America’s prisons. After all, over 75% of the homeless men who enter Ready, Willing and Able’s program have a history of incarceration.

As the high numbers of homeless ex-convicts might suggest, inmates and the homeless are, in many ways, similarly situated. Drug and substance abuse run high in both groups. Untreated mental illness is found with a higher than average prevalence among both criminals and the homeless. In both, kinship ties are often weak. Friends are rare. Both the inmate and the homeless person have failed, for one reason or another, to live up to society’s expectations. As such, they are quick to believe that society has failed them. For the convict and the homeless man, life simply seems unfair. This inevitably results in social disengagement. They exist in a world separated from the mainstream, physically, emotionally and psychologically.

If society has any interest in preventing ex-convicts from returning to crime, policymakers must focus on reintegrating the disaffected into society. Ready, Willing & Able and other anti-homelessness programs demonstrate that disaffected individuals can gain a sense of self-esteem and societal worth through work. Similar success is possible in prison labor. Inmates, like the homeless, are disaffiliated from and disaffected with society. Through the consociative influence of work, they have the potential to overcome the gulf between them and their fellow citizens.

Providing education and drug treatment are useful first steps, but, alone, neither will address the reasons why an individual turns to drugs or crime in the first instance. Criminals commit crimes because they believe that society’s strictures do not apply to them or because they believe it is simply not worth obeying the law. They conceive of themselves as, at least partially, outside of and separate from the law abiding world. This perception is only reinforced by time spent in prison, physically isolated from society. Prison establishes routines “alien to life in the community.” Upon release, if an inmate still feels no connection to society, he is more likely to return to crime. An individual who believes that success is possible through lawful behavior is, indeed, more likely to comport himself according to the law’s demands. Work can significantly affect this perspective, for the better or the worse. Prison labor programs can reinforce the bonds between an inmate and society. Labor can also reinforce the walls between the two.

**Purpose Matters**

Simply putting prisoners to work is insufficient. Instead, prison labor must be carefully directed toward a specific purpose: the reduction of recidivism through the reintegration of inmates into society. Hence, prison labor programs must particularly emphasize the consociative aspect of work. As Part III made clear, prison labor has a multitude of purposes, often operating in conflict with one another. The history of prison and homeless labor demonstrates that the purpose for which people are put to work goes a long way toward determining the impact of their labor.

Labor imposed as punishment for crime or vagrancy may be just in terms of moral desert. Sentences of hard labor may deter crime. Yet, neither does much to improve the position of the laborer. Labor that, on top of a prison sentence, is sufficiently harsh to further punish or deter crime will likely not impart new skills to the inmate. It will certainly result in inmates conceiving of work as a punishment, and as something to be avoided, rather than as a vital step toward self-sufficiency. Surely, homelessness is not so rewarding that labor is needed to deter it. Further, punitive labor for the homeless simply reinforces the notion that society does not care for them. From their perspective, the same society from which they have been cast out only concerns itself with their plight to punish it. Punitive labor is therefore dissociative rather than consociative.

Labor used to shame inmates operates in a very simi-
lar way. Chain gangs fail to exploit the consociative value of work. Instead, they force prisoners to bear the stigma of their status as inmates while working on public roads and in other places where they are likely to confront members of the public. Contrast this with RWA, whose participants don recognizable blue jumpsuits with “Ready Willing & Able” stitched across the back while picking up garbage and sweeping the streets of New York City. Both entail contact with the public, both require laboring in clearly demarcated attire, but only chain gangs involve shame. RWA members frequently cite their interactions with the public as encouraging and uplifting experiences, far from shaming.

Thus, it appears that a system can be created in which prisoners, perhaps only the non-violent ones, can do public works projects in a uniform without shame. To eliminate the shaming aspect, emphasis must be placed not on the prisoner’s status as inmates, but on their taking steps to improve themselves and reintegrate into society. Under the current system of chain gangs, this is not possible. However, if prisons rewarded, rather than punished, inmates with the prospect of working outside the prison walls, labor on a road gang (without chains) could be an empowering experience.

The employment of prison labor to defray societal costs can work both toward and against consociative ends. Forcing homeless men and women to work to pay for their beds struck many as simply another hardship upon already downtrodden individuals. Criminals may garner less public sympathy, but labor programs designed merely to cut the costs of imprisonment will likely strike the inmate as exploitative. This is the wrong impression, as it is fundamentally unfair for criminals to be able to live without supporting themselves, while law-abiding citizens must work. Regardless, it is the mindset of the incarcerated individual and his relationship with society that impacts his future behavior. If prison labor’s primary purpose is to reduce prison costs in the short term, rather than to help reintegrate prisoners into society, inmates will see work as an alienating feature of their incarceration.

Of course, cutting costs and promoting societal reintegration can go hand-in-hand. The question is simply one of emphasis. A reduction in criminal recidivism reduces the long term cost to society. Moreover, useful work that gives an inmate a sense of purpose will inevitably produce goods that have value, which can, in turn, be sold on the open market or used by the state. RWA participants clean streets, renovate apartments, work as exterminators and do office work for a wage. Part of their money goes toward room and board. An analogous system of prison labor would thus bring in money to defray the costs of imprisonment. Prisons might obtain smaller cost offsets in the short term than if they cared little for the consociative value of work, but inmate labor will reduce their costs nonetheless.

Vocational training and education alone will not suffice

Those most concerned with the wellbeing of prisoners in our modern penal system have often focused on rehabilitat- ing inmates so that they can lead successful lives on the outside. Though well intentioned, this approach is wanting. The rehabilitative aspects of such programs have ignored the rehabilitative value of work, instead focusing on improving prisoner’s life skills through education as well as substance abuse and psycho-

logical counseling. Work only comes into play as a way to fill prisoners’ time and a method by which to impart job skills. While vocational training, education and counseling are necessary, prisoners might garner further benefit from work itself. The earliest American prisons used work to change the habits and values of prisoners. Modern prisons use it merely to provide new opportunities.

Vocational programs fail to comprehend the importance of individual decision making on crime. For vocational programs to reduce recidivism significantly through the simple provision of job skills and education, crime must be a result of a lack of opportunity. To be easily quelled by vocational programs alone, crime must not be a matter of individual choice, but a learned behavior arising from a lack of opportunity and “impersonal forces in society.” To be sure, crime is higher in impoverished neighborhoods than it is in wealthy ones. It does not follow that a lack of opportunity causes crime. Crime remains the result of individual acts, which necessarily follow from individual choices.

It is one thing to teach a man how to work, it is quite another to convince him why he should work. To be sure, if they are to remain outside the prison walls, ex-convicts must have the capacity to earn a living without resorting to crime. This capacity alone will not suffice, however. Sufficiently disaffiliated from society to resort to crime in the first place and physically and socially separated from their fellow citizens during their imprisonment, prisoners must learn to believe not only in themselves, but also in society. A critical stitch in the American social fabric is a strong work ethic. In a capitalist society, it is through work that individuals connect with those around them. If prisoners do not learn to work, they will remain disconnected from wider society, believing that society’s rules are somehow unfair or inapplicable to them. Without both the capacity and the desire to work, prisoners will never be able to live a life without crime. To recall Weber’s warning: “The Puritans wanted to be men of the calling – we, on the other hand, must be.”

Using Consociative Labor to Create a Prison Labor System That Works

A prison labor system modeled on the consociative value would look quite different from what exists today. First, it would have to be significantly expanded. Today’s state use systems and the small PIE program reach only an extreme minority of inmates. The federal government’s prison labor system, Federal Prison Industries (FPI), is the largest of any state use system, but it employs fewer than one in five federal prisoners. A reformed prison labor system must strive to involve, in some way or another, all inmates. This would require a significant transition, but is likely not as difficult as it seems at first blush.

A state use system cannot suffice to create a consociative system of prison labor. Instead, prison labor reform must take a holistic approach. If America’s inmates are going to be rehabilitated through consociative punishment, the prison labor system must be all encompassing. It cannot be a reform simply of America’s prison industries, whether state use or contract, but instead a reform of all labor done by prisoners. Currently, work in prison consists of: (1) institutional work assignments, (2) public works projects off prison grounds, often done in chain gangs, (3) “state use” prison industries and, (4) under the PIE program, inmate labor contracted to private companies. In
order to harness the consociative potential of work, prison labor programs should be reconstituted to combine all four of these areas into one labor system.

In some areas, the solution might simply be an issue of emphasis. Many prisoners spend a portion of their day sweeping floors, landscaping, serving food in the prison cafeteria, or otherwise contributing to the day-to-day operations of the prison. Often, these institutional work assignments are approached by prison administration as simply a means by which to keep the prisoners busy. For the most hardened criminals, and for those who will never be released, this may be all that prison labor has to offer. Yet, for the majority of prisoners, institutional work can be harnessed to provide a greater output. Much of this work has clear counterparts in the outside world—janitorial, landscaping and food service work are prevalent low wage jobs. By approaching these work assignments as training for life on the outside and not simply as busy work, prisons can imbue these tasks with meaning.

Institutional work assignments are a vital part of a holistic reform of the prison labor system, for the majority of prison work will be in such assignments. In those prisons with operating prison industries, whether for state use or contract, a waiting list often exists for employment. If certain jobs are preferable to inmates, they should be used as incentives, both for good job performance and for good overall comportment. Similarly, less enjoyable jobs should be given to discourage poor performance. Since part of the rationale behind prison labor is to train prisoners without skills to become better workers, simple productivity cannot be used as the sole marker of success. Instead, a more subjective assessment, including an inmate’s progress and receptivity to improvement, must be employed.

If prison labor is to help inmates for life in the labor market outside prison walls, it should operate with two broad purposes in mind: (1) improving skills and work ethic for as many prisoners as possible and (2) mimicking the outside labor market as effectively as possible. The goal should be full inmate employment while in prison and all prisoners should be forced to work, in some way or another, for much of their day. Not only will such a system help introduce more inmates to the consociative benefits of work, but it will also improve administrative control, defray prison costs, and satisfy the public’s sense that prisoners should work just like non-criminals. Given current underemployment in prison, however, approximating full employment will require greater job opportunities.

Creating more job opportunities for inmates while in prison requires significant reforms. Institutional work assignments are already saturated: there are simply not enough tasks to employ all prisoners. The “state use” system cannot be expanded much without causing a major impact in the few industries that produce goods for state consumption. Accordingly, any expansion would have to occur in contract labor or in public works projects. Both show promise. Contract labor could be expanded on the model of the current federal “state use” system, Federal Prison Industries. Significant attention should be paid to improving prisoner skills and education through an apprenticeship or probationary period. Choice of industry will also be important. Diffusing prison labor away from “state use” industries will simultaneously diffuse the political backlash against it. That does not mean, however, that opposition to labor competition from prisoners will not exist. Methods exist to avoid this problem. The primary one is to concentrate prison labor in those areas where labor shortages currently exist.

As the growing number of immigrant workers, legal and illegal, demonstrates, the current market is unable to fulfill its demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labor through American citizens and legal residents alone. Prisoners can be used to supplant a small part of the labor supply coming from illegal immigration. Of course, it is worth noting that prison labor can only affect a portion of this labor shortfall, as there are currently about five times as many illegal immigrants as there are prisoners in the United States. Given that many prisoners would work in institutional or public works projects and not as contracted labor, the number of prisoners entering the labor force would be even smaller. This, of course, is not an original proposal. Some states have already implemented it in a few instances. Politicians have proposed it as a way to eliminate the need for illegal immigrant labor. Prison labor will not solve the illegal immigration problem. The numbers simply do not add up. Yet, using prisoner labor in these areas can provide an outlet for valuable inmate work while reducing political opposition.

Public works projects also show potential for increased inmate labor activity. As the recent experiment in chain gangs has demonstrated, the state always has a need for extra labor, whether for cleaning highways, maintaining parks, or helping to build roads. A number of projects that the state would not otherwise hire labor to complete, could be undertaken by inmates. Chain gangs, in both their historical and modern incarnations, have also demonstrated another fact: laboring in chains is a punishing and shameful experience that does little to reinforce the social bonds between the chained and society. Public works programs need not depend on chain gangs. A modern community work crew system should thus operate in an inverse fashion to traditional chain gangs. Rather than punish prisoners by forcing them to labor outside in the public eye as a shaming experience, prisons should reward those prisoners who, as they approach their release dates, have made the most progress during their incarceration. The public should be notified of the program. Rather than being a mark of shame, working in a guarded, but unchained, work crew should be, like the ex-homeless street sweepers of RWA, a badge of honor signifying significant progress toward rehabilitation. To preserve public safety, assignments on community work details should be given only for those inmates who have demonstrated a serious commitment to reform.

As opportunities for labor in prisons expand, prisons must determine how to allocate jobs to prisoners. In doing so, they should seek to replicate the outside labor market as best as possible. Inmates should be allowed to apply for jobs they
desire and should be selected based on their commitment to improving themselves and working hard. Those who do not demonstrate a commitment should be given less desirable jobs, in particular institutional work assignments. However, these jobs should not be used as punishment alone; every job should carry with it a significant aspect of instruction, so that prisoners may gain skills and a sense of social worth through employment.

Compensation should be provided for inmate labor. As with the PIE program, market prices should be paid for those inmates who work for contracted companies. Prisoners should be required to use part of these funds to contribute toward their upkeep in prison, the payment of any outstanding obligations such as child support or court ordered restitution, and toward a savings account to serve as “gate money” upon their release. To ensure incentive to work, however, prisoners should be allowed to keep a significant portion of their wages.

A prison labor system such as this will help to instill the importance of work in the minds of prisoners and, by giving them some sense of purpose, will encourage them to maintain an upstanding existence upon their release. More than vocational training alone, consociative punishment uses work as a means to bond the individual to society as a whole. To maintain a law-abiding life upon release, an ex-convict must work. Even if he has a job, he must also become a stakeholder in society. He must believe that society’s rules apply to him and that he can flourish within the American social order. By using labor neither to punish, nor to shame, nor to save money, but to instill a sense of self-sufficiency through job skills and work ethic, a consociative system of prison labor holds the potential to help reintegrate America’s two million soon-to-be ex-convicts.

**Conclusion**

America’s history and culture have crafted an American society that is based, in large degree, on the idea of a strong individual work ethic. As a nation of immigrants, Americans have used work to establish themselves in this country and bond across ethnic and religious lines. Even with a welfare state, those who do not work find it very difficult to succeed. When they fail, those who do not work envision themselves not as members of society, but as its victims. They believe that society’s rules have contributed to their dilemma and are thus unlikely to follow them.

Both the homeless and the incarcerated are disaffiliated from society. Physically separate from the rest of us, they are also socially, psychologically and emotionally alienated. Homelessness-to-work programs have demonstrated that work has the power to overcome this divide. By promising self-sufficiency, a crucial component to self-worth in a capitalist society, work has a significant consociative impact on the homeless. It can have the same impact on convicts.

By any account, America’s prison system leaves much to be desired. Prison rehabilitation efforts have for too long ignored the value of work. Focused on education, vocational training, and counseling, rehabilitation has ignored the importance of human agency in determining whether or not an inmate returns to a life of crime upon release. Crime, though affected by circumstance, is not the result of it. Crime is the result of the bad choices made by criminals. They make these decisions, in part, because they have become, for one reason or another, disconnected from society at large. Emerging from prison after a period of physical separation from his fellow citizens, bearing the stigma of a felon status, an ex-convict is quite likely to experience this sense of disaffiliation. Work can reconnect him to his fellow man and help him overcome his disassociation.

Prison labor in America is in need of a holistic reform. It should be expanded dramatically, but in a form divergent from its controversial, and sometimes dark, past. Prison administrators must reassess the purposes they seek to achieve through inmate work. Prison labor can accomplish a multitude of goals, but society will benefit most if the consociative value of work is paramount. Institutional control will still improve under a consociative system of prison labor, for those prisoners who will be released and those who will not. Some of the costs of imprisonment will still be defrayed by the value of prisoners’ labor, and preventing ex-convicts from returning to prison might save even greater costs.

By using work as it is used in the outside world, as a means of empowerment and self-sufficiency, prisons can better position inmates for life on the outside. If inmates are shamed through labor, they will be less likely to take pride in their work as free men. If their labor is exploited for the state’s monetary gain with little attention paid to their training, convicts will never learn the value of a hard day’s work. If ex-convicts cannot embrace a work ethic, they will find it hard to succeed in an American society in which work is an invaluable social link. Without the consociative impact of work, the odds are lower that an ex-convict will reintegrate into society. It logically follows that his chances of returning to prison are higher. If that happens, the vicious cycle simply begins again.

1. David A. Snow & Leon Anderson, Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People 110 (Univ. of Cal. Press 1993) (quoting Everett C. Hughes, Men and their Work 43 (1958)).
6. See WEBSTER’S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY 484 (3d ed. 1993) (defining consociative as “[p]romoting, exhibiting, or having to do with association or fellowship”).
10. Applebaum, supra note 9, at 216.
11. Applebaum, supra note 9, at x-xi (remarking that the Protestant Ethic has also been termed the Puritan Ethic).
12. Id. at 3.
15. Id. at 35.
16. Id. at 34.
17. Id. at 116.
18. Id. at 107.
19. Id. at 116.
20. Id. at 120.
21. Id. at 120.
22. Id. (emphasis in original).
23. Applebaum, supra note 9, at xi.
24. Id.
25. See Michael Powell, Early-20th-Century Concerns Resurface in Immigration
Debate, WASH. POST, May 8, 2006 (discussing the inability of many immigrants to advance by traditional social means, specifically education: “[l]ike today’s Mexican immigrants, these earlier immigrants often… stressed work over education.”).

28 Id.
29 See id. (discussing the recurrent patterns involved in native reactions to increased immigration).
30 Id. at 217.
32 Karen Kornbluh, Families Valued, DEMOCRACY, Fall 2006, at 36.
33 JONATHON COHN, SICK 120 (2007).
34 Id. at 9.
37 See generally, JILL ANDRESKY FRASER, WHITE COLLAR SWEATSHOP: THE DETERIORATION OF WORK AND ITS REWARD IN CORPORATE AMERI-
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39 CIULLA, supra note 8, at 7.
40 HANS J. EYSENCK AND GISLI H. GUDJONSSON, THE CAU-
SES AND OFFENDER REINTEGRATION 57, 59 (Willian Publishing 2004);:
41 Stephen Farrall, AFTER CRIME AND PUNISHMENT: PATHWAYS TO
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the success of inmates upon release.”).
42 WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS: THE WORLD OF
THE NEW URBAN POOR 52 (Random House 1996).
43 CIULLA, supra note 8, at 4.
44 See generally Stephen Garvey, Freeing Prisoners’ Labor, 50 STAN. L. REV. 339,
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46 Garvey, supra note 44, at 350.
47 Id.
48 Due to efficiencies created by allowing prisoners to share common areas, the
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often drove prisoners insane. Edward L. Rubin, The Inevitability of Rehabilitation,
49 See Eva S. Nielsen, Decency, Dignity, and Desert: Restoring Ideals of Humane Punishment to Constitutional Discourse, 41 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 111, 127-29
(2007). See generally Peter Scharff Smith, The Effects of Solitary Confinement on
50 Daniel T. Rodgers, THE WORK ETHIC IN INDUSTRIAL AMERICA, 1850-1920
8 (1974).
51 Garvey, supra note 44, at 350.
52 Id. at 344, 351.
53 Id. at 352.
54 Garvey, supra note 44, at 352.
55 Id. at 344.
56 Id. at 352.
57 Id. at 354.
58 See ALEX LICHTENSTEIN, TWICE THE WORK OF FREE LABOR: 3-16
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system in the post-Civil War South).
59 U.S. CONST. amend. XIII, § 1.
60 Garvey, supra note 44, at 354-55.
61 Id. at 356.
62 Garvey, supra note 44, at 367.
63 Id. at 358-66.
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65 Donald Braman, Punishment and Accountability: Understanding and Reforming
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supra note 44, at 359.
66 LICHTENSTEIN, supra note 58, at 96.
67 Garvey, supra note 44, at 359.
68 Id. at 360.
69 Id. at 364.
70 Braman, supra note 65, at 1175.
71 LICHTENSTEIN, supra note 58, at 156-85.
72 Lynn M. Burley, History Repeats Itself in the Resurrection of Prisoner Chain
Gangs: Alabama’s Experience Raises Eighth Amendment Concerns, 15 LAW &
73 Garvey, supra note 44, at 365.
74 Id. at 361-62.
75 Id. at 345.
78 Garvey, supra note 44, at 366-67.
79 Id.
80 Id. at 370.
81 See, e.g., N.C. Dep’t of Corrections, North Carolina Prison Inmates at Work, http://www.doc.state.nc.us/work/workover.htm (last visited Feb. 28, 2008) (citing these types of work as useful rehabilitative and restitutional, but not deterrent, tools).
82 See Burley, supra note 72, at 133.
83 See Garvey supra note 44, at 396-397 (stating that the current prison industry
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94 Id. at 53-54; see also Christopher Uggens, Jeff Manza and Angela Behrens, ‘Less
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99 BENEDICT S. ALPER, PRISONS INSIDE-OUT: ALTERNATIVES IN CORRECT-
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100 Id. at 77.
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102 DAVID FARABEE, RETHINKING REHABILITATION 65 (2005).
104 See CHARLES W. COLSON, JUSTICE THAT RESTORES 113 (Tyndale House
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45-47 (2000) (discussing high levels of public support for using “restorative justice” to
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106 See Kerry L. Pyle, Note, Prison Employment: A Long Term Solution to the Overcrowding Crisis, 77 B.U. L. REV. 151, 164 (1997) (pointing out that as of the mid-1990s, state and federal prisons spent between $30,000 and $50,000 per inmate per year).

107 Braman, supra note 65, at 1153.


110 Garvey, supra note 44, at 397.


112 Garvey, supra note 44, at 397.


114 LICHTENSTEIN, supra note 58, at 3-4.

115 However, the growing use of private prisons has caused concern that these prisons, as private actors, might be more likely to maltreat inmates. See CHARLES H. LOGAN, PRI-VATE PRISONS (1990); see also Sharon Dolovich, State Punishment and Private Prisons, 55 DUKE L.J. 437 (2003).

116 Rubin, supra note 48, at 344.


118 Though, inevitably, the success or failure of rehabilitative labor programs depends on the success of wider prison efforts at rehabilitation, I seek only to examine the efficacy of prison labor as a rehabilitative tool, while assuming the efficacy of other prison programs.

119 See Garvey, supra note 44, at 348 (quoting MICHAEL MERANZE, LABORATORIES OF VIRTUE: PUNISHMENT, REVOLUTION AND AUTHORITY IN PHILADELPHIA, 1760-1835 169 (1996)).

120 Id.

121 See FARABEE, supra note 102, at 25-35 (discussing the predominant modern approach to prisoner rehabilitation).

122 Id.


124 See U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103.


126 See, e.g., U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103. Inmates help prepare and serve three meals daily. They also work in helping with the receiving, handling, and storing of food, as well as in sanitation.

127 See, e.g., U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103. (stating sentenced inmates are required to work if they are medically able).

128 ALPER, supra note 99, at 77.


131 See, e.g., Md. Dept’of Public Safety and Correctional Services, Reentry Goals and Priorities, available at http://www.mpss.state.md.us/rehabserve/reentry.shtml (last visited March 3, 2008) (stating that over 1,000 of the state’s inmates are involved in public works or community service projects).

132 See U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103 (asserting that currently, FPI jobs offer wages between $0.23 and $1.15 per hour).

133 See Glover, supra note 139.

134 Id.

135 U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103.

136 See generally Philip C. Mitchell, Federal Prison Industries: Ending Their Mandatory Source Status, 83-SEP MICH. B. J. 19 (2004). Stating that this has been eliminated by 18 USC 2418(a), now federal contracting officers can buy items available through UNICOR from other sources).

137 U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103.

138 Garvey, supra note 44, at 370.


140 UNICOR, About FPI Programs, supra note 98.

141 Id.

142 See Mitchell, supra note 146, at 19.

143 See id.

144 Id.


146 ATKINSON, supra note 149, at 1.

147 See KENNETH L. KUSMER, DOWN & OUT, ON THE ROAD 3 (Oxford University Press 2002) (stating that at first the homeless were not very noticeable but they became more noticeable in the eighteenth century).

148 See id. at 3-4 (explaining that during that decade the homeless population drastically increased in size).


150 See id. at 87.

151 See id.

152 KUSMER, supra note 157, at 6.

153 See id. at 6.


156 See generally KUSMER, supra note 157, at 239.

157 See id. at 239.

158 See U.S. DEPT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, supra note 5, at iii.

159 KUSMER, supra note 157, at 239.

160 U.S. DEPT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, supra note 5 at iv.

161 See id.

162 See KUSMER, supra note 145, at 242.

163 See PAUL A. ROLLINSON & JOHN T. PARDECK, HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AMERICA 7 (Haworth Press 2006).

176 NELS ANDERSON, supra note 159, at 86.
177 ROLLINSON & PARDECK, supra note 173, at 14.
178 Id. at 17-18.
179 DACOSTA NUNEZ, supra note 165, at 17.
180 ROLLINSON & PARDECK, supra note 173, at 16.
181 Id.
182 ROLLINSON & PARDECK, supra note 173, at 18.
183 See generally Greenblatt, supra note 164.
185 Id. at 14.
186 Id.
187 supra note 185, at 2.
188 supra note 5, at iv.
189 Nearly twenty five percent of those individuals who stay in homeless shelters are disabled.
190 Between one-third and one-half of homeless individuals abuse drugs or alcohol. See KUSMER, supra note 157, at 243. Almost as many are mentally ill. Id.
191 Twenty seven percent
192 Homeless Men in New York City: Toward Paternalism through Privatization, in THE NEW PATERNALISM 161, 178 (Lawrence M. Mead, ed., Brookings Institution Press 1997). This message neatly summarizes the paternalistic approach that several private anti-homelessness programs have taken to reforming and reintegrating the homeless.
193 DACOSTA NUNEZ, supra note 165, at 40.
194 BAUM & BURNES supra note 185, at 153.
195 Id. at 16.
196 Id.
197 Id.
198 Main, supra note 190, at 176.
199 KUSMER, supra note 157, at 247.
200 See The Doe Fund, A Word from Our Founder, available at http://www.doe.org/about/?showID=1 (last visited Mar. 12, 2008) [hereinafter A Word from Our Founder]. The guiding principle of RWA is simple: the homeless are motivated to work and are capable of doing so, if only they are given the necessary opportunity and support.
203 A Word from Our Founder, supra note 199.
205 Id.
206 Id.
207 Job Placement, supra note 201.
209 See id. “Participating programs have ended their homelessness themselves by becoming self-sufficient members of our community and productive, welcome members of society.”
212 DACOSTA NUNEZ, supra note 165, at 110-122.
215 See The Doe Fund, Criminal Justice, available at http://www.doe.org/programs/?programID=13 (last visited Mar. 12, 2008). “This is a resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state and federal agencies that provide emergency and supportive housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, legal aid and case management support for hundreds of thousands of homeless veterans each year.”
216 See Kahan, supra note 85, at 588 (explaining that the “distinctive meaning of criminal wrongdoing” is that the criminal denies an important societal value, such as the “moral worth” of a victim).
219 See Work Works: Success Stories, supra note 211.
221 See FARABEE, supra note 102, at 25-35.
222 Garvey, supra note 44, at 348.
223 Cf. JAMES Q. WILSON AND RICHARD J. HERRNSTEIN, CRIME AND HUMAN NATURE 44 (1985) (arguing that crime is the result of individual decisions based on incentives).
224 COLSON, supra note 104, at 53.
225 WEBER, supra note 13, at 120 (emphasis in original).
226 U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Inmate Work Programs, supra note 103.
227 See ALPER, supra note 99, at 77.
228 Id.
229 See generally Glover, supra note 139.
230 See Braman, supra note 65, at 1153.
233 In Colorado, supervised teams of low-risk inmates will be available to harvest vegetables.
235 This might include simple tasks such as picking up litter in the public right-of-way alongside state and county roads or more complex public works projects such as maintaining and repaving the roads themselves. While the government, be it state or federal, currently funds much of this work, there is a seemingly endless supply of tasks to be completed. Tax dollars can run short; not every road can be cleaned of litter, nor can every pothole be quickly filled. See generally Bulery, supra note 72 (arguing that chain gangs are not merely degrading, but instead so cruel as to violate the Eighth Amendment).
236 See Oregon Department of Corrections, supra note 41 (discussing the work done outside prison walls by “community work crews”).
237 See Work Assignments, supra note 204. Ready, Willing & Able’s “men in blue” wear recognizable blue jumpsuits as they pick up garbage and clean the streets of New York City.
238 See Oregon Department of Corrections, supra note 41.
239 12M reporting: 1 Percent of U.S. Adults Behind Bars, supra note 2.
240 See Work Assignments, supra note 204. Ready, Willing & Able’s “men in blue” wear recognizable blue jumpsuits as they pick up garbage and clean the streets of New York City.
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