



## An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse: An Essay on Prison Reform from an Insider's Perspective (Flashpoint)

By Jens Soering

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The United States has more people locked away in prison per capita than any other country. Prison building is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and in some states more money is spent on prisons and prisoners than on education. Nearly one quarter of all prison inmates worldwide are housed in U.S. jails or penitentiaries, even though the United States has only five percent of the world's population. Yet, in spite of the vast amount of resources spent on locking people up and the number of people in prison, the United States leads the developed world in the number of homicides and violent assaults.

For the last eighteen years, Jens Soering has experienced the inside of many different prison environments, from a youth remand center in London to America's notorious Supermax prisons, to medium-security institutions. What he has seen and experienced has convinced him that not only do prisons not rehabilitate prisoners who may be useful for society once their sentence has ended, but prisons turn petty criminals into hardened convicts?all at enormous expense to society. Meanwhile, other nations control their crime rates at a fraction of the cost of the United States correctional system.

Soering does not argue that prisons should not exist or dispute that there are people who need to be locked away. His book is not an indictment of the legal system that lands many people in prison. Instead, **An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse** offers a mainly monetary analysis of why it is absurd fiscal policy to lock people up so often and for so long.

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### Editorial Review

Review

Reviewed by Jean Franklin

Criminal justice, too easily ignored in our society, is addressed in this book by one who has spent the last 18 years behind bars. He demonstrates, poignantly, that the majority of prisoners are either racial minorities, of limited mental ability, or mentally ill. Many would not be dangerous to others if released. Soering also points out just how much money is spent on incarceration, with little positive result.

Reviewed by Stephen Healy and Peter Wagner, October 2005

When Virginia lifer Jens Soering released his second book, **An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse: An Essay on Prison Reform from an Insider's Perspective** he fired warning shots across the bow of the prison industrial complex. **An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse** is the best short, readable, fact-driven summation of why prisons don't work, but what makes the book so powerful is that it is written by a conservative Christian addressed to other fiscal conservatives.

Fiscal conservatives define "good government" as "small government", so by using a simple cost-benefit analysis, Soering shows that locking up 2 million people fails to justify the \$57 billion cost. While progressives may oppose the current criminal and penal systems for social and ethical reasons, Soering's arguments have the potential to split the Republican party's fiscally conservative base from its "get tough on crime" leadership.

Using fresh analysis and ground breaking arguments to bring sometimes dry statistics to life, Soering's book is organized around six myth-busting chapters:

- There is no problem
- They may be expensive, but at least prisons prevent crime
- Crime prevention does not work
- Rehabilitation behind bars does not work
- There are no alternatives to prison, and
- Criminal justice issues are so important that no one would dare mislead the public about them

Soering, a German citizen serving two life terms, brings a unique perspective that allows him to challenge common ideologically derived assumptions from both the right and the left. Soering places the US prison in an international context to show precisely how US prison policy fails us. While all modern societies have a "crime" problem, the United States stands virtually alone in relying *solely* on expanding its punitive incarceration system to address the problem. Soering explains that the prison population has grown not because of a growth in crime, but because of a complete systemic failure to prevent people already in the system from re-offending. The majority of prisoners who are released either fail to successfully complete parole or are shortly returned to prison after committing a new crime. Judged by any standard used in the marketplace, "corrections" is an abysmal failure.

One good conservative solution? Fiscal incentives.

Reducing poverty has proven results in reducing crime, because people with something to lose are less likely to commit a crime. But reducing poverty has been anathema to neo-conservatives like Bush. "The poor do not deserve it, and we cannot afford it anyway," they say. But from a fiscal conservative perspective, it makes good economic sense to end poverty. After all, the poverty line in the U.S. for a family of three is \$13.22 a day per person. That's supposed to pay for everything. By contrast, incarceration costs on average, \$55.18 a day. Soering asks whether reducing poverty would be cheaper and more effective at reducing crime. And of course, in some places the incarceration costs far more than the average. In the Fairfax County Virginia, jail, incarceration costs \$130.00 a day. That's quite a decadent expenditure by society, particularly considering that a night's stay in a Walt Disney World no-frills resort can be had for only \$119.33.

In an age where conventional "liberals" have adopted the neo-liberal "welfare reform" program, it is ironic that one of the clearest defenders of the social safety net is a writer with an ideological tie to the people who opposed Johnson's War on Poverty. But as Soering points out, spending on education and other social services for the poor?not mass incarceration?*is more* in line with fiscally conservative social principles because social services do lower criminality and its associated costs. This is simply that the stitch in time saves nine.

Beyond the title, drawn from that of a white paper issued in the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher's conservative English government, the book contains very little moralizing about "bad" people. That title will no doubt make some progressives wince, but it's also a reflection of the genius of the book. It's a fact of reality that conservatives believe some people are "good" and some are "bad." While progressives might not agree with the fiscally conservatives about why crime exists, we can certainly agree that the \$57 billion a year spent on corrections isn't improving public safety.

This isn't a radical book that questions how we define crime or one that imagines a new world where prisons don't exist. Instead, the book uses a highly effective indictment of the prison industrial complex as a massive failed experiment whose time has come and gone.

Smart capitalists everywhere should read this book and cut their losses.

Reviewed by Bill Sizemore, March, 6, 2005

Any citizen who cares about living in a moral society?or, for that matter, any taxpayer who cares about how efficiently and effectively his or her tax dollars are being spent?should read this compelling book.

It is a disturbing and thought-provoking look at the American mania for incarceration and what it has, and has not, accomplished. The author, Jens Soering, is a uniquely qualified observer for three reasons:

He is an exceptionally well informed amateur criminologist who marshals one startling statistic after another. For instance: Crime in the United States is at a 30 year low, yet the nation's imprisoned population has soared above 2 million, making America the world's largest jailer.

A German citizen, he brings a European perspective to the issue. He demonstrates that in stark contrast to the United States, the rest of the industrialized world places a priority on lowering, not raising the number of people behind bars. The results, as measured by crime rates, are no worse than America's?but are achieved at a vastly lower cost.

He knows the system like no other expert. A Virginia prison inmate, he has served 18 years of two life terms for double murder. He and his ex-girlfriend, Elizabeth Haysom, both honor students at the University of

Virginia, were charged in the bloody slaying of her parents in their Bedford County home in 1985.

Soering says he is innocent, but that is not the focus of this book. His insider's perspective allows him to add flesh and blood to what would otherwise be dry statistics as he chronicles the lives of the men he lives with in the "big house."

"I myself will never be released," he writes. Nevertheless, he admits to a personal agenda: "to free as many of my fellow convicts as possible."

Hundreds of thousands of imprisoned Americans should not be behind bars, he argues, because it is unnecessary, hideously expensive and often counterproductive to keep them there. He includes in this group, the elderly, the mentally ill, non-violent drugs offenders, juveniles in adult prisons and so-called "technical violators" who are imprisoned not for committing a crime but for violating administrative probation rules.

To understand why imprisonment has no appreciable impact on crime rates, Soering writes, it is necessary to grasp some key facts about the people sent to prison. They are overwhelmingly young, many are illiterate; a growing number are mentally ill; and a majority were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they committed their crimes. Soering argues that prison actually makes things worse. It warehouses offenders for years or decades with little or no opportunity for education, training or treatment, and then "releases them back to the streets with a criminal record that permanently impairs their ability to earn a legal living."

And the "perpetual prisoner machine," as Soering terms it, keeps growing with no end in sight. Virginia's prison population, which has quadrupled over the past quarter century, is projected to grow 20 percent, to 43,000 by 2010. That's nearly the population of Charlottesville. The cost to taxpayers is nearing \$1 billion a year.

Soering suggests it's time to ask: Isn't there a better way?

Jens Soering fires a warning shot across the bow of the prison industrial complex. This book is the best short, readable, fact-driven summation of why prisons don't work, but what makes the book so powerful is that it is written by a conservative Christian addressed to other fiscal conservatives.

Reviewed by Kenneth Gutierrez, Winter/Spring 2005

If he'd been convicted in his native Germany, he would be free right now. But Jens Soering had the misfortune of being convicted in a country that has only five percent of the world's population, but nearly a quarter of its prisoners; a country that, because it has increased the length of sentences and virtually eliminated parole, has seen its prison population grow seven times larger than it was in 1970; a country that puts a larger percentage of its own citizens behind bars than any other country in the world.

The country Jens Soering was convicted in was, of course, the United States. A former student at the University of Virginia, he was arrested in 1986 for the double homicide of his girlfriend's parents (a crime he denies committing). A former Jefferson Scholar and the son of a German diplomat, Jens Soering has written prolifically while behind bars, publishing dozens of articles and two books. In his latest book, **An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse**, he confesses that his "personal agenda is to free as many of my fellow convicts as possible, since I myself will never be released."

Soering works towards this goal by assembling a staggering array of facts and statistics to support his argument that the American penal system is not only cruel and vindictive, but also a huge waste of money.

Yet despite its heavy use of statistics, **An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse** is far from being a dull read. The results of his research are shocking: African-American men are jailed at a rate of 6,838 per 100,000 while, "by comparison South Africa kept only 851 out of 100,000 of its black men caged in the last year of the Apartheid." Currently, "5.66 million adults in this country either are now or at one time have been in prison" and yet prison populations continue to grow even while crime rates have plummeted. Why? Aside from pointing his finger at special interests such as prison guard unions and for-profit, corporate prison operators, Soering speculates that one reason our prison system continues to grow is that "murder reports on network TV news rose 336% from 1990-1995 while the actual homicide rate fell by 13%."

Soering is relentless in his exposure of the dark underbelly of American society that is our prison system. "Anywhere from 250,000 to 600,000 of America's 2.1 million prisoners," he reports, "are forced to have sex against their will each year," resulting in an HIV infection rate that's 28 times as high in New York State prisons than in the civilian U.S. population. "Prosecutors," he writes, "know full well they are in effect imposing capital-punishment-by-virus whenever they put a juvenile on trial as an adult. But failure to do so would mean losing their next election, so the gruesome practice of providing hardened convicts with underage sex toys continues."

Alongside all the facts illustrating the brutality, excessive cost, and ineffectiveness of prisons, Soering provides a battery of statistics proving that the opposite is true of rehabilitation programs: They're cheap and they work. And yet funding for any sort of betterment of inmates has continued to vanish while simultaneously the number of inmates has exploded. According to Soering, inmates "who completed a college degree program behind bars re-offended at nearly half the rate of those who began but did not finish their studies," despite which "college degree programs behind bars have now been cut almost entirely, from 350 in 1982, to no more than twelve in the entire United States in 2001."

Named after the conclusion reached by a 1990 British government report on prisons, **An Expensive Way to Make Bad People Worse** is a scathing indictment of the American criminal justice system that will undoubtedly advance the cause of prison reform by opening the eyes of all who read it to the waste and injustice of our current system. "If I can make changes in the system so that folks like this can be released, then I want to do that," he once told an interviewer. "The other option is playing basketball."

"The best short, readable, fact-driven summation of why prisons don't work." Peter Wagner, Prison Policy Initiative

#### About the Author

**Jens Soering** is a German citizen and Centering Prayer practitioner who has been incarcerated since 1986. His case has been featured on Court TV and A&E's *City Confidential*. His work has been featured in *Christianity Today*, *The Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *America*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *The American Conservative*. His book *The Convict Christ: What the Gospel Says about Criminal Justice* was the first place winner of the Catholic Press Association's 2007 awards.

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