



The Prison Industrial Complex and Agricultural Labor

Prison labor has a long, intertwined history with agriculture. After slavery was abolished in the late 1800s, a convict leasing system imprisoned recently freed black Americans and sold them to plantation owners. Today, the legacy of slavery continues as over 30,000 incarcerated men and women, disproportionately people of color, still work in farming or food-related positions—often for little pay and in poor working conditions. Private companies selling goods from buffalo mozzarella to Vidalia onions profit immensely from the exploitation of incarcerated individuals in agricultural labor. State governments, through their Department of Corrections (DOC), also take advantage of inmates by using the agricultural goods within state departments as a way to minimize food-related costs.

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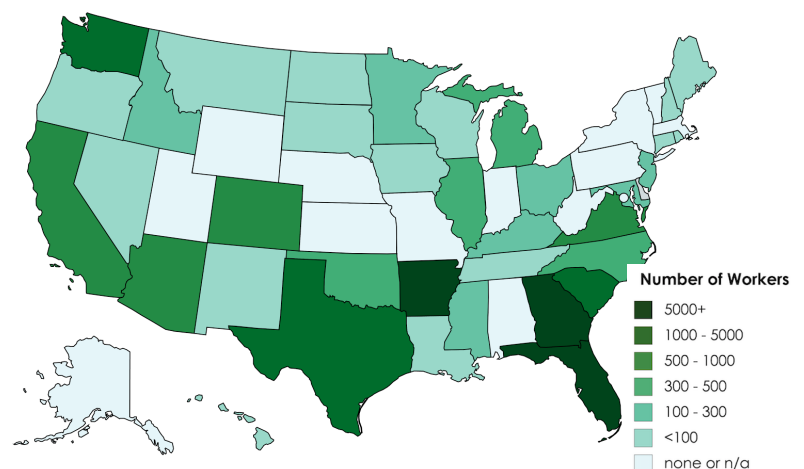
Agricultural labor in state prisons varies greatly among states, and even between facilities within a single state. Some work is paid, some is unpaid, and other work is volunteer labor. Regardless of how work is classified, **most inmates receive less than \$2 to \$3 dollars per day** after wage deductions, with many making less than a dollar per day.

It is difficult to depict the magnitude of agricultural labor occurring in prisons because few state department of corrections report on their farming operations. However, even with sparse information, it is known that 46 states have some confirmed agriculture production occurring within their prison systems and **over 20% of states have large-scale operations.**

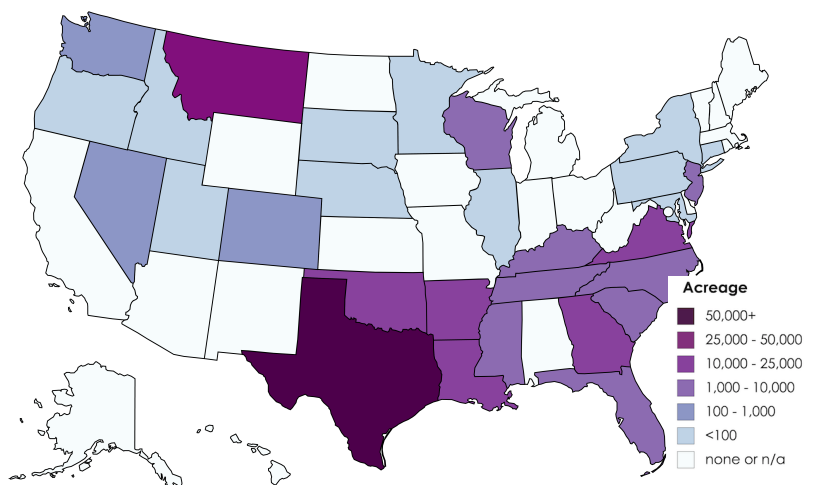
As the maps show, prison labor tends to be more highly concentrated in southern states. **This distribution reflects the roots of prison labor in slavery** and the post-slavery practice of convict leasing.

***Important Consideration:** These maps only capture a fraction of agriculture production occurring within prisons because 1) only data from state prisons was collected – so any agricultural labor in county or federal prisons is missing and 2) only information could be included from states that provide data on their farming operations, which many do not report. As a result, the maps provide only a conservative estimate and likely largely underestimate the number of inmates working in agriculture and acreage of prison farms and gardens.

Confirmed Number of Inmates Working in Agriculture by State*



Confirmed Acreage of Prison Farms & Gardens by State*



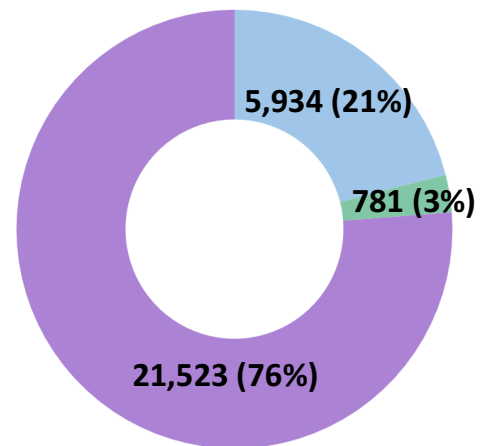
Who Organizes Prison Agricultural Labor?

Correctional Industries, an entity of the DOC, organize inmate labor to produce and sell foods through farming operations or by contracting with private companies.

State DOCs or Independent Facilities run large-scale prison farms to alleviate incarceration costs by supplementing food in prisons or selling to other departments within the state.

Prison Gardens, typically organized by individual facilities, utilize small tracts of land to grow food to be used within the prison or to be donated, often for rehabilitative purposes though some gardens function essentially as smaller state-run farms.

Division of Agricultural Labor in State Prisons



● Industry-Run ● Prison Gardens ● State-Run

Who Stands to Benefit?

- 1. Companies with labor contracts** By law, companies with inmate labor contracts must pay inmates the prevailing industry wage. However, they save money as they do not have to pay overtime or pay for benefits. Additionally, the base pay is still low because agriculture is often exempt from the minimum wage and benefits requirements of other industries. For example, **Arizona Corrections Industry** has a **\$5 million labor contract with Hickman's Family Farms**, the 4th largest US egg producer, and a **\$2 million labor contract with Nature Sweet** which established a base pay of **\$2.00/hr before wage deductions**
- 2. Companies in niche markets** By law, prisons must sell goods to private companies at a prevailing market price and must not displace employees currently working in those fields. But in niche markets, these prices have not been established or are not enforced and there are so few employees working in the sector that displacing labor is not an issue. Companies can then make a large profit by buying cheap products for prison farm operations and then selling the product for a much higher price on the market. **Abbey Winery sourced grapes from Colorado Correctional Industries** to produce a wine which **won a silver medal** at the 15th Annual Grand Harvest Awards in California.
- 3. State DOCs** Prisons must sell goods to open markets at the prevailing market price so that they fairly compete with other competitors. Often, this allows DOCs to achieve a large profit margin because their cost of production is much lower than other companies who must pay their employees minimum wage. For example, **CALPIA**, California's correctional industry made over **\$2 million in profit** from agriculture and food between 2015 and 2016.

Food for Thought

Despite their exploitative labor practices, agricultural work within both prison gardens AND correctional industries has been shown to reduce rates of recidivism. Inmates cite farm jobs as more desirable than other jobs, as it gives them an opportunity to be outside and they find the work fulfilling. Prison farm jobs sometimes even have a wait list to participate. It is important to consider to the larger context of slavery that these preferences of work exist in. Still, the preference of farm work suggests that calling for end of prison farms is not answer. Instead it should be advocated that **farm work programs are centered on building skills, paying fair wages, and preparing inmates for reentry rather than gaining profits or cutting costs.**