



Willie Ingram spent 51 years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where he picked crops. He recalled seeing men, working with little or no water, passing out in the fields, and being beaten by men with shields over their faces. CHANDRA MCCORMICK VIA AP

Continued from previous page

sidered employees, are denied many of those entitlements and cannot protest or form unions.

“They may be doing the exact same work as people who are not incarcerated, but they don’t have the training, they don’t have the experience, they don’t have the protective equipment,” said Jennifer Turner, lead author of a 2022 American Civil Liberties Union report on prison labor.

Almost all of the country’s state and federal adult prisons have some sort of work program, employing around 800,000 people, the report said. It noted the vast majority of those jobs are connected to tasks like maintaining prisons, laundry or kitchen work, which typically pay a few cents an hour if anything at all. And the few who land the highest-paying state industry jobs may earn only a dollar an hour.

Altogether, labor tied specifically to goods and services produced through state prison industries brought in more than \$2 billion in 2021, the ACLU report said. That does not include work-release and other programs run through local jails, detention and immigration centers, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation facilities.

Some incarcerated workers with just a few months or years left on their sentences have been employed everywhere from popular restaurant chains like Burger King to major retail stores and meat-processing plants.

Unlike work crews picking up litter in orange jumpsuits, they go largely unnoticed, often wearing the same uniforms as their civilian counterparts.

Outside jobs can be coveted because they typically pay more, and some states deposit a small percentage earned into a savings account for prisoners’ eventual release. Though many companies pay minimum wage, some states garnish more than half their salaries for items such as room and board and court fees.

It’s a different story for those on prison farms. The biggest operations remain in the South and crops are still harvested on a number of former slave plantations, including in Arkansas, Texas and at Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Farm. Those states, along with Florida, Alabama, South Carolina and Georgia, pay nothing for most types of work.

Most big farms, including Angola, have largely mechanized many of their operations, using commercial-size tractors, trucks and combines for corn, soy, rice and other row crops. But prisoners in some places continue to do other work by hand, including clearing brush with swing blades.

“I was in a field with a hoe in my hand with maybe like a hundred other women. We were standing in a line very closely together, and we had to raise our hoes up at the exact same time and count ‘One, two, three, chop!’” said Faye Jacobs, who worked on prison farms in Arkansas.

Jacobs, who was released in 2018 after more than 26

years, said the only pay she received was two rolls of toilet paper a week, toothpaste and a few menstrual pads each month.

She said she also endured taunting from guards saying “Come on, hos, it’s hoe squad!” She was later sent back to the fields at another prison after women there complained of sexual harassment by staff inside the facility.

“We were like ‘Is this a punishment?’” she said. “‘We’re telling y’all that we’re being sexually harassed, and you come back and the first thing you want to do is just put us all on hoe squad.’”

David Farabough, who oversees Arkansas’ 20,000 acres of prison farms, said the state’s operations can help build character.

“A lot of these guys come from homes where they’ve never understood work and they’ve never understood the feeling at the end of the day for a job well-done,” he said. “We’re giving them purpose. ... And then at the end of the day, they get the return by having better food in the kitchens.”

In several states, along with raising chickens, cows and hogs, corrections departments have their own processing plants, dairies and canneries. But many states also hire out prisoners to do that same work at big private companies.

The AP met women in Mississippi locked up at restitution centers, the equivalent of debtors’ prisons, to pay off court-mandated expenses. They worked at Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen and other fast-food chains and also have been hired out to individuals for work like lawn mowing or home repairs.

“There is nothing innovative or interesting about this system of forced labor as punishment for what in so many instances is an issue of poverty or substance abuse,” said Cliff Johnson, director of the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Mississippi.

In Alabama, where prisoners are leased out by companies, AP reporters followed inmate transport vans to poultry plants run by Tyson Foods, which owns brands such as Hillshire Farms, Jimmy Dean and Sara Lee, along with a company that supplies beef, chicken and fish to McDonald’s. The vans also stopped at a chicken processor that’s part of a joint-venture with Cargill, which is America’s largest private company. It brought in a record \$177 billion in revenue in fiscal year 2023 and supplies conglomerates like PepsiCo.

Though Tyson didn’t respond to questions about direct links to prison farms, it said that its work-release programs are voluntary and that incarcerated workers receive the same pay as their civilian colleagues.

Some people arrested in Alabama are put to work even before they’ve been convicted. An unusual work-release program accepts pre-trial defendants, allowing them to avoid jail while earning bond money. But with multiple fees deducted from their salaries, that can take time.

The Associated Press receives support from the Public Welfare Foundation for reporting focused on criminal justice. This story also was supported by Columbia University’s Ira A. Lipman Center for Journalism and Civil and Human Rights in conjunction with Arnold Ventures. The AP is solely responsible for all content.