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**Wolcott Wheeler SweeneyVesty Writing Assignment**

**Part I: Article**

**Turning America’s Prisoners Into America’s Workforce**

Today the United States is encountering a twin crisis. On one hand, we’re facing a critical shortage of skilled workers. On the other, we needlessly jail more people than anywhere else in the world—depriving ourselves of badly-needed productivity. We believe that the solution of the first problem can easily dovetail into that of the second.

Commenting on America’s current shortage of workers, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Thomas Donahue declared in a recent CNBC [interview](https://www.cnbc.com/video/2018/10/03/weve-run-out-of-skilled-workers-says-us-chamber-of-commerce-ceo.html) that basically we’ve run out of both skilled and non-skilled workers, imperiling American prosperity in the long run. With its aging population and declining birth rate, America is headed for a systemic shortage of workers. But where are we going to find the additional workforce that we so desperately need?

When we consider our lack of a qualified workforce, why we are locking up so many people who could be productive workers? The U.S. jails a greater percentage of its population than any other nation by far: 2.2 million people, a 500% increase in the last 40 years. Although America contains only 5% of the world’s population, it houses 25% of its prisoners. As can be imagined, the social and financial price of this misguided policy is incredibly destructive, damaging generations. If we designated our jailed population as a single city, then “Prison” would be ranked as America’s fifth largest city.

The financial cost is also crippling; U.S. per capita incarceration far exceeds that of any other country on earth. Incarceration bleeds the United States of $482 billion every year, and as part of a domino effect, it shatters families and communities, robs us of labor productivity, and imposes a gigantic fiscal burden.

Why does America have so many prisoners? It’s not the result of increased crime rates—it originates from changes in law and policy. First, as a result of the War on Drugs that began in 1982, we began throwing more people in prison. In 1980, 40,900 were incarcerated for drug offenses in the U.S.; by 2016, that number had exploded over tenfold to 450,345. Currently the number of people in prison for a drug offense exceeds the number of people jailed for any crime in 1980.

Second, our society decided to impose longer prison sentences with severe measures like mandatory minimums and reductions in parole release. According to the National Research Council, half of the 222% growth in the state prison population between 1980 and 2010 was created by longer sentences imposed for all offenses. On top of that, life sentences have increased over time, so that now, one out of every nine person in prison is serving a life sentence. Of these, almost a third are doomed to life without parole.

Third, institutional racism has also played a part in this surge of the jailed. While people of color constitute 37% of the U.S. population, they comprise a disproportionate 67% of the prison population. African-Americans have a greater chance of being arrested than white Americans, only to face a higher conviction rate and harsher sentences. If you’re a black man, you’re six times more likely to be imprisoned than if you’re a white man, and if you’re a Hispanic man, you’re twice as likely to be jailed as a non-Hispanic white man.

Lastly, poverty, poor education, and single-parent families are also driving Americans into prison. In the U.S. today, approximately 13.6 million single parents are raising over 21 million children, and 84% of single parents are mothers. When we view the devastating social damage triggered by fatherless homes, the [statistics](https://thefatherlessgeneration.wordpress.com/statistics/) are mind-boggling: fatherless homes account for 63% of youth suicides, five times the average; 90% of all homeless and runaway children, 32 times the average; 85% of all children who demonstrate behavior disorders, 20 times the average; 80% of rapists with anger problems, 14 times the average; and 71% of all high school dropouts, nine times the average.

It makes no sense to imprison so many people when they could be productive contributors to our society.

If we make a conscious and concerted effort to reduce criminality, increase rehabilitation, decrease incarceration, and cut back the length of sentences for non-violent crimes, we could add vitally needed workers to our labor pool and create stronger and more productive communities and families.

There is hope. The current administration has put criminal justice and sentencing reform on its agenda after the midterm election, recognizing that the epidemic of mass incarceration we’re currently undergoing has no place in a civilized society. According to President Trump, too many people are in prison for too long for no reason. As a notable example, Kim Kardashian has appealed to the President directly about the need to free more people from irrationally long sentences, and it is anticipated that he will use his powers of pardon and clemency to rectify more miscarriages of justice.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has mobilized a broad-based initiative to address this mounting problem. The Chamber recognizes that a direct correlation between incarceration and low literacy has been proven by the fact that 85% of all juveniles who interact with the court system have functionally low literacy.

In response to this trend, over the next three years, the Chamber will invest $1 million to support literacy programs for at-risk youth in low-decile counties, collaborating with local and national literacy organizations such as the nonprofit [Aid to Inmate Mothers (AIM)](http://www.inmatemoms.org/)’s [Storybook Program](http://www.inmatemoms.org/programs-storybook-project.aspx), which sends recordings and books to the children of inmates, and [the Petey Greene Program](http://www.peteygreene.org/our-impact/), a nonprofit organization dedicated to training college students so they can tutor prisoners in five states and Washington, D.C.

[The U.S. Chamber Litigation Center](https://www.chamberlitigation.com/), the Chamber’s legal arm, is fighting to counteract initiatives by states to ban reading in prisons. This wrong-headed war on books in prisons has been reported by such leading newspapers as [The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/theres-a-war-on-books-in-prisons-it-needs-to-end/2018/02/08/c31cd122-02b3-11e8-8acf-ad2991367d9d_story.html?utm_term=.d0742d61d017), [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/opinion/books-prison-packages-new-york.html), and [The Philadelphia Inquirer](http://www2.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/pennsylvania-prison-incarceration-books-ban-inmates-prisoners-20181015.html).

[The U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform](https://www.instituteforlegalreform.com/) is supporting the administration’s [First Step Act](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/5/22/17377324/first-step-act-prison-reform-congress), which seeks to rehabilitate prisoners by encouraging them to participate in rehabilitation programs to possibly obtain earlier release. The bill has been passed by the House of Representatives, and President Trump has announced his intention to sign it.

In addition, the Chamber is encouraging member organizations to actively support literacy programs while pressing national and local leaders to undertake comprehensive prison reform. The Chamber believes that the way to reduce the number of people sent to jail and limit the length of their sentences is to address the larger pre-conviction issues of arrest, prosecution, and sentencing. And once people are incarcerated, the Chamber contends that we should strive to cut the amount of time they spend in prison by offering reduced sentences for good behavior.

The Chamber is also recommending that its member organizations be pro-active in hiring recently released prisoners and helping to integrate them into the workforce by supporting such institutions as halfway houses. A comprehensive study detailing this proposal is currently in the works.

With fewer individuals in prison, more people can join the workforce—and thereby strengthen the American economy and continue our prosperity.

**Part II: Press Release**

**U.S. Chamber of Commerce Backs Prison Reform to Enhance America’s Workforce**

***CEO Thomas Donohue announces a wide range of initiatives to help solve America’s manpower crisis***

New York, NY, October xx, 2018 – The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has announced its support of wide-ranging prison reform measures to counteract America’s severe shortage of both skilled and unskilled workers.

“Basically, we’ve run out of both skilled and non-skilled workers, and we need them to keep this economy going,” said U.S. Chamber of Commerce CEO Thomas Donahue. “Where are we going to find them? In this light, it makes no sense for the U.S. to lock up 2.2 million potentially productive workers when they could be contributing to our economy.”

Donahue pointed out that the U.S. jails a greater percentage of its population than any other nation by far. Although America contains only 5% of the world’s population, it houses 25% of its prisoners, at the crippling cost of $482 billion every year. This is the result of changes in law and policy, not increased crime rates. The War on Drugs has overcrowded our prisons, and the crisis has only been intensified by severe measures such as mandatory minimums and reductions in parole release. One out of every nine person in prison is serving a life sentence, and of these, almost a third have been sentenced to life without parole. In addition, poverty, poor education, and single-parent families are also driving Americans into jail.

“If we make a conscious and concerted effort to reduce criminality, increase rehabilitation, decrease incarceration, and cut back the length of sentences for non-violent crimes,” Donahue said, “we can add vitally needed workers to our labor pool and create stronger and more productive communities and families.”

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