Discipline and Devolution: Constructions of Poverty, Race, and Criminality in the Politics of Rural Prison Development

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Abstract: The soaring expansion of the US prison population is transforming the geographies of both urban and rural landscapes. As the trend in mass incarceration persists, depressed rural spaces are increasingly associated with rising prison development and the increasing criminalization of rural communities of disadvantage. Drawing on in-depth archival and interview research in rural communities in the Northwestern states of Idaho and Montana, this paper explores how cultural productions of poverty and exclusion intersect with rural prison development. I examine how representations of poverty and criminality are entangled with processes of economic restructuring and the localization of economic development and social welfare. I explore the ways in which the rural prison geography of the Northwest is linked to the material and discursive construction of those in poverty and how these narratives are produced through local relations of race, ethnicity, and class. I suggest that the mobilization of these constructions legitimates rural prison expansion, increasingly punitive social and criminal justice policies, and the retrenchment of racialized and classed inequality. Further, I argue that these discursive imaginations of the poor work to obscure the central dynamics producing poverty under the neoliberal restructuring of rural economies and governance.

Keywords: poverty, race, crime, neoliberal restructuring

Prisons are not left empty and social definitions...are not easily changed (Mayhew 1994:43, in Hannah-Moffat 2004:290).

Poor relief reinforces traditional structures of power and does not interfere with the needs of accumulation in particular localities (Boushey 1997:171).

Prisons loom large on the US horizon as over two million people, predominantly drawn from communities of color, are currently incarcerated. Recent projections forecast a growth in the prison population of 13% in the next 5 years; by contrast, the nation’s population is predicted to expand by 4.5% (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2007). The contemporary trend in mass incarceration is underscored not only by the skyrocketing of the prison population, but also...
by increasingly punitive social welfare and crime policy and the
entrenchment of racialized and classed inequality. Paralleling the
monumental growth in incarceration and state spending on corrections,
the retrenchment of the US welfare state has dramatically reworked
funding eligibility and allocation of public assistance through the
implementation of “get tough” policies designed to move welfare
recipients from “dependency” into the workforce. The 1996 Personal
Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)
ended welfare as a nationally funded entitlement and imposed a host of
more punishing policies including strict time limits, work requirements,
diversion programs, and harsher enforcement of sanctions.

A growing body of literature theorizes the punitive welfare apparatus
and the acceleration of incarceration as akin to other practices that
regulate and discipline the poor as social and spatial inequalities
intensify under advanced capitalism and global economic restructuring
(Beckett and Western 2001; Gilmore 1998–1999, 2007; Herbert
and Brown 2006; Peck 2003; Prashad 2003). This scholarship
situates the increased enactment of hyperpunitive crime and welfare
policy in relation to the restructuring of political and economic
relationships under neoliberalism, broadly defined as a set of policies,
practices, and sensibilities that promote market triumphalism and
liberal individualism via the promotion of rational choice, unregulated
markets, and unimpeded competition as well as the diminution of public
describes the contemporary “social/penal frontier” as “an active zone
of neoliberal statebuilding, a zone fissured and enveloped by complex
scalar politics” including the erosion of national welfare benefits, the
criminalization of poverty and hyperregulation of people of color, and
“the privatization of (local) reproduction”. Peck further argues that
situating the specific processes of these formations in local conditions
is helpful in laying bare the multiple articulations and contradictions of
neoliberalism.

Building from these themes, I pose questions about how cultural
representations of poverty, crime, and exclusion intersect with rural
prison development in communities experiencing restructuring and deep
inequality in the rural American Northwest. Drawing from a region-wide
political economic analysis and archival and interview research in two
comparative community case studies in Montana and Idaho¹, I examine
the ways in which poverty and prison development are represented
and reproduced under the restructuring of economies and governance
in rural Northwestern communities². Specifically, I investigate how
local economic, political, and social leadership discursively constructs
imaginations about the causes and consequences of poverty in the
context of devolution and the localization of social service provision
and economic policy.
I situate prison development within a range of strategies for rural economic development that emphasize industrial recruitment as a means for employment creation and capital investment, including hog farms, large-scale dairies, and animal and food processing plants. I argue that community leaders frame these efforts in distinctly neoliberal manners, particularly in their focus on competitive efforts of recruitment, their emphasis on markets and job growth as the solution to poverty, and their promotion of “business-friendly” incentive packages designed to attract industrial investment. I interrogate how discourses of poverty, whether codified by race, crime, or individual choice, work to obscure the linkages between economic development, socio-economic exclusion, and prison expansion. By “studying up”—focusing on privileged actors, like community officials and gatekeepers—I examine how local politics of difference are mobilized in ways that have important material consequences, including the kinds of investments pursued as well as distribution and access to social services.

**Discipline and Devolution**

Geographers critical of the neoliberal project examine its spatial reproduction through the logics of the market fundamentalism and individual choice. This vast body of literature examines how processes of neoliberalization (occurring at a variety of scales) unfold through specific policies and rationalities, characterized by privatization, deregulation, the localization of social and economic policy, the reduction of trade barriers, and the retrenchment of public welfare (England and Ward 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002; Peck 2003). Extending beyond deregulation and public policy retrenchment, more recent articulations of neoliberalism are distinguished by “aggressive intervention by governments around issues such as crime, policing, welfare reform and urban surveillance with the purpose of disciplining and containing those marginalized or dispossessed by the neoliberalization of the 1980s” (Routledge 2003:334). These interventions are examined in relation to the remaking of the neoliberal state, which utilizes an expanded array of regulatory mechanisms to sanction the poor (Peck 2001, 2003; Routlege 2003; Shram 2000). Following this line of analysis, the expansion of inequality under neoliberal economic and social policy leads to the enactment and enforcement of laws and policies that criminalize and exclude the poor and other marginalized groups (Herbert and Brown 2006). Thus, the increasingly punitive character of both welfare and criminal justice systems in the United States underpins a shift from the social welfare management of poverty to its treatment through incarceration (Beckett and Western 2001; Wacquant 2001).

The concept of neoliberalism is also used to imply a specific cultural project and constellation of discourses—or a regime of knowledge—
that constructs subjects and spaces through differing mechanisms of power and governance at a variety of scales. As a set of policies and practices, neoliberalism reinscribes a distinctive, liberal self to enforce the technologies of the “free” market, the logics of personal responsibility, and a state that seeks to foster self-governance (Fraser 1993). These rationalities are underlain by the notions of blame and culpability, which mark disparities and individual rather than structural. Neoliberal shifts are thus at once material—involving the destruction of supports and redistributive policies—as well as discursive—reframining the market as the means through which to allocate public good and repositioning those who are disadvantaged by these broader political economic shifts as deficient individuals who need to be subject to new disciplinary practices in the emerging economic order (Peck 2003; Routlege 2003).

The construction of individuals as self-determining and autonomous is, of course, culturally encoded by the dynamics of race, class and gender. Policymakers and the media have long constructed the poor as criminal and undeserving, at once undermining public support for assistance and repositioning the poor as producing their own poverty (Piven and Cloward 1971; Shram 2000, 2006). Empirical examinations document how these representations of the poor have served as justificatory narratives to bolster political economic efforts to dismantle the liberal welfare state (see, for example, Albelda and Withorn 2002; Piven 2001; Shram 2006). The power of gendered and racialized rhetoric in situating meanings and understandings about poverty are emblazoned in the social constructions of “welfare queens”, “the ghetto”, and “the underclass”. Punitive neoliberal initiatives are produced through cultural representations that cast some poor as deserving of state assistance, and some as lazy, criminal, and undeserving. Poverty knowledge is thus a disciplinary knowledge that legitimates some groups needs and their management while rejecting others (Shram 2000:18). Neoliberal constructions of poverty flow through social hierarchies and relations of race, class, gender, and citizenship in ways that cast out and criminalize some while defining others as deserving and entitled.

My focus on the discursive framing of the poor is important because representations of poverty shape access to limited public services and bolster community development policies that have intensified dynamics of inequality. Specifically, the criminalization of poverty in these communities works to legitimate rural neoliberal restructuring in two ways. First, these representations undergird decreased spending on social welfare and increased investment in incarceration, as well as open hostility to the poor. In other words, these narratives provide the ideological justification for the displacement of spending from social services—already profoundly limited under devolution and state funding crises—to corrections, which disproportionately impacts poor
communities of color with already limited community resources and support.

Next, I argue that the criminal coding of poverty not only supports the erosion of public assistance but also goes hand in glove with discourses surrounding competitive neoliberal economic development and the intensification of racialized and classed inequality that has occurred in the wake of rural economic restructuring in the Northwest. Wilson and Grammenos (2005), for example, analyze the ways in which discursive imaginaries of poor Puerto Rican communities were mobilized to support gentrification in restructuring, inner-city Chicago. Similarly, I contend that scripts about poverty in the Northwest reinforce neoliberal initiatives by constructing the poverty experienced by some groups as criminalized and individualized, rather than systemic or structural. This framing absolves town officials from providing support for the poor and legitimates community boosters’ pursuit of economic development policies that have re-entrenched social and spatial inequalities.

To chronicle these points, I draw on examples from communities in Idaho and Montana where community representations of poverty intersect with local politics of race, ethnicity, and citizenship in place-specific ways to constitute entitlement and access to resources in additional to community development policy. In the next section, I discuss rural restructuring, policy devolution, and rural prison expansion. Next, drawing on empirical examples, I consider how racialized and criminalized constructions of the poor underpin and legitimate neoliberal initiatives and uneven development within two rural communities in these Northwestern states. I conclude with a brief consideration about the ways in which neoliberal discourses about poverty constitute poor subjects while simultaneously obscuring the mechanisms that produce their exclusion and marginality. I argue that these discursive imaginations of the poor work to obscure the central dynamics producing poverty under the neoliberal restructuring of rural economies and poverty governance.

**Governing Rural Development: Restructuring, Poverty, and Prisons**

The contemporary restructuring of political and economic relations is transforming rural landscapes as the erosion of federal social and economic supports is further underscored by declining industrial investment and employment opportunities in spatially isolated communities. Within global networks of capital accumulation, rural places are tremendously vulnerable to the pressures of restructuring, particularly as their economies are more dependent on market sectors that have faced increasing global competition and consolidation and whose production processes can be easily outsourced (eg agriculture and manufacturing) (McGranahan 2003:136; Weber et al 2002). In the
American Northwest, for instance, international trade agreements and drought have severely impacted the agricultural industry as farmers and ranchers face expanding competition from increased flows of beef and wheat from Canada and Mexico (Lawson et al 2008b). As the resource-based anchor of many rural economies deteriorates, traditional sources of income disappear.

Indeed, a significant feature of rural restructuring is the declining prominence of agricultural or resource-based economic activities. In many rural places, this transition has occurred alongside the expansion of the service sector. Shifts to amenity-based tourism focused on environmental recreation such as skiing, fishing, and hunting has generated dramatic changes in rural Western landscapes (Ghose 2004). This process is significant in shaping contemporary patterns of wealth and inequality as new streams of wealthy residents and middle class retirees purchase property and second homes within declining rural communities. Rural gentrification has amplified inequalities as the proliferation of high-end resorts and wealthy in-migrants generates rising land prices and a greater demand for services and retailing. The prominence of the service sector has further segmented rural economies and class structures as cost of living increases and rising housing values price low-wage workers out of local markets and intensify economic polarization (Lawson et al 2008b). Furthermore, the growing importance of the amenity-driven service sector in rural areas is indicative of number of rural economies dependent on a low-wage, low-skill sector of employment (Falk and Lobao 2003). Rural gentrification, wage polarization, and the rise of service activities all contribute to shifts in patterns of poverty and inequality in the Northwest.

Reflecting broader trends in domestic policy that have reoriented social spending and economic development towards marketized agendas, state and local programs in the Northwest are being reframed in ways that are intensifying poverty as rural communities with depressed economies and declining resource bases are increasingly responsible to administration of community services and welfare. One of the most decisive acts of policy devolution is the 1996 PRWORA, which abolished federal entitlement to cash assistance and transferred federal responsibility for welfare to states and municipalities. In addition to these sweeping changes, PRWORA restructured federal financing of provision from matching grants to block grants (Sawicky 1999). This rescaling of welfare administration vested substantially increased discretion to state and local governments in the provision of social services, and in doing so, created dramatic variation in definitions of need, eligibility and entitlements to assistance from state to state. These distinctions mean that there is tremendous variability in how reform has been implemented across states and counties (Pickering et al 2006; Sawicky 1999).
Initiatives to reform welfare in the states of Montana and Idaho resonate with these national efforts, but also illustrate the spatial unevenness of state welfare regimes. Both states have some of the most restrictive and punitive welfare systems in the country, historically operating at the minimum federal benefit level and imposing strict guidelines and policies that enforce swift and harsh sanctions. However, the structure and administration of services in the state varies (Lawson et al 2008a). Montana, for instance, implemented a welfare-to-work program and did away with Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) under Families Achieving Independence in Montana (FAIM), a state-based alternative to policy reforms outlined in PRWORA (Finn and Underwood 2000). However, in Idaho, welfare provision is differently structured, with seven regional divisions coordinating with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare in administering services (Lawson et al 2008a). This framework means that counties themselves carry an increased financial burden for the provision of social services, as the state provides little in the way of funding for public welfare. Consequently, counties are highly dependent on federal community block grants and private foundations, which provide the majority of support for provisions in the absence of government funding (Lawson et al 2008a).

Since the passage of PRWORA, both Montana and Idaho have seen substantial decreases in their welfare caseloads. Following the implementation of welfare reform in Montana, the state cut the number of rolls in half (McLaughlin 1998). Furthermore, Montana’s Department of Health and welfare reduced the state’s TANF program by 25% to avoid a budget deficit in 2003 (Forsell 2003). Idaho was second in the nation in cutting welfare caseloads in 2001, following only the state of Wyoming (Lakes 2002). Moreover, in 2006, for the second year in a row, the State of Idaho’s ‘Self-Reliance’ program—which includes cash benefits and food stamps—denied more applications that it has approved (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare 2007). While many supporters of welfare reform cite this trend as an indication of the program’s success, critics argue that these declines are the outcome of new restrictive time limits and other sanctions that have pushed record numbers off of the roles.

Meanwhile declines in federal support are increasing the need and demand for services in both states. For example, the implementation of Idaho’s 2-year maximum benefit period—the shortest benefit period in the nation—fueled increases in homelessness and demand at local food banks and shelters (Lakes 2002). Furthermore, food banks in Idaho have seen a spike in need and have simultaneously witnessed a growing number of food insecure families (Idaho Food Bank 2007). Similarly, food banks in Montana report that demand for their services triple in 2003 (Donovan 2003).
Within this context of diminishing supports and increasing need, many rural communities find that they are unable to fulfill the requirements set forth by changes in welfare policy (Weber et al 2002; Zimmerman and Hirschl 2003). Limited resources, industry decline, and restricted job opportunities not only contribute to the intensification of poverty, but also underscore the challenges of supporting a local population with an insufficient industry and tax base. These changes have facilitated transformations in the economic development strategies, policies, and practices pursued by rural communities evaded by national growth and renewal. In particular, community development policies have primarily emphasized industrial recruitment in order to offset the economic and employment declines of traditional rural industries. Intensified by increasing competition for scarce economic investments, rural communities compete with one another utilizing an array of incentives (tax breaks, land, infrastructure) and marketing strategies to secure industrial resources. Reflecting these broader trends, rural communities in the Northwest are engaged in the recruitment of a range of typically considered less desirable industries, such as prisons and juvenile correctional facilities, mega-dairies, animal slaughtering and processing plants, and hazardous waste storage as they encounter increasing competition, rural gentrification, and deep poverty.

Rural prison development must then be situated within a neoliberal framework wherein communities must compete for economic viability in order “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” (Herbert-Cheshire 2000:2). Community development discourse associates prison development with increased employment opportunities, job growth and expanded tax revenues for rural communities (Gilmore 1998–1999, 2007; Beale 2001). Within this rhetoric, prison projects create multiplier effects with the establishment of other businesses within communities, such as hotels, gas stations, and restaurants intended to accommodate a growing population and increased levels of out-of-town visitors (Huling 2002; King et al 2003). In addition to the expansion of employment and business opportunities, the revenues generated from property and sales taxes are sizeable. In some cases, prisons are the largest taxpayers within rural communities (Kulish 2001). I now turn to case study research in Idaho and Montana to examine how local discourses about poverty, race, and crime work to justify growing inequality and prison recruitment efforts.

Constructions of Poverty, Race, and Crime in the American Northwest
The states of Idaho and Montana provide trenchant examples of increasingly punitive crime and welfare policy, particularly as recent state cuts have severely impacted social welfare provisions at the
community level, resulting in stricter guidelines and requirements for public assistance, increased surveillance and, as discussed above, fewer people on welfare rolls. The evidence abounds. In Montana, where participants in the state’s welfare-to work program make about $3 an hour, cash assistance for welfare recipients was even further decreased by 26% in 2003 (Donovan 2003). Despite the continued growth in costs of living, efforts to increase the state’s minimum wage from $5.15 an hour and improve welfare benefits in 2005 were defeated (Donovan 2003). Unlike most states, in Idaho both driving without a license and writing a bad check, even for an amount less than $250, are considered felony offenses (Russell 2005:1). Equally strict, ownership of a vehicle makes individuals ineligible for public assistance, although public transportation is non-existent in rural Idaho (Russell 2005:1).

Although the sheer numbers of prisons and incarcerated individuals in the rural American Northwest are smaller on a whole than in other areas, the states in this region are currently engaged in substantial prison expansion projects. In fact, the rate of expansion occurring in these states is quite startling in reference to relative population sizes and crime rates, both of which are well below the national averages. The state of Idaho has experienced one of the fastest rates of prison growth in the nation with an incarceration rate 13% above the national average and one third of it’s prison population is housed out of state or in county jails (National Institute of Corrections 2007). Meanwhile, Montana’s prison population continues to expand at a rate of 4–5% a year and in 2004 the Department of Corrections asked for a budget increase of $18 million dollars to fund new prison expansion projects (Montana Department of Corrections 2007).

Indeed, spending on prisons across the Northwest is extraordinary. Even as state and local governments encounter declining industrial bases, the devolution of federal community development funds, and the retrenchment of social service provision under welfare reform, investment in incarceration continues to climb. Recent state spending on corrections and Temporary Assistance to Need Children (TANF) cash benefits in Idaho and Montana reflect this trend: for example, in 2001 the State of Idaho spent $95,494,000 on prisons (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004) while investing just $43,452,900 on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (US Bureau of the Census 2000b). Similarly, Montana’s prison expenditures totaled $71,994,000 in 2001 (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004) while spending on TANF came in at $44,270,189 in the same year (US Bureau of the Census 2000b).

As prison growth has surged, poverty and inequality have deepened. The region contains some strikingly high levels of poverty, with poverty rates approaching 30% within some rural counties (US Bureau of the Census 2000a). One in four Latinos residing in the rural
Northwest lives in poverty as immigration to the region continues to boom (Kandel and Cromartie 2004), both fueled by and fueling the region’s retail, construction and agricultural sectors (Lawson et al 2008a, 2008b). The decline of historically dominant extractive industries in the region together with economic downturns and budget shortfalls have contributed to the shrinking of social policy funds.

Racialized Poverty Subjects and Entitlement to Services in Golden County, Idaho

I think that it [crime] hurts communities. It goes right back to the economics of the community. It costs so much, the cost of the paper work and the time. The time that the officers put in...the cost is phenomenal to fight the crimes that are occurring. And it unfortunately goes back to the poor. It’s the people who aren’t doing well, a lot of the people who got laid off from their jobs and stuff (personal interview 2005).

The deeply conservative state of Idaho is home to some of the nation’s most restrictive welfare and crime initiatives. Moreover, though Idaho ranks 37th in the nation in terms of crime rates, its prison growth has been truly remarkable. Since the passage of the state’s determinant sentencing laws, the prison population has grown by 169% (Jacobson 2005). In spite of the enormous fiscal pressures that prison expansion places upon the state’s budget—a budget which provides an appallingly small amount of support for social services—state lawmakers believe these expenditures are necessary. According to the Idaho State law, counties are responsible for indigent healthcare and assistance. However, rural counties in Idaho have few resources to fund poverty alleviation and social welfare programs.

Golden County, Idaho, located in the southwest corner of the state, is a county whose political economic history is dominated by agriculture. However, rises in agribusiness and development pressures stemming from the expansion of the Boise-metro area are making it increasingly difficult for its residents to make a living in traditional industries. Located on the Snake River, Golden County’s amenities and agricultural industry make it attractive to an array of new residents ranging from seasonal farmworkers residing in labor camps to wealthy retirees seeking more land for less money. In interviews, long-term residents expressed a great deal of anxiety about increasing property taxes (which were becoming unaffordable for some), the decline of the agricultural economic base, and the demise of family farms, both from the consolidation of agricultural activities and the breakup of former agricultural property for real estate development. In addition to these wealthy newcomers, a growing number of White and Latino residents...
who cannot afford to live in Boise are purchasing land and housing stock in Golden County that is more affordable. These new sets of in-migrants to the area are emblematic of the polarization of racial and class identities in the area. Profound economic and demographic change has heightened racial tensions in southwest rural Idaho, particularly as agricultural employment becomes increasingly mechanized and poverty deepens. Under these conditions, poverty policies have become increasingly restrictive and rural identities have been reworked through notions of race, citizenship, and class in a manner that constructs Latinos as poor and as criminal.

Archival research reveals that southern counties in rural Idaho exhibit high rates of both White and Latino poverty. Yet in interviews with local community members, poverty was coded as primarily a problem of the Hispanic community. Tapping into deeply racialized statewide anti-immigrant sentiment and “get tough” on crime and welfare rhetoric, these narratives weave a particular regime of understanding of the rural poor. Fueled by and further reinforcing this deeply raced and classed sentiment, counties in Idaho, who are by state law responsible for social welfare provision, have worked hard to try and pass a measure that would make indigent funds only available for US Citizens. In a statement that constructs indigent Latino immigrants not just as burdens on the social system but also as future prison inmates, the executive director the Idaho Counties Association claims:

> Idaho’s property tax payers have been left financially responsible, in part, for a failed policy on immigration. To the tune of more that $2 million dollars annually, property taxpayers have been held responsible for indigent health care and other social costs for illegal immigrants in Idaho. In addition, Idaho counties are also responsible for their cost of incarceration...often that cost includes medical care while incarcerated (Chadwick 2004).

The stereotype of the migrant worker or the poor Latino family as a financial burden to the counties, as draining the State’s prisons and social system, is deployed to delegitimate their use of assistance thereby constituting them as poor who are undeserving. By contrast, poor elderly whites, who comprise the majority of white poverty in the county, are seen as more justified in receiving the assistance available. As explained by one long-term resident:

> We have gang-wannabes. And, I think in my own personal opinion, I’m trying not be biased about this, there are a lot of Hispanic people that look for problems, who want to be able to blame their inability to get a good job on somebody else (personal interview 2005).

Later, she explains, “There are very few Americans asking for service. They have pride.”
The deployment of a criminalizing and demoralizing discourse works to justify the appallingly few services available for poor Latinos—documented and undocumented—in a state where minimum wage laws still do not apply to farm workers. It further designates this group as undeserving of service and support. Moreover, this discourse limits responsibility for employers who devalue their labor and for those who advocate lower taxes to prevent supposed dependence on and abuse of the public welfare system. Underscoring the criminalization of poor Latinos, migrant farmworkers bused into southern Idaho for seasonal cropwork reside in former German prisoner of war camps that remain, in their original form, in Golden County.

In line with this logic, recently a particularly xenophobic County Commissioner, Robert Vasquez, the grandson of Mexican immigrants, sent a bill for $2 million dollars to the Mexican consulate for unpaid welfare and incarceration costs ($575,075 for welfare services and $1.4 million for incarceration fees) (Egan 2005). In a similarly public forum, he also tried to declare his county a disaster area because of an “invasion of illegal aliens” (Egan 2005). Vasquez’s offensive rhetoric and political stunts have garnered him nationwide attention, particularly when he declared that illegal immigrants “overwhelm public services, bring gang violence and drugs and spread diseases like tuberculosis” (Egan 2005:2). His comments are not only racist and disturbing; they also provide a commentary about the state’s politics of exclusion, punishment, and citizenship. In addition, Vasquez’s efforts have generated some unlikely coalitions, as immigrant and human rights groups protest his demeaning representations and the business community rallies against his efforts to sue firms hiring illegal immigrants. These alliances underscore a key irony of the cultural construction of poverty in Golden and local economic imperatives centered upon an abundance of cheap labor: at the same time that immigrants are constructed as threatening criminals and burdens to the system, local business leadership necessitates—and facilitates—the presence of immigrant workers in the county.

The subtext of interviews and media commentaries suggests that the criminal constructions of poverty in Idaho are fueled by tensions about migrant farmwork and the growing Latino population “settling out” in the areas. These discourses are framed in relation to economic pressures on public funding for social services and in terms of alleged crime increases and drug trafficking. As one rural service provider explained, “There has been an explosion in the Hispanic population. And as a result of that, there has been an increase in crime” (personal interview 2005). This comment equates the growing Latino presence in the community with crime. In the context of contracting labor markets and a general shrinking of social service provision, struggles over access to jobs and services are thus significantly infused with local racial politics. By criminalizing poor Latinos, these discourses sanction Latino poverty
as an acceptable feature of the landscape, making it invisible in plain sight.

Combining rhetoric about crime, poverty, and citizenship, these narratives work to legitimate neoliberal cuts in public funding, fuel prison expansion, and justify racial and class inequality. Furthermore, this fear of crime and anti-immigrant rhetoric has fueled new “tough on crime” measures that have significantly contributed to the dramatic growth in Idaho’s prison population. Highlighting a key contradiction of neoliberal investment, Idaho’s House Speaker Mike Simpson recently stated: “You don’t base your crime policy on the fact that it costs you money. I think Idahoans want to be tough on crime and they’re willing to pay for it” (Russell 2005:1). Thus, although Idahoans are unwilling to adequately fund social services for their state’s poor, this official’s comment suggests that there is no limit to its spending on incarceration.

In spite of this fact, however, critical state budget crises are limiting new prison construction projects, though the extraordinary growth in Idaho’s prison population is putting significant pressure on its already overcrowded system. As recently as April 2008, the State of Idaho was forced to move prisoners to Oklahoma due to prison overcrowding and a recent projection forecasts that Idaho should expect a 78% increase in prisoners requiring an estimated $1 billion in prison construction alone by 2017 (Idaho Press Tribune 2008). Despite budget shortfalls, the state sees new prison construction as “a key prong in the state’s multi-pronged approach to managing inmate growth” and proposals are in the works to spend $189 million in 2009 on new prison construction and expansion of existing facilities (State of Idaho, Division of Financial Management 2007).

Social (Dis)Investment in Ridge County, Montana

I begin this section with comment made by a county official in Ridge County, Montana. This county has been the potential site for two private corrections facilities in the past decade. After a first failed attempt in the late nineties, the city of Carson in Ridge County is now the location of a new detention facility operated by a private corrections corporation. This commissioner explained to me that the city wanted “a prison for their greed”:

I did say that. Because here’s a good example: there’s a little group in town that wants to build a soup kitchen for people that are on the street. But the city has opposed that on every step of the way. What I’m trying to say is that this is a service for people who are needy but it doesn’t produce revenue. There is a difference. I told the people that were responsible for building that that maybe they should call it a detention soup kitchen and the city would be interested! And that way it would get built. But that’s good example of how people interpret things here (personal interview 2006).
This observation raises a number of questions about the complex social and political economic dynamics underlying rural poverty, community need, and prison development in Carson. Ridge County is a place where historical, social, and political geography is defined by indigenous colonization, struggles over land, power and resources (water, coal bed methane), racial inequality, and deep and persistent poverty. This county is the site of the often mythologized Battle of Little Big Horn, or “Custer’s Last Stand”, in which General George Armstrong Custer’s 7th Calvary was defeated by the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne nations, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse in 1876. Nearly two-thirds of the county is tribal land designated for the Crow Indian Nation and, to a smaller extent, the Northern Cheyenne Indian Nation, whose land extends into a neighboring county. Carson sits just on the Crow Reservation border and a growing portion of the tribe lives in the community.

Agriculture, at one time a significant part of the county’s economic base, has declined in its importance over the past two decades, particularly after the large-scale closing of a sugar beet processing plant. Although some residents continue to farm beets and wheat, much of the agricultural property surrounding the community of Carson has been sold or re-zoned for other purposes. Resource extraction has increased with a recent boom in coal-bed methane, but its water intensive method of extraction has heightened strife over water and land rights between recreationalists and county and tribal leaders. Because much of the county’s land is tribal or federally owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the county itself receives little revenue from the booming coal-bed methane industry. Recently, city leaders have promoted the siting of a new detention center in Carson—and its 110 corresponding jobs—as a solution to the area’s stagnating economy and high unemployment.

Deep poverty and racialized inequality structures local politics and community need in a place one town leader described as a “divided community” (personal interview 2006). The county’s poverty rate in 2005 registered at 29%, a great deal higher than the national poverty rate of 12.4%, or the state rate of 14% (US Bureau of the Census 2000a). However, many sources I spoke with estimated the rate of poverty experienced by Ridge County residents to be much higher than this official calculation. The existing effects of social and spatial abandonment (Gilmore 2007) experienced by American Indians in the state of Montana are reflected in the community’s intense levels of poverty (well over 30%) and rapid incarceration. Though American Indians comprise just 6% of the state’s population, in 2005 they made up over 22% of the state’s prison population. The spatial isolation of the Reservation leaves few employment opportunities for tribal members, which reinforces and reproduces the deep need experienced by those who aspire to live close to their community.
as members of the sovereign tribal nation (personal communication 2006).

In Carson, the High Plains Authority, a private economic development corporation, works closely with the city in guiding economic development policy (personal communication 2006). The High Plains Authority was key in brokering an agreement with CiviGenics, a Texas-based corrections corporation, to facilitate the location of a detention facility in Carson. Just a decade earlier the community was nearly selected as the location for a new state prison to be managed by the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). County Commissioners, representing their largely tribal constituency, prevented the prison siting from moving forward on county land just outside of Carson. Consequently, the state institution operated by CCA located in a different rural town in Northwest Montana. More recently, city—not county—officials were again approached. Ultimately, city leaders, together with the High Plains Authority expedited CiviGenics’ efforts to construct, manage, and operate a detention center for the temporary holding of inmates in transition within the city of Carson. The facility, currently under construction, is located in the center of town next to the community grocery store. As one local administrator informed me, “It will blend in real nicely. You won’t even know what it is when you pass by” (personal interview 2006).

The dynamics of inequality are distinctly visible on the community’s landscape. In spite of its small population of just over 3000, homelessness is prominent on the streets of Carson. When pressed about issues of unemployment and poverty, town leaders in Carson narrated poverty in two ways. They denied the existence of community hardship or racialized and isolated poverty as an issue within the tribal community and not within the broader (white) population. A quote that illustrates the denial of poverty by community leaders emerged when discussing the city’s rejection of the soup kitchen introduced above with the director of the county’s only food bank. She explained:

They [service providers] were concerned that we had such a homeless problem and we needed a soup kitchen. Because, I mean you walk downtown and you see all these homeless. But the sheriff’s department said “no, they are not homeless. They have places they can go. They just aren’t welcome when they’re drunk or on drugs” (personal interview 2006).

The sheriff’s rejection of the homeless in this comment denies homelessness as a phenomenon experienced by residents in the community and trivializes their circumstances by suggesting that “they have places they can go”. Further, it constructs the homeless in Ridge County as criminal and deviant, as existing outside of the community’s moral and social order. A local job services coordinator
further associated rising rates of crime and poverty in Carson with the social and economic deterioration of the community. He explained that:

A lot of the people that work in Carson don’t live there because of the crime problem. The overall appearance of the town has degraded. The sidewalks are in disrepair, the streets are dirty, there are homeless. Infrastructure is slowly getting worse (personal interview 2006).

Rather than situating the city’s infrastructural decline and increasing need for services within Carson’s shrinking tax base, declining cite revenues, and dwindling employment opportunities (all of which a jobs service coordinator might be well aware of), this individual represented the city’s problems with rising levels of crime and “rampant drug and alcohol abuse” (personal interview 2006).

These criminalized constructions parallel narrations of poverty at the state level. Discourses about poverty and crime in Montana are closely connected with state drug problems, specifically its growing issue with methamphetamine use. In fact, meth has been identified as the key issue on the state’s legislative agenda and in social welfare and crime policy. Mirroring tactics deployed in other US drug wars, an important component in the circulation of this discourse is the construction of meth abuse in Montana as a statewide epidemic and the mobilization of fear. Although there is no question about the dangers of methamphetamine use and its effects on communities and people over time, the disproportionate focus on meth within Montana’s crime and public welfare policy obscures the processes creating inequality, such as inadequate access to employment or social and economic supports. The need experienced by the homeless in Carson is represented as the outcome of drug or alcohol abuse, and not as the result of inequality or injustice.

In another representational tactic, community leaders in Carson racialized poverty as a “cultural factor” or “lifestyle choice” within the American Indian communities. Here again poverty is defined as a personal choice and as such, is not related to economic restructuring or community class and race relations. Carson’s food bank director again clarifies:

It’s more of a lifestyle thing, I think. Granted, a lot of Indians live that lifestyle that people don’t like. You know, your winos, your . . . Just don’t keep up your homes. Move around. Wreck buildings that you rent. You know, that sort of thing. But you know, I see a lot of whites that are just the same. It’s just a cultural difference, you know when I go to visit them. They have cultural things that are different (personal interview 2006).

By constructing poverty and inequality as part of a lifestyle, this rhetoric makes being poor a choice and presumes that those who are poor have
chosen to be so. Further, this framing of need reinforces the notion of a “culture of poverty” where poverty is passed down generationally rather than actively produced through unequal relations of race and class or uneven political and economic processes.

Although American Indians make up a third of Carson’s population, racialized definitions of the poor identified poverty as existing on the reservation but not within the city itself. The city’s economic development coordinator described striking unemployment levels in Ridge County in this manner: “The unemployment rate is high primarily because of reservation influence there. So if you took the unemployment rate in the city and the unemployment rate in the city and the unemployment in the county, they’d be very, very opposite”. When further pressed, he gave this response, simultaneously racializing and criminalizing the hardship experienced by Native Americans, as well as stigmatizing their presence in the community:

When I grew up in Carson, there were very few Indian families in town. Now, I think there is, I don’t know but I’m guessing somewhere between 20 to 40 percent of the population is Indian now. And that in and of itself does not necessarily mean that the values have changed in town. But it does tend to bring a lot more of the reservation in town as a result. And with the rampant alcohol and drug problems on the reservation and the unemployment, the problems follow (personal interview 2006).

This commentary marks Native Americans not just as deviants but also as differentiated and separate from the wider (white) community of Ridge County. By defining poverty as a problem exclusive to the American Indian community, poverty is racialized and delimited as a problem outside of the city of Carson itself.

This refusal of need and racialized containment of poverty underwrites community disinvestment in social services, significantly emblematized by the city’s rejection of a soup kitchen proposal, as well as the city’s pursuit of economic development policies that retain local social hierarchies. Many privileged community leaders that I spoke with were personally invested in local economic development strategies, including the detention center siting. In spite of the opposition to prison-led development expressed by county leaders and the tribal community only a decade earlier (personal interview 2006), city administrators were compelled to pursue a detention center for economic development. In the words of the previously quoted county official, they pursued “a prison for their greed” and not in the interest of the broader community.

When asked how the city coordinated with tribal leaders about local economic development issues, a city official made a clear distinction between Carson and the Crow Nation:
They [the Tribal community] have their economic development focus out there on the reservation as well and they are doing some interesting things. But, you know, we’ve been focused on city economic development. For example, the detention facility we’re building is going to have to employ 110 people when it opens, so we’ll have to draw from the county. So it should have a good impact, a positive impact on the unemployment.

The clear separation in this comment between Carson’s economic initiatives and the Crow Tribe’s efforts further designates accountability for economic and social supports away from the city and onto to the tribal community. Indeed, the detention center was billed to city residents as a solution to community employment problems. Although community boosters insist that the company managing the center aims to draw from the local labor pool of Ridge County, educational and certification requirements will exclude many county residents from the majority of jobs (personal communication 2006). In fact, many acknowledge that few people in Ridge County will fill the professional positions in the prison; rather residents who do receive jobs will most likely fill low-end food service and janitorial positions (personal communication 2006). Seeking to represent Carson as an attractive place for investment, personally interested community leaders must actively deny the existence of poverty, which among other things, might indicate failed local policy.

As in the case of Idaho, investment in incarceration in Montana continues to surge, even as some states have scaled back prison expansion agendas in light of state fiscal crises. Quite remarkably, the Montana State Legislature approved a 41% increase in the funds for the Department of Corrections in 2007, with a 2-year budget expansion totaling $355.2 million (Montana Department of Corrections 2007).

Conclusion
As increasing numbers of the poor are banished from state care and/or incarcerated, many identify America’s War on Poverty as a literal war on the poor and dispossessed. If welfare reform provides one means of disciplining the working poor, prisons provide yet another way to monitor, regulate and discipline the undeserving poor. Indeed, newly reformed welfare regimes come with a full array of mechanisms and procedures to sanction and deny recipients. This paper presents a suggestive analysis of the ways in which discourses about the poor in the rural American Northwest increasingly construct poverty in relation to crime rather than as a problem of social and economic inequality. Constructions of poverty reflect social hierarchies and cultural representations; they manifest particular relations of power and reproduce cultural norms.
The narrations of poverty woven by residents I spoke with in rural Idaho and Montana inform the politics of access to limited local services and reinforce neoliberal policies that have intensified dynamics of inequality. More specifically, these discursive imaginaries racialize and criminalize poverty to demarcate entitlement to a shrinking array of local services; they contain, deny, and trivialize the hardship experienced by the poor by making their poverty a lifestyle and/or a personal choice. Framing poverty in these ways redirects or focuses attention away from the dynamics of racism and inequality stemming from histories of oppression (eg Indigenous colonization in Montana) and rural economic restructuring (eg Idaho’s consolidating and mechanizing farming sector). Moreover, these narratives (re)present poverty as an issue related to drugs, crime, and deviance, that can—and should—be treated through incarceration rather than through public welfare and social justice.

At the same time that these individualizing narratives invisibilize and excuse the presence of deep poverty and inequality, they reinforce neoliberal budget cuts on services by constituting the poor as undeserving. Racialized and criminalized constructions of poverty that exclude some while entitling others are certainly not new, nor are they exclusively neoliberal, as many historical examples demonstrate. Indeed, these discourses build from a long trajectory of rhetoric that “blames the victim”, thereby marking some as deviant and undeserving. Rather, it is the construction of these discourses in the context of increasingly localized punitive crime and social welfare policy, the neoliberal retrenchment of supports, and the historically unprecedented build-up of state prison systems that makes such cultural framings distinctive. As neoliberal rural restructuring leads communities to pursue development strategies that put places in direct competition with one another for scarce resources (eg community block grants, industrial development) and employment opportunities, poverty is denied and invisibilized by community officials seeking to remain competitive for investment. Moreover, these downward pressures further reinforce the devaluation of particularly racialized bodies (American Indians and Latinos) and particular forms of labor (seasonal farmwork in Idaho) as competition drives wages down, tax revenues decline, and poverty intensifies.

Meanwhile, states in desperate fiscal predicaments are endeavoring to finance their ever-burgeoning prisons systems—fueled and reinforced by punitive policies—which further redirect limited resources away for social investments. Criminalizing the poverty of certain groups works to legitimate neoliberal polices that increasingly fund prison development over social welfare and these tactics are critical in reinforcing particular social, economic, and political relations. Furthermore, the fear of crime and anti-immigrant rhetoric mobilized has fueled new “tough
on crime” measures that have significantly contributed to prison expansion. This neoliberal management of poverty and inequality, underscored by the individual responsibility of the liberal subject, mobilizes the commonplace logics of competitiveness, state downsizing, and individualism to naturalize a politics of exclusion. By attributing the dynamics of inequality to individual choice, the processes and politics underpinning poverty and the expansion of prisons are simultaneously invisibilized and deflected from public responsibility.

Acknowledgements
This research was conducted with support from the West Coast Poverty Center, the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies, and the Association for Pacific Coast Geographers Cultural Geography Fieldwork Scholarship. Additional support also came from collaboration with Vicky Lawson and Lucy Jarosz and their National Science Foundation grant, #BCS 0136703. I would also like to thank Melissa Wright and the anonymous referees for their insightful comments and feedback.

Endnotes
1 In order to protect the confidentiality of participants in my study, I have changed the names of my case study communities and counties.
2 My larger project examines the production of rural poverty and prison development in four communities in the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. This research is the outgrowth of a larger project undertaken with Vicky Lawson and Lucy Jarosz examining rural restructuring and racialized patterns of poverty across the American Northwest. This paper draws from comparative research in the states of Idaho and Montana. Interviews in Idaho were conducted for this research project took place in the summer of 2005. The research in Montana took place in the fall of 2006.
3 A majority of the rural population in the rural Northwest is white (88%), however, the Latino population in the area has experienced a threefold expansion over the last two decades (Kandel and Cromartie 2004; Lawson et al 2008b). This growing population of Latinos is geographically concentrated in specific parts of the region. Research with the Rural Poverty Project locates high concentrations of Latino families in southwestern Idaho. Poverty rates for Latinos in southern Idaho are 27%, much higher than white poverty rates in the area. These numbers do not include poverty rates for undocumented migrants who move through the complex agricultural networks for seasonal labor.
4 Community leaders in Carson insisted on calling the new corrections facility in their town a “detention center” rather than a prison. The same county official that I quote below made an important connection between this more sanitized term and community support for the facility, noting, “All you have to say is ‘detention center’ and the community was okay. It’s just another word for a prison!” (personal interview 2006).
5 The city’s new detention center is located on formally agricultural land that was recently annexed into the city and zoned for commercial investment specifically for this use.
6 Montana has launched a massive PR campaign—the Montana Methamphetamine Project—to target meth abuse across the state. The campaign’s initiatives include statewide placement of disturbing billboards depicting the physical effects of long-term meth use and radio messages with former addicts announcing that “it could happen to you”.
References


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