



P.O.V.

Discussion Guide

Season **20**

Prison Town, USA

A Film by Po Kutchins and Katie Galloway



www.pbs.org/pov



Letter from the Filmmakers

New York/Berkeley, June 6, 2007

Dear Viewer,

While working on criminal justice-related documentaries over the last decade, we began to notice a strange new phenomenon — the rural prison town. Hundreds have sprung up across the country since the early '80s — yet, strangely, there seems to be little information in the mainstream media about them. But we had many questions: What did townspeople hope for when they invited prisons in? How were inmates' relatives treated by the communities? Had prisons helped or hurt rural economies? What kind of bargain had these towns struck?

We explored these questions and more during the four years it took to make our film. We chose to focus on Susanville, a traditional ranching community in Northern California — which is also one of the country's biggest penal colonies. The area is

home to three prisons and has far more inmates than free people. About half of the town's unincarcerated adults work at the prisons and, by all accounts, the correctional industry has changed their lives radically. Ranchers routinely trade their boots and spurs for mace and khaki greens to go to their night jobs. Cows graze next to high-wattage barbed wire that could kill a man three times over. Once a laid-back country community, people now feel that the town is permeated by the tension that pervades the prisons, and they complain that it has become a police state. "Susanville: come on vacation, leave on probation" is the local motto.

Initially we encountered the suspicion and mistrust common in prison towns. When we began filming, people were either afraid to talk or would speak openly off the record but then shut down when the camera went on. Eventually, however, a great number opened up to us in profound and intimate ways.

Over the years, we met and interviewed hundreds of people and watched them confront issues that emerge in a culture and economy built on incarceration. Besides our main characters — a laid-off mill worker who has no choice but to work at the prison, a Susanville prisoner and his family struggling to survive in the town, a local dairy owner fighting the prison system to save his family business, and a young dad and his family hoping to cash in on the lucrative life of a correctional officer — we also filmed many others



Filmmaker Katie Galloway



Filmmaker Po Kutchins
Photo Robert Palumbo



Letter from the Filmmakers

over the years: old-time ranchers, high school students, seasoned correctional officers, local politicians, town social workers and probation officers. All had strong feelings, many had conflicting perceptions and few were happy with what had become of their town. All of the people we met helped us better understand the impact of this industry that is radically altering the landscape of rural America.

We hope our film puts a human face on issues that may seem far removed from the lives of most Americans but in fact affect us all. The United States now incarcerates well over 2 million people — more than any other country in the world. Across the nation, prisons are transforming our economy, psychology and culture. We hope our film sheds light on this transformation and promotes much-needed dialogue about the wisdom of America's policy of mass incarceration.



Susanville, California is one of hundreds of American prison towns.
Photo Ben Kutchins

Po Kutchins and Katie Galloway
Filmmakers, *Prison Town, USA*



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Introduction



Susanville, a small town in Northern California, once boasted successful mill and ranching industries, but by the 1990s, they were in decline, and so were the jobs they provided. Like hundreds of other rural communities at the time, the town tried to resuscitate its struggling economy by building a prison — with unanticipated consequences. ***Prison Town, USA***, a feature-length (75-minute) documentary, tells Susanville’s story. Through portraits of a laid-off mill worker turned guard, a struggling dairy owner and an inmate’s family stranded in the town, the film sheds light on an industry that is transforming the landscape of rural America.

Susanville, California.

Photo Ben Kutchins

Prison Town, USA is a study in contrasts — between small-town rural life and the adversarial, violent “street” culture common in U.S. prisons. The intersection of these two worlds provides a rich tool for outreach, providing viewers with an opportunity to examine a wide range of personal and public-policy issues, including the consequences of current approaches to crime prevention, criminal justice, privatization and economic development.



Background Information



High Desert State Prison, Susanville, CA.

Photo Ben Kutchins

Susanville

Susanville is a Northern Californian town of about 7,200 residents (not counting inmates) who are mostly Caucasian. It is the county seat for Lassen County. The closest big city, Reno, Nevada, is ninety miles away.

Susanville's Prisons

(figures from FY '05-'06)

Susanville's prisons house approximately 11,000 inmates, making it one of the largest prison populations in the world. Approximately half the adults in Susanville work at one of the area's three prisons:

CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL CENTER

www.cdcr.ca.gov/Visitors/fac_prison_CCC.html

- A minimum-security facility opened in 1963
- Number of custody staff: 783
- Number of non-custody staff: 338
- Design capacity: 4,096
- Total inmate population: 6,271



Background Information

HIGH DESERT STATE PRISON

www.cdcr.ca.gov/Visitors/fac_prison_HDSP.html

- A high-security facility opened in 1995, after two years of construction
- Number of custody staff: 967
- Number of support-services staff: 377
- Design capacity: 2,452
- Total inmate population: 4,792

FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION HERLONG

www.bop.gov/locations/institutions/her

- A medium-security facility opened in 2005 with a satellite camp for minimum-security inmates
- Design capacity: 1,536 medium security, 128 minimum security
- Total inmate population: 1,040 medium security, 118 minimum security (7/2007)



Former dairy worker Gabe Jones now works at Susanville's High Desert State Prison.

Photo Ben Kutchins

Sources:

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Fact and Figures:
www.cdcr.ca.gov/DivisionsBoards/AOAP/FactFiguresArchive/FactsFigures4thQ2005.html

"Prison Reform Overview." State of California.
www.gov.ca.gov/prisonreform

To put Susanville's prisons in context, the California Department of Corrections reports the following:

- California spends \$7.4 billion a year on the prison system.
- Prison costs the state \$34,150 a year per inmate.
- About 93 percent of prisoners are male, the average age is 36, and the average prisoner reads at the seventh-grade level.
- About half of all parolees return to prison within two years.
- There were 170,475 people in California state prisons, camps and correctional centers in 2005. The facilities were designed to house half as many inmates.
- At the end of 2006, there were 7,813 third-strikers in California prisons — 7,736 men and 77 women.



Background Information

The Growth of U.S. Prisons

Over the past 25 years, the U.S. has undergone the biggest prison-building boom in human history, with more than 1,000 state and federal institutions constructed, including facilities built in 350 rural counties. The Urban Institute found that nearly a third of U.S. counties now have at least one prison.

The rate of growth has been so high that many facilities, including those in Susanville, suffer from chronic staffing shortages. Those shortages lead to added overtime (and more income) for corrections officers, but they also force guards to work while fatigued.

There are many reasons for the exploding prison population, including but not limited to:

- A growth in crime. According to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report, in 1980 there were 597 violent crimes per 100,000 persons; in 1991 there were 758 crimes per 100,000 persons.
- American prison sentences are 5 to 12 times longer for comparable crimes than any other Western nation.
- The passage of “three strikes” laws mandated minimum 25-year-to-life sentences for repeat felony offenders.
- The imposition of mandatory minimum sentences as a reaction to increased crime rates.
- The “War on Drugs.” In 2002, 1.2 million simple drug possession arrests were made in the United States — about half for possession of marijuana. Not all arrests resulted in incarceration, but many states imposed mandatory minimum sentences for any drug-related crime (New York State’s Rockefeller drug laws, for example).
- Incarceration for nonviolent offenses.

Number of persons under correctional supervision in the United States:

	<i>Probation</i>	<i>Jail</i>	<i>Prison</i>	<i>Parole</i>	<i>Total</i>
1980	1,118,097	183,988	319,598	220,438	1,842,100
1985	1,968,712	256,615	487,593	300,203	3,013,100
1990	2,670,234	405,320	743,382	531,407	4,350,300
1995	3,077,861	507,044	1,078,542	679,421	5,342,900
2000	3,826,209	621,149	1,316,333	723,898	6,445,100
2005	4,162,536	747,529	1,446,269	784,408	7,056,000

750,000 Americans currently work in prisons or jails.

*Note: Jails are most often run by sheriffs and/or local governments and are designed to hold individuals awaiting trial or serving short sentences. Prisons are operated by state governments and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and are designed to hold individuals convicted of crimes.

Sources:

Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 21, 2007.

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/corr2tab.htm

“Loving Those Good Old Georgia Prisons.” Ron Fraser. *The Macon Telegraph*, January 22, 2005.

Marshall County Sheriff’s Office (Lewisburg, TN): www.mctnsheriff.com/content/view/14/9/

“Study Tracked Boom In Prisons And Notes Impact On Counties.” Fox Butterfield. *The New York Times*, April 30, 2004.

“The New Landscape of Imprisonment: Mapping America’s Prison Expansion.” Sarah Lawrence and Jeremy Travis. The Urban Institute, 2004.



Background Information



Third generation dairy owner Mike O'Kelly's biggest customer is the prisons in Susanville, CA.

Photo Ben Kutchins

Economic Impact

The U.S. Census counts prisoners where they are incarcerated. Both federal and state agencies distribute program and service funds as well as the number of elected representatives based on census data. So, the more prisoners counted in a town or county, the bigger its share will be of tax dollars and the greater its political representation.

Yet a 2003 study of prisons in rural communities by The Sentencing Project found that there were no overall effects on local employment, per capita income or consumer spending, three leading indicators of economic vitality. Specialized jobs in new prisons are often filled by outsiders. Local workers may not be qualified for the positions and may find that work for which they are qualified is being performed instead by prison labor. Training facilities for corrections officers are often centrally located within a state, making it difficult for rural residents to attend.

State and federal dollars follow inmates to the prison and are added to the prison town or county coffers, but at the expense of the prisoner's home community, which is often a disadvantaged urban area.

Sources:

- "Almost 10% of All Prisoners Are Now Serving Life Terms." Fox Butterfield. *The New York Times*, May 12, 2004.
- "Big Prisons, Small Towns: Prison Economics in Rural America." The Sentencing Project, February 2003. www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/articles_publications/publications/bigprisons_20030201
- "Loving Those Good Old Georgia Prisons." Ron Fraser. *The Macon Telegraph*, January 22, 2005.
- "Prisons: Will Boom Ever Come to End?" Ron Fraser. *Wisconsin State Journal*, December 20, 2004.
- "Study Tracked Boom in Prisons and Notes Impact on Counties." Fox Butterfield. *The New York Times*, April 30, 2004.
- "The New Landscape of Imprisonment: Mapping America's Prison Expansion." Sarah Lawrence and Jeremy Travis. The Urban Institute, 2004.
- "The Prison-Industrial Complex." Eric Schlosser. *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1998.



Background Information

Selected People Featured in *Prison Town, USA*



Mike O'Kelly

Dairy owner

O'Kelly, a third-generation dairyman, finds his business endangered when the prisons threaten to abrogate their "good neighbor" buy-local policy. O'Kelly currently has in hand a copy of a Prison Industries waiver that allows the Susanville prisons to continue to buy his milk for at least another year.



Gabe Jones

Former dairy worker who becomes a guard

Gabe Jones liked his job at Mike O'Kelly's Morning Glory Dairy, but the prospect of earning much more money as a prison guard finally proved irresistible — sending him off to guard academy. Jones still works at High Desert State Prison.



Danette Jones

Gabe's wife



Background Information

Selected People Featured in *Prison Town, USA*



Dawayne Brasher

Former mill worker who becomes a guard



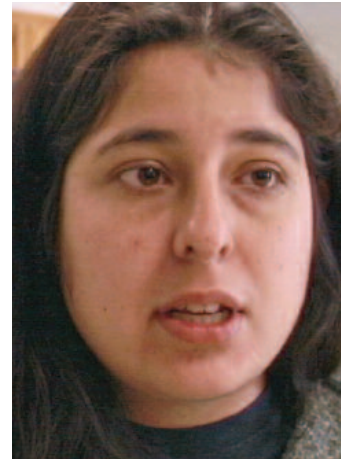
Bonnie Brasher

Dawayne's partner



Lonnie Tyler

Inmate, aircraft painter



Jennifer Machin

Lonnie's common-law wife

Dawayne Brasher worked in Susanville's lumber mills for nearly 20 years until the last one closed in 2004. His only choices were to leave his hometown or seek work at the huge prison complexes that have sprung up in the area.

The Tyler family was just passing through Susanville when father Lonnie was arrested for shoplifting \$40 worth of groceries and diapers. Lonnie got a 16-month sentence, leaving Jen and the kids stranded in "prison town." Jennifer and Lonnie have moved back to Mena, Arizona, where Lonnie got his start painting aircrafts. Lonnie is happily employed by the same aircraft-painting shop where he got his start and is making enough money that Jennifer can stay home with the children.



General Discussion Questions

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, consider posing a general question and giving people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can't engage until they have had a break, don't encourage them to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question, such as:

- **If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask them?**
- **If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you tell them?**
- **Did anything in this film surprise you? If so, what? Why was it surprising?**
- **What insights did you gain from this film? What did you learn about the film's subjects and/or about yourself?**



Susanville, CA.
Photo Ben Kutchins



Discussion Prompts



Former lumber mill worker Dawayne Brasher now works at High Desert State Prison.

Photo Ben Kutchins

Impact on the Town

- The film suggests that towns where prisons have been built, like Susanville, changed “in ways they never anticipated.” What changes did you observe in the film? What was the impact of those changes on the town and its residents? Which seemed to be most surprising to the residents?
- How did the prisons change Susanville’s reputation, and is that reputation important? What would your first reaction be to hearing someone say that they are from a “prison town?” Would you want to live there? Why or why not? How does thinking of Susanville as a prison town rather than a typical small, rural American town change the picture in your head?
- One corrections officer who grew up in Susanville recounts that he didn’t know anything about gangs before

working in the prison and that he learned “street smarts” from the prison population. What are the cultural values introduced into Susanville by the prisons? What might be done to provide the mostly white guards from Susanville with insight into the prisoners they guard, many of whom are urban blacks or Latinos?

- Prisons set up a tense, adversarial relationship between corrections officers and inmates. How does that relationship play out in town, where families of inmates and guards live side-by-side, send their kids to the same schools, etc.?



Discussion Prompts



Impact on the People

- Given what you see in the film, would you want to work as a prison guard or want someone in your family to work as a prison guard? Why or why not?
- Make three lists of words or phrases, describing the perfect citizen, parent and correctional officer. Note which skills or characteristics overlap and which are contradictory.
- One veteran correctional officer says, "It's a little bit of a culture shock for everybody that starts here." Describe the contrast between how you would want someone to behave as a prison guard and how you would want them to behave in town or at home.
- Consider the following observation on the demands and impact of being a correctional officer: *"When you work out there you know you're the one that has the power...you're gonna do what I'm gonna tell you what to do.... I think it's hard for you to just turn off being in a position of authority all the time, and coming home and then doing the same things to your families. There's a lot of domestic violence."* What might be done to help guards successfully shift between work and home?

Many local ranchers are forced to work at local prisons to make ends meet.

Photo Ben Kutchins

- In your view, what is the impact of being in a constantly hostile environment? One veteran guard describes how he copes by saying, "You have to learn how to deal with it and not take it home with you." Imagine that you can't talk with your partner or friends about your work or what you spend most of your time doing. What would the impact on your relationships be?
- What kinds of stressors does prison work put on a family that were not present when the primary earner worked for the mill, for example? How might the community help guards decompress from being in a constant state of high alert?
- What is the impact of Lonnie's incarceration on his son Jeremy? How might Jeremy's reaction affect his classmates, teammates or friends? What might a school or community do to help kids like Jeremy?



Discussion Prompts



Public Policy

- One Susanville resident observes that “the prison hasn’t really produced the economic results that were portrayed to the community. It’s mostly created minimum-wage jobs outside the institution.” How should prisons be held accountable for the promises they make to the communities in which they are built?
- In your view, should prisons run by private companies be free to operate as they wish, or should they be required to serve the public interest even if that means not maximizing profit?
- Susanville’s city council passed a motion to pressure the prisons to use local businesses and renew Mike’s contract. If you were on the council, how would you have voted? If you represented the business interests of the prison, what argument would you have made to convince the council to vote

Former lumber mill worker Dawayne Brasher now works at the High Desert State Prison.

Photo Ben Kutchins

against the motion? What do you think would happen to Susanville and its businesses if Mike’s dairy went under?

- What did you learn from Mike about community organizing?
- In light of what you saw in the film, are you satisfied that the current sentencing practices are an effective strategy for dealing with crime? Are you comfortable with the continued expansion of the prison system? Why or why not?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of parole requirements for former inmates like Lonnie? What do you think a more effective parole policy would look like?



Taking Action

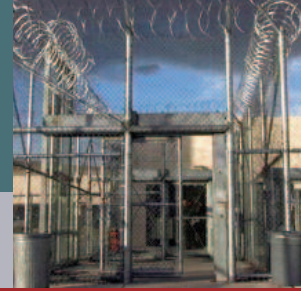


- Investigate services available to guards and inmates at the jail or prison nearest you. Work to fill any gaps in needed services.
- Work to support your local domestic violence shelter or programs like Crossroads (featured in the film) that support families in need, including families of inmates.
- Convene a town hall meeting to address the pros and cons of privatizing the prison system.
- Coordinate efforts to support or create a reentry program that helps inmates newly released from prison adjust to life on the outside.
- Volunteer to help literacy projects or other programs that facilitate productive visits between inmates and their children and/or help children deal with their feelings toward an incarcerated parent.

Parolee Lonnie Tyler struggles to keep his family afloat in a town that offers few work options outside of the prisons.

Photo Evan Eames

- Support organizations involved in rural economic development.
- Work with youth agencies, law enforcement, clergy, schools and other stakeholders to implement crime-prevention strategies that do not involve incarceration. Do an internet search for "Alternatives to Incarceration" along with your city or state to find out about existing projects near you.
- Investigate what the government spends on prisons and jails in your state. Discuss your reaction to the percentage of tax dollars currently being spent on incarceration.



Resources

FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s *Prison Town, USA* Web site
www.pbs.org/pov/prisontown

The *Prison Town, USA* companion Web site offers a streaming video trailer of the film; an interview with filmmakers Katie Galloway and Po Kutchins (video, podcast and text); a list of related Web sites, organizations and books; a downloadable discussion guide and classroom activity and the following special feature:

EXCLUSIVE VIDEO – ADDITIONAL SCENES

Spend some extra time with the permanent and temporary residents of Susanville, California, in these scenes not shown in the broadcast version of the film.

Prisons in the U.S.

THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/

The Bureau of Justice Statistics at the U.S. Department of Justice provides comprehensive statistics on the federal prison system.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND REHABILITATION

www.corr.ca.gov/visitors/fac_prison_HDSP.html

This Web site for High Desert State Prison (the prison from the film), includes statistics, history and more.

COMMISSION ON SAFETY AND ABUSE IN AMERICA'S PRISONS

www.prisoncommission.org/

The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons released "Confronting Confinement," the report resulting from a yearlong inquiry into prison conditions and effectiveness of incarceration policies in the United States.

What's Your P.O.V.?

*P.O.V.'s online Talking Back Tapestry is a colorful, interactive representation of your feelings about **Prison Town, USA**.*

Listen to other P.O.V. viewers talk about the film and add your thoughts by calling 1-800-688-4768. www.pbs.org/pov/talkingback.html

OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE: BIG PRISONS, SMALL TOWNS

www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/articles_publications/publications/bigprisons_20030201/bigprisons.pdf

The Open Society Institute and The MacArthur Foundation funded this comprehensive report on how prisons affect local rural economies. The study found that counties that had prisons did not see a significant shift in their unemployment rates.

URBAN INSTITUTE: THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF IMPRISONMENT

www.urban.org/publications/410994.html

This report maps the prison expansion and explains the impact on rural communities when inmates from cities are incarcerated far from home. It focuses on the ten states that have seen the greatest surge in prisons since 1980.

FEDERAL BUREAU OF PRISONS

www.bop.gov/

BOP has a handy clickable map that shows all of the federal correctional facilities throughout the U.S. The site also posts regulations and policies that shed light on the day-to-day operations of federal correctional facilities.



Resources

PRISON POLICY

PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE

www.prisonpolicy.org

This organization aggressively lobbies for prison reform and has detailed information on how U.S. Census figures are distorted by counting people in prisons. On the site, you can find a reprint of "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America", a chapter from a book on mass incarceration.

THE SENTENCING PROJECT

www.sentencingproject.org

The Sentencing Project, a non-profit organization, is a nationally recognized source of criminal justice policy analysis. Its site aggregates media coverage of the trend toward revisiting harsh drug offense sentencing.

P.O.V.'S THE LEGACY WEB SITE

www.pbs.org/pov/pov1999/thelegacy

The P.O.V. Web site for the film *The Legacy* (original airdate: June 1, 1999), which examines the background behind California's "three strikes" law, includes video clips and links to related resources.

CORRECTIONS CORPORATION OF AMERICA

www.correctionscorp.com

Corrections Corporation of America is the founder of the private corrections industry and is the nation's largest provider of jail, detention and corrections services to governmental agencies. The company's Web site is a one-stop resource for the industry perspective, including press releases, history and links to research and industry organizations.

COMMISSION ON SAFETY AND ABUSE IN AMERICA'S PRISONS

www.prisoncommission.org/

This organization regards mass incarceration as a major public health issue, not just a public safety issue. "Confronting Confinement" is a lengthy report the commission issued in 2006 that states that "what happens inside jails and prisons does not stay inside jails and prisons."

INMATES

PRISON TALK

www.prisontalk.com/forums/archive/index.php/f-605.html

This bulletin board provides a way for families of inmates or others with an interest in Susanville's prisons to network.

THE REENTRY NATIONAL MEDIA OUTREACH CAMPAIGN

www.reentrymediaoutreach.org

The Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign uses documentary films (many shown on PBS stations) to spark community discussions and decision-making about solution-based reentry programs. The campaign's Web site includes video clips, teaching materials, discussion guides and other resources designed to help groups address the needs of prisoners once they are released and transitioning back into their home communities.



How to Buy the Film

For more information on buying *Prison Town, USA*, please visit the P.O.V. site: www.pbs.org/pov/prisontown



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and entering its 20th season on PBS, the award-

winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought over 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, P.O.V.'s Borders. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V. is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

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The P.O.V. 20th Anniversary Collection is a limited-edition DVD collection produced in partnership with Docurama. The collection contains 15 titles reflecting the range and diversity of P.O.V. films, including the series' inaugural broadcast, *American Tongues*, by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker.

Available at www.amdoc.org/shop.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public-television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films.

P.O.V. Interactive

www.pbs.org/pov

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces a Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.'s Borders. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique Talking Back feature, filmmaker interviews, viewer resources and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

American Documentary, Inc.

www.americandocumentary.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream-media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

Front cover: Susanville, California is one of hundreds of American prison towns.

Photo: Ben Kutchins

20th Anniversary Sponsor

