

# Assignment #02. Penal Labor

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## Inmates in Finland are training AI as part of prison labor

[The article](#) was about partnership between an AI company and Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency, utilizing penal labor to tag local data which is used to train AI products. They already processed quite a lot of data, comparable to amount that average startup would require. Currently, the labor is only being held in two prisons, while the company seeks to expand their partnership.

In order to discuss about moral justifiability of the case, I must mention that the idea of penal labour raises important moral issues. In addition, the work characteristic of classifying AI training data should be considered. So I'd like to consider both issues before I make my opinion.

## Penal Labor

Penal labor is a type of forced labor as a penalty, and usually applied to prison inmates. Because of their similar nature, penal labor has been often compared and discussed together with slavery. In French African colonies, penal labors were used as mean of colony exploitation [until 1950s](#). In the United States, [the 13th Amendment](#) explicitly mentions that penal labor is not slavery, but punishment for a crime. For a nation that is deeply related with abolition of slavery and civil rights movement, it is natural for legislators to precisely limit the range of penal labor to protect inmates' human rights. The fact that products of the penal labor is only used for government needs shows that US government reduces the likelihood of exploiting inmates for taking economic advantage.

Penal labor should also be treated as a kind of labor. As a form of labor that produces economical or social benefits, penal labor can pay for the social cost of prison. [In 2012 report by Vera institute of justice](#), the average cost per inmate was \$31,286 in year 2010, and total \$39 billion was spend on prison management in 40 states. Although [the follow-up study](#) showed that the cost was decreased by \$232 million in 2015, it remains as a significant social cost. Also, In the article [Why Prison?: An Economic Critique by Peter N. Salib](#), which claims that imprisonment is an incorrect way to punish criminals, mentions nonmonetary sanctions caused by imprisonment system destroys a part of social wealth.

As prisons generate huge costs, utilizing inmates as economic participants is an important factor to reduce the cost. Penal labor can reduce the cost by allocating inmates to works directly related to management of prisons. In another way, penal labor can be used to produce goods to be used outside the prison, which can indirectly contribute to an increase of social wealth. In some countries like France or Finland, prison can also make a contract with a private company, providing penal labor in turn of reasonable payment, being a win-win situation for both. In summary, penal labor can help maintaining the legal system stable in an economic way.

Also, penal labor can work as a rehabilitative program for inmates. [According to the US Reentry Resource Center](#), at least 95 percent of the inmates are eventually released and return to their communities, and more than half of them fails to find jobs. Rehabilitation is therefore an important social role of prisons. [In a Study from Florida State University](#), participating in a vocational program increased the possibility of reemployment after release by 42%. In this perspective, penal labor with suitable rehabilitative purpose can lead ways for inmates to become desirable social members.

## Classification of AI dataset

Deep learning is the mainstream technology of the current AI academic community. In short, it is a methodology to "train" neural network models to produce predictions for specific purpose. To train the network, researchers need a special dataset which is already tagged for a desired purpose. Because the precision is usually related to the effort invested in training, many researchers seek to increase quality and quantity of their dataset.

As a result, there are new markets for producing and trading datasets. It's called 'micro-tasking' industry, because each small part of dataset becomes a task. One of the pioneers of this market is [Amazon Mechanical Turk](#), a crowdsourcing platform for distributing data-related tasks to individuals. For researchers, MTurk produces meaningful dataset which can be readily used for their researches. For individual participants, Mturk is a good source of work that required almost no skill or knowledge. Similar services such as [Clickworker](#) and [Toluna](#) continue to expand the market.

However, there are some controversial opinions on micro-tasking industry. Because of the nature of the task, the market only provides options for low-paid works which is very close to exploitation. [From the article about individual workers of MTurk](#), a worker who spends 30 hours per week gets average \$4 to \$5 per hour, and faces many problems caused by system defects. [A study by Kotaro Hara et al.](#) shows that median wage is about \$2 per hour, and only top 4% of them earns more than \$7.25 per hour. Another problem is that the workers are forced to remain on the platform because less-educated workers have no other options to earn money. In conclusion, current micro-tasking platform exploits both labor and time to find another job or develop job skills of individual workers.

# My Opinion

In general, I agree with private tech company utilizing penal labor for training AI work. First of all, I think that penal labor makes a lot of contributions in and out of prison. As already mentioned, adequate labor can be assigned to inmates as punishment for crime, and in the same time, it can produce economic benefits to cover up social costs that they make. Especially, AI is a rising technology that future human society will largely depend upon. In this sense, participating in AI training work can be more socially beneficial than other types of penal labor.

Also, the original article mentions that the inmates would prefer the AI work, because it matches "the requirements of modern life" and work as "an opportunity to have a job that can empower them." Although penal labor is compulsory, providing preferable options for inmates is desirable for both prison and inmates themselves.

One point I'm worried about is that current micro-tasking industry exploits low-educated people as cheap sources of time-consuming labor. Even outside the prison, the market provides only cheap and inescapable jobs for normal people. The disadvantages would be worse for prison inmates, if their vocational program does not provide rehabilitation chance. While expanding the AI work into more prison, if work conditions and wages are not significantly improved compared to current market situation, inmates will suffer from difficulties in reemployment after release, or stuck in micro-tasking industry as a cheap labor source.

For Vainu to continue their expansion of partnership, I think that overall conditions of the AI work should be improved. To prevent inmates to become vulnerable target of labor exploitation, rehabilitative actions should be provided in parallel. In specific, Vainu and other AI companies can provide rich source of computer science-related education for inmates. If Vainu and prison can agree on providing rehabilitation program related to computer science and AI technology, their partnership expansion will not only provide great opportunities for inmates, but also result in increase in social wealth.

Overall, the case of Vainu and Finnish prison looked like a small social experiment. In ideal and experimental conditions, progressive ideas like training AI as penal labor can be easily executed and succeed. However, to apply them in a real-world situation, there are many other factors to consider. From this point, the experiment would become engineering. I hope Vainu and Finnish government can find good conclusion, which will set an example for penal labor system and AI tech market.