

San Antonio Criminal Justice Action Coalition

To educate and engage the public on the issue of mass incarceration in an effort to bring about fundamental reform of our justice system

WASTING MONEY & WASTING LIVES: The Proliferation of For-Profit Prisons

The mission of prisons in the U.S. is typically centered on protecting the public through incarceration of offenders in settings that are secure, safe and humane. Most also tout the importance of cost-efficiency as well as the provision of opportunities for inmates to gain the skills necessary for law-abiding reentry into their communities. Our country's experience with for-profit prisons has demonstrated that they are hardly the ideal means to accomplish such objectives.

The boom in privatized prisons began in the 1980s and there are now over 100,000 inmates under the supervision of private or privately-managed institutions. Added to this is the fact that almost half of all detained immigrants are in private facilities. As with any private for-profit enterprise, this multi-billion dollar business has as its primary focus the profitability of the corporation and the well-being of its shareholders instead of social priorities.

Cutting corners to achieve an acceptable profit margin takes a number of forms, but with public funding already limited, it's easiest to do so in high-cost areas such as personnel, training and programs. "According to Russell Boraas, a private prison administrator in Virginia, the secret to low operating costs is having a minimal number of guards for the maximum number of prisoners." (*V. Pelaez, Global Research, March 31, 2014*)

Private prisons employ 15% fewer guards per prison than public prisons. Private prison guards receive 35% fewer training hours than public prison guards (*L. Anderson, Kicking the National Habit, Public Law Contract Journal, 39 (1), 2009*). This type of cost-savings can result in dangerous unintended consequences. According to J. Austin & G. Coventry (*Emerging Issues on Privatized Prisons, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Feb. 2001*), "Assaults on guards by inmates were 49% more frequent in private prisons than in government-run prisons. Assaults on fellow inmates were 65% more frequent in private prisons.

Private prisons are expending huge sums of money to influence decision makers. "The three largest for-profit prison corporations have spent more than \$45 million on campaign donations and lobbyists to keep politicians on the side of privatized incarceration." (*K. Matthews, Truthout, Dec. 27, 2013*) The reasons for this largesse are straightforward.

Whenever a private prison takes over responsibility for the administration of punishment and rehabilitation, it gains influence over a public discretionary function at the expense of citizens' liberty interests. States sign agreements to ensure that beds are filled to a certain capacity (commonly 90%) at any given point. If the states fail to fill the beds, they are still required to pay at that level. Early release and good behavior programs are not likely given this scenario. Public policy then becomes subordinated to corporate profitability.

As of 2010, there were 128,195 inmates in private prisons, representing an increase of 80% from 1999 (*P.M. Sabol, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011)*). According to a December 2012 Bureau of Justice Statistics report, Texas has more inmates (18,603) in private prisons than any other state. It is time to shift this responsibility back to the public sector where profit is not the primary motivator.

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