

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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CLEVELAND - The Sentencing Project, a criminal justice reform organization based in Washington D.C., has released a new report entitled *Too Good to be True: Private Prisons in America*. The report details the history of private prisons in America and comes to many of the same conclusions as the 2011 ACLU of Ohio report, *Prisons For Profit: A Look at Prison Privatization*.

The Sentencing Project report shows that from 1999 to 2010 the use of private prisons increased by 40 percent at the state level. In many cases privatizing prisons is seen as a quick remedy for states looking to alleviate budget concerns, but, like the ACLU, the Sentencing Project found that the cost effectiveness of private facilities is often overstated and largely illusory.

Private prison companies spend millions trying to convince policy makers and local governments that these facilities save money, said ACLU of Ohio Executive Director Christine Link. Instead, they create a short term infusion of cash, then keep all future proceeds while slashing employee salaries and cutting rehabilitation and education programs. So what you end up with is a facility that creates many more problems than it solves.

The Sentencing Project report tells the story of Littlefield, a West Texas town that used city bonds to build a private prison in 2000. The town hoped that the prison would create jobs; instead it closed after being plagued by mismanagement, riots and an inmate suicide. In the end, the town had to raise taxes, slash services, and cut jobs just to manage the \$9 million debt left by the prison. The report claims that this story is not unique and that private prison facilities can often leave a community in a worse situation than they were before.

Ohio has its own troubled history with private prisons. In the 1990s, a private federal prison was opened in Youngstown, but was closed a few years later after a string of lawsuits, security breaches, and increased costs. Despite this history, In 2011 Ohio lawmakers unveiled a plan to sell five prisons to private companies. One facility was ultimately sold.

Our prison system clearly has problems, said Link, But the answer is to work toward stopping the flow of people into the system, not turning the operation over to private companies who actually profit from increased incarceration.

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