**The Ethics and Economics of Private Prisons**

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Any institution conceived to maintain and enhance the welfare of the people must be motivated purely, or at least primarily, by that goal. Any other format of a public institution is unable to effectively support the public interest without ethical contradictions. This is not to say that the public welfare can never be closely associated with non-governmental organizations, such as regional concessions to provider companies for organizing the distribution of utilities, but those instances must be led by extensive regulation and intrusive government oversight.

One such institution is the United States prison system. 2,266,800 adults were incarcerated in the United States in 2011, approximately .94% of the adult population,⁠1 with 6% of state prisoners and 16% of federal prisoners currently held in private prisons.⁠2 The prison system’s purpose is to uphold justice by enforcing the rulings of the legal system, specifically in the context of criminal acts. This system cannot make a profit or otherwise be privately operated if it intends to not obstruct the operation of justice and sustainably rehabilitate inmates.

The control of the prison system by private corporations is expanding and presents a problem which could eventually become unstoppable. The strength of multi-billion dollar companies in controlling state prisons resides in its inevitable concession system. As mentioned earlier, often when public utilities and services are devolved to private powers they are restricted by leasing to single large companies who then gain a foothold in regional politics as a result of their integration into the legal system. This manifests itself in lobbying as well as the simple image of prisons cracking down on crime, giving strength to politicians who praise them.⁠3

Organizations such as the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) fund research on the fiscal benefits of privatization, often times purposefully performing methodological inaccuracies in order to enhance the data collected. One California study compares the most expensive public prison to its antipode in the private industry. Unsurprisingly, this same research is currently being used by researchers at Temple University to persuade state legislatures to consider privatizing their own prison systems.⁠4

Inmates do not generally expect to lounge in Versailles when sent to prison, but the conditions faced by occupants of private prisons are dramatically worse than those in public facilities. The American Civil Liberties Union and other organizations have launched investigations and filed multiple lawsuits against private prisons across the United States for holding inmates in horrific conditions and not providing them with care necessary to maintain their physical and emotional wellbeing. One report describes these conditions as “a perpetual state of crisis, where prisoners live in barbaric and horrific conditions and their basic human rights are violated daily.”⁠5

The abuses felt by prisoners in private institutions are neither appropriate for this article nor are they effable, but they should not surprise a careful observer when one considers the motives of corporate corrections facilities. If private prisons nurtured inmates and rehabilitated them so they could reenter society and live fulfilling lives, they would never come back to prison. This is problematic in a world where corporations like GEO group and the CCA make more money from more inmates staying for longer periods of time. The CEO of CCA Damon Hininger once said “[r]eentry programs and reducing recidivism are 100 percent aligned with our business model,” or in lameman’s terms, he wants prisoners to come back, and doesn’t want them to leave.⁠6 This also intersects with how these businesses influence policymakers and judicial officials to push for maximum sentences on convicts.

The negative implications of private prisons on society are not born only by those held within it, but also those who fund it. As the number of prisoners within prisons increases, the amount of money the government must spend on them increases proportionally.⁠7 While prison corporations argue that giving them ownership of prisons streamlines the process of inmate processing and decreases the cost of their holding, every other aspect of the justice system is encumbered by their integration.

One must take into account the entire prison-industrial complex when evaluating the economic implications of private control of justice. The horror of police arrests, the process of judicial hearings and trials, and the complexity of prison transfers and government agency overlap all expand when the number of arrests increases, the length of prison sentences increases, and the amount of police patrols increases⁠8.

When considering government economics, it is important to identify alternative methods to resolve fiscal imbalances. Thankfully, there is already a different way to house prisoners, in prisons. While the terrifying conditions of prisons will remain absent private prisons, their proximate cause will cease to operate and the ethical dilemma raised by the prison system can refocus on issues of institutional discrimination rather than the failure of the profit motive.

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8 Zeidman, Dan. "Senate Hearing Explores the Exorbitant Costs of Incarceration." American Civil Liberties Union. August 1, 2012. Accessed May 3, 2015. https://www.aclu.org/blog/senate-hearing-explores-exorbitant-costs-incarceration.