

# Prison Privatization: Turning People into Profits

On the surface, prison privatization seems like a great idea. Private prisons are purportedly safer, cheaper, and more efficient than public prisons. But like many things, if it sounds too good to be true it probably is. In reality, private prisons are understaffed, unsafe, and unsanitary. By transforming the prison system into a business, the pressure to keep more people in jail increases. We must return to a fully federal and state managed prison system whose goal is to rehabilitate citizens - not profit from prisoners.

Prison privatization changes a state responsibility for public safety into a money making institution under the guise of saving taxpayer money and increasing efficiency. However, the track record of private prisons paints a different picture. In 2001, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) conducted a comparison of private and public prisons and determined that “rather than the projected 20% savings, the average savings from privatization was only 1%.” Proponents of prison privatization also claim that private prisons are more efficient and of higher quality than public prisons. The BJA study also showed, however, that “no definitive research evidence would lead to the conclusion that inmate services and the quality of confinement are significantly improved in privately operated facilities.” Private prisons are neither cheaper nor more efficient – they continue to exist merely for the profit of the prison industrial complex.

The private prison is a business, thus the company’s chief concerns are profits and stock prices; not the wellbeing of the people under their supervision or the welfare of the community where they are located. The prison privatization model calls for incarcerating as many people as possible for as cheaply as possible. Understaffing is an easy way to accomplish this goal. But understaffing leads to a high rate of violence among prisoners and also higher rates of escape. A survey of private prisons found 49% more inmate on staff attacks and 65% more inmate on inmate assault occurred in private prisons when compared to public prisons. Private prisons also understaff medical personnel, leading to outbreaks of disease and deaths from lack of access to adequate medical care.

Another way of cutting costs is to eliminate or reduce training and rehabilitation programs in private prisons. Not only does this deprive prisoners of a chance to better themselves, it also deprives society as a whole from gaining a rehabilitated person after they serve their time. Often, without rehabilitation former inmates will return to a life of crime, ensuring a steady flow of inmates.

In addition to being unsafe and unhygienic, private prisons are unethical. One of the most heinous aspects of prison privatization is lock-up quotas. This is a system whereby the state or country contracts with the prison to provide a set amount of prisoners for lock up or pay a fine for failing to meet these human quotas. This is essentially funneling people into prisons for the sake of profits, not the sake of public safety. Eliminating these quota contracts would go a long way to make prisons less profitable and thus less attrac-

tive to businesses.

As with any private industry, lobbying is driving many of the laws that govern prisons and prisoners. Private prison lobbyist push for any law change that will increase the amount of prisoners regardless of whether that law actually protects the public or deters crime. For example in Oklahoma, possessing a cell phone in jail is now a felony instead of a misdemeanor. By changing this law, Oklahoma jails are guaranteed to have more prisoners for longer incarcerations. But does this law actually deter people in prison from getting cell phones? Not at all. It is simply a construct of the private prison system to keep its bottom line healthily in the black. By writing laws that simply serve to keep prisons full we are doing an injustice on two fronts. We are locking away people needlessly and we are spending money on keeping them there that could be used for better things.

Brothers and sisters, we must stop the privatization of prisons and return to the former model of state run correctional facilities. We must stop unbalanced sentencing just to keep prisons full in order to turn profits for corporations. We must stop allowing people to suffer violence and disease while they are incarcerated, which is tantamount to cruel and unusual punishment. We must call on our law makers to reform the laws that govern the prisons and prisoners so that they are just and fair and not simply in the interest of the prisons' owners. We must take a stand for those who have no voice, the incarcerated.