

Private vs. Public Facilities, Is it cost effective and safe?

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A private prison, jail, or detention center is a place in which individuals are physically confined or interned by a third party that is contracted by a local, state or federal government agency. Private prison companies typically enter into contractual agreements with local, state, or federal governments that commit prisoners and then pay a per diem or monthly rate for each prisoner confined in the facility. Today, the privatization of prisons refers both to the takeover of existing public facilities by private operators and to the building and operation of new and additional prisons by for-profit prison companies.

The privatization movement can be traced to the contracting out of confinement and care of prisoners after the American Revolution. Deprived of the ability

to ship criminals and undesirables to the Colonies, Great Britain began placing them on hulks moored in English ports (Campbell, 2001). The partial transfer of San Quentin prison administration from private to public did not mark the end of privatization. The next phase began with the Reconstruction Period (1865–1876) in the south, after the end of the Civil War. Farmers and businessmen needed to find replacements for the labor force once their slaves had been freed. Beginning in 1868, convict leases were issued to private parties to supplement their workforce (Todd, 2005). This system remained in place until the early 20th century.

Federal and state government has a long history of contracting out specific services to private firms, including medical services, food preparation, vocational training, and inmate transportation. The 1980s, though, ushered in a new era of prison privatization. With a burgeoning prison population resulting from the War on Drugs and increased use of incarceration, prison overcrowding and rising costs became increasingly problematic for local, state, and federal governments. In response to this expanding criminal justice system, private business interests saw an opportunity for expansion, and consequently, private-sector involvement in prisons moved from the simple contracting of services to contracting for the complete management and operation of entire prisons (“Sentencing Project”, 2004).

The modern private prison business first emerged and established itself publicly in 1984 when the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) was awarded a contract to take over a facility in Hamilton County, Tennessee. This marked the first time that any government in the country had contracted out the complete operation of a jail to a private operator (Jail Breaks, 2001). The following year, CCA gained further public attention when it offered to take over the entire state prison system of Tennessee for \$200 million. The bid was ultimately defeated due to strong opposition from public employees and the skepticism of the state legislature (Bates, 1998). Despite that initial defeat, CCA since then has successfully expanded, as have other for-profit prison companies. As of December 2000, there were 153 private correctional facilities (prisons, jails and detention centers) operating in the United States with a capacity of over 119,000.

Private companies in the United States operate 264 correctional facilities, housing almost 99,000 adult offenders (Schmallegger, F., & Smykla, J. (2007, 2005, 2002) Companies operating such facilities include the Corrections Corporation of America, the GEO Group, In, and Community Education Centers. The GEO Group was formerly known as Wackenhut Securities, and includes the Cornell Companies, which merged with GEO in 2010.

Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) has a capacity of more than 80,000 beds in 65 correctional facilities. The GEO Group operates 61 facilities with a capacity of 49,000 offender beds.

Most privately run facilities are located in the southern and western portions of the United States and include both state and federal offenders. Proponents of privately run prisons contend that cost-savings and efficiency of operation place private prisons at an advantage over public prisons and support the argument for privatization, but some research casts doubt on the validity of these arguments, as evidence has shown that private prisons are neither demonstrably more cost-effective, nor more efficient than public prisons. An evaluation of 24 different studies on cost-effectiveness revealed that, at best, results of the question are inconclusive and, at worst, there is no difference in cost-effectiveness.

A study by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics found that the cost-savings promised by private prisons "have simply not materialized." Some research has concluded that for-profit prisons cost more than public prisons. Furthermore, cost estimates from privatization advocates may be misleading, because private facilities often refuse to accept inmates that cost the most to house. A 2001 study concluded that a pattern of sending less expensive inmates to privately-run facilities artificially inflated cost savings. A 2005 study found that Arizona's public facilities were seven times more likely to house violent offenders and three times more likely to house those convicted of more serious offenses.

Evidence suggests that lower staff levels and training at private facilities may lead to increases in incidences of violence and escapes. A nationwide study found that assaults on guards by inmates were 49 percent more frequent in private prisons than in government-run prisons. The same study revealed that assaults on fellow inmates were 65 percent more frequent in private prison (Austin, Coventry, 2001).

After an complete analysis on private vs. public run correctional facilities, one may come to the conclusion that private run facilities are no more cost saving effective or safer than a state run facility. We must ask ourselves, is any monetary amount worth the lives of one of our own? The statistics are there, this profession is tough enough, we should take pride of it and not risk the lives of our bravest officers just to attempt to save the state a couple of dollars.

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