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Privatization of Prisons in Texas

              The privatization of governmental services has increased dramatically in the past decade as local, state, and federal agencies have searched for ways to cut costs while still meeting their mandated responsibility to provide various public services. This privatizing trend has particularly affected the criminal justice system. Since the early 1990s, privatized correctional facilities have increased significantly, nationally and statewide. This policy has far-ranging consequences not only within the criminal justice system, but as an instructive example for government officials when considering the costs and benefits of privatization as a public policy option. By 2001, thirty states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico had privately-operated correctional facilities (Austin and Coventry 4). This movement has incited considerable debate and controversy, mainly because prison privatization calls for giving the private sector direct control over the lives of a captive human population.

              Surprisingly, there has been little objective and concrete analysis of the privatization of prisons in the United States. This is probably for two reasons: first, ideological arguments on the matter have pushed out substantive research, and second, because this trend has only recently accelerated in the U.S. and mainly on a state level. However, case studies and statistics at the state level are more accessible. With capacity for over 30,000 prisoners in 43 facilities, the state of Texas has privatized more of its prison system than any state in the nation (McDonald and Patten Jr. iv).

              Public policy concerning the criminal justice system has become more daunting and important in the last decade. The problems in the system are twofold: an overcrowding prison population, mainly due to “three strikes” legislation and reducing early parole; and the costs of operating prisons with this growing population (Austin and Coventry). According to the most recent U.S. Department of Justice survey, slightly over 2.2 million people were incarcerated in correctional facilities in this country in 2003. In comparison, in 1993, 1.37 million people were imprisoned in this country (Beck and Harrison 1).

               At the same time, the growth of privately operated correctional facilities has increased significantly in this country. Private prisons now hold 95,522 inmates in this country, which is 6.5 percent of total prisoners (Beck and Harrison 5). In Texas, 16,570 inmates (10 percent of its prison population) are held in private facilities, about 10,000 more than the next highest state. Furthermore, six states had at least 25 percent of their prison population housed in private prisons, led by New Mexico (44%), Alaska (31%), and Montana (29%). These current statistics show that while state governments have been forced to manage and operate overcrowded and over-capacity prisons at considerable costs, many have turned to the private sector to operate prisons (McDonald and Patten Jr.). According to the General Accounting Office, prison operating costs have grown steadily since 1980, increasing almost 550 percent since 1980 based on inflation-adjusted dollars (Austin and Coventry 1).

               Prison privatization started in the early 1980s, ostensibly to ease the burden on taxpayers by offering financial relief to private companies to run state prisons. Thomas Beasley founded Corrections Corporation of America in 1983, “the nation’s leader in the construction and management of private prisons” (Darling). That year, Corrections Corporation of America set up the first privately-operated prison in Tennessee. Since then, the number of private correctional facility firms has grown to 14 (Austin and Coventry 3). The privatization of prisons occurs in two ways. First, state government can contract out (or outsource) specific services in a correctional facility to a private company after a bidding process. Second, and more radically, private companies build their own privately-managed prisons and contract with state governments to house their inmates. This latter approach, giving private correctional facility firms wide latitude over inmates, is taken in the Texas criminal justice system. In fact, many of these privately operated facilities “have no relationship at all with the state governments in these states, other than an obligation to pay corporate income taxes” (McDonald and Patten Jr. v). (Due to its length, the remainder of this sample paper is omitted).

Works Cited Page

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