How Does Privatization Affect the Carceral State?

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(Guenther, L., 2015, CCA/CoreCivic facility).

Plastech Corporation; Anagram; Impact Design: what do these three major U.S. manufacturers of wide-ranging everyday products all have in common? These and a myriad of other mass conglomerates all currently profit from the labor of inmates incarcerated in American private prisons and enjoy massive capital gains – Anagram alone was valued at nearly $9,000,000 USD as recently as 2018 (Wu and Brady, 2020). With large contractors such as MINNCOR who offer labor contracts to companies like those who rely on private prison labor, paying inmates as little as between "$0.50 and $2.00 per hour," the benefit to the contractors and corporations is obvious (Wu and Brady, 2020). But what about the benefit for those who must perform the labor; and is this a question that anyone profiting from this labor is even asking? What effects does the privatization of prisons, including the labor produced therein, have on this country's system of surveilling, criminalizing, and incarcerating its citizens – otherwise known as the carceral state? These are some of the themes explored in this paper, beginning with a brief history of private prisons and the impact they have had on inmate populations, conviction rates, inmate quality of life, and the U.S. economy. This initial analysis is followed by an examination of the social implications of the privatization of prisons and those of forced labor as a punitive measure, as well as a look into the connections between the privatization of prisons, corporate revenues, and the state of punishment in modern day America. Most importantly, this paper investigates the effects that the privatization of prisons has had, and continues to have, on those who must live daily within the reality of the carceral state – the incarcerated population.

INTRODUCTION

Louisiana, 1844 – just before the end of legalized slavery in the U.S., one penitentiary was turned over to a private company which used the facility as a factory for prison laborers to manufacture clothing (Young, 2020). This was one of the first examples of prison privatization, although systems mining the labor of enslaved convicts through convict leasing programs had been in place since pre-Jim Crow. Before the advent of private prisons, state prisons were thought of as a "privilege," and seen as a space for "reformation," (Muhammad, 2011) something reserved strictly for white Americans at the time. Arriving in 1865 was the Thirteenth Amendment loophole which outlawed slavery with one meaningful exception – "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted" (U.S. Const. amend. XIII § 1). In a perverse dichotomy, the Thirteenth Amendment at once abolished one kind of slavery and expanded another. The Thirteenth Amendment championed an excessively dangerous legal construction which has, historically, been used to "extract labor from those trapped between the walls of America's prisons" (Young, 2020). So, how is the labor extracted?

Firstly, employment is a requirement of all qualifying inmates of state and federal prisons with the typical wages of prisons ranging from as low as 3 cents per hour in Louisiana and as high as 97 cents per hour in Colorado (Zandt, 2024). With the highest state prison wage still being under one dollar per hour of typically hard labor, combined with the additional forced component, an arrangement not unlike that of convict leasing is created. In a sense, these convicts are being leased to corporations, not dissimilar to the convicts leasing widespread through the Jim Crow South. This reaffirms Michelle Alexander's 2010 postulation that mass incarceration is "the New Jim Crow," and, further, a "stunningly comprehensive and well disguised system of racialized social control" (p. 4). This unholy union of exploitative corporations and a carceral system once theoretically meant for rehabilitation has, essentially, created warehouses of individuals who are technically property of the state and who labor tirelessly for the benefit of private interests.

As of 2020, "private prisons incarcerated 99,754 American residents," which then represented "8% of the total state and federal prison population" (Buday and Nellis, 2022). This number had been rapidly rising in the past two decades alongside the 14% increase of the public prison population which has taken place since 2000. However, since 2012, the population of private prisons has decreased significantly, a foreboding sign for agencies such as the Bureau of Prisons, or BOP, which is "the largest prison system relying on privatization," whose "reliance on private facilities increased by 79%" since 2000 (Buday and Nellis, 2022). This concurrent recent decline in prison population and increased reliance upon private prison labor could create a dangerous situation in which the government and the private interests they are financially connected to become motivated to maintain and somehow inflate their dwindling populations of prison labor.

Today, CoreCivic, formerly known as the Corrections Corporation of America, or CCA, is America's largest private prison corporation and collected "$1.6 billion annual gross revenue from more than 60 facilities in 20 different states" in 2014. On top of this revenue, CCA collects over "$96 million a year in state taxpayers' money each year," (States of Incarceration, 2015) to run just a few of their facilities. Clearly, private prisons are big business, and contribute the cheap labor required to keep costs down and earnings up for some of the biggest companies in the country. Industries currently reliant upon cheap prison labor manufacture products ranging from circuit boards, as in All-Wire Inc. of California, to processed potatoes, as in Dickinson Frozen Foods, out of Idaho (Wu and Brady, 2020). Economic arrangements such as these, of course, create delicate relationships because private prisons must "answer to both the institutional environment of corrections and the competitive market environment of business," (Wright, 2010, p. 80) two institutions which have competing and conflicting goals.

The goals of private prisons functioning as for-profit businesses pose large ethical concerns as to how the privatization of prisons will ultimately affect the U.S. carceral system, and, arguably most importantly, what impacts this could have on the lives of the inmates of prisons themselves. Are private prisons, which warehouse inmates to provide cheap labor to benefit corporations who the prisons then generate capital from, anything other than a reiteration of American slavery? In 2012, CCA's U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (hereinafter "SEC") filings read much like the documents of a slave-trader and even warned investors that profits would decline if the demand for prisoners declines. Meaning, "if the world's largest police state shrinks, so does the corporate bottom line" (Ford, 2012, p. 9). By reducing the value of human lives to dollar amounts, represented merely as figures on a spreadsheet for the benefit of investors to manipulate, a dangerous precedent is revisited. This system loudly echoes the philosophies of American slavery, another economic system which translated the lives of human beings into capital gains.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prisons generating low-cost labor have been an intrinsic part of the U.S. prison system since its inception, with the history of this construction primarily benefiting government interests prior to the involvement of private industry. Although privatization and profiteering were not the modus operandi of the earliest U.S. prisons, the history of the carceral state is one in which inmates and wards of the state have long created cheap labor to be mined for the interest of one entity or another. The idea of private workhouses, wherein prisoners labored to offset the costs of their incarceration and to supplement the jailers' salaries, was first popularized in England in 1555, an idea which was adopted by the colonial states. This construction eventually led the British to send many convicts to the American colonies to be used as hard labor, which simultaneously provided both profit and punishment (Appleman, 2021, p. 5). These humble beginnings laid the groundwork for American carceral labor profiteering and the privatization of punishment.

By 1785, the newly established states born from the original British colonies began to implement incarceration as a punitive measure, using local jail houses or houses of correction. This was a turning point in the freshly forming American criminal justice system, the period in which incarceration became the cornerstone of criminal punishment. The organization of prisons began to receive more attention, and by the 19th century, inmate labor played a central role in the inception, organization, and spread of carceral institutions. The "reformist" ideas of the early 19th century were less about the actual rehabilitation and reform of the prisoners themselves, and more concerned with the stratification of social hierarchies as a means of social control. Additionally, these "reformist" prison policies were heavily influenced by concerns about the cost and profitability of carceral institutions (Appleman, 2021, p. 8).

From the launch of the carceral state and its early evolutions, the costs and benefits of incarceration have been at the forefront of U.S. carceral discourse. The history of prison profiteering cannot be discussed without invoking the image of chain gangs, the chained-together prison laborers of the late-19th and early-20th centuries – a visual and historic representation of the ways that state governments and private companies have long financially benefited from low cost prison labor. At the turn of the 20th century, using chain gangs to repair roads was a cost cutting measure employed by many Southern state governments. To use an example provided by Willamette University professor Laura I. Appleman, "in South Carolina, a low-skilled cotton mill hand was paid $1.25 per day in 1915," yet "housing, clothing, and food for chain gang members cost only $0.20 per day, pay for guards was only another twenty cents, per day, and then miscellaneous costs added merely $0.15 per day" (Appleman, 2021, p. 22). Not only did the capital generated by inmate labor include the maintenance cost of the inmates themselves, but this for-profit carceral system also provided labor at half the cost of non-prisoner labor, which clearly benefited state governments to no small degree.

Of course, state governments are far from the only entities enjoying the benefits of low cost prison labor; the private sector has been generating wealth from this same pool of labor since the very beginning of the American carceral system and continues to financially benefit from it today. Private companies and individuals have been eager to take advantage of inmate labor cost savings, even using cheap prison labor to aid in the response to natural disasters (Appleman, 2021, p. 34). A constant which remains unchanged throughout the history of the prison system is the economic advantage that inmate labor cost savings provides to both state governments and to private industry.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In the 21st century, private industry plays an integral role in nearly every aspect of mass incarceration and criminal justice, from the smallest to the largest components (Appleman, 2021, p. 38). While in the present day, the scale of private industry's involvement in the U.S. criminal justice system is staggering, this did not happen overnight. The history of the prison industry, what some scholars refer to as the prison industrial complex, is the history of brutal prison labor, labor which has been a source of wealth for both the state and private industry (Appleman, 2021, p. 38). So, how profitable are prisons and who enjoys the wealth generated by prison labor? Moreover, how does privatization factor in?

In a thorough analysis of the carceral state and state-sanctioned punitive structures, it is essential to consider the actual ramifications of incarceration on the most personal level; what it means to be incarcerated to the individual who has been incarcerated. A ubiquitous need for incarcerated individuals is that of communication with the outside world, a way to connect with family members and friends who are not incarcerated. In the 21st century, this is accomplished through telephones, which are owned and operated by private companies such as Global Tel* Link, "The Next Generation of Correctional Technology" (Segura, 2013).

Global Tel* Link, (hereinafter "GTL"), is a third-party private company which facilitates prison inmate communication with outside contacts through the mandated use of for-profit phone accounts which inmates and their families pay for. Inmates and their families must pay GTL to be able to communicate with each other, which is one of the few ways inmates have to retain their connection to their loved ones and to the world at large. GTL pulls in over $500 million per year, essentially extorting families by forcing them to pay exorbitant rates simply to use the phone, rates that are sometimes as high as $1.13 per minute (Segura, 2013). This creates an absolute behemoth of a monopoly for GTL, one which is highly profitable for the company and client alike. By offering kickbacks in the form of commissions to the prisons and jails it serves, GTL has no problem securing contracts and maintaining its highly profitable monopoly status. In the same instant that higher kickbacks to prisons and jails secures greater numbers of contracts for companies like GTL, higher kickbacks translate into higher phone rates for inmates and their family members (Segura, 2013).

When considering the privatization of prison services, such as phone services being provided by companies like GTL, even state and federal public prisons are part of the private sector on some level. This slow-but-steady privatization of the carceral state has created powerful financial incentives for companies like GTL to prioritize profits over efficiency and to cut corners wherever possible, as actors in the private sector are known to do, all in the interest of maximizing the bottom line. More significantly, the privatization of prison services sets up a system which benefits from mass incarceration, and aids in the creation of policies that fuel mass incarceration. Although "defenders of for-profit prison services pitch them as superior, efficient, money-saving options for cash-strapped states and localities that can ill-afford the costs of mass incarceration," these privatized services can end up incurring huge unseen costs to inmates and their families, as evidenced by GTL's audacious pricing of phone calls (Segura, 2013).

Phone services are just one example of how the private sector infiltrates the prison system and creates kickbacks for prisons and profits for private companies. Public prisons, both federal and state, outsource various functions and services to private companies, which is leading to the privatization of these institutions. Of course, full privatization of prisons has already boomed in the U.S., and in 2020 just under 100,000 Americans were incarcerated in private prisons. This number has been on the rise and has increased by 14% since 2000 (Buday and Nellis, 2022) before its more recent decline. As Liliana Segura, Associate Editor of The Nation, emphasizes, "no phenomenon is more emblematic of prison profiteering than the rise of private prisons," because private prisons operate on a business model built on the profits of punishment (Segura, 2013). Regardless of whether the rates of incarceration in private prisons continue to trend down or experience another significant increase, companies like GTL will continue to profit from the inmate population of private and public prison facilities. So, how do these companies create their profits, exactly?

HOW'S THE MONEY MADE? PRISON SLAVERY AND CORPORATE PROFITS

Similarly to the hotel industry, one which is built on the need to keep its beds as full as possible, the private prison industry must, too, rely on the filling of prison beds to maximize profits. Private companies serving public and private prisons make billions of dollars per year based on this very principle. Companies such as GTL, with its over $500 million in earnings in 2013, and CCA, which brought in a whopping $1.76 billion in revenues in 2012, are clearly heavyweights of private industry (Segura, 2013). Not only do these companies all profit from the labor of incarcerated people, but they also contribute millions upon billions of dollars to the national GDP. Figures such as these illustrate the nation's dependence on what can only be described as the borderline-slave labor of incarcerated people – an economic relationship that has cemented companies like CCA and GTL as titans of the private prison industry.

A closer look at the history, involvement, and power of CCA unmasks this leader of the industry as its newly rebranded corporate iteration, CoreCivic. As of 2021, CoreCivic generated $1.9 billion in revenues, a small but clear improvement on their 2012 figures. Obviously, the for profit carceral industry is a successful one, and as of today, CoreCivic "owns or manages 74 prisons and jails in the U.S. with a total capacity of 74,957 beds, which are 56% of all privately owned prison beds in the U.S." (AFSC, 2022). Financial gains such as these become even more impressive when factoring in the complete lack of taxes paid by CoreCivic for a substantial period. Between 2013 and 2020, CoreCivic was incorporated as a Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT), making it no longer subject to federal corporate income taxes. Of course, as a REIT, CoreCivic was required to distribute 90% of its income to stockholders, making it too reliant on loans from banks which eventually decided to stop financing private prison companies like CoreCivic. As of 2021, CoreCivic has reorganized as a taxable corporation, which, clearly, has not slowed down their growth nor impeded their impressive multiple-billion-dollar earnings (AFSC, 2022).

CoreCivic is still the largest owner of private prisons and the "largest private owner of real estate used by government agencies in the U.S." (AFSC, 2022). Because it also owns some prisons without managing them directly, CoreCivic is also the second-largest private prison operator, after GEO Group. Besides its domestic operations, CoreCivic owns 50% of AgeCroft Prison Management, a joint venture with Sodexo that operates the HM Prison Forest Bank in Salford, England, for the U.K. (AFSC, 2022). This harkens back to the earlier beginnings of prisons and the carceral state, one in which the U.S. and the U.K. worked together to reap the profits of low-cost prison labor, one which historically was shared between the crown and the colonies. Mergers such as CoreCivic-AgeCroft embody the present-day incarnation of the U.K.-colonial prison profit pipeline.

CoreCivic is a top-earning profiteer of the U.S. prison system, an excessively powerful entity who earns revenue based on the mass incarceration of Americans. From the companies who profit from providing prisons a service, such as GTL, (Segura, 2013) to the prison corporations themselves, of which CoreCivic is the prime example, the entities and individuals profiting from low-cost prison labor are primarily these behemoth, faceless conglomerates. These companies, of course, comprise shareholders and executives who are only concerned with earnings, not the rehabilitation of those from whose labor they profit. Companies like CoreCivic have transformed the carceral state into a network of businesses working together to provide their shareholders with the most diversified portfolios, not with pretending that anything that happens in their facilities is even remotely rehabilitative.

Despite former President Biden's 2021 executive order ending the federal use of private prisons, CoreCivic and other private prison corporations have sought ways to circumvent limitations to federal contracts by instead contracting with local county and state facilities which hold federal prisoners (AFSC, 2022). As in other trades, corporate officers often find clever ways around certain regulations, even executive orders signed by a President. As impossible a question as it may seem, one cannot help but wonder: if the profit of facilitating private prisons is absorbed by these corporations, who pays the true cost of incarceration?

(Young, S., 2020, Hallway in Prison Facility).

FINDINGS: WHEN THE STATE SERVES THE INTERESTS OF CORPORATIONS, JUSTICE IS LOST

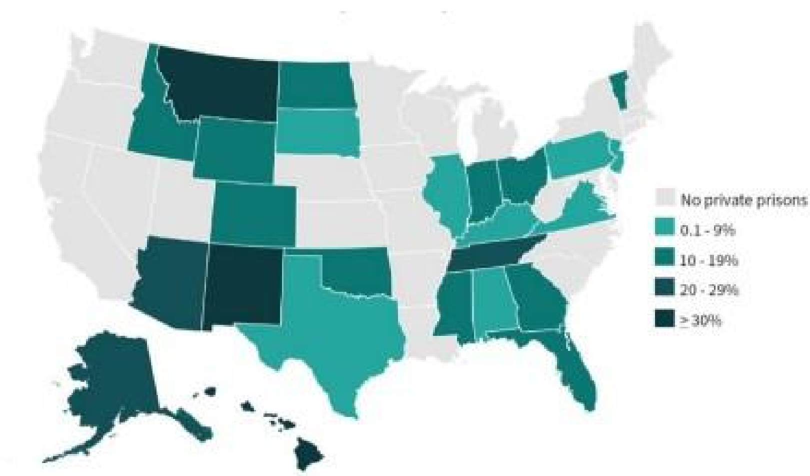
The most popular argument for the privatization of prisons by its proponents is that private facilities cost the government less than public facilities, specifically due to the cost cutting measures utilized by private prison corporations. By streamlining and corporatizing the carceral state, a more efficient structure of punitive facilities is promised. However, this might not be a wholly accurate representation of the facts, as a 2007 University of Utah study has already described how "cost savings from privatizing prisons are not guaranteed and appear minimal" (Young, 2020). This evidence is obviously far from convincing that the proposed financial savings which prison privatization proponents have promised will ever amount to substantial figures.

Moreover, lower-cost facilities are not synonymous with well-run facilities, and it is the very same cost-cutting measures employed by private prison corporations which make private prisons so dangerous. One of the first and most crucial services private prisons cut back on to reduce their overall operating costs are cleaning services. A 2016 Justice Department report indicated that inmates did not have access to proper healthcare in private facilities and observed a higher rate of inmate-on-staff and inmate-on-inmate assaults. This means that not only are private prisons filthier and more physically dangerous, but also that inmates also do not have access to clean, proper healthcare as needed. Research from the Arizona Department of Corrections asserts this, showing that many of its private prisons went out of their way to avoid accepting individuals who were suffering from severe mental conditions (Young, 2020). This picking and choosing of who gets the privilege of being incarcerated in a private facility is a representation of who is profitable to these companies and who is not.

In addition to the confirmed poor living conditions of private prisons, critics of privatization also consider the ethical implications of a system in which the owners and operators of prisons have a vested interest in maintaining mass incarceration. To be able to truly cash in on incarceration, obviously it must occur in great scores; hence mass incarceration contributing to the revenue streams of the owners and operators of private prisons. This reliance on mass incarceration translates into a need for legislation which incarcerates more people and goes in the reverse direction as prison reformers and advocates for prison abolition. Moreover, profiting from mass incarceration leads private prison corporations to lobby for government policies and candidates that will put more people in prison. CoreCivic alone spent an average of $1.4 million per year between 1999 and 2010 in federal lobbying efforts; clearly, they are investing in mass incarceration, which in turn boosts their profits (Young, 2020).

Is this model of mass incarceration needed to generate profits for the private sector sustainable? Furthermore, is the exploitation of prison labor a reasonable result of the criminal justice system? What are the societal implications of the reduction of human lives into low-cost labor for the private sector? The choices set forth by Sydney Young in *Capital and the Carceral State: Prison Privatization in the United States and United Kingdom* (2020) include maintaining privatization, reforming private prisons, and abolishing the privatization of prisons altogether. However, the main takeaway is that these questions are being addressed, and many critics of privatization are actively working toward reform and abolition. Whether the answer is maintenance, reform, or abolition, all sides of this argument can agree that prison corporations must be held accountable for their mismanagement and negligence regarding the lives of the inmates who they house and generate profits from (Young, 2020).

Since the early days of Colonial Era private workhouses, wherein prisoners labored to offset the costs of their incarceration and to supplement the jailers' salaries, the benefits of prison privatization have been clear. From chain gangs building roads for half the cost of non incarcerated laborers to the incredible system of labor being generated by private prisons in the 21st century, the groundwork to profit from the low-cost labor of incarcerated individuals has been a part of the American prison system since its early beginnings (Appleman, 2021, p. 8). Private companies like GTL enjoy billions of dollars in annual revenue for the services they provide to prisons, which come at a relatively low cost to the prison owners and operators. However, services such as the phone services provided by GTL do present immense costs to the inmates and the inmates' families; it is almost as though there is a double charge for this service, when considering the exorbitant cost to the inmates and their families.



(Budd, K. M., 2024, Percent of Imprisoned People in Private Prisons, 2021).

As has been discussed throughout this paper, private prisons are big business in the U.S., with CoreCivic being the largest U.S. private prison corporation to date (Segura, 2013). In 2021, CoreCivic generated an unprecedented $1.9 billion in revenue, a number made even more impressive when considering private prisons have just around 100,000 of the 2.3 million total prison population. In 2023, CoreCivic operated 43 jails and prisons, 39 of which it owns, and generated 52% of its total annual revenue from federal prison and immigration detention authorities. Even former President Biden's previously mentioned 2021 attempt to bar federal prisons from using private facilities to house inmates proved unsuccessful in the face of a company with such unchecked power. As set forth earlier in this paper, CoreCivic successfully dodged an executive order to continue business as usual, which, in this case, is the business of warehousing inmates with the sole purpose of generating capital gains from their labor (AFSC, 2022). It is clear that in addition to their powerful revenue stream, CoreCivic also holds a great deal of influence over even the most powerful leaders of this country.

While certainly having proved to be advantageous for corporations, the benefits of privatization for the state's population of taxpaying citizens are harder to define. There exists a myriad of ethical concerns regarding the privatization of prisons and the effect they have on inmates' quality of life. In many places, it has been shown that the cost-cutting measures of private prison corporations are directly linked to facilities not being up to what many Americans consider humane standards. In many cases, facility cleaning and maintenance are areas where cost-cutting measures are first implemented, leading to filthy facilities, and adjacently contributing to an environment rampant with violence and squalor (Young, 2020).

As set forth in the Introduction of this paper, the earliest American prisons were already for-profit institutions, meaning that prisons have essentially always been private to some degree. In early 20th century prisons, as masterfully detailed by Laura I. Appleman in the groundbreaking Bloody Lucre: Carceral Labor and Prison Profit (2021), the capital generated by inmate labor covered the cost of maintaining the inmates and provided labor at half the cost of non-prisoner labor. This is a model which greatly benefited state governments and the taxpayers who employed them (p. 22). It is through this model of supposed efficiency and the promise of revenue that the private sector caught wind of the immense yield with very little overhead costs that could be gained through the use of low-cost prison labor.

As made evident by GTL's wide profit margins, prisons do not need to be owned by private companies themselves in order for private companies to squeeze hundreds of millions of dollars out of the labor of their inmates. With hundreds of millions, even billions of dollars, per year in revenue to consider, it would be difficult to imagine the private sector not taking advantage of prison labor which costs them as low as $0.50 to $2.00 per hour (Wu and Brady, 2020). With costs of labor so drastically low and potential revenues so incredibly high, the privatization of prison services and of the prison system itself creates the ultimate pool of cheap, forced labor, and contributes to a system of mass incarceration purely for the sake of maintaining absurdly high corporate revenues.

The true costs and ramifications of prison labor contributing to mass incarceration in the U.S. massively outweigh the benefits of privatization, which, as confirmed by the research conducted herein, are predominantly financial benefits for companies in the private sector who rely on cheap prison labor to manufacture their products. Privatization, as an important example, provides essentially no benefits to the taxpayers footing the bill for the costs of many state and federal prison facilities and services. As provided by tax records courtesy of the SEC, CoreCivic (formerly CCA) received over $96 million per year in state taxpayers' money each year to run just seven Tennessee facilities, according to a 2014 report (States of Incarceration, 2015). Based on these figures, it appears that privatization provides little impactful benefit to taxpayers and in fact may be costing them more money for prison services; not to mention the cost to inmates and their families.

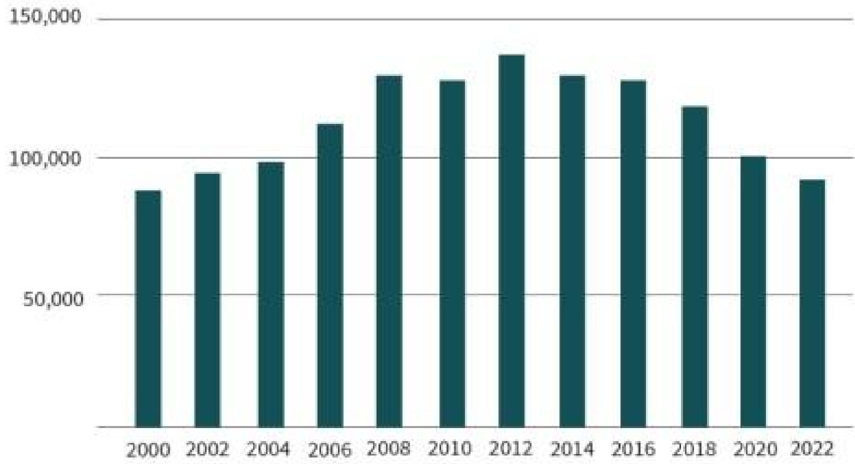
UNDERSTANDING LIMITATIONS AND MOVING FORWARD

Although a wealth of research exists regarding the profits of private prisons and the quality of life afforded to inmates by the profiteers who own these prisons, in addition to thoroughly recorded history about the carceral state as a whole, there are some gaps in the available research. Some gaps in research regarding the carceral state and the effects of privatization are areas such as long-term effects of privatization, as well as the long-term effects of poorly compensated hard labor on the prison population. More research is needed in the area of financial benefits to the state regarding privatization, as there are gaps there, as well. For example, more data points can be located showing the strain private prisons have on taxpayers, and while claims can be found concerning the great savings to the state afforded by privatization, not much empirical evidence has been located to back up these claims.

Of course, some gaps in research cannot be rectified without the simple passing of time, as long-term effects are hard to gauge for a system like mass incarceration which has only truly blossomed over the past 20 or so years (States of Incarceration, 2015). One particularly remarkable gap in current research regarding the carceral state and privatization is the laser focus researchers seemingly have on the U.S., U.K., and other Western nations. There are considerable areas of interest regarding the carceral and punitive systems of, for example, East Asia or West Africa, yet very little research exists concerning non-Western carceral and punitive systems.

To achieve a fully well-rounded, well-researched, and well-informed understanding of the effects privatization has on the carceral state as a whole, research must be expanded to include non-Western nations, as well as the research of the distant past, of civilizations who have already implemented similar punitive systems which produced capital. Profiting from the low cost labor of human beings is not a new concept, and, as such, it would be worthwhile taking a more extended view into the past, beyond that of the 19^{th}, 20^{th}, and 21^{st} centuries, for guidance. Taking a more phenomenological approach in carceral research is also recommended, as the intimate and personal experiences of those surviving the daily realities of prison labor and life within the carceral state will provide the most critical analysis of these systems of labor, incarceration, and capital.

The most productive research can only be conducted through a critical lens, especially if the punitive pendulum is swinging toward reform in this area. It is clear reform is needed not only within the carceral state itself, but more so in the research methodologies used to view this topic. Without taking a more personal, close-up, qualitative approach, the meaning of the



(Budd, K. M., 2024, Number of People in Private Prisons, 2000-2022).

research will be lost on the researcher. By taking the humanity out of carceral research, the point is lost completely; these are human beings, individuals experiencing the carceral state, and more data points must be collected regarding the conditions of these very real individuals laboring for the carceral state in order to truly understand the ramifications of this system of punitive forced labor.

CONCLUSION

Although the privatization of prisons and prison services first began as a means of offsetting the cost of housing inmates (Appleman, 2021, p. 22), the creation of a system which generates cheap labor has clearly benefited private companies much more than any other party involved. The true cost of prison labor, of course, is the impact on the inmate population, whose lives are taxed with the burden of forced, often manually hard labor from which they receive no benefit, and who are further forced to pay the costs of prison services, such as the high-priced telephone communication services provided by GTL discussed above. As made glaringly obvious by the research of Cindy Wu and Prue Brady, the entities who benefit the most from prison labor are corporations and conglomerates of the private sector who manufacture products using strictly inmate labor at a fraction of the cost of even minimum wage (Wu and Brady, 2020).

The stark reality of the modern carceral state is that of a machine operating in perpetuity, one which is fueled by the lives of incarcerated Americans who are fed into its machinations on an endless conveyor belt. The machine of mass incarceration then generates enormous wealth from the labor of these individuals, whose lives are ultimately nothing more than a means for already well-established companies to continue to increase their revenue. Rising rates of incarceration go hand in hand with skyrocketing earnings of companies benefiting from cheap prison labor. This is a disturbing scenario teeming with opportunities to take advantage of some of the most vulnerable members of the population and is, simply put, not a reasonable result of the criminal justice system.

To close with the words of the brilliant social reformer, prison abolitionist, and civil rights activist Michelle Alexander (2010), "As a society, our decision to heap shame and contempt upon those who struggle and fail in a system designed to keep them locked up and locked out says far more about ourselves than it does about them" (p. 171).

The willingness of the average American to not only stand by and watch as people who struggle are warehoused in prisons intended only for the harvesting of cheap labor, but also to willingly purchase and consume products manufactured by exploitative prison labor, directly contributes to the system of mass incarceration Alexander dubbed the New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2010, p. 11). In this way, it is the responsibility of every American to cut off the stream of wealth that continues to flow from the system of mass incarceration, since without demand, there can exist no need for supply. While fundamental structural changes must take place to dismantle the mechanisms of mass incarceration, it is also up to each individual American to take a stand against companies who take advantage of low-cost prison labor, and to cut off the head of the snake by refusing to support all products manufactured using the forced labor of incarcerated people.

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