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Inside the Workings of Private Prisons

Imagine if your relative had been sent to a private prison and was living under inhumane conditions, would you want to put a stop to facilities that don't care about their wellbeing? I know I will, and that is speaking from experience with my uncle. Private prisons are run by private for-profit companies, but where are the records that provide information about the living conditions inside private prisons? Since they are run by a for-profit company, money determines whether the residents are going to have worse or better living conditions within this specific type of prison.

In 2019, there were 116,000 people arrested and sent to private prisons (Bryant & Rhinehart, 2021). As some may know, a public prison is completely run by the government but for a private prison to run functionally, there has to be a contract between the government and a private company. A reason for government-involvement with for-profit companies is because it provides some control over the population within public prisons and a way for the government to save money. Private prisons are entirely run by a for-profit companies whose goal is to continue to make money (Bryant & Rhinehart, 2021) which can be remembered by a simple formula: more expansion of private prisons = more residents to place = more profit.

Numerous issues can arise within private prisons but, here are two major ones. One issue is that if the prisons are not providing adequate custody for residents, the prisons remain in business meaning having a high population of residents in the prison earns the company more money. Another issue is that for-profit companies can cut off resources (such as x and x) for residents if those resources cost money and cut into the prisons' profits (Bryant & Rhinehart,

2021). Having for-profit companies running a prison is ethically wrong because it privileges profit over people!

Additionally, private prisons are exactly that...private. As private companies, they can turn away media which makes it difficult to gather any information on the conditions residents could be experiencing. Many situations can arise within a private prison that should not happen to human beings. One situation is how medical assistance is completely ignored to minimize the use of money at a private prison. A *New York Times* article (2019) explains how in the East Mississippi Correctional Facility, residents who need medical care set fires in their cells to bring attention to their problem. Another example suggests the medical staff ignores issues until the issue is much bigger than what it was initially. One resident had punctured wounds and the staff poured only distilled water on the wounds. That resident was left in pain and eventually ended up in a hospital after severely bleeding in his cell (Williams, 2018).

Another situation is that these private prisons are understaffed and overpopulated with residents. In an interview with Wessler (year), he speaks about how 200 federal residents were being looked after by one guard. Further, in a podcast with Shane Bauer (year), he speaks about how the private prison he went undercover in, had only one psychologist and one psychiatrist available for all residents, meaning the residents that needed assistance would have to wait long hours until they receiving help. By waiting long hours, these residents can have a psychotic break or end up hurting themselves or others.

“In 2016, private prisons had higher rates for contraband, violence, and use of force than public prisons” (Kim, 2019). The inability to hire enough staff in these private prisons can result in exacerbated violence. Staffing shortages (staff cost money) create more opportunities for residents to beat or kill each other, staff or harm themselves. When the officers are outnumbered,

it provides an easier way for residents to proceed with violence towards the staff which can lead them to be beaten or even killed in the prison.

According to separate articles, Chan and Devall (2021) and Williams (2018) violence arises more in lockdowns. Those who work for private prisons earn lower wages than those working in public prisons. Also, staff in private prisons often have less training than those who work for public prisons. Understaffing makes it difficult for the staff or the facility, in general, to keep up with the conditions of the prison. For example, the Warden in East Mississippi Correctional Facility was not able to comprehend if the prison was able to perform basic functions like helping residents or keeping residents in cells. Also, the “Warden receives incentives for staying in budget and doesn’t get penalized if inmates die under questionable circumstances or if fires damage the prison” (Williams, 2018) meaning money is the only beneficial incentive within private prisons. Another situation is that staff seem to not care about residents which question the empathy a private prison has for residents living in the prison. For example, two officers were taking a resident away but, another resident attacked, and the officers ran away instead of helping. Upon returning, the officers just laughed and told the resident not to do it again with no consequences given (Williams, 2018). Another example is when residents on suicide watch are given less attention and are fed fewer calories than other residents (Chan & Devall, 2021).

Many sources explain why private prisons are beneficial for the community and residents. One benefit is that it solves the number one problem of public prisons which is overcrowding. By helping with the control of overcrowding in the public prisons, is a positive benefit as the “government saves money on operating costs” (Koirala, 2020). Another benefit is that private prisons create employment opportunities and decision-making happens a lot quicker

than public prisons since those prisons are not run by the government and often have streamlined bureaucratic structures.

Although some states and the federal government have abolished the use of private prisons, there are still many states that utilize these prisons. According to Vox, a resident was able to tell the difference in the conditions between public and private prisons. He discovered that there was more working staff, more supplies given to residents, supplies were of better quality, and more within the public prison system (Kim, 2019). This resident was able to become the director of the Human Rights Defense Center and started to fight to abolish private prisons. Presently, Colorado has a bill proposed to close private prisons in 2025 and Minnesota introduced a bill in 2020 that could ban for-profit immigration detention centers (Kim, 2019).

Private Prisons are horrible for residents because their living conditions are subpar and the focus is on profit over people. To join the fight against private prisons you can start by calling your local representatives or legislators and asking them to work to abolish private prisons. You can also organize and/or sign petitions to end this inhumane treatment! After private prisons get abolished, residents have a better chance of getting help they deserve within a public prison. It may not be perfect, but it's certainly a step toward a better, and more ethical direction.

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