



THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, EXPLAINED

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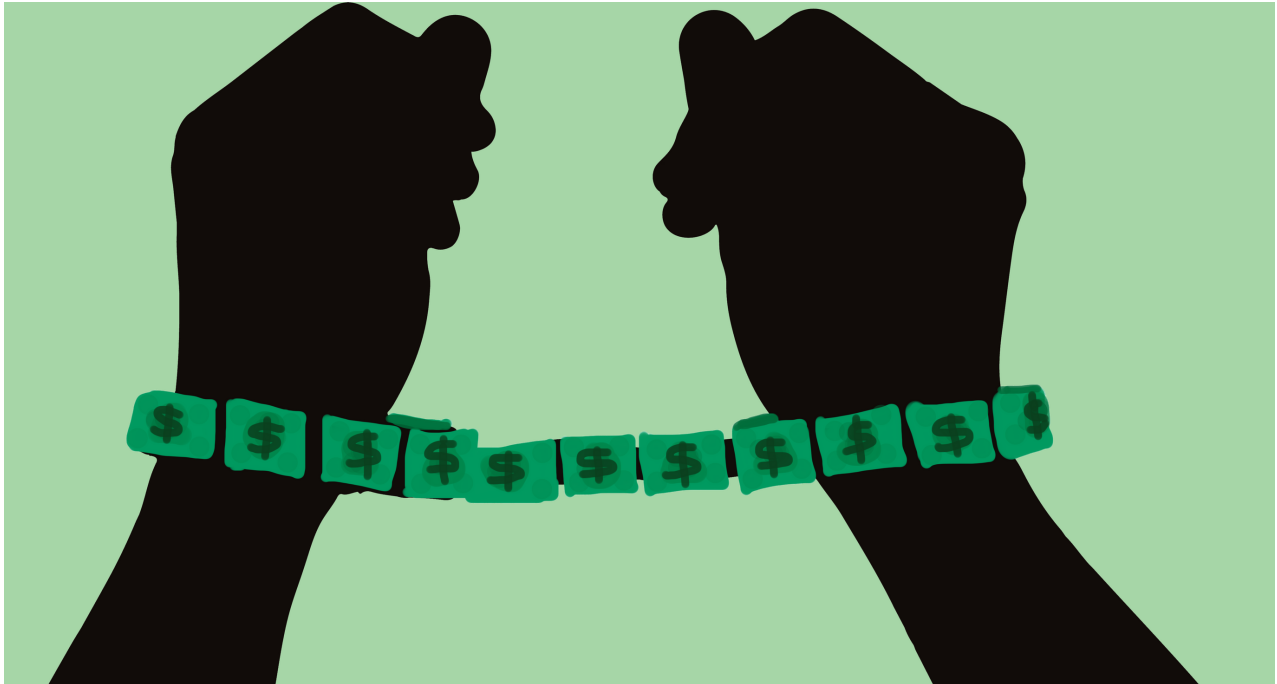


Photo derived from The Georgetown Voice

Some people view mass incarceration as dangerous. Other people view it as an opportunity to make profit.

The prison industrial complex is a phenomenon in which prisons are becoming a private industry to make profit. Corporations have been profiting off prisons for decades, forcing more and more people into prison to profit off them. The more prisoners there are, the more money corporations make. As overcrowding becomes more prevalent, prisoners are forced to live in inhumane conditions so corporations can make as much money as possible.

In the 1990s, the “tough on crime” laws began to take effect on the prison populations in the U.S. The numbers of incarcerated people continued to rise and today, the U.S. is home to the largest prison population in the world.



As the prison population continued to grow, the U.S. also saw the growth of the private prison industry. With private prisons in place, the government does not have to concern itself with the business of overseeing prison operations. Instead, the burden is shifted onto a private company.

With private prisons being for-profit, they maximize their profits by joining the prison industrial complex. These private companies must incarcerate as many people as possible in order to make profit. It is important to focus on the prison industrial complex because it ultimately generates more crime. When corporations' main source of income is prisoners, it benefits them to maintain criminal activity.

What is the Prison Industrial Complex?

The prison industrial complex is a term used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems. The idea of the prison industrial complex was used to describe the network of people who prioritize financial gain over rehabilitating prisoners. Private corporations and government agencies saw prison growth and crime spike as a business opportunity instead of a social problem.

The prison industrial complex is composed of conservative and liberal politicians who use the fear of crime to secure votes, poor rural areas where prisons are the foundation of their economy, and private companies that consider the \$35 billion spent yearly on correctional facilities not as a burden on taxpayers but as a lucrative market.

It is not a coincidence that in 1991, the rate of violence had dropped by 20 percent, but the amount of people in prison had skyrocketed by 50 percent. Activists and scholars argue against the belief that the reason behind mounting prison populations is increased levels of crime. Alternatively, they argued that the real reason behind the mounting prison population was prison construction and the drive to fill these new structures with human bodies, which stemmed from ideologies of racism and the desire for profit.

The National Criminal Justice Commission and other businesses alike manipulate society into thinking that if the crime rate is rising, then more prisons are needed; and if the crime rates are decreasing, it is because of the increase in prisons. Therefore, building more prisons will decrease crime even more. However, these companies could care less about decreasing crime rates—they want to build prisons and incarcerate more people so that they can make more profit. This ideology fuels the prison industrial complex.



How do Private Prisons Profit Off Incarceration?

It costs an average of \$23,876 a year to house a state prisoner. In order to save money, some states pay companies to handle their prisoners. Private prisons make their money by running as cheaply as possible and placing as many prisoners as they can into their prison for a basic fee. As a result, private prisons are a \$70 billion industry. However, in order to make money, private prisons need to have a certain amount of prisoners or else they must pay for the empty beds. This creates a need for a solution to incarcerate as many people as possible.

The growth of private prisons relies on their ability to acquire new contracts that allow them to develop new correctional facilities.



Photo of prisoners with barcodes on their back.
Photo derived from L.A. Progressive

When they gain control over new correctional facilities they create new spaces to keep the maximum number of inmates so that they can make the maximum amount of profit.

The growth of inmates depends on crime rates and sentencing patterns in the area in which the private prison is located. If an area has low crime rates and relaxed sentencing patterns, then a private prison is unnecessary. On the other hand, if an area has high crime rates and harsh sentencing patterns, then creating a private prison in that area might be useful. For this reason, private prison officials prefer tough enforcement efforts, harsh conviction and parole standards, and strict sentencing practices. That way, more people are incarcerated and put into private prisons.

In order for private prison companies to ensure that tough enforcement efforts are made and more people are incarcerated, they have joined with lawmakers, corporations, and interest groups to support privatization through the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC is a non-profit membership association that focuses on promoting "the Jeffersonian principles of free markets, limited government, federalism, and individual liberty." The way that they advocated for those principles was by supporting large-scale privatization of governmental functions.

However, ALEC was money-driven and used their power to support private prisons. Behind the scenes, ALEC worked with lawmakers to pass "tough on crime" laws that would incarcerate more people into private prisons so that they can profit off of them.



ALEC worked with other companies to draft laws regarding longer sentencing policies and prison privatizations. These laws promoted mandatory minimum sentences, three strike laws, and truth-in-sentencing, all which generated higher prison populations. These laws required prisoners to serve their full sentence because the longer they stay in the prison, the more money the prison makes.

There are hundreds of companies just like ALEC that support “tough on crime” laws that generate higher prison populations. Private prison companies exist off of these laws because they only make profit when they have prisoners. Therefore, they do everything in their power to advocate for strict law enforcement that will incarcerate as many people as possible.

Which Corporations Profit off Incarceration?

Many corporations cut their costs and maximize profits through providing bad service to prisoners. The following is a list of corporations who profit off prisons and how they provide poor service:

- **Global Tel-Link**: Provides phone service to more than 50% of state prisoners. This phone company charges prisoners up to \$17 for a 15-minute call. Prisoners families’ have to pay this exorbitant amount to speak with their loved one or else they cannot speak to them at all.
- **Corizon**: This health care provider makes \$1.4 billion a year providing health care to over 530 prisons. Corizon is a for-profit service which means that their main objective is to maximize profits. The way that Corizon maximizes profits is by cutting costs and providing low quality health care to prisoners. To make higher profits, Corizon does not provide prisoners with drugs and health care, uses unsanitary practices, does not transfer prisoners to hospitals when needed, and provides insufficient mental health screenings.
- **Aramark**: Made \$14 billion in revenues in 2018 selling food services to prisons across the country. The huge profits were made possible through selling low quality goods at high prices. Over the years, Aramark has been involved in scandals behind the horrible quality of its prison food services. For instance, it has been reported that Aramark served rat and maggot-infested foods in Michigan and Ohio prisons.
- **Prisoner Transportation Services (PTS)**: Is the largest provider of transportation for prisons. In 2016, PTS charged Nevada Prisons \$1.05 per adult per mile and charged higher rates for minors and prisoners with mental disabilities. PTS priced its services at \$350 for a minimum trip. In the past years, 14 women have reported being sexually assaulted by transportation guards and 4 people have died while being transported by PTS.



Many corporations cut their production costs by using prison labor. Prisoners are forced to complete lucrative labor. Today, activists call it modern day slavery.

The following is a list of corporations that benefit from prison labor:

- **McDonalds**: Uses inmates to produce frozen food. The inmates process beef for patties and process bread, milk, and chicken products.
- **Starbucks**: Uses inmates to cut production costs by employing inmates to package holiday coffees.
- **Sprint**: Uses inmates to provide telecommunication services and places inmates in call centers.
- **Verizon**: Uses inmates to provide telecommunication services.
- **Victoria's Secret**: Uses inmates to cut production costs by employing female prisoners to sew products and replace “made in” tags with “Made in USA” tags.
- **Fidelity Investments**: Many 401(K) and other investments are held by Fidelity. In fact, some of the money that you have invested with Fidelity might be used in operations related to the prison industrial complex. Fidelity funds ALEC, which as mentioned before, has supported laws that create higher prison populations and increases the use of prison labor.
- **J.C Penney**: Sells jeans that are made by inmates.

Prisoners are forced to work in sweatshops and in the field for hours a day. Some consider prison labor inhumane. However, the living conditions that they are put in are even worse.



Female prisoners sewing boots as part of their required labor. Photo derived from Dressemer



How Does the Prison Industrial Complex Create Inhumane Living Conditions?

As “tough on crime” laws were passing through legislation, the number of incarcerated people began to reach an all time high. The U.S. had the largest prison population and the highest incarceration rate in the world. With the desire to fill up their prisons to make profits, private prison companies were filling up their prisons beyond maximum capacity. Private prisons were flooded with inmates and started to run out of beds and space to put their inmates in.

With the prison population exceeding maximum capacity, inmates began to turn their anger on one another, which led to violence and even death among the inmates. Inmates are beaten, stabbed, raped, and killed in prison because private prison officials would rather profit off of inmates than create livable conditions for inmates.

Inmates who need medical care or help managing their disabilities are neglected and placed in solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is a cheaper alternative to medical treatment and therefore, private prison companies rather ignore their inmate’s medical needs. Unfortunately, solitary confinement has been proven to exacerbate mental health issues and comprises half of all suicides in prison.

Additionally, correctional officers use their power to engage in excessive cruelty and misconduct against inmates. To make matters worse, correctional officers are understaffed and prisons cannot afford to fire any of them. Therefore, correctional officers continue to treat inmates like animals in cages because they know that they will not lose their jobs.

With more prisoners than beds, prisons have been squeezing three inmates into a cell that has been designed to house only two inmates. Many inmates have been forced to sleep on the floor or on a mattress that is as thick as a kindergarten mat with some of the foam missing.



Prisoners sleeping on the floor due to prison overcrowding.
Photo derived from Chattanooga Times Free Press



Forcing three inmates to live in a small cell has pushed inmates beyond their breaking point. One inmate reported that the conditions were so bad that he suffered from suicidal thoughts. He said, “Among the problems were a broken toilet that flooded his cell, bugs and mold in the showers, and cold food on trays that smelled of mildew.”

Private prison officials turn a blind eye to the inhumane conditions that their prisoners are living in. As long as they are filling up their prisons and making profit, they will not see a problem.

How Does the Prison Industrial Complex Contribute to a Racist Prison System?

It has been argued by many activists that people of color (POCs) are punished and incarcerated into a strategic and racist prison system. Mike Davis, an activist fighting against the prison industrial complex, has argued that most of the new admissions to prisons are POCs because legislators are systematically passing laws to incarcerate more people of color.

It is clear that crime is racialized. Black, Latino, Native American, and Asian people are portrayed as violent, drug traffickers, rapists, robbers, and more. Laws such as the War on Drugs and the Three Strike Rule were passed in an effort to incarcerate more people of color. Law enforcement agencies place more police officers in neighborhoods that have a higher concentration of POCs so that they can arrest more POC rather than White people. With racist beliefs in mind, police officers arrest colored bodies to feed into the prison industrial complex and make private prisons profit.

In order to obtain as many prisoners as possible, the economy of prisons relies on racial stereotypes of criminality. For instance, it is assumed that Black “welfare mothers” reproduce criminal children. Therefore, children of Black “welfare mothers” are targeted more by law enforcement than children of White mothers. Law enforcement actively participates in racist practices in arrest, conviction, and sentencing patterns. Law enforcement believes that by arresting more POCs, they will be able to make crime disappear. However, they do not care to make crime disappear, they actually want it to keep happening. That way, they can arrest as many people of color as possible so that the private prisons can make profit.

Due to the constant surveillance of minority neighborhoods and the laws that have passed to incarcerate more people of color, more than 70 percent of the imprisoned population are POCs. People of color have been thrown into private prison for nothing more than profit because the more bodies there are, the more money private prisons make.



Why Should We End the Prison Industrial Complex?



Photo derived from Forbes Magazine

With the prison industrial complex in place, it is difficult for prisons to attend to the needs of their prisoners because they are too concerned with finding ways to cut costs to maximize their profits. By cutting the costs of medical care, food services, etc., prisoners are forced to live in inhumane conditions.

The term “crime and punishment” is frequently linked together, but how about “crime and rehabilitation” or “crime and therapy”? Imagine a world where we do not respond to crime by throwing human bodies into prison cells so that corporations can make billions off of them. Imagine what would happen if there wasn't a prison industrial complex to create the catastrophe that is mass incarceration.

We need to find a balance of attending to the needs of prisoners, having less violent conditions, more accessible health care, more access to drug programs, more educational work opportunities, and shorter sentencing. We will not be able to find this balance with the prison industrial complex in place. Once we remove the need to make profits off of prisoners, we will be able to create a balanced prison system and at the same time find alternative methods to sentencing altogether.

The prison industrial complex is taking advantage of the fact that people do not care about prisons enough to do something about their brutality. If the prison industrial complex continues, corporations will continue to thrive off of prisoners' misery. The first step to this change is awareness. The second step will be to abolish the prison industrial complex and give prisoners a chance to rehabilitate and be put back into society.



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