



National Experts: Private Prisons Pose Serious Risk

NATIONAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE EXPERTS QUESTION PRIVATE PRISON CONCEPTS,
CRITICIZE RECORD ON SAFETY, CIVIL RIGHTS

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TALLAHASSEE – Some of the nation’s top criminal justice experts warned lawmakers and the public today about a plan that would create the country’s largest private prison system by turning over 28 mostly south Florida correctional facilities to private, for-profit companies which would run the prisons under contract with the state.

“One of the fundamental problems with private prisons is injecting the profit motive into the prison system,” said David Shapiro, a staff attorney with the ACLU’s National Prison Project in Washington, D.C. who wrote *“Banking on Bondage: Private Prisons and Mass Incarceration,”* a national report on private prisons released in November, 2011. “Profit should not be a motive to keep someone in confinement.”

Most of the debate surrounding Florida’s proposal to privatize about 20% of its state prisons has been about costs and the asserted savings of private management. But, according to the experts gathered in Tallahassee, not only are cost savings questionable, but an examination limited strictly to costs sidesteps larger questions about civil rights, government accountability and obligations for humane conditions raised by for-profit prisons.

“Private prisons turn the incentives upside down,” said Julie Ebenstein, Policy and Advocacy Counsel with the ACLU of Florida. “It costs less in any number of ways to keep people out of prison, but private prisons make profits by keeping people in – filling prison beds – which makes for-profit prisons the enemy of sentencing reform and effective reentry.”

Private prisons have incentives to increase profits by cutting basic services such as medical care, and staff training, and staffing levels – potentially putting both inmates and correctional workers at risk. Private prisons can also limit the number of inmates requiring extra attention, such as the elderly, those needing mental health care services and high security risks.

“Most prisons don’t have luxury of picking who they care for or supervise,” said Dr. Byron Price, professor at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas and author of [Merchandizing Prisoners: Who Really Pays for Prison Privatization?](#) “Warehousing the most vulnerable or more dangerous prisoners in public facilities while for-profit companies siphon off profits isn’t a plan – it’s medieval. The research shows that private prisons don’t save dollars or make sense. ”

Even before the 2012 Legislative Session, Florida’s history with private prisons has been mixed. The courts rejected a 2011 Legislative attempt to privatize corrections facilities. Previous efforts to supervise and administer the state’s existing private facilities have been controversial and ineffective.

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"The overwhelming body of evidence on private prisons – including their history in Florida – shows that locking people away for profit is an invitation to abuse," said Ebenstein. "The choice is a pretty easy one: we outsource our prisons and pay the price in safety costs and civil rights, or we can make real reforms in sentencing and rehabilitation that will save money and keep Florida safe by preventing future crime."

"Florida's prison population has exploded over the past decade, increasing over 40% since 2000," said Tracy Velazquez, Executive Director of the Justice Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. "If what Florida is seeking is money savings, rather than political payback, they should follow the lead of others in the South and across the country in reforming their sentencing policies. If they don't do this, state correctional costs will skyrocket, particularly as Florida's older prison population has more than doubled in the past ten years."

Like the 2010 version, lawmakers have handled the 2012 private prison plan in a way that minimizes public input and objective analysis. Legislators have even filed a bill to exempt this privatization from a required fiscal analysis and limited public debate and testimony in committee hearings.

In June, 2011, The Justice Policy Institute released a national report on the influence and track record of privatization efforts titled, *"Gaming the System: How the Political Strategies of Private Prison Companies Promote Ineffective Incarceration Policies."*

"The way the Florida bill has been handled is typical – big, for-profit companies have great influence and usually get what they want without a real examination of consequences," Velazquez said. "But it may be moot to study Florida's plan because we don't need any deeper study of private prisons – we already know they are dangerous, ineffective and pose a serious threat to basic civil and human rights."

The 2012 plan to privatize Florida prisons is under consideration in the Florida Senate and has been a priority of the Senate President and Governor Rick Scott. Rep. Mark Pafford (D-West Palm Beach) hosted the ACLU press conference at the Capitol.

"People can debate whether private, for-profit prisons save money but everyone should have the facts," said Shapiro of the ACLU. "Evidence for cost savings is mixed – at best."

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The ACLU report, "Banking on Bondage" is here: <http://www.aclu.org/prisoners-rights/banking-bondage-private-prisons-and-mass-incarceration> For more information on the ACLU prison project: <http://www.aclu.org/prisoners-rights>

The Justice Policy Institute report, "Gaming the System: How the Political Strategies of Private Prison Companies Promote Ineffective Incarceration Policies" is here: <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/2614> For more information on the Justice Policy Institute: <http://www.justicepolicy.org/index.html>