Scandals in US For-Profit Prisons: A Comprehensive Analysis

I. Introduction: The Landscape of For-Profit Prisons and the Shadow of Scandal

For-profit prisons have become an increasingly prominent feature of the United States correctional system, experiencing significant growth particularly from the 1980s onward [1]. This expansion coincided with the intensification of the "War on Drugs" and the implementation of stringent "tough on crime" policies, which led to a dramatic surge in incarceration rates [1]. As the number of individuals behind bars escalated, the public sector faced mounting pressure, leading many states and the federal government to turn to private companies to build and manage correctional facilities [2]. By 2022, approximately 8 percent of all prisoners in the U.S. were held in private prisons, marking a 5 percent increase since 2000 [1]. This reliance on private entities has transformed corrections into a substantial industry, generating over $7.4 billion annually [1].

However, this pursuit of profit within the realm of incarceration has been accompanied by a persistent shadow of scandals. These controversies encompass a wide range of issues, including allegations of judicial corruption, systemic human rights violations, pervasive medical neglect, dangerously low staffing levels, unethical exploitation of inmate labor, and a notable lack of transparency compared to publicly run institutions [1]. The increasing profits of these private facilities, estimated at $374 million each year, raise critical questions about whether they are a result of efficient management or the exploitation of both inmates and staff [1]. This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these scandals, exploring their underlying causes, the far-reaching consequences they entail, and the various policy and legal responses that have been enacted or proposed to address these deeply troubling issues.

II. Judicial Corruption: The 'Kids for Cash' Scandal - A Landmark Breach of Trust

Perhaps one of the most egregious examples of corruption directly linked to for-profit prisons is the 'Kids for Cash' scandal that unfolded in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, between 2003 and 2008 [1]. This case involved two judges, Mark Ciavarella and Michael Conahan, who orchestrated a scheme to accept nearly $2.6 million in kickbacks from two private for-profit juvenile detention facilities, PA Child Care and Western PA Child Care [5]. The judges systematically sent thousands of children to these facilities, often for minor offenses such as mocking an assistant principal on Myspace or trespassing in a vacant building [8].

The impact on the children and their families was devastating. Over 2,500 children across more than 6,000 cases were affected by this corruption [5]. Alarmingly, over 50 percent of the children who appeared before Judge Ciavarella lacked legal representation, and approximately 60 percent were removed from their homes and placed in these private facilities [5]. These children were often given harsh sentences without proper due process, their fates determined by the financial incentives driving the judges' actions.

The legal repercussions for those involved were significant. Following an investigation prompted by a concerned parent in 2007, the U.S. Attorney filed federal criminal charges against both judges [5]. Ultimately, Judge Michael Conahan, along with the former co-owner of the facilities, Robert Powell, and the developer, Robert Mericle, pleaded guilty to federal criminal charges [5]. Judge Mark Ciavarella was found guilty of various federal crimes in 2011 and sentenced to 28 years in prison [5]. In 2009, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court granted extraordinary relief, vacating the adjudications of all youth who appeared before Ciavarella between 2003 and 2008, dismissing their cases with prejudice, and ordering their records expunged [5]. Furthermore, the Juvenile Law Center partnered with pro bono counsel to file a federal class action lawsuit on behalf of the affected children and parents, seeking monetary damages under federal civil rights laws and the RICO Act [5]. In a more recent development, President Biden commuted the sentence of Michael Conahan in December 2024, a decision that angered many of the families whose children were victimized by the scandal [6].

The 'Kids for Cash' scandal starkly illustrates the potential for the profit motive within the private prison industry to corrupt the judicial system. The financial benefit derived from increased occupancy in the private detention facilities allegedly incentivized the bribery of judges, leading to the wrongful incarceration and profound suffering of countless children. This landmark case serves as a chilling reminder of the inherent risks associated with allowing private financial interests to intersect with the administration of justice, particularly when vulnerable populations are involved.

III. Human Rights Violations and Abuses: A Pattern of Mistreatment and Dangerous Conditions

Beyond outright corruption, for-profit prisons in the United States have been plagued by numerous reports and allegations of human rights violations and abuses [1]. These violations encompass a wide spectrum of mistreatment, including alarming rates of violence, both between inmates and perpetrated by staff, as well as various forms of abuse and neglect that compromise the safety and well-being of incarcerated individuals [1].

A key factor contributing to these violations is often attributed to cost-cutting measures implemented by private prison companies to maximize their profits [1]. These measures can include maintaining lower staffing levels compared to public prisons, providing inadequate training to correctional officers, and compromising the quality of essential services such as food and medical care [1]. For instance, studies have shown that private prisons often pay staff less per hour and require significantly fewer hours of training prior to service, leading to higher staff turnover rates and a less prepared workforce [10]. This understaffing has been directly linked to an increased risk of violence and a diminished ability to maintain order within the facilities [10].

Reports from various sources paint a disturbing picture of the conditions within some for-profit prisons. The Yale Daily News reported that attacks on staff in private prisons were 163% higher and inmate-on-inmate attacks were 30% higher compared to public facilities [1]. The NAACP further highlighted that inmate-on-inmate violence is 66% higher and violence toward staff 49% higher in private prisons [13]. The U.S. Justice Department's Inspector General found that private prisons, per capita, experienced more contraband smuggling, more lockdowns and uses of force by correctional officers, and more assaults, attributing many of these issues to chronic understaffing [10].

Specific instances of extreme violence and abuse have also come to light. The Walnut Grove Correctional Facility in Mississippi, a youth prison run for profit, was described as having "barbaric conditions" and a "culture of violence and corruption" [15]. A Department of Justice investigation into the facility found "systematic, egregious, and dangerous practices," including rampant sexual abuse of younger inmates, sometimes facilitated by corrupt prison staff [15]. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which filed a lawsuit over the conditions, reported a youth melee that resulted in the stabbing of several individuals, with one sustaining irreparable brain damage [15]. These accounts underscore the severe human cost that can result when the primary focus of a correctional institution shifts from rehabilitation and safety to profit generation.

The fundamental tension between the profit motive and the provision of safe and humane conditions in correctional settings is a recurring theme in the criticism of for-profit prisons. As Sir Nigel Rodley, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, explained, the profit motive can diminish the rights and needs of prisoners and the direct responsibility of states for their treatment [14]. The prioritization of financial gain can inadvertently create an environment where the basic human rights of incarcerated individuals are compromised.

IV. Medical Neglect and Inadequate Healthcare: A Systemic Failure of Care

A particularly concerning aspect of the scandals surrounding for-profit prisons is the pervasive issue of medical neglect and the provision of inadequate healthcare to inmates [1]. Numerous reports and legal cases have highlighted instances of insufficient medical staffing, denial or rationing of necessary medical treatment, and an overall poor quality of care within these facilities [1].

The profit-driven nature of these institutions can create a powerful incentive to minimize healthcare costs, as these expenses can significantly impact the bottom line [1]. This can manifest in various ways, such as understaffing medical departments, delaying or denying access to specialists, providing less expensive but potentially less effective treatments, and implementing restrictive policies regarding medication and care [18].

There have been numerous documented cases of severe medical neglect in for-profit prisons. Kamyar Samimi, a legal immigrant detained by ICE at an Aurora, Colorado, facility operated by GEO Group, died after being abruptly cut off from his prescribed methadone, allegedly due to GEO policy [24]. An internal ICE review reportedly found major deficiencies in his medical care for opioid withdrawal [24]. His children filed a lawsuit against GEO Group for wrongful death, highlighting the inhumane conditions and lack of adequate medical care [25].

CoreCivic, another major private prison corporation, has faced numerous lawsuits and settlements related to medical neglect. In Tennessee, the company spent over $4.4 million since 2016 to settle dozens of complaints alleging mistreatment, including at least 22 inmate deaths, with many cases involving allegations of denied or delayed medical care [28]. One lawsuit involved Jonathan Salada, a diabetic inmate at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center who died after allegedly being repeatedly denied his diabetes medication [29]. His family settled the case for $50,000 [29]. Another case involved the suicide of an inmate at a CoreCivic facility where staff allegedly falsified records [31].

Management & Training Corporation (MTC) has also been implicated in cases of inadequate medical care. A lawsuit was filed against MTC and other entities alleging gross negligence leading to the death of Roxsana Hernandez, a transgender asylum seeker living with HIV, while she was being transported between facilities [35]. The lawsuit claimed a failure to provide adequate medical care, food, water, and rest, despite her visibly deteriorating health [35]. Additionally, a riot at the Willacy County Correctional Center in Texas, operated by MTC, was reportedly triggered by issues including poor medical care [33].

These examples underscore a systemic issue where the prioritization of profit in for-profit prisons can lead to a dangerous compromise in the quality and accessibility of healthcare for incarcerated individuals. The legal challenges and settlements, while sometimes providing a measure of justice, also highlight the significant difficulties in ensuring that private correctional facilities meet their fundamental obligations to provide adequate medical care.

V. Understaffing and Compromised Safety: A Recipe for Disorder and Danger

Understaffing has emerged as a significant and recurring problem within for-profit prisons across the United States, directly impacting the safety and security of both inmates and correctional officers [1]. The drive to minimize labor costs, a primary means of increasing profitability, often results in fewer correctional officers being on duty than what is considered necessary for maintaining a secure environment [10]. This shortage of staff can lead to a breakdown of order, increased violence, and a reduced ability to respond effectively to emergencies [1].

The economic model of private prisons incentivizes lower staffing levels through reduced salaries and benefits, as well as less comprehensive training programs, all of which contribute to higher staff turnover [10]. The Yale Daily News reported significantly higher rates of attacks on both staff and inmates in private prisons, suggesting a direct correlation with inadequate staffing [1]. The U.S. Justice Department's Inspector General also identified chronic understaffing as a fundamental cause of numerous problems in these facilities, including increased contraband, lockdowns, use of force incidents, and assaults [10].

Major private prison corporations, including GEO Group and CoreCivic, have been repeatedly implicated in understaffing scandals [3]. In 2014, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) ruled against a private prison firm in Mississippi for severe understaffing and inadequate training [3]. While the specific company wasn't named, it was noted that both GEO Group and CoreCivic have faced similar issues [3]. That same year, the FBI launched a criminal investigation into a GEO Group-run prison in Idaho, where correctional officers allegedly compensated for understaffing by negotiating with prison gang leaders to maintain order through the threat of gang violence, earning the facility the grim nickname "Gladiator School" [3]. A federal judge also penalized GEO Group for misreporting its staffing levels in Idaho in 2013 [3].

CoreCivic has also faced scrutiny for understaffing, particularly at its Trousdale Turner Correctional Center in Tennessee, which is currently under federal investigation [28]. Lawsuits filed against CoreCivic detail instances where even critical staff positions were reportedly unfilled, leaving inmates vulnerable to attacks and unable to get help when needed [29]. Tennessee's corrections agency has fined CoreCivic millions of dollars across its facilities since 2016, with a significant portion related to failures to meet staffing requirements [29]. The history of the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center (NEOCC), managed by CoreCivic, is also marked by problems, including numerous stabbings, murders, and a major escape in its early years of operation in the 1990s, suggesting a long-standing issue with safety and security that could be linked to staffing [11].

The consequences of understaffing in for-profit prisons are far-reaching. It not only jeopardizes the safety of incarcerated individuals, making them more susceptible to violence and abuse, but it also places correctional officers in precarious situations, increasing their risk of injury and reducing their ability to effectively manage inmate populations. The pursuit of profit through reduced staffing ultimately creates a more dangerous and volatile environment within these facilities.

VI. Exploitation of Inmate Labor: Profit at the Expense of Human Rights

The practice of utilizing inmate labor within for-profit prisons for minimal or no pay has generated significant ethical and legal concerns, with critics arguing that it constitutes exploitation and a form of modern-day slavery [1]. This practice allows private prison companies to generate revenue by compelling incarcerated individuals to work in various capacities, often without providing fair compensation or adequate labor protections [1].

In many states, and even under an exception clause in the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, prison labor is permissible, with incarcerated workers often receiving extremely low wages for their work [38]. The Yale Daily News reported that most private prisons pay less than $1 per hour, with some paying as little as $0.25 [1]. Some states, such as Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas, pay nothing at all for the vast majority of prison work [38]. Despite generating billions of dollars worth of goods and services annually, incarcerated workers are often denied basic labor protections, including minimum wage and overtime, the right to unionize, adequate training and equipment, and workplace safety guarantees [38].

This system of low-cost or unpaid labor provides a significant economic advantage to for-profit prison companies, allowing them to minimize operational costs and increase their profit margins [1]. For example, in Oklahoma, inmates were reportedly forced to process chickens at a facility for no pay [1]. Critics argue that this reliance on cheap inmate labor creates a perverse incentive for private prisons to maintain high occupancy rates, as a larger inmate population translates directly to a larger workforce and greater potential for profit [1]. The NAACP has explicitly stated its opposition to the for-profit prison industry, highlighting that these companies profit directly from the incarceration of others [13].

Furthermore, incarcerated workers often face punishment, such as solitary confinement, denial of sentence reductions, or loss of family visitation, if they refuse to work [38]. This coercion further underscores the exploitative nature of the system, where individuals are compelled to labor under threat of additional punitive measures. The University of Chicago Law School and the ACLU, in a joint report, found that over three-quarters of incarcerated people surveyed reported facing such punishments for declining to work [38].

The exploitation of inmate labor raises fundamental questions about human dignity and fairness within the correctional system. By profiting from the labor of incarcerated individuals at such low or nonexistent wages, for-profit prisons contribute to a system that some argue perpetuates a cycle of economic disadvantage and undermines the principles of just compensation for work performed. The "exception clause" in the 13th Amendment, which allows for slavery as punishment for a crime, is seen by many as the root of this exploitation, enabling the underpayment and lack of protection for incarcerated workers [38].

VII. Lack of Transparency and Accountability: Obscuring Scrutiny and Oversight

A significant concern surrounding for-profit prisons is the comparative lack of transparency and accountability compared to their publicly run counterparts [1]. This opacity makes it considerably more challenging for the public, policymakers, and even oversight bodies to scrutinize their operations, assess the quality of care and safety within their facilities, and hold them accountable for any misconduct or failures [1].

Unlike public prisons, private correctional facilities are generally not subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests [1]. This exemption means that information about internal incidents, cost-cutting measures, operational procedures, and contractual agreements is often shielded from public view [1]. This lack of access to information hinders the ability of journalists, researchers, and advocacy groups to effectively monitor these institutions and report on any potential abuses or systemic problems. The Yale Daily News highlighted this issue, noting that the inability to access information makes it harder for the public to understand what occurs within these prisons and to hold them responsible for their actions [1].

Furthermore, the primary accountability of for-profit prisons is often directed towards their shareholders rather than the public interest [13]. As publicly traded companies, their primary fiduciary duty is to maximize profits for their investors. This can sometimes lead to decisions that prioritize cost savings over the well-being of inmates or the safety of staff, and the lack of public oversight can make it difficult to challenge these decisions. The NAACP emphasizes this point, stating that private prisons are not accountable to the public but to shareholders [13].

The private prison industry has faced criticism for its overall lack of transparency [10]. While public prisons are subject to various levels of governmental oversight and public scrutiny, the contractual relationships between private prison companies and government agencies can sometimes obscure lines of responsibility and make it difficult to determine who is ultimately accountable for ensuring proper standards and conditions are maintained [40].

Efforts have been made to address this lack of transparency. In 2017, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee introduced a resolution aimed at requiring operators of federally funded private prisons to maintain the same level of transparency about their operations as government-run prisons [39]. However, the fundamental challenge remains in balancing the proprietary interests of private companies with the public's right to know about the conditions within facilities that house individuals under the state's authority. The lack of transparency in for-profit prisons creates a significant barrier to effective oversight and can contribute to an environment where scandals and abuses are more likely to occur and less likely to be brought to light.

VIII. Impact on Incarceration Rates and Sentencing: The Profit Motive's Influence on Justice

A deeply concerning aspect of the for-profit prison model is the potential influence it may exert on increasing incarceration rates and the length of sentences handed down by the justice system [1]. Critics argue that the economic viability of private prisons is intrinsically linked to maintaining a high occupancy, which could incentivize these companies to support policies and practices that lead to more people being incarcerated for longer periods [11].

Research from Washington State University indicates a correlation between the presence of private prisons and an increase in both the number of criminals incarcerated and the length of their sentences, particularly for non-violent crimes where judges have more discretion in sentencing [4]. The study found that private prisons led to an average increase of 178 new prisoners per million population per year [4]. The authors suggested two potential reasons for this effect: corruption, where judges or legislators might be influenced to impose harsher sentences or enact stricter laws, and increased capacity, where the availability of private prison beds might make judges less hesitant to incarcerate individuals [4]. The 'Kids for Cash' scandal serves as a stark example of the potential for such corruption [4].

Private prison companies often engage in lobbying efforts at both the state and federal levels, spending significant sums of money to influence criminal justice policies [3]. The ACLU reported that the two largest for-profit prison companies spent millions lobbying the federal government alone, with even more spent on state lobbying [41]. The Justice Policy Institute noted that these political strategies have allowed private prison companies to promote policies that lead to higher rates of incarceration, thus increasing their profit margins [43].

Many private prison contracts include "bed mandates" or guaranteed occupancy clauses, which require the state to pay the private prison company for a certain percentage of beds, regardless of whether they are occupied [11]. This creates a financial incentive for the state to maintain a high prison population or face paying for empty beds, effectively shifting the financial risk onto taxpayers and potentially discouraging efforts towards criminal justice reform and reduced incarceration [11]. The NAACP highlights that by requiring a minimum prisoner capacity, private prison companies remove any incentive for a reduction in the number of people incarcerated, including sentencing reform or a decrease in crime [13].

The Hamilton Project noted that market concentration within the private prison industry raises concerns about companies having stronger incentives to lobby for favorable legislation, such as increased mandatory minimums for sentence length [3]. The argument is that if a single company houses a significant portion of a state's private prisoners, it stands to benefit substantially from laws that increase incarceration rates [3].

The perception that private companies are driving immigration detention policy in the interests of profit is also prevalent [39]. The rise in the percentage of immigrant detention beds located in privately run facilities has led to concerns that these companies are lobbying for and even helping to craft policies that lead to increased detention [39].

The connection between the profit motive and the potential for increased incarceration and longer sentences raises serious ethical questions about the role of private companies in a system designed to administer justice. The financial incentive to keep prisons full could inadvertently lead to an overreliance on incarceration as a solution to crime, potentially at the expense of rehabilitation, alternative sentencing, and a more just and equitable criminal justice system.

IX. Notable Scandals at Specific Facilities: Case Studies in Failure

Examining specific scandals at individual for-profit prison facilities provides critical insights into the types of problems that can arise and the severe consequences for those incarcerated within them. The Walnut Grove Correctional Facility in Mississippi stands out as a particularly egregious example of the failures that can occur in a profit-driven correctional environment [3].

This facility, which initially housed young men aged 13-22 convicted as adults, was operated by the GEO Group under contract with the state of Mississippi [16]. It became notorious for a culture of violence and corruption, leading to multiple federal investigations and lawsuits [15]. In 2010, the Department of Justice launched a civil rights investigation into conditions at Walnut Grove, and a separate FBI investigation uncovered extensive corruption within the Mississippi prison system, including contracts related to Walnut Grove [16].

The findings of the DOJ investigation were damning, revealing "systematic, egregious, and dangerous practices" at the facility, exacerbated by a lack of accountability and controls [17]. The DOJ found reasonable cause to believe that there was a pattern of unconstitutional conduct, including deliberate indifference to staff sexual misconduct and inappropriate behavior with youth, excessive use of force by staff, inadequate protection of youth from youth-on-youth violence, deliberate indifference to youth at risk of self-injurious and suicidal behaviors, and deliberate indifference to the medical needs of youth [17]. The DOJ stated that sexual misconduct at Walnut Grove was "among the worst that we have seen in any facility anywhere in the nation" [15].

A federal class-action lawsuit filed in 2010 by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the ACLU National Prison Project detailed horrific conditions, alleging that prison guards engaged in sexual intercourse with prisoners, tolerated and encouraged violence, smuggled illegal drugs, and denied required education and sufficient medical care [15]. The lawsuit described a facility run by gangs, whose members included corrupt prison staff, and where rapes of younger inmates were common [16]. The lawsuit was eventually settled in 2012 with a sweeping consent decree aimed at ending the unconstitutional conditions [15]. U.S. District Judge Carlton W. Reeves, in approving the settlement, wrote that the GEO Group had "allowed a cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts and conditions to germinate" [15].

Despite these findings and the settlement, problems persisted, and the Walnut Grove Correctional Facility was eventually closed in 2016 [3]. However, it was reopened in January 2023 by the Mississippi Department of Corrections [45]. Even after reopening as a state-run facility, concerns remain, with a prisoner recently pledging a hunger strike over allegations of sexual misconduct by a guard, highlighting the enduring legacy of the facility's troubled past [45].

The scandal at Walnut Grove serves as a stark reminder of the potential for severe human rights abuses and systemic failures within for-profit correctional facilities. The pursuit of profit, coupled with inadequate oversight, can create an environment where the safety and well-being of incarcerated individuals are severely compromised. The facility's history underscores the need for rigorous scrutiny and accountability in any correctional setting, but particularly in those where financial incentives could potentially conflict with the fundamental principles of justice and humane treatment.

X. Scandals Involving Major Private Prison Corporations: A Recurring Theme

The scandals associated with for-profit prisons are not limited to isolated incidents at individual facilities; rather, they appear to be a recurring theme across various facilities operated by the largest private prison corporations in the United States, including GEO Group, CoreCivic (formerly Corrections Corporation of America - CCA), and Management & Training Corporation (MTC) [3]. These corporations have faced numerous allegations and controversies related to understaffing, medical neglect, mistreatment of inmates, and other operational deficiencies.

Corporation	Facility (if applicable)	Description of Scandal	Year(s)	Outcome
GEO Group	Idaho Correctional Center	Understaffing leading to gang rule ("Gladiator School")	2014	FBI investigation, federal judge penalty
GEO Group	Aurora ICE Detention Facility (CO)	Medical neglect leading to the death of Kamyar	2017	Lawsuit filed, ICE internal review found

		Samimi		deficiencies
CoreCivic	Northeast Ohio Correctional Center (OH)	High rates of violence, stabbings, murders, escape	1990s	Lawsuit settled for $2.5 million
CoreCivic	Trousdale Turner Correctional Center (TN)	Numerous allegations of mistreatment, medical neglect leading to deaths, severe understaffing	2016-present	Federal investigation, over $1.1 million in fines by Tennessee, millions paid in settlements
MTC	Willacy County Correctional Center (TX)	Riot due to poor medical care and mismanagement	2015	Facility deemed "uninhabitable," contract terminated, lawsuit filed by county
MTC & CoreCivic		Lawsuit alleging gross negligence leading to the death of Roxsana Hernandez	2018	Lawsuit filed
GEO Group & CoreCivic	Various	Involvement in understaffing scandals	Ongoing	OSHA rulings, FBI investigations, penalties
CCA (now CoreCivic)	Various	Long history of mismanagement, abuse, and corruption	Ongoing	Numerous reports and criticisms

As illustrated in the table above, both GEO Group and CoreCivic have been involved in multiple understaffing scandals across different facilities [3]. These staffing shortages have been linked to compromised safety and security, with instances of correctional officers allegedly relying on gang leaders to maintain order due to insufficient staff [3].

Allegations of medical neglect have also been widespread across facilities managed by these corporations [23]. Cases like the death of Kamyar Samimi in a GEO Group facility and the numerous settlements against CoreCivic in Tennessee highlight the potentially fatal consequences of inadequate healthcare in for-profit prisons [24]. Lawsuits against MTC also allege failures to provide necessary medical care, leading to serious harm or death [33].

Furthermore, these major corporations have been criticized for their lobbying efforts and potential influence on legislation that could benefit their bottom lines by increasing incarceration rates [3]. The NAACP has long opposed the for-profit prison industry, citing a long record of mismanagement, abuse, and corruption among private prison corporations like CCA (now CoreCivic) [13].

The recurring nature of these scandals across different companies and facilities suggests that the problems may be systemic to the for-profit model itself, where the inherent drive to maximize profits can create incentives to cut corners in areas critical to the safety, well-being, and humane treatment of incarcerated individuals.

XI. Policy Changes and Legal Responses: Attempts to Address the Crisis

In response to the numerous scandals and criticisms surrounding for-profit prisons, various policy changes and legal responses have been implemented or proposed at both the federal and state levels [2]. These efforts aim to limit the use of private prisons, increase oversight and accountability, and address the underlying issues that contribute to these controversies.

One of the most significant federal policy changes was President Biden's executive order in January 2021 to phase out the federal government's use of private prisons within the criminal justice system [2]. This order directed the Department of Justice to end contracts with private detention centers, based on the conclusion that these facilities were less safe and less effective at providing correctional services compared to those run by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) [2]. By the time of the order, the BOP's reliance on private facilities had already decreased, and all of its for-profit prisons have since been closed [2].

However, this executive order did not extend to the U.S. Marshals Service, which continues to hold a significant portion of its detention population in for-profit facilities, often using agreements with city or county governments as intermediaries [41]. Furthermore, President Trump reversed Biden's executive order on his first day back in office in January 2025, raising concerns about a potential resurgence in the federal government's use of private prisons [46].

At the state level, some initiatives have been taken to limit or ban for-profit prisons. California, for instance, began taking steps in 2019 to fight against privately run prisons [40]. Ohio has also faced calls to cut ties with private prison operators due to a history of problems [11]. Despite a dip in privatization during the Biden administration, there is anticipation among social justice advocates for a potential return to prisons for profit nationwide [11].

Legislative efforts have also been proposed to increase transparency and accountability within the private prison industry. In 2017, a bill called the "Ending Tax Breaks for Private Prisons Act" was introduced to stop these companies from taking advantage of certain IRS loopholes [39]. As mentioned previously, a resolution was also proposed to require the same level of transparency for federally funded private prisons as public ones [39].

Advocacy groups and legal organizations, such as the ACLU, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Juvenile Law Center, have played a crucial role in challenging the practices of for-profit prisons through lawsuits, public awareness campaigns, and policy advocacy [5]. These organizations have been instrumental in uncovering scandals, bringing legal action against private prison companies for abuses and neglect, and advocating for policy reforms aimed at ending or limiting the use of for-profit prisons.

Despite these efforts, the policy landscape surrounding for-profit prisons remains dynamic and often subject to political shifts. The economic interests of the private prison industry, coupled with varying political ideologies regarding the role of the private sector in corrections, contribute to an ongoing debate about the ethics and efficacy of this model. The reversal of federal policies depending on the administration in power highlights the continued tension and the lack of a stable consensus on the future of for-profit prisons in the United States.

XII. Conclusion: The Enduring Scars of Profit-Driven Punishment

The analysis of scandals related to for-profit prisons in the US reveals a disturbing pattern of issues that raise serious concerns about the ethics and efficacy of this model of incarceration. Recurring themes of judicial corruption, systemic human rights abuses, pervasive medical neglect, dangerously low staffing levels, unethical exploitation of inmate labor, and a significant lack of transparency consistently emerge from the available evidence.

The 'Kids for Cash' scandal stands as a stark reminder of how the profit motive can directly corrupt the justice system, leading to the profound harm of vulnerable individuals. Beyond this egregious example, numerous reports and legal cases detail a multitude of human rights violations and instances of inadequate care within for-profit facilities, often attributed to cost-cutting measures driven by the need to maximize profits. The exploitation of inmate labor for minimal or no pay further underscores the ethical challenges associated with profiting from incarceration.

The lack of transparency in for-profit prisons hinders public oversight and accountability, making it difficult to ensure that these institutions adhere to basic standards of safety and humane treatment. Furthermore, evidence suggests a potential link between the presence of for-profit prisons and increased incarceration rates and sentence lengths, raising concerns that the pursuit of profit may be influencing the administration of justice itself.

Notable scandals at facilities like Walnut Grove Correctional Facility and recurring controversies involving major private prison corporations such as GEO Group, CoreCivic, and MTC highlight that these problems are not isolated incidents but may be systemic to the for-profit model. While policy changes and legal responses have been implemented and proposed, the landscape remains dynamic, with ongoing debates about the appropriate role of private entities in the correctional system.

Ultimately, the scandals associated with for-profit prisons leave enduring scars on the individuals affected and raise fundamental questions about the ethics of profiting from punishment. The ongoing scrutiny and reform efforts reflect a growing recognition of the potential negative impacts of this model on the fairness, integrity, and humanity of the US correctional system. Moving forward, a continued critical examination of the for-profit prison model and a consideration of alternatives that prioritize rehabilitation, safety, and justice over financial gain will be crucial to ensuring a more ethical and effective approach to corrections in the United States.

Works cited

1. Private Prisons: Corrections or Corruption? - SJP - Yale Daily News, accessed March 17, 2025, https://yaledailynews.com/sjp2024/2024/10/08/private-prisons-corrections-or-corruption/
2. Private Prisons in the United States - The Sentencing Project, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/private-prisons-in-the-united-states/
3. The economics of private prisons - The Hamilton Project, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.hamiltonproject.org/publication/paper/the-economics-of-private-prisons/
4. Privatized prisons lead to more inmates, longer sentences, study finds | WSU Insider, accessed March 17, 2025, https://news.wsu.edu/press-release/2020/09/15/privatized-prisons-lead-inmates-longer-sentences-study-finds/
5. Luzerne "Kids for Cash" Scandal - Juvenile Law Center, accessed March 17, 2025, https://jlc.org/luzerne-kids-cash-scandal
6. Biden's commutation in 'kids for cash' scandal angers some Pennsylvania families, accessed March 17, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/kidsforcash-judge-conahan-commutation-biden-d32ee4cda3615469032d166a0f38814d
7. Kids for Cash - Wikipedia, accessed March 17, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kids_for_Cash
8. Kids for cash scandal - Wikipedia, accessed March 17, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kids_for_cash_scandal
9. Kids for Cash | The New Press, accessed March 17, 2025, https://thenewpress.com/books/kids-for-cash
10. Private Prisons | Pros, Cons, Debate, Arguments, & Controversy | Britannica, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/procon/private-prisons-debate
11. Ohio's Problematic Private Prisons: A Primer - ACLU of Ohio, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.acluohio.org/en/news/ohios-problematic-private-prisons-primer
12. Prison Conditions | Equal Justice Initiative, accessed March 17, 2025, https://eji.org/issues/prison-conditions/
13. NAACP Opposes the For-Profit Prison Industry, accessed March 17, 2025, https://naacp.org/resources/naacp-opposes-profit-prison-industry
14. Privatization of Corrections: A Violation of U.S. Domestic Law, International Human Rights, and Good Sense, accessed March 17, 2025,

https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1275&context=hrbrief
15. Investigation, Lawsuit Expose Barbaric Conditions at For-Profit Youth Prison in Mississippi, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.splcenter.org/resources/stories/investigation-lawsuit-expose-barbaric-conditions-profit-youth-prison-mississippi/
16. Walnut Grove Correctional Facility - Wikipedia, accessed March 17, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walnut_Grove_Correctional_Facility
17. Department of Justice Releases Investigative Findings on the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility in Mississippi, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/department-justice-releases-investigative-findings-walnut-grove-youth-correctional-facility
18. Cut-rate care: the systemic problems shaping 'healthcare' behind bars, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/healthcare.html
19. From Public to Private Care The Historical Trajectory of Medical Services in a New York City Jail - PMC - PubMed Central, accessed March 17, 2025, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2679790/
20. Exploring the Side Effects of Privatized Correctional Health Care in Favor of a Public Delivery Model, accessed March 17, 2025, https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1558&context=crsj
21. State watchdog finds medical neglect, other violations at private prison that houses Tarrant inmates | KERA News, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.keranews.org/news/2024-01-23/state-watchdog-finds-medical-neglect-other-violations-at-private-prison-that-houses-tarrant-inmates
22. Arizona's privatized prison health care has been failing for years. A new court case could change that - PBS, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/arizonas-privatized-prison-health-care-has-been-failing-for-years-a-new-court-case-could-change-that
23. Private Prison Giant Hired ICE Detention Chief - Project On Government Oversight (POGO), accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.pogo.org/investigations/private-prison-giant-hired-ice-detention-chief
24. Medical Neglect at a Denver Immigration Jail, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.pogo.org/investigations/medical-neglect-at-a-denver-immigration-jail
25. SAMIMI-GOMEZ et al v. THE GEO GROUP, INC. et al | ACLU Colorado, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.aclu-co.org/en/cases/samimi-gomez-et-al-v-geo-group-inc-et-al
26. Civil Rights Complaint: GEO Group Staff in Golden State Annex ICE Facility Sexually Abuse People With Impunity | Asian Law Caucus, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.asianlawcaucus.org/news-resources/news/ice-sexual-abuse-federal-complaint
27. UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT NORTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA PANAMA CITY DIVISION EARVIN EALY, Plaintiff, v. Case No.: 5:12cv205/MP - GovInfo, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-flnd-5_12-cv-00205/pdf/USCOURTS-flnd-5_12-cv-00205-0.pdf
28. Largest Private Prison Operator Under Federal Investigation Spent Millions Settling Mistreatment Claims | Defender Services Office, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.fd.org/news/largest-private-prison-operator-under-federal-investigation-spent-millions-settling
29. Prison operator under federal scrutiny spent millions settling Tennessee mistreatment claims, accessed March 17, 2025,

https://apnews.com/article/prison-settlement-tennessee-mistreatment-deaths-1c2b3cd5cd395a7f1453566e366fb415
30. Cathey v. CoreCivic, Inc., accessed March 17, 2025,
https://casetext.com/case/cathey-v-corecivic-inc
31. Private prison operator under investigation after $4M in settlements - Straight Arrow News, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://san.com/cc/private-prison-operator-under-investigation-after-4m-in-settlements/
32. CoreCivic Has Paid $4.4M To Settle Tennessee Inmate Complaints, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://www.ncja.org/crimeandjusticenews/corecivic-has-paid-4-4m-to-settle-tennessee-inmate-complaints
33. Management and Training Corporation - Wikipedia, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Management_and_Training_Corporation
34. Erickson v. Mgt. & Training - Supreme Court of Ohio, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/rod/docs/pdf/11/2013/2013-Ohio-3864.pdf
35. TLC, the Law Office of R. Andrew Free, and the Law Office of Daniel Yohalem File Lawsuit Against CoreCivic and Multiple Private Entities Alleging Gross Negligence Lead to Roxsana's Death - Transgender Law Center, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://transgenderlawcenter.org/tlc-the-law-office-of-r-andrew-free-and-the-law-office-of-daniel-yohalem-file-lawsuit-against-corecivic-and-multiple-private-entities-alleging-gross-negligence-lead-to-roxsanas-death/
36. ROSBOROUGH v. MANAGEMENT TRAINING CORPORATION (2003) - FindLaw Caselaw, accessed March 17, 2025, https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-5th-circuit/1173821.html
37. Beair v. Mgmt. & Training Corp. - CoCounsel: One GenAI assistant for professionals, accessed March 17, 2025, https://casetext.com/case/beair-v-mgmt-training-corp
38. U.S. prison labor programs violate fundamental human rights, new report finds, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://news.uchicago.edu/story/us-prison-labor-programs-violate-fundamental-human-rights-new-report-finds
39. Private prisons: Research, data and controversies - The Journalist's Resource, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://journalistsresource.org/economics/private-prisons-research-data-lobbying/
40. Private prisons in America: punishment for profit - Daily Journal, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://www.dailyjournal.com/articles/376589-private-prisons-in-america-punishment-for-profit
41. President Biden's Order to Ban Private Prisons Faces a Persistent Internal Challenge: The U.S. Marshals Service | ACLU, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://www.aclu.org/news/criminal-law-reform/president-bidens-order-to-ban-private-prisons-faces-a-persistent-internal-challenge-the-u-s-marshals-service
42. Privatization and Flawed Punishment: An Economic Analysis and Critique of Private Prisons in the United States and United Kingdom - Scholarly Commons, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1898&context=njilb
43. The Political Bribe that Turned Prisoners Into Profits - Represent.Us, accessed March 17, 2025, https://represent.us/action/private-prisons/
44. Walnut Grove Prison is Officially Closed - Mississippi Free Press, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://www.mississippifreepress.org/walnut-grove-prison-is-officially-closed/
45. MDOC prisoner vows hunger strike if his sexual assault complaint is not investigated - Mississippi Today, accessed March 17, 2025,
https://mississippitoday.org/2024/01/11/mdoc-prisoner-vows-hunger-strike-if-sexual-assault-com

plaint-is-not-investigated/
46. What Will Trump's Executive Order on Private Prisons Really Do? | The Marshall Project, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/01/22/trump-private-prisons-executive-order
47. Betrayal Behind The Bars: Curbing Corruption in Prisons | YIP Institute Criminal Justice, accessed March 17, 2025, https://yipinstitute.org/policy/betrayal-behind-the-bars-curbing-corruption-in-prisons
48. Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2025 | Prison Policy Initiative, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html