

# Tennessee Voices: Prisons should be government's job

Hedy Weinberg 11:09 p.m. CDT May 9, 2014



(Photo: File / The Tennessean)

The U.S. accounts for 5 percent of the world's population, but almost a quarter of the world's prisoners. In Tennessee, the prison population grew at twice the rate of the general population over the past 13 years. Numerous factors are associated with this country's mass incarceration crisis. But one that strikes close to home is the rise of the prison-industrial complex, the powerful corporations with a vested financial interest in an ever-increasing number of people behind bars.

Nashville-based Corrections Corporation of America, or CCA, is the nation's oldest and largest private prison company. CCA runs more than 60 jails and prisons in 21 states, grossing \$1.7 billion in 2012. It has gotten contracts, including seven in Tennessee, by promising to run corrections facilities better and for less. But CCA

has broken that promise time and again.

While proponents claim private prisons save governments money, evidence of cost savings is mixed at best. In Tennessee, taxpayers were contractually required to pay CCA nearly a half-million dollars for empty beds at the Nashville jail in 2011. In Idaho, CCA admitted in court to falsely billing the state for 4,800 hours of unstaffed security posts at one prison. An independent audit found that the number of unstaffed hours was probably closer to 26,000, and the FBI is currently investigating.

Numerous meta-studies have found that private prisons offer no cost advantage. One of the few studies that does show a cost benefit is the infamous Temple University study. Private prison corporations often cite this study, failing to note when they do that it was funded by for-profit prison companies and that its authors are currently the subject of an ethics investigation.

The argument that CCA can run prisons better than the public sector is also questionable. One CCA prison in Idaho was known as the "Gladiator School" because it had four times the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults than the state's seven other prisons combined. In Ohio, CCA was ordered to pay the state \$500,000 for violations of 47 state standards. And four current and former employees have filed a lawsuit against CCA, contending that they sustained severe emotional distress and physical injuries due to inadequate training, understaffing, and broken or useless equipment, such as radios with malfunctioning buttons and empty cans of pepper spray.

With all of these problems, how does CCA keep growing? It built a robust lobbying program to advance its agenda, hiring 199 lobbyists in 32 states between 2003 and 2011. It also spent millions to lobby and litigate against transparency, fighting to ensure that it is not subject to the same open-records laws as publicly run prisons.

Privatization is not always a bad thing. But incarcerating people should be the government's responsibility. The government has a vested interest in protecting public safety and reducing both the number of people behind bars and recidivism. CCA has a vested interest in people racking up "frequent-flier" miles in its facilities. Indeed, CCA reported in SEC filings that "risks" to its bottom line include "reductions in crime rates" and lower minimum sentences for nonviolent crimes. Clearly, private prisons are beholden to shareholders, not taxpayers.

The ACLU is not the only group to conclude that prisons shouldn't be run by corporations. The United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and many other religious groups have condemned prison privatization because of the inherent conflict between the justice system's goal of rehabilitation and private prisons' profit motive. And at the end of April, three investment groups pledged to divest \$60 million from CCA and other private prisons, joining the growing number of investors who have pulled funds from private prison corporations for ethical and financial reasons.

CCA has repeatedly broken its promise to run prisons better and for less. It's time for Tennessee to join the ranks of Texas, Idaho, Mississippi and Kentucky and walk away from contracts with CCA. To learn more or to sign the petition urging the governor to end CCA contracts, visit [www.whoiscca.com](http://www.whoiscca.com) (<http://www.whoiscca.com/>).

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