

Research Week Abstract

Private prisons, or for-profit prisons, are places of incarceration managed by a third party company contracted by the federal government. Prison labor, private prisons, and the current private prison industrial complex developed within the context of extensive federal policy changes and subsequent mass incarceration. These systems advanced over a long period of time in America, beginning with colonization. English prison sentences were commuted to indentured servitude if the prisoners were willing to move to the colonies. This was a largely different system than what now exists. Incarceration comparable to the modern day system began in the 1700s with the conversion of jails from holding criminals awaiting trial to housing convicted criminals. Inmate labor on prison plantations in the Reconstruction Era South capitalized on racism following the emancipation of slaves. Legislation in the United States has played a massive role in the proliferation of mass incarceration creating pressure on the federal government to contract with private corporations. Beginning with President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society policies and continuing through the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations, increased incarceration rates and sentencing with increased mandatory minimums and harsher penalties drastically enlarged the criminal population. This swell in the criminal population directly influenced the federal government under President Clinton to begin federal contracts with private prison corporations. The enforcement of these policies resulted in racial discrimination as arrests disproportionately affected minorities despite relatively equal drug use from white people at the time. Private prisons have recently received bad press based on allegations of the mistreatment of inmates, including withholding necessary medical and mental health treatment. This paper aims to examine the history and development of private prisons as

well as the problematic and racially discriminatory nature of the prison industrial complex which exists today.