

The Case against a Private Prison in Lowndes County, Georgia

<http://www.l-a-k-e.org/topics/incarceration/letter/>

To the Board of Directors of the Valdosta-Lowndes County Industrial Authority,

We the undersigned are opposed to a private prison in Lowndes County, Georgia.

A private prison would not increase employment in Lowndes County. It would not even save the state money. And it would have high risk of closing after or even before it opened, because of escapes and inmate disturbances, and most importantly because the state and federal governments can no longer afford to incarcerate so many people. That would leave us and the state holding the bag for any investment in building it.



Outsourcing public justice for private profit at taxpayer expense is not only bad business, we the taxpayers can't afford to pay for it while public education is under increasing budgetary pressure.

As members of the local community, we do not wish to live in a private prison colony, with the attendant risks of inmate violence and escape, and the accompanying public opprobrium that would drive away the knowledge-based workers we claim to be trying to attract.

Finally, public justice should not be a matter of private profit.

Please find attached documentation for all these points.

Sincerely,

Sign your name	Print your name	Print your address

The Business Case

The main purpose of attracting industry to Lowndes County is to increase employment and boost the local economy, and a private prison wouldn't do that.

No increased employment per capita

According to an empirical study, siting a private prison in a rural county does not increase employment. ([Big Prisons, Small Towns: Prison Economics in Rural America](#) by Ryan S. King, Marc Mauer and Tracy Huling, February 2003.)

Counties that hosted new prisons received no economic advantage as measured by per capita income.

Why?

Overall, over the course of 25 years, we find no significant difference or discernible pattern of economic trends between the seven rural counties in New York that hosted a prison and the seven rural counties that did not host a prison. While prisons clearly create new jobs, these benefits do not aid the host county to any substantial degree since local residents are not necessarily in a position to be hired for these jobs.

They detail effects on unemployment during economic recovery, downturn, and boom, and in each period unemployment was slightly worse in counties that hosted a prison.

Competition with local workers

Warden Elijah McCoy of Decatur County Prison houses prisoners for the state and hires them out to compete with local labor. ([Inmate housing a hot topic](#) by Brennan Leathers, The Post-Searchlight.com, 18 February 2011)

McCoy said he is satisfied with the current arrangement because Decatur County gets "the cream of the crop" of inmates. He explained that he gets to request prisoners with specific skills, such as electricians or plumbers, and then transport them to Bainbridge to do labor.

"Working our inmates the way we do has greatly benefited the county," McCoy said. "We can construct buildings from the ground up and wire them. We perform all of the county's maintenance and operate some of the equipment at the county's landfill."

Lowndes County just renewed [a contract with Valdosta State Prison for three work details](#). Is it the Industrial Authority's purpose to further subsidize the county government by providing cheap prison skilled labor to further compete with local workers?



Private prisons don't save money

The main rationale for private prisons is they are supposed to save tax dollars. That turns out not to be true. ([Private Prisons Found to Offer Little in Savings](#), by Richard A. Oppel Jr. page A1, New York Times, 19 May 2011.)

The conviction that private prisons save money helped drive more than 30 states to turn to them for housing inmates. But Arizona shows that popular wisdom might be wrong: Data there suggest that privately operated prisons can cost more to operate than state-run prisons — even though they often steer clear of the sickest, costliest inmates.



That conclusion was based on research by the Arizona Department of Corrections. The American Friends Service Committee in Arizona reached the same conclusion. ([The Pitfalls of Private Prisons](#), by Caitlin Harrington for Arizona Public Media 20 July 2011.)

Besides, if private prisons really did save money for the state, why did the Florida state legislature try sneaking in prison privatization before the public noticed? A judge in Tallahassee just ruled they can't do that. ([Judge Rules Florida Prison Privatization Unconstitutional](#), by Dara Kam for Post on Politics 31 August 2011.)

High risk of closing

Because states and the federal government can no longer afford the high cost of incarceration (\$1 billion a year in Georgia), there is high risk of a prison closing. ([Private Prison Promises Leave Texas Towns In Trouble](#), by John Burnett for NPR 28 March 2011.)

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the total correctional population in the United States is declining for the first time in three decades. Among the reasons: The crime rate is falling, sentencing alternatives mean fewer felons doing hard time and states everywhere are slashing budgets.



Littlefield, Texas, borrowed \$10 million to build the Bill Clayton Detention Center in 2000, housing prisoners from Idaho and Wyoming. In 2009 Idaho pulled its prisoners out because of budget problems and an inmate suicide scandal. Private prison operator GEO Group closed the prison, which remains empty.

Grayson County, Virginia, built a state prison that cost \$105 million in state tax dollars. It still sits empty, to the tune of \$700,000 a year to keep it maybe usable someday. ([New Virginia prison sits empty, at a cost of more than \\$700,000 a year](#), by Susan Kinzie for Washington Post, 30 May 2011.)

The commonwealth has closed 10 prisons since January 2009, Traylor said.

Southampton Correctional Center, Pulaski Correctional Center, Dinwiddie Correctional Unit, Tazewell Correctional Unit, White Post Detention Center and Chatham Diversion Center were closed before February 2009. Brunswick Correctional Center and Botetourt Correctional Center closed in the winter 2010. In the summer 2010, it was announced that Grayson's prison would not open. And this April, the James River Correctional Center closed.



That process started under a Democratic governor and continues under a Republican governor. Virginia, like Georgia, was spending \$1 billion a year on incarceration, and simply can't afford it.

Drug decriminalization will reduce incarceration

According to [CCA's 2010 Annual Report to the SEC](#):

The demand for our facilities and services could be adversely affected by the relaxation of enforcement efforts, leniency in conviction or parole standards and sentencing practices or through the decriminalization of certain activities that are currently proscribed by our criminal laws. For instance, any changes with respect to drugs and controlled substances or illegal immigration could affect the number of persons arrested, convicted, and sentenced, thereby potentially reducing demand for correctional facilities to house them. Legislation has been proposed in numerous jurisdictions that could lower minimum sentences for some non-violent crimes and make more inmates eligible for early release based on good behavior. Also, sentencing alternatives under consideration could put some offenders on probation with electronic monitoring who would otherwise be incarcerated. Similarly, reductions in crime rates could lead to reductions in arrests, convictions and sentences requiring incarceration at correctional facilities.

Back in April, Gov. Deal signed a law creating a sentencing reform panel; exactly what CCA is worried about. ([Deal signs measure creating sentence reform panel](#) By Associated Press, 23 April 2011)

The legislation creates a 13-member commission that would study sentencing reforms in hopes of offering alternative sentences for some drug addicts and other nonviolent offenders. The panel would have to report its findings by early 2012, in time for lawmakers to act on them in the next legislative session.



"We must do a better job rehabilitating lives. We know that drug addiction is the root cause of much crime," the governor said at a signing ceremony at the Hall County Courthouse. "Our entire society benefits if we can turn these tax burdens into taxpayers. I look forward to working with this council to make Georgia corrections work better for Georgians."

The measure was adopted overwhelmingly by Georgia lawmakers and from leaders of all three branches of state government as a way to slash the state's incarceration rate, which is the highest in the nation, according to a study by the Pew Center on the States.

Georgia is already starting to change sentencing in exactly the ways CCA says will decrease demand for its private prisons, thus increasing the risk that any private prison built in Lowndes County could end up closing.

Cutting corners for private profit causes problems

CCA's 2010 Annual Report to the SEC recognizes "inmate disturbances" as a business problem:

Escapes, inmate disturbances, and public resistance to privatization of correctional and detention facilities could result in our inability to obtain new contracts or the loss of existing contracts.

The very nature of private prisons produce such disturbances. One way private prison operators (unsuccessfully) attempt to reduce costs to the state is by paying for fewer guards per prisoner. Here is a particularly bad example: ([When the Wolves Guard the Sheep](#), by Mariah Adin in Kids and Crime 28 March 2011.)

The largest juvenile prison in the nation, Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility houses 1,200 boys and young men, between the ages of 13 and 22, and is run by a private contractor, the GEO Group based in Boca Raton, FL. ... State audits over the last several years had already indicated the burgeoning problem. While it is recommended at youth facilities to have an inmate-to-guard ratio of 10:1 or 12:1, Walnut Grove had a ratio of 60:1.

It's not just less staff, it's less qualified staff: [Prison Privatization: Recent Developments in The United States](#), by Judith Greene, A Paper Presented at the International Conference on Penal Abolition, 12 May 2000.)

The difficulties at Jena were attributed primarily to staffing deficiencies: a lack of stable leadership, high turnover, excessive overtime, and inadequate training. These faults are common in private corrections, with staff turnover running almost three times higher, on average, than at public correctional facilities. ...

While performance problems of such severe magnitude are not yet common in the private prison industry, violent incidents are not isolated to a few facilities. A recent survey of private prisons by James Austin compared the rates of major incidents in private and public prisons of comparable security levels and found that private prisons had fifty percent more inmate-on-staff assaults and two-thirds more inmate-on-inmate assaults. These ominous signs are fueling a mounting perception that in pursuit of profits, private prison managers are heedless of the essential requirements necessary for delivery of safe and humane correctional services.

Fewer and less qualified staff produce problems of violence, such as the incident the FBI is investigating in Boise, Idaho at the so-called Gladiator School. (*CCA-run prison remains Idaho's most violent lockup*, by Rebecca Boone for AP 9 October 2011.)

In the last four years, Idaho's largest privately run prison has faced federal lawsuits, widespread public scrutiny, increased state oversight, changes in upper management and even an ongoing FBI investigation.

Yet the Corrections Corp. of America-run Idaho Correctional Center remains the most violent lockup in Idaho.

Records obtained by The Associated Press show that while the assault rate improved somewhat in the four-year period examined, ICC inmates are still more than twice as likely to be assaulted as those at other Idaho prisons.



Problems occur right here in Georgia. (*Private prisons for immigrants lack accountability, oversight*, by Azadeh Shahshahani for AJC 11 June 2009.) In March, a man held at the Stewart Detention Center, a federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Lumpkin died in a hospital in Columbus. In July, a man died at the Wheeler County Correctional Facility in Alamo. Both facilities are run by CCA.

From October 2003 through Feb. 7, 2009, 18 people died in immigration detention custody in facilities operated by CCA alone, according to information from The New York Times.

Yet ICE has failed repeatedly to hold CCA accountable. Instead, the federal agency continues to reward CCA with additional contracts, most recently for operation of the North Georgia Detention Center in Hall County.

Escapes from private prisons have become internationally notorious. (*The perverse incentives of private prisons*, in The Economist, 24 August 2010.)

LAST week authorities captured two fugitives who had been on the lam for three weeks after escaping from an Arizona prison. The convicts and an accomplice are accused of murdering a holiday-making married couple and stealing their camping trailer during their run from justice. This gruesome incident has raised questions about the wisdom and efficacy of private prisons, such as the one from which the Arizona convicts escaped.

As CCA stated:

Escapes, inmate disturbances, and public resistance to privatization of correctional and detention facilities could result in our inability to obtain new contracts or the loss of existing contracts.

And there are escapes and inmate disturbances happening, causing public resistance, and increasing the risk of any local private prison closing.

The Moral Case

We can't afford to spend tax dollars on new prisons while we're cutting corners on education. ([Deal signs measure creating sentence reform panel](#) By Associated Press, 23 April 2011)

The high incarceration rate comes with high costs. Georgia pays \$3,800 each year to educate a child in public schools, and \$18,000 every year to keep each inmate behind bars, Deal said.

Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, spells out the implications: ([New prison empty ... for now](#), by Laurence Hammack for roanoke.com 2 January 2011.)

"Corrections over the past 25 years has become an increasingly big component of state budgets, to the point that it's competing for funding with education and other core services," Mauer said. "And you can't have it both ways anymore."

Lack of transparency and accountability

We are all well aware that the Valdosta Daily Times has tried for years to get information about violence at the publicly-operated Valdosta State Prison through open records requests and freedom of information requests, with little success. With a private prison it would be worse. ([Private Prison Fact Sheet](#), American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network, unknown date.)

In 1998 the private prison industry stopped providing information on assaults, escapes, inmate population, inmate classification, staffing ratio's, turnover rates, training statistics and virtually all information that would allow the public to make an informed choice regarding the privatization of our correctional facilities.

In 2007, [H.R. 1889, the Private Prison Information Act](#), got as far as the House Judiciary Committee, where it died.

To require prisons and other correctional facilities holding Federal prisoners under a contract with the Federal Government to make the same information available to the public that Federal prisons and correctional facilities are required to do by law.

So a private prison would not even be required to answer open records or FOIA requests. Which means none of us would know about problems inside until someone escapes or someone dies. That is a huge risk to the business case, to public safety, and to the reputation of the entire community.

The Religious Case

Private prisons are opposed by **too many religious groups to detail here**, Methodists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, and others, both nationally and in local churches. A group from DC called A Strength to Love put it this way: ([Strength to Love: A Challenge to the Private Prison Industry](#), by Marian Wright Edelman for change.org 13 December 2010.)

The privatized, for-profit prison industry is particularly plagued by a conflict of interest at its core: On the one hand, the industry is responsible to its shareholders to make money, and its income is determined by how many beds are filled. On the other hand, its civil responsibility to the inmates and to the whole of society is to help incarcerated people become their intended selves, and to prepare them to succeed upon release. It is well established that services and programs like job training and education serve to lower the occurrence of re-offense. But it is better for the company's bottom line to minimize staff and services, let the inmates succeed or fail on their own terms, and reap the financial benefits of strict sentencing laws and high rates of recidivism. It is this experience of exploitation, frequently referred to as a modern day form of slavery, that many members of Strength to Love have personally experienced, and which we have been called to dismantle.

The Political Case

According to [CCA's 2010 Annual Report to the SEC](#):

We may face community opposition to facility location, which may adversely affect our ability to obtain new contracts. *Our success in obtaining new awards and contracts sometimes depends, in part, upon our ability to locate land that can be leased or acquired, on economically favorable terms, by us or other entities working with us in conjunction with our proposal to construct and/or manage a facility. Some locations may be in or near populous areas and, therefore, may generate legal action or other forms of opposition from residents in areas surrounding a proposed site.*

Does the Industrial Authority really want another biomass black eye?

Further information is available here: <http://www.l-a-k-e.org/topics/incarceration/>.
