

## Analyzing the Exit of Private Prisons: Now What?

### **Objective:**

You will be able to...

- Analyze the causes and effects of the private prison industry leaving community corrections services
- Engage with both sides of a timely nationwide debate on whether private companies should be involved with correctional services
- Form arguments based on facts presented in the reporting to debate the role of private industry in incarceration

### **Warm-up:**

1. Prisons, and other correctional institutions, are in every state and in many communities around the country. Who runs them?

a. Who pays for them?

b. Is it the same everywhere?

2. This lesson centers around a debate about which entities (private companies or public institutions like the government) control these institutions.

a. What are the main differences between those entities?

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b. What are the main similarities?

c. What predictions can you make about how private companies and public institutions would run correctional facilities differently?

3. This lesson explores the lives that people lead when they're released from prison. What do you think happens to people when they are released?

a. Where do they go?

4. Without looking up the definition, what do you think is a **halfway house**?

a. What purpose do you think they serve?

b. Who do you think lives in them?

c. Who runs them?

**Background:**

Amid nationwide debate on government use of private companies to run prisons and other correctional services, the public media stations of the Mountain West News Bureau collaborated on the Pulitzer Center project *Private Prisons: Locking Down the Facts*. They investigated the efficacy and morality of this industry for employees, inmates, and the economies of the small towns that often house them.

The news article “Denver Didn't Want the Private Prison Industry to Run Its Halfway Houses. Now Who's Going to Do It?” by Ali Bunder takes students to Denver, Colorado right after the City Council voted to terminate contracts with private corrections firms GEO Group and CoreCivic. In this lesson, students grapple with the same questions which now face the city: How can the city adequately provide services to newly released inmates? What should the role of private companies be in state correctional policies? Can companies prioritize residents' welfare over profit?

**Introducing the Reporting:*****Resource 1: “Denver Didn't Want The Private Prison Industry To Run Its Halfway Houses. Now Who's Going To Do It?”***

Read Ali Bunder's story from the Mountain West News Bureau.

Write down your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why did the issue of privately run halfway houses catch Councilwoman CdeBaca's attention “right away” upon her election?
2. What are her arguments for terminating the city's contracts with GEO Group and CoreCivic?
3. What questions arose after the contracts were terminated?
4. Explain the financial problem facing the city as a result of the decision.
5. What are the conditions like in the city's privately run halfway houses:
  - a. According to CoreCivic staff member Shannon Carst?
  - b. According to Councilwoman CdeBaca?
6. Does the author provide all the answers to the questions they raised in the text? What is left uncertain?

## **Reflection:**

Write down your answers to the following questions on the same sheet of paper.

1. Greg Mauro, the director of the city’s Community Corrections Division, said that the Council’s decision to cut ties with GEO Group was like “to kind of jump out of a plan without a parachute.” What do you think he means by that?
2. Councilwoman CdeBaca says that “companies like CoreCivic don’t have true rehabilitation at the heart of their business model.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. She also asserts that there is a difference between “simply a private entity and a multi-billion dollar corporation”? What could this difference be?
  - a. Do you agree that the distinction is important?
4. Based on what you read, do you think that former inmates are better or worse off than before the Council’s decision?
  - a. Why or why not? Refer to quotes from the reporting in your answer.
5. Ms. Carst refers author Ali Bunder “back to public affairs” after she asks about how the company can both make money and encourage people not to return to prison.
  - a. What is “public affairs”? What do they do?
  - b. What answer do they give the author?
6. Denver will end its relationship to CoreCivic — who do you think should “fill the gap”?
  - a. The government? Another large company? A smaller one?
  - b. Why?

## **Extension Activity:**

### **Option 1: Research Project**

The reporters on this project, who are based in Colorado Springs, CO, conducted some of their reporting using public information available about how correctional services are run. Undertake a similar research project in your own communities by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Look at state and local laws and contracts given to private companies in the different aspects of correctional work as described in the article. You can find this information on your state government or state correctional board’s website.

**Step 2:** Explore publicly-available information on these companies’ websites and in other news outlets about their work.

**Step 3:** Investigate ways that members of your community may have been impacted by these contracts. For example, do you know anyone who has experience with these services that you could interview?

Step 4: Write a research paper, or, based on your findings, write letters to representatives or conduct a social media campaign to publicize your research and how you feel about it to persuade elected officials to share your view

### **Option 2: Prepare for debate**

Prepare your research and arguments for an in-class or online debate. Pick a side of the private corrections debate — either in support of the usefulness and necessity of private companies contracted for corrections or in opposition to their use — and follow these steps.

Step 1: Conduct research in order to form arguments in support of your position in anticipation of a class-wide debate on the issue where each side tries to persuade the other side to switch positions.

Step 2: Try to think of the other side's arguments — what will they say to try to convince others that your view is wrong? Use these arguments to form your own counter-arguments in advance.

Step 3: Take the above and create a document, bulleted list, or other resource that you will be able to draw from during the debate.