

# Private prisons have a political role in corrections issues in the US, researcher finds

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Private prisons play a political role in immigration and incarceration issues in the United States and the industry may face obstacles as well as opportunities in the current political landscape, a new paper from an Oregon State University researcher suggests.

"The big picture view of this industry shows that companies operating private prisons are [political actors](#) who shape politics and policies but also are affected by ongoing political battles," said the paper's author, Brett Burkhardt, an associate professor of sociology in the School of Public Policy at OSU. "That leaves them in a somewhat precarious position moving forward."

The findings were published recently in a special issue of the journal *Criminology & Public Policy* that focuses on private prisons.

The modern private prison system in the United States has been around since the 1980s. Today, the industry is a multi-faceted, multi-billion dollar market. Private prisons hold more than 120,000 inmates, about 8% of all prisoners, for 29 states and the [federal government](#). The two largest private prison companies also operate more than 13,000 beds for immigrant detention.

Burkhardt's paper reviews existing research on private prisons and the politics of the industry in an effort to identify broad themes. He found that privatizing corrections is not uniformly accepted by politicians and the public.

"There is no evidence to suggest that private prisons are any better, or worse, than public correctional facilities, which raises questions about what their role is," Burkhardt said. "Private prisons tend to take on different responsibilities, generally working with lower risk offenders."

He also found that private prisons face both challenges and opportunities in the current climate. Among the obstacles facing the industry is the volatility around immigration detention, which provides a growing market but also may present moral or ethical challenges for investors and the public.

While the current U.S. government administration has adopted tough immigration policies that have led to increased detention, some private companies are refusing to participate in activities related to detention of migrant children, or publicly distancing themselves from government policies around child [detention](#), Burkhardt found.

The private prison industry also faces declining incarceration rates nationally—in part due to political decisions around criminal justice reform and decriminalization of drugs like marijuana in many places.

But as the corrections industry changes in the U.S. private [prison](#) companies also could explore new opportunities that emerge, such as overseeing drug testing and [treatment programs](#) or community supervision programs.

"The issues the private corrections industry are facing are not going away anytime soon. That presents a dilemma for the industry," Burkhardt said. "Political decisions will help determine how the [industry](#) develops from here."

**More information:** Brett C. Burkhardt, The politics of correctional privatization in the United States, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2019).

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