What is the Prison Industrial Complex?
The term “prison industrial complex” (PIC) is used to describe the complex set of systems and institutions – including criminalization, surveillance, policing, the media, the courts and prisons – that act in concert to maintain state power, reinforce existing social hierarchies and concentrate wealth. Although popularly referred to as the “criminal justice system,” the term prison industrial complex is a more accurate description of these systems in part because it draws attention to the important connections between public corrections and private industry.

Prison Privatization
Since 1980, the U.S. prison population has increased by 355 percent and today the U.S. incarcerates more people than any nation in the world – nearly one-quarter of the world’s prison population. Increasingly, the system of prisons and detention facilities responsible for holding incarcerated populations in the U.S. is being turned over to private for-profit corrections firms. Prison privatization takes many forms and includes facilities owned and managed entirely by private corporations, publicly-owned facilities operated by corporations and public facilities which outsource certain services (such as construction and food service). Over the past decade, the total prison population has increased less than 16 percent while the number of people held in private federal facilities exploded, growing by 120 percent. As of 2009, some 129,000 people were incarcerated in private facilities and private prison companies continue to expand their share of this lucrative “market.”

The Prison Industrial Complex and Immigration
The prison industry increasingly depends upon immigrant populations to fill its beds and turn a profit. Immigrants may be held in private jails when detained pre-trial or when sentenced for criminal offenses.

Immigration detention
When non-citizens are apprehended by immigration agents, they may be held in detention while they await court proceedings or removal by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Since the late 1990s, the number of people held in immigration detention has increased dramatically. The average daily population of detained non-citizens grew from approximately 5,000 in 1994 to over 33,000 by

2010. ICE relies heavily upon private contractors to hold non-citizen detainees: of the 33,000 beds reserved for immigration detention in 2009, 49 percent were administered by private corporations.5

Incarceration for criminal offenses
The criminal prosecution of undocumented migrants through programs like Operation Streamline has made non-citizens the fastest-growing segment of the prison population in the U.S. Private prisons have absorbed many of the new inmates – and associated profits – created by these policies. For instance, in Texas, the criminal prosecution of unauthorized border crossers has cost over $1.2 billion – most of which has been funneled into private detention facilities and prisons.6

The Prison Industry and Public Policy
As the U.S. has become increasingly reliant upon private contractors to jail immigrants, the prison industry has sought to exercise greater control over the public policies governing immigration enforcement. The prison industry has invested over $6 million in campaign contributions to state candidates since 2000 and at least $1 million annually in lobbying efforts since 2003.7 In addition, CCA and GEO Group have been members of the American Legislative Exchange Council, a secretive strategic partnership of some 200 corporations and over 2000 state legislators that writes and promotes industry-friendly legislation throughout the country. In fact, ALEC wrote the model legislation that became Arizona’s SB1070 and similarly vicious anti-immigrant laws in states like Indiana, Georgia and Alabama.8 Much of the recent upswing in anti-immigrant policy can be directly attributed to efforts by the prison industry to fill its beds.

What Should Be Done?
The use of private contractors to detain and imprison non-citizens has created an industry dependent upon the criminalization of immigrants and heavily invested in crafting public policy which ensures a steady stream of immigrants to fill its prisons and detention centers. This profit motive has played a key role in the terrorization of communities, separation of families and systematic exploitation that characterize U.S. immigration enforcement. To help correct these injustices, the U.S. should (1) end mandatory detention for those awaiting immigration hearings; (2) cancel all existing prison contracts between federal custodial agencies and private prison companies; and (3) repeal all anti-immigrant legislation which criminalizes undocumented communities including 287g and Secure Communities.

---

9 Ibid.

---

For more information
For a printable pdf of this page and many other resources visit: http://www.cultureofcruelty.org/resources/
To learn about Border Patrol’s ‘Culture of Cruelty’ visit: http://www.cultureofcruelty.org/
To find out more about No More Deaths visit: http://www.nomoredeaths.org/