

The background of the entire page is a dense, overlapping field of US dollar bills, including \$1, \$5, \$20, and \$100 denominations. The bills are rendered in a monochromatic green and black color scheme. In the foreground, a hand with a blue sleeve is shown holding a thick stack of \$100 bills. The hand is rendered in a stylized, comic-book-like illustration style with bold black outlines and flat colors. The overall composition suggests a focus on money and its role in the prison industry.

# The Prison Industry: How it Started, How it Works, How it Harms.

## *Discussion Guide*

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**WORTH**  
— RISES —

# CHAPTER 1: ARCHITECTURE + CONSTRUCTION

1. The surge in prison and jail construction between 1970 and 2017 targeted rural areas with waning industries and in need of jobs. Despite short-term gains, in what ways were rural communities eventually hurt by the corrections boom? How can we ensure rural areas have a healthy jobs market without risking anyone's freedom and dignity?
2. While the jail population has been declining, new jail construction continues to grow bed capacity each year. How can we prepare and protect our communities against carceral campaigns, like those of the '70s, '80s, and '90s, aimed at increasing jail populations to meet the ever-increasing jail capacity?
3. Many of the architectural "security features" built into prisons and jails are dehumanizing and cause psychological damage to those forced to live with them on a daily basis. How do these designs actually undermine security? How do they expand the profit margins of carceral corporations and the carceral state?
4. We know that the labor of enslaved people has been used to build our nation's infrastructure. How have corporations and governments used prison labor to expand and maintain the carceral infrastructure?
5. Why don't modernization projects alleviate the harm caused by incarceration? While modernization cannot make prisons humane, it's also true that, even as we call for decarceration, many of our loved ones and community members are still inside. What demands can we make that will improve conditions for those inside, weaken the prison industry, and support abolition? What set of criteria might we use to determine these potential demands?
6. Where do you see the need for better community design? Imagine an alternative infrastructure for addressing the harm in your community. Start small, how is harm addressed? Now, on a mass scale, how might you spend the \$4.6 billion that is currently spent on correctional construction annually? How do we ensure that this alternative infrastructure does not replicate the carceral system?

## CHAPTER 2: OPERATIONS + MANAGEMENT

1. How did Nixon's rhetoric and policies on crime and the shifting economic landscape of the 1980s contribute to the rise of the private prison industry?
2. Why do you think CoreCivic and The GEO Group's first contracts were to build and operate federal immigration detention centers? Might there be different barriers to entry for the corrections and immigration systems? How might these differences further explain the dominance of private prisons in immigration detention (75% of beds) versus jails and prisons (8% of beds) today?
3. How does CoreCivic's response to delayed construction on its first immigration detention center mirror what we still see today in immigration detention?
4. As members of ALEC, private prison corporations guaranteed their own profits by drafting and championing multiple laws that promoted incarceration and extended prison sentences. What responsibility do the other members of ALEC (corporations and legislators) have for the spread of a carceral ideology?
5. The Obama administration's Department of Justice moved to phase out private prisons and their stocks tanked. CoreCivic and The GEO Group responded by contributing to pro-Trump Super PACs. Their contributions were rewarded with devastating immigration policies, like "zero tolerance," that filled their beds. How might communities strategically fight back against the role of corporate money in politics, particularly money supporting incarceration?
6. Unlike the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security cited a lack of "alternative options" in its decision to continue using private detention facilities. Unsurprisingly, Biden left immigration detention centers out of his executive order to phase out the federal use of private prisons. What are non-carceral alternative options to private immigration detention facilities?
7. "Man-days" are a key revenue indicator for private prison corporations. How does the use of this compensation structure, along with guaranteed occupancy rates, incentivize governments to increase surveillance, policing, and incarceration?
8. How are private prison corporations co-opting abolitionist language to ensure their sustained profitability? How is this impacting criminal legal policies? Where do you see evidence of this in your community? How can we stay ahead of their schemes in our language, messaging, solutions, and actions?
9. In a post-abolition landscape, what might reparations for those impacted by the greed and predation of the private prison industry, which greatly shaped our prison landscape, look like? What might you fund with the billions we recover?

## CHAPTER 3: PERSONNEL

1. Private security corporations, like G4S, began as union-busting muscle for hire. How are the interests of union-busting factory owners and the prison industry aligned?
2. Today, G4S is one of the world's largest private employers. What implications does this have for dissemination of carceral thought around the world? What level of interruption is needed on a global scale? How do we ensure that our struggles are aligned long-term with the struggles of other marginalized and oppressed populations across the globe?
3. Training events like the West Virginia Mock Riot promote violence as a go-to response for prison staff and mark incarcerated people as targets. How do we see the ideas and skills taught during these trainings enacted inside of prisons and jails? How do we see them spill over into the world outside of correctional settings?
4. How does the lack of staff training for mental health crises and other health emergencies mirror the ways that these issues are dealt with outside of prisons and jails? What is the impact? What alternative responses would meaningfully address these health crises?
5. Why might medical vacancies be particularly hard to fill in prisons and jails? How do the ethics of the prison industry align, or not, with those of the medical field as espoused by the Hippocratic Oath. What are the risks of relying on a temporary healthcare workforce for the ongoing care and treatment of an ailing and aging population?
6. There is an inherent conflict of interest in a private corporation drafting the policies governing correctional staff trainings and administering that training. How do such circumstances facilitate abuse and reduce government accountability?
7. In a system where there is little to no institutional liability, what avenues of recourse exist for incarcerated people and their loved ones harmed by government and corporate actors? What are the barriers to accountability? How can we innovate to minimize these barriers?

## CHAPTER 4: PROGRAMS + LABOR

1. How are pro-slavery talking points around rehabilitation and labor recycled within the carceral system today? How do those same talking points show up in broader society? What impact do they have? How do we counter them and better describe the community members and communities we want to be and see?
2. Why might the Ashurst-Sumners Act of 1935 have excluded agriculture and services from its ban on the sale of products made using incarcerated labor in interstate commerce? What was unique, if anything, about those services at the time? How does their distinction continue to impact our economy today?
3. Society's belief in and understanding of rehabilitation has wavered over the centuries. What purpose does it serve to declare the concept of rehabilitation "dead" either in theory for the masses or in practice for an individual? What becomes of people deemed irredeemable? How do we balance the roles of individual agency and systemic oppression in our abolition framework?
4. Despite adopting a rehabilitation narrative, prison administrators still typically prioritize work programs over educational ones. Why? What does this say about the true purpose and function of prisons and jails? In some cases, incarcerated people might even prefer work programs, or compete over preferred jobs. Proponents of prison labor think this should change our calculus, why doesn't it?
5. Although corporations advocate for the preservation and expansion of prison labor with the help of trade associations, often using rehabilitative arguments, the use of prison labor in production lines is almost never marketed as a selling point to consumers. Why not? How do we reckon with the reality that we all benefit from prison labor regularly, directly or indirectly?
6. How do prison labor practices necessitate an underground economy within prisons and jails?
7. How does the state's abuse of prison labor impact the well-being of all residents? What solutions would end this conflict of interest?
8. Incarcerated people have routinely responded to state emergencies, from fighting wildfires to manufacturing masks in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the rhetoric and imagery around these incarcerated workers has rarely matched their contribution or other frontline workers. What underlying ideologies allow the public to exalt some heroes while simultaneously consenting to the forced labor and wage theft of others?

## CHAPTER 5: EQUIPMENT

1. Military-grade weapons became common in prisons after the 1971 Attica Prison Uprising, during which incarcerated people demanded better living conditions and an end to racial violence at New York's Attica Correctional Facility. Why did the state respond with militarization rather than by addressing the concerns presented by the demands?
2. Why is the term "less lethal" problematic when it comes to the labeling and advertising of weapons? How do corporate terms like this influence their use in the correctional setting and how the public may view them? What repercussions should corporations face when such weapons kill someone?
3. How is the concept of "security" used to thwart health and safety considerations for incarcerated people? How is it used to pad the profit margin for corporations that manufacture supplies for prisons and jails? Where do we see this in other areas of society? How do we combat it?
4. How can the frequent use of restraints be tied back to concerns, previously discussed in Personnel, around inadequate hiring practices and lack of training for correctional staff?
5. Why should we be concerned that household brands, such as Amazon and Microsoft, are participating and investing in prison surveillance technology? What implications might the growth of surveillance software in prisons have for society at-large?

## CHAPTER 6: DATA + INFORMATION

1. How do the crime statistics used to justify mass incarceration mirror the racist ideologies used to uphold slavery and Jim Crow?
2. Many of the tools originally developed and used for the military are soon after implemented in prisons, detention centers, and other carceral spaces. What are the connections between military operations and domestic corrections and detention systems? What are the shared underlying beliefs and ideologies that dictate policy and practice in these spaces?
3. States and corporations have built proprietary risk and needs assessment tools. What are some of the key concerns presented by these tools? Why might states be investing heavily in them anyway? What is dangerous about corporations refusing to reveal their assessment algorithms? How many the corporate interests in this sector align with those in others?
4. Despite claims that bail is needed to compel individuals to appear for court, bail fund data suggests that people appear for court 95% of the time with just simple reminders and support. Why does the broader narrative around the need for bail persist? What fears do ending cash bail stoke in the public? What systemic issues do these fears obscure or miss?
5. Biometric technology has long been associated with imaginings of dystopian futures. What is particularly dystopian about the compulsory voice prints that companies like Securus coerce incarcerated people and their loved ones into providing? How is biometric data being used to further target and criminalize Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities?
6. Immigration and Customs Enforcement partners with Amazon to store personal information on immigrants and their loved ones, creating the technology infrastructure for deportations. Which communities are most impacted by these practices and how? How might such practices impact access to health and safety? How should we reckon with Amazon's popularity as a consumer brand and its almost unavoidable presence in today's society?
7. Data systems are often marketed as accurate and neutral, and the solution to human error and bias. In what ways is data not neutral? How does bias make its way into everything from assessment algorithms to biometric analyses? How do we push back on this pursuit of formulaic justice?

## CHAPTER 7: TELECOM

1. Prison phone justice is not just a criminal justice issue; it is also a racial justice, gender justice, and economic justice issue. Why?
2. How do profit-sharing agreements between telecom providers and government agencies shift the cost of incarceration on to communities? Why might local jails be more interested in corporate kickbacks from services like phone calls than state prison systems? What strategies might we use to fight unjust practices in the telecom industry, with the understanding that governments are also often profiting from exploitative telecom practices?
3. The prison telecom industry has baked security and surveillance into its communication services, and used it to justify call rates. Why shouldn't security and surveillance costs fall on families? What analogous communication methods could you use to make your point?
4. In what ways has the prison telecom industry become a critical law enforcement partner? What tools has it deployed to support law enforcement efforts? What long term impact will those tools have?
5. Why are the telecom industry's efforts to diversify beyond phone calls and into video conferencing, electronic messaging, and tablets dangerous? What benefits do these new services provide to incarcerated people and their loved ones? How can we realize the benefits of expanded technology and avoid the dangers they carry? What alternatives can be introduced to replace known predatory vendors?
6. Why is video conferencing an inadequate alternative to traditional prison visits? How does replacing visits with video conferencing contribute to the further dehumanization and alienation of incarcerated people from their communities? Why have few facilities that eliminated visits at the behest of a corporate contract reinstated them after the contractual mandate was removed?
7. Predatory practices in this sector cost more than the money that incarcerated people and their loved ones must pay. What support can we create or offer families and their incarcerated loved ones who face reduced contact with their loved ones, to the detriment of the mental, physical, and emotional health, while we fight?



## CHAPTER 8: FINANCIAL SERVICES

1. How do financial services corporations manipulate people into sending money to incarcerated loved ones through their costly money transfer services? What deceptive practices do they employ?
2. Corrections administrators often garnish the accounts of incarcerated people to collect fines and fees among other things. Why is this exploitative?
3. Debit release cards are most popular in jails, why? How are debit release cards different from traditional debit cards? Beyond their predatory charges, what concerns do debit release cards raise?
4. How do parole and probation payment systems make reentry difficult and force some back behind bars? How does this cycle strengthen their business model?
5. Why has it been difficult for impacted parties to seek legal recourse? What will it take to get the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to increase the regulation of financial services in prisons and jails?
6. What are some reasons the corrections telecom, financial, and commissary sectors might be merging? What implications might this have on incarcerated people and their communities in the future?

## CHAPTER 9: FOOD + COMMISSARY

1. The same corporations that serve food in prisons and jails, often serve food in a variety of public and private institutions, but the quality of their service is remarkably different. Why? What does it say about how these corporations value the lives of people behind bars?
2. In any other setting, the types of violations these corporations commit would undoubtedly lead to contract terminations. Why do states continue to contract with private foodservice providers despite the many persistent issues of quality and safety? Why might governmental regulatory agencies be reluctant to impose quality and safety standards on correctional foodservice?
3. What do you think makes acts of “gastronomical resistance,” such as food strikes, effective for incarcerated activists demanding conditions change?
4. What conflicts of interest arise out of having the same private vendor manage both general foodservice and commissary and care package programs in the same facility?
5. How does forcing incarcerated people to depend on commissary and care packages for basic food and hygiene needs deny people dignity, deflect state responsibility, and shift carceral costs onto families? How might this fuel an underground economy?
6. Why is privatizing care packages not just exploitative, but also dehumanizing and isolating for incarcerated people? If you were to prepare a care package for a loved one inside, what would you include and why?
7. The inhumanity of prison food services is among the most obvious human rights violation exacted by our carceral system, and yet it’s reality is accepted. What level of organizing and public pressure might it take to shift the landscape around food access inside of prisons and jails?

## CHAPTER 10: HEALTHCARE

1. How might a simple arrest lead to severe illness, injury, or death? Who is disproportionately impacted by these practices? How and why?
2. What social factors explain why, on average, incarcerated people are in worse health entering the system than broader society? Why are prisons and jails unable to meet people's healthcare needs? How do prisons and jails worsen the health of incarcerated people, particularly in facilities with privatized healthcare? How is this likely exacerbated by the overall disposition of the system and system actors toward incarcerated people? What are the short-term and long-term individual and social consequences?
3. What unique medical challenges do the aging of the prison population raise?
4. Why is decarceration the only effective medical response to stopping the spread of COVID-19 and curbing death in prisons and jails? Medical practitioners have explained that correctional health is public health, what do they mean?
5. Why might mandating that incarcerated people pay copays to receive healthcare be the equivalent of outright denying them healthcare altogether? Could you make an argument that this violates *Estelle v. Gamble*?
6. Prisons are not spaces for effective mental healthcare, but are frequently used to address both acute and recurrent mental health issues. What are actual solutions that we can implement in our communities to better take care of those in need of mental health services that do not involve prisons, jails, or other cruel and dehumanizing facilities? What kinds of community responses might we be able to develop in response to mental health crises that do not involve the police?
7. Why do prison healthcare corporations preference pharmaceutical solutions over therapeutic treatment for mental health or substance abuse illness? What might it feel like to detox in a prison or jail?
8. Big pharma has raised many ethical issues in marketing pharmaceuticals to prisons and jails. What are some examples? Can pharma ethically push drug treatments in an environment that cannot adequately provide care? Is it consistent with medical ethics to forcibly administer antipsychotic treatments to a person to make them competent to stand trial?
9. Prisons cannot currently access Medicare or Medicaid funding for people in their custody. Would access to Medicare or Medicaid funding improve the care of in prisons and jails, why or why not? How might a universal mandate for free healthcare shift what healthcare looks like for incarcerated populations? In what ways might it remain the same?

## CHAPTER 11: TRANSPORTATION

1. How might “security concerns” contribute to the extraordinarily high cost of transporting incarcerated and detained individuals?
2. How do the profit motives of prison transportation corporations put the lives of incarcerated people, corrections staff, contracted drivers, and the public at risk? How do they facilitate and encourage the dehumanization of the incarcerated people being transported?
3. Why might women and gender non-conforming or non-binary people be at an increased risk of health and safety violations during prison transportation?
4. Transportation is one of the few times that incarcerated people may interact with members of the public outside of visiting hours. How do these public taxing and dehumanizing experiences that incarcerated and detained people face during extraditions and other transfers reinforce negative ideas about incarcerated people in the public imagination?
5. There is no shortage of horror stories regarding the transportation of incarcerated people between facilities or jurisdictions. Why is there still no meaningful regulation of this business? Why is the only regulation in place one that focuses on escape prevention?

## CHAPTER 12: COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

1. Advocates have described the bail bonds business as one that relies on unjust confinement to sell freedom. Why? Why is cash bail a discriminatory system? What are some ways that commercial bail bonds corporations exploit those who are unable to pay for their freedom?
2. How do private diversion programs rely on the fear of incarceration to exploit people? Some say that diversion programs are for the wealthy, why?
3. Community supervision is promoted as either an alternative to incarceration or a reentry mechanism. Explain why this is not true. How does community supervision actually increase the number of people under correctional control and drive up incarceration?
4. Electronic monitoring is rapidly expanding as an “alternative to incarceration,” though it’s clearly not. Why have advocates described electronic monitoring as e-carceration? What individual or public concerns might electronic monitoring create? Where might you go that you do not want anyone to know?
5. Why might private halfway houses increase recidivism rates? How are these issues similar to those of private rehabilitation centers used in diversion?
6. After promoting incarceration for decades, private prison corporations are now spending billions to buy up the emerging community corrections field. Considering their past behavior, what can we expect in the coming years from the community corrections space?
7. Community corrections has been referred to as prison by another name. Why are community corrections interventions not real alternatives to incarceration? How do they continue to perpetuate the same harm as incarceration?
8. What community-led and community-based programs, spaces, and practices can you imagine that would actually ensure the health and well-being of all members of our communities, including both those who have been harmed and those who may have harmed someone? How can they promote accountability while facilitating healing and building trust amongst community members?

## BONUS CHAPTER: INVESTORS

1. Corporations involved in the prison industry are supported financially by investors who expect substantial returns but are typically less visible to the public. How might we increase their visibility so they cannot hide in the shadows and avoid responsibility for their investments?
2. Many prison industry investors are, in fact, major institutions like public pensions, university endowments, and foundations and charities. What responsibility to major institutions, especially those investing taxpayer money, have to invest in businesses that build, rather than decimate, communities? How can the people who contribute to or draw from those funds influence their investment decisions?
3. Many of these institutional investors have senior executives who serve in leadership positions for major cultural or charitable institutions. Why shouldn't they be allowed to do so?
4. Despite holding tremendous financial power, these investors have vulnerabilities. What are they? How might they be targeted to create change?
5. How can organizers, activists, and advocates build power on a mass scale to challenge these investors and their underlying investments? How might we leverage this power to further stifle and dismantle the prison industry?