

Undergraduate Thesis Prospectus

Improving Public Access to Virginia Court Data

(technical research project in Computer Science)

The Private Prison Controversy in the United States

(sociotechnical research project)

by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Prospectus

General Research Problem

In the U.S., how can crime be equitably managed without compromising human and civil rights?

Addressing crime in the U.S. has become a task that requires thorough management. It begins from the moment of contact by officials until due process is fully carried out. John Bennett (2018), Chief of Tampa Police, breaks down a plan for equitable crime reduction. The first step begins with how well officers are trained and taken care of by means of health and welfare. He states a strong foundation of an informed officer reduces any unnecessary action. Second is a focus on crime prevention through defining a model mission statement. Actions of officers must revolve around “crime reduction and community involvement” to establish trust and transparency between law enforcement and the community. Revolving the mindset around community will bring about equitable outcomes.

Improving Public Access to Virginia Court Data

How can the accessibility of Virginia Court Data be improved for the general public?

The state of Virginia implemented their website for online court data within the past year. Through their efforts, the state realizes the importance of the accessibility of such records online. However, being this new, its Online Case Information System (OCIS) has its flaws so a small team and I will work with UVA Law’s Legal Data Lab to optimize their system. I voluntarily signed up for this project that is led by Professor Jack Davidson in the Computer Science department. The goal is to build a system that collects publicly accessible Court Data into an easily searchable database for the state of Virginia.

As it is right now, Virginia's OCIS does not allow for users to download public court data online. Allowing universal access will allow the public to utilize this data ranging from research purposes to promoting safety in applications such as Airbnb, Uber, and so on.

My team and I are responsible for both the frontend component of designing the interface of the new website, and the backend component of aggregating the appropriate data. The website's frontend interface will be designed through Django: a commonly known Python framework. It is assumed that HTML will be used as the main coding language. As for the backend, we are hosting the website through Amazon Web Services (AWS). Putting this all together, we will scrape information from public court data websites and aggregate the data into a uniform and universally accessible website.

The Private Prison Controversy in the United States

How are private prison corporations, elected officials, civil and human rights advocates, and other social groups competing to determine the legitimate place of private prisons in the U.S. prison system?

The relationships among corporations, government, correctional communities, and media constitute what is known as the "prison industrial complex" (Davis, 2003). The flaw with the prison industrial complex stems from the punishment process. It "takes into account economic and political structures and ideologies, rather than focusing on individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb crime" (Davis, 2003). One such exploitation of the U.S. prison system is using prisoners as subjects in medical research. Dermatologist Albert Kligman founded his unethical research using the inmates at Holmesburg Prison (Hornblum, 1999). Davis (2003) states, "the prison-building project created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus." As corporations drive their profits, elected officials bolster this scheme by focusing on ways to incarcerate as many prisoners as

possible. All the while, the media paints the picture that communities are now safe from rapists, robbers, or murderers – and thus, these pillars make up the prison industrial complex.

With the growth of prison populations, private prisons have proliferated. In 1971, U.S. prisons held 200,000 inmates; by 2008 the population was 2,000,000 (ABA, 2009). The “War on Drugs” of 1970s was the initial cause of the growth of inmate population (ABA, 2009). Because of “three strikes” laws, abolition of probation, and mandatory minimum sentencing, people who might have been sent to rehabilitation were incarcerated.

It is no coincidence that the U.S. prison population is mainly composed of Black and Hispanic men. Two thirds of state prison inmates are Hispanic or Black when these demographics only account for about a quarter of the nation’s population (Loury, 2019). Sociologist David Garland states, “the prison is used today as a kind of reservation, a quarantine zone in which purportedly dangerous individuals are segregated in the name of public safety.” Private prisons take advantage of classes and racial groups that are economically and politically problematic – a direct result from the legacy of the United States’ history of enslavement, disenfranchisement, segregation, and discrimination (Loury, 2019). Dating back to 1918, the state of Texas purchased 13 plantations and turned them into prisons to exploit cheap convict labor (Bauer, 2018). The 13th Amendment provided this loophole of sorts when slavery was abolished. It states that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude” shall exist in the United States “except as punishment for a crime.”

A modern adaptation of such an exploit is evident within corporations such as the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA; now CoreCivic), and GEO Group. Both of which have contributed \$10 million to state lawmakers (Goodkind, 2013). These same lawmakers allow for corporations like CoreCivic to form contracts with organizations like the Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE). Their partnership accounting for roughly a quarter of CoreCivic's revenue (Bauer, 2018). Upon President Trump's authorization to separate immigrant children from their families, CoreCivic's stock rose by an astonishing 14% in two weeks. The company's CEO, Damon Hininger, quoted "this is probably the most robust kind of sales environment we've seen in a long time." As David Garland says, "we have given up on the ideal of rehabilitating criminals and have settled for simply warehousing them."

In 2010, the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act imposed a "bed quota" on private prisons. At any time, at least 90 percent of beds must be filled. The rule is an incentive to keep prison populations high. U.S. Senator Robert Byrd introduced the act. Byrd received contributions from both CCA and GEO Group (Figueroa, 2014). The tandem of political corruption and easy monetization of private prisons allows for a system of perpetual exploitation.

Some civil rights advocacies demand reform or abolition of private prisons. According to their critics, for-profit prison systems are incompatible with effective criminal justice (Anderson, 2009). Inmates also receive less care than their publicly managed counterparts. Staff members at an ICE detention center were reported to have threatened illegal immigrant detainees with "adopting our children out to other people" (Bauer, 2018). In another case, training seminars for a private prison in Texas included guards watching videos of prisoners get "beaten, tasered, and even subjected to unleashed dogs" (Anderson, 2009). Similarly, to cut costs, a private maximum-security prison in Washington, D.C., reclassified high-risk prisoners and sent them to a medium-security prison in Ohio. Those from D.C. were reclassified as medium-security in order to avoid the cost of adjusting the security level of the prison. Two inmates in the Ohio prison were stabbed to death and 44 others were assaulted within 18 months (Anderson, 2009). Anderson

(2009) concludes that private prisons cannot be reformed and therefore must be abolished. In 2016, 18 percent of federal prison inmates and 7 percent of state prison inmates were in private prisons (ALCU, 2016). With correct management, privately detained prisoners can be relocated to public correctional facilities.

The states of Illinois and New York abolished private prisons in 2006 and 2007, respectively. Both states reported public prison costs that were lower than the national average (Anderson, 2009). Furthermore, abolishing private prisons completely will eliminate costs in the long run as inmates will be provided with more correctional opportunities and do not have to be held to longer sentences (Anderson, 2009). While these two states have shown the ability to identify the problem with the prison industrial complex, more work is needed to be done.

As Bauer (2018) pleads, we must add a greater share of social responsibility towards criminal justice policy. If the United States were to view private prisons as a tool -- like all tools, you can use them well or use them poorly (Armstrong, 2019). Private prisons can serve a purpose and provide rehabilitation, but proper management and accountability are required. However, none of this is achievable until the United States' history of racism and stance of being "tough on crime" is uprooted.

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