Private prisons incarcerated 100,151 American residents in 2020, representing 8% of the total state and federal prison population. Since 2000, the number of people housed in private prisons has increased 15%.

Harmful crime policies of the 1980s and beyond fueled a rapid expansion in the nation’s prison population. The resulting burden on the public sector led to the modern emergence of for-profit prisons in many states and the federal system. Of the 1.2 million people in federal and state prisons, 8%, or 100,151 people, were in private prisons as of yearend 2020.

States show significant variation in the use of private prisons. At one end of the spectrum, Montana incarcerates half of its prison population in privately run facilities, but in another 19 states, private prisons are not used at all. A total of 31 states use private corporations like GEO Group, Core Civic, LaSalle Corrections, and Management and Training Corporation to run some of their corrections facilities.

Montana is not alone in its reliance on private prisons. Arizona, Hawaii, New Mexico, Mississippi, and Florida rely considerably on private prisons for housing imprisoned people. In these states, between 13% and 45% of the prison population resides in a for-profit prison (See Table 1).
The proportion of imprisoned people in private facilities compared to public facilities has not changed considerably in the past 20 years. In 2000, 8% of the imprisoned population was also in private facilities; but fluctuations in the total number of people imprisoned over 20 years translated to a 15% rise in the number of people in private prisons. Since 2012, however, the population in private prisons has decreased significantly.
The largest prison system relying on privatization is the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Since 2000, BOP’s reliance on private facilities increased by 79%, and the number of people in federal custody in its private facilities (inclusive of prisons, halfway houses, and systems of home confinement) totaled 27,810 people in 2020. In 2021, President Biden issued an executive order to phase out the BOP’s use of private prison beds.²

Under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 33,724 people are held in immigrant detention, and 81% of this population is held in privately run facilities.³

Political influences have been instrumental in securing the growth of for-profit private prisons. However, if overall prison populations continue the current trend of modest declines, the privatization debate will likely intensify as opportunities for the prison industry decrease and corporations seek to make profits in related corrections areas.

### Endnotes

1. Formerly Corrections Corporation of America.
2. White House Briefing Room (2021). Reforming our incarceration system to eliminate the use of privately operated criminal detention facilities.