

Prison System in Tennessee: A Cycle of Racism and Control

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Tennessee's claim of being "tough on crime" means racialized policing and incarceration, and profit making off of marginalized people.

Tennessee likes to call itself “tough on crime.” But what that usually means is locking up kids too young, targeting Black and brown communities, and pouring public money into the private prisons that exist because of an exploitative and racist system. Growing up in rural Tennessee, I saw punishment take priority over real support at every turn. There was a kid in my high school who came to class daily on downers — probably Xanax, which we all knew he sold. My teacher would pull him into the hallway to talk, trying to keep him awake and connected. I didn’t understand then why she bothered. Later, when he disappeared from class, I learned another teacher had called the school resource officer, and he was sent to an alternative school. The teacher had been shielding him. It stuck with me: our system is wired to punish kids instead of addressing why they struggle.

That same logic stretches across Tennessee’s entire criminal legal system. The state cages Black people and migrants at wildly disproportionate rates, shuffles children into adult prisons, enforces some of the weakest gun laws in the country while claiming to be “tough on crime,” and still executes people with methods that border on torture. Layered on top of this is [CoreCivic](#), the private prison giant headquartered in Nashville, profiting off incarceration while communities are stripped of resources. This isn’t about safety — it’s about power, profit, and control.



Racism & Incarceration in Tennessee

The racial imbalance in Tennessee’s prisons is [staggering](#). Black Tennesseans make up about 17% of the population, yet nearly 44% of the state’s prison population. Migrants also face constant harassment, from [ICE raids in Nashville neighborhoods](#) to [racial profiling on highways](#). Growing up, I didn’t need stats to notice it — the only Black and brown kids in my school were harassed constantly by local law enforcement, treated like criminals before they ever committed any offense.

This isn’t just about “who commits crimes.” It’s about who the state decides to punish, and who it protects. [As the ACLU of Tennessee points out](#), district attorneys hold enormous power in deciding who is prosecuted and who gets second chances. But time and again, communities of color bear the brunt of harsher sentencing, limited diversion programs, and cash bail that keeps poor people locked up for being poor.

And then there’s [CoreCivic](#) — the giant private prison corporation headquartered in Nashville. CoreCivic has made millions of dollars by turning incarceration into a [business model](#), profiting from longer sentences and harsher laws. A recent report showed how Tennessee’s push for harsher prison sentences [directly benefits CoreCivic](#). In rural counties, prisons are pitched as “economic development” — jobs for locals, revenue for governments. But what that really means is that entire communities are now dependent on locking people up for survival.

I think about how my grandfather Larry Drolsum, a defense attorney, would talk about his clients — people who had “made terrible choices” but were still human, still had a story behind what they did. As a kid, I believed even Disney villains had backstories. Compare that with the way Tennessee politics talks about crime today: no humanity, no context, just harsher sentences and more profit for companies like CoreCivic.

The prison system didn’t become this way by accident. Its roots stretch back to the end of slavery, when Southern states replaced plantation labor convict leasing — arresting Black men on vague charges like “vagrancy” and forcing them to work in mines, farms, and railroads. Tennessee was one of the [earliest states](#) to adopt this system, leasing prisoners to private companies that treated them as disposable labor. The state and corporations profited. Black communities paid the price. In many ways, mass incarceration became the modern successor to Jim Crow — a system that criminalized poverty and Black life while claiming to protect “public safety.”

Today — in place of convict leasing, we have mass incarceration. Instead of plantation owners, we have private prison corporations like CoreCivic. The language has changed, but the function is the same: control labor, extract profit, and maintain a racial hierarchy under the cover of “law and order”

The prison system here isn’t designed to make us safer. It’s designed to control, punish, and profit. And the people who pay the highest price are overwhelmingly Black, brown, and working-class.

Kids in Adult Prisons and The Case of Jordan Norris

One of the worst examples of how Tennessee treats young people in the criminal legal system is the story of Jordan Norris, someone I went to high school with in Cheatham County. In 2016, Norris was strapped into a restraint chair at the county jail and [tortured with a Taser](#) more than 40 times. Video footage captured deputies shocking him again and again, while one even bragged: *“I’ll keep doing that until I run out of batteries.”* These weren’t moments of restraint or de-escalation. This was cruelty, plain and simple.

The injuries were so severe that Norris was left with burns across his body. The [United Nations](#) went so far as to label the abuse “torture” in an [official statement](#). Federal prosecutors eventually charged deputy Mark Bryant, who was sentenced to five years in prison for using excessive force. But even with the conviction, the punishment barely scratched the surface of what was done — not to mention the broader culture in Tennessee that made such abuse possible in the first place.

In 2018, just two years after the torture, Norris was found dead at his home. Officials called it an overdose, and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation said it was [looking into the case](#). But no clear answers were ever given. For many of us, it feels deeply suspicious that someone who survived that level of state-sanctioned violence died under murky circumstances, with the truth buried as quickly as the headlines faded. His story is not an outlier — it’s a warning about what happens when we accept a culture of control over a culture of care.

Gun Violence Hypocrisy

Tennessee politicians act like they want to solve violence — but their actions tell a different story. The state boasts some of the weakest [gun control laws](#) in the country even as shootings climb. Groups like [Giffords](#) report that Tennessee’s loose gun policies enable mass violence. But instead of addressing access to firearms or mental health, the narrative always circles back to punishment and repression.

I remember where I was when the [Covenant School](#) massacre occurred in Nashville in 2023. The panic didn’t just focus on guns — it honed in on identity politics. The shooter was trans, and many in the media and political class used that fact to demonize trans people broadly, as though identity is a cause of dangerous activity. The narrative became: “Watch out for this marginalized person,” instead of asking why a state with no resources, no support, and rampant hate would produce someone so destabilized. That instinct to scapegoat identity instead of systems is part of the hypocrisy.

Then there was the shooter at [Antioch high school in 2025](#) whose extremist beliefs had links to white supremacist ideology. Researchers tracking far-right violence have long documented how many attackers are influenced by extremist movements that circulate online and glorify violence. A report from the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) found that people connected to the so-called alt-right movement have been responsible for numerous killings and attacks in the United States. These incidents are rarely random or “senseless” — they emerge from political ideologies steeped in racism and grievance. And yet Tennessee’s response didn’t pause to ask why someone in Nashville would absorb those ideas.

The Death Penalty in Tennessee

The death penalty is one of the starkest examples of how Tennessee’s prison system isn’t about justice — it’s about punishment and control at the cost of basic human dignity and justice. My grandfather worked as an attorney and defended people facing death row. He always said the most important part of his job wasn’t just arguing the law but visiting his clients before their executions. For many, he was the only person who came. That stuck with me: how isolated and abandoned people were in their final days, and how much the state relied on that invisibility to make killing them acceptable.

This summer, Tennessee made national headlines when it [executed Byron Black](#) in the electric chair despite warnings from doctors that his defibrillator, a resuscitator for his heart, would shock him back to life and make the execution torturous. Human rights experts have long classified this kind of practice as cruel and unusual punishment, if not outright torture. But Tennessee executed him anyway, insisting on “law and order” over even the most basic standards of humanity.

What does it say about a state when it insists on killing a man strapped into a machine designed to keep him alive? It says that death is not about justice here — it’s about sending a message of dominance. The fact that executions continue despite international condemnation, despite concerns about medical torture, shows how deeply Tennessee clings to punishment as the cornerstone of its system.

And just like with kids in adult prisons or gun violence, there's a pattern: Black men and poor defendants are disproportionately sentenced to death, while wealthier people with better legal resources avoid it. My grandfather's stories made this clear — the difference wasn't always in the crime, but in who had money, who had connections, and who the state wanted to make an example of.

Tennessee's commitment to the death penalty reveals what the prison system here is really about: not safety, not healing, but control over the most vulnerable. Until we name executions for what they are — state-sanctioned torture — we can't build an honest conversation about justice.

Private Prisons = Profit Over People

If you want to understand how incarceration in Tennessee really works, follow the money. The state has become a testing ground for [CoreCivic](#), one of the largest private prison corporations in the country. Instead of treating incarceration as a social failure to be reduced, Tennessee lawmakers actively expand sentencing laws and prison contracts — policies that just happen to boost CoreCivic's profits. As reporting shows, every time sentences get harsher, the company's stock goes up. That's not public safety, it's a business model.

The [CoreCivic prison crisis](#) is not an accident. Politicians who should be asking hard questions instead receive campaign contributions from the same company, and in return, CoreCivic gets contracts worth millions to manage overcrowded facilities. The revolving door is so blatant that it's hard to separate Tennessee's "tough on crime" policies from corporate lobbying. When prisons become "economic development" for rural counties, incarceration is no longer about justice — it's about jobs for some at the expense of freedom for others.

Private prisons also show the hollowness of the state's rhetoric. Leaders like to talk about "efficiency," but CoreCivic facilities are plagued with staff shortages, unsafe conditions, and [human rights violations](#). Inmates become cheap labor, making pennies an hour while corporations cash in. Families are charged exorbitant fees for phone calls and commissary items, funneling even more money out of already struggling communities. When incarceration itself becomes a profit center, every new arrest, every harsh sentence, every "tough on crime" bill is good news for shareholders and a mockery of any claims of justice.

Tennessee has let the profit motive redefine what justice even means. As long as prisons are run for money, the people inside will be treated as commodities, not humans.

What It Really Means: Structural Violence

At the heart of all this — from caging kids to execution to private prisons — is structural violence. [Paul Farmer described it](#) as institutions and systems causing harm by denying life necessities even without an obvious attacker. Tennessee is a living example.

Instead of investing in schools, healthcare, or mental health, the state pours money into cages. Instead of tackling poverty or gun violence, Tennessee doubles down on punishment and profits.

Black and Brown communities are over-policed, incarcerated, and surveilled; migrants are criminalized; entire neighborhoods lose their fabric under the weight of displacement. That last point — housing — is central. Nashville is now ranked among the [most intensely gentrified cities in the U.S.](#) with skyrocketing rents and eviction pressures forcing longtime residents out, especially Black communities. In May 2025 [the Tennessean](#) noted that the “most intense” gentrification in the U.S. is happening in Nashville and that’s not incidental. It’s tied to the same logic that justifies incarceration and dispossession.

When neighborhoods are transformed for “economic development,” homes are torn down, families pushed out, and new housing built in luxury towers. For those displaced, the prison pipeline often becomes the new land of last resort. Black people lose homes, support systems, and stability — then the state treats survival strategies as crimes.

Natural disasters expose this even more clearly. After the 2020 Nashville tornado, speculators swooped in to buy damaged homes from families who had just lost everything, flipping them into profit machines while survivors were still struggling to recover. The [Nashville Scene](#) described investors as “vultures” descending on North Nashville. The same communities targeted for land grabs after disasters are the ones most vulnerable to over-policing and incarceration.

In my rural Tennessee schooling, many from neighborhoods that were “declining” got pulled into the carceral net, while the city center was targeted for new investment. Now those same patterns play out in Nashville: Black neighborhoods are bulldozed under the name of “revitalization,” while law enforcement and prisons expand in those very neighborhoods. Structural violence is not just about incarceration — it’s about what is demolished, who is displaced, and what is denied.

In this system, crime becomes both the symptom and justification. The state creates instability (through disinvestment, displacement, lack of housing, lack of jobs), then uses that chaos to argue for more policing and prisons. That is how structural violence sustains itself.

Until we reclaim housing, community, stability, and control over our land, the idea of “public safety” will always be a sham. The cages are built on the ruins of what was taken first.

The Alternative: Building Beyond Cages

If Tennessee has perfected punishment, then the real challenge is imagining — and fighting for — what could exist instead. This is where [Socialist Reconstruction](#) feels urgent. The book makes it clear that prisons don’t exist in isolation. They’re bound up with poverty, housing, healthcare, education, and labor exploitation. Socialism is the only alternative because it shifts the goal of society away from profit and toward meeting the needs of the workers. Instead of wealth flowing into corporations and private prisons, the capital that the workers create can be directed toward housing, healthcare, education, and stable jobs. A system organized around profit will always produce poverty, which is one of the main engines of incarceration.

So what does that future look like? [Nashville's housing crisis](#) isn't accidental — it's part of the same profit-first logic that drives incarceration. Healthcare and mental health access are just as central. How many kids funneled into "discipline" systems could have had their lives changed by trauma counseling or addiction services instead of handcuffs? How many school shootings could be prevented by confronting alienation and hate before they explode into violence?

Labor is the backbone of it all. Tennessee has leaned into private prisons like CoreCivic because incarceration generates cheap labor and profit. Abolishing private prisons and strengthening workers' rights flips that destructive logic on its head: people should be paid fairly for their labor, not forced into it behind bars.

Tennessee's labor history shows this struggle clearly. In the [Coal Creek War of 1891](#), miners in East Tennessee rebelled against the state's convict leasing system, where imprisoned workers were forced to labor in mines and used to break strikes. Decades later — on the opposite side of the state in West Tennessee — Memphis sanitation workers marched under the banner "I AM A MAN," demanding dignity, safety, and union rights. These fights weren't just about wages, but about rejecting a system that treats working people as disposable, which is why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. joined that struggle in the place where he was assassinated.

The alternative to incarceration is visionary. It's about directing resources where they actually keep people alive and safe. Prisons do not solve problems, nor are they meant to. They are an expression of oppressive systems that are intended to exploit and to dehumanize. The alternative is to build a different society where true public safety would be valued.

Breaking the Cycle

From kids funneled into adult prisons to people electrocuted on death row with medical devices still strapped to them, Tennessee shows how deep the commitment to punishment really runs. Add in private prisons like CoreCivic turning incarceration into profit, and a state that lets gentrification and gun violence run unchecked, and you see the same pattern everywhere: those in power want to cage and to control.

Structural violence is a choice — one made daily by lawmakers, corporations, and institutions. And if it's a choice, then it can be unmade.

So why isn't that choice being made? Because the current system serves the interest of a handful of billionaires. From slavery to convict leasing to modern mass incarceration, punishment in the United States has long been tied to racial and economic control. Tennessee was the nucleus of the convict leasing system in the late 19th century. The mechanisms have changed, but the logic remains the same. What once looked like forced labor in coal mines, now appears as corporations profiting from incarceration and entire industries benefiting from expanded policing, surveillance, and prisons. A system built around profit and control always chooses punishment over investment in human life.

The question is whether Tennessee will keep clinging to cages, or whether we'll demand something better — and fight to make it real.

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