

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/10/03/obama-and-bureau-of-prisons-lowball-cost-of-supermax-confinement/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | October 3, 2010

In response to questions at his September 10 press conference, President Obama spoke about his failure to fulfill his clear campaign promise to close the military prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He blamed fear and political rhetoric for blocking his plan to move Gitmo detainees to prisons in on U.S. soil. In the course of discussing Guantanamo, Obama said:

And by the way, just from a purely fiscal point of view, the costs of holding folks in Guantanamo is massively higher than it is holding them in a supermax maximum security prison here in the United States.

There's no question that the president's statement was true. The trouble started when the federal Bureau of Prisons was asked to provide information on the cost of holding a prisoner in a U.S. supermax. The *Miami Herald's* Carol Rosenberg followed up on the numbers. In an [article following the press conference](#), she wrote:

Pentagon reports the annual cost of running the prison camps, staffed by a variety of U.S. military troops, at \$116 million. With a current population of 176 war-on-terror detainees, that's more than \$650,000 each.

By contrast, it costs nearly \$5,575 a year to keep a prisoner in federal detention, said Bureau of Prisons spokeswoman Traci Billingsley on Friday. A Supermax prisoner's cost might be a bit higher, she said, because of additional security.

That just didn't sound right to us—neither the \$5,575 figure, nor the fact that supermax costs would only be just a bit higher. And sure enough, [a few days later](#) Rosenberg reported:

A Bureau of Prisons spokesman on Monday revised upwards the cost of housing a captive in federal detention, days after the bureau said it spends a tiny fraction of what the military spends at Guantanamo Bay.

The new figure \$27,251 a year per federal prisoner compared to \$650,000 per captive at the U.S. base in Cuba is still a tiny fraction. Obviously, they were far less expensive than what the military is doing, said Bureau of Prisons spokesman Edmond Ross.

The per prisoner cost has exceeded \$25,000 for several years now in the federal system, he said. It was unclear how a colleague arrived Friday at \$5,750 a year, he said.

Now, \$27,351 may still be a tiny fraction of what's spent at Gitmo but multiplied by more than 200,000 federal prisoners, it's still a lot of money. More importantly, it's still *not* an accurate figure for the cost of keeping a supermax prisoner—something the BOP spokesperson neglected to mention when he provided the corrected number.

If the Bureau of Prisons wished to provide an accurate projection of costs, it could have provided figures for ADX Florence, the notorious federal supermax in Colorado, or for the Communications Management Units (CMUs) at Marion or Terre Haute federal penitentiaries—the units that most resemble any proposed future home for Guantanamo detainees. Yet it chose instead to offer the media misleading lowball figures.

We do know that the [average](#) annual cost for a supermax prisoner, according to one study by the Urban Institute, is \$75,000 a year, as opposed to \$25,000 for a prisoner in the general population. At the Illinois State [Tamms supermax](#), it's about \$92,000 a year.

And this does not take into account the cost of building supermax prisons in the first place. The price tag for ADX Florence, completed in 1994, [was \\$60 million](#), and it houses only about 400 prisoners. Obama's proposed future home for Gitmo detainees, an unused state prison in Thomson, Illinois, would [cost \\$237 million](#) to buy, retrofit, and activate.

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James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics

to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

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October 25, 2022

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September 29, 2022

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this is the BOP at there best lol like i siad the old saying when a pollitshon opens thare mouth the bop takes that to a new standered if the BOP ses it 98% of the time they are lieing hears what they not saying obma fisrt off it not a supermax max it just supermax dah thow he wants to make tommson overkill as in he dosent want it to be a supermax he wants it to outdo adx he wants to pass standered for supermax with it to buy and get on it feet you seen the cost i not sher that includes the faces lift and upgrades to the prison as well to make it exseed supermax wich means going cost more then that per inmate if obma gets his way you want know where your taxes and kids lerning and gramas nestegg and yours are going to build that supermax anyone herd the song creed my owen prison wondering if by time he out if he just have built his owen prison we know how mad we got at bush allmoest thow him in one cant wate to see what they do to him this nashion is the plane of justice your in my home now they want game they got it this nashion is all bout prison now like it or not it is the lifeblood at the end of all darknes it brings light to dark lands but canseres when it grows out of control like it has now the FBOP is by far a powerful brach of power sadly are court is standing like the tribunal and leting this nashion kill itself slowly we keep going we all going be of justice not usa but poj we give up are rights so fast we are at the start of the age of justice and i not kissing no tribunal or BOP ass FBOP as in bleep BOP

interesting.. so it is apparent the president is in complete denial of what is really going on in US prisons,, GOOD to know! at least we are clear we cannot count on him for justice or fairness.

what next? and as that goes, what is up with the president making PSAs about food banks? is he prepping us for Russian like breadlines of the 80s?

Can we say Pork Barrel? The media spin is so obvious the Feds will just cry foul even if favoritism is rubbed in their faces and up their noses. Not that I promote expanding Florence to accommodate this travesty of justice, for what its worth for the fiscal-minded folks; the disparity in the cost comparisons the public is footing the bill both figuratively and in the loss of humanitarian values is astounding!

Twitch Entropy,
Central Texas ABC

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

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