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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | February 25, 2012

The following article originally appeared on [MotherJones.com](#).

President Obama's budget request for fiscal year 2013 includes cuts to everything from Medicare and Medicaid to defense and even homeland security. But federal prisons are among its biggest winners, according to an analysis by the [Federal Times](#). The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is seeking a 4.2 percent increase, one of the largest of any federal agency, which would bring its [total budget](#) to more than \$6.9 billion.

So what kind of criminals are we spending all this money to incarcerate? If you're thinking terrorists and kidnappers, think again. According to the [Sentencing Project](#), only 1 in 10 federal prisoners is locked up for a violent offense of any kind. More than half are drug offenders—hardly surprising, since federal prosecutions for drug offenses more than doubled between 1984 and 2005. The 1980s also produced mandatory minimum sentences, which meant we were not only sending more people to prison, we were keeping them there far longer—a perfect formula for an exploding prison population.

Indeed, the [federal prison population ballooned](#) from fewer than 25,000 inmates in 1980 to 210,000 in 2010—an eightfold increase while the federal prison budget grew by a whopping 1,700 percent. Nowadays, as state prison populations have [begun to fall](#) for the first time in decades—the product of a steady decline in violent-crime rates, lawsuits over prison conditions, and deficits that have forced state officials to rethink their incarceration policies—the number of federal inmates continues to grow by about 3 percent a year. The [projected](#) 2013 federal prison population is 229,268 inmates—6,500 or more than in 2012. Increasing funding for more prison beds has been shown to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, notes the [Justice Policy Institute](#). If you build it, they will come.

According to Obama's [new budget](#), new federal prisons opening in Mississippi and West Virginia will house some 2,500 of those additional prisoners. Another 1,000 will be placed in private prisons—which now hold 18 percent of federal prisoners, far more than most state systems. The remainder of the new inmates will presumably be jammed into the existing federal prison facilities, which are already operating at 142 percent of capacity.

Factored into the budget request is \$44 million in savings from an expansion of programs that let prisoners shave time off their sentences by behaving well and participating in educational and vocational programs, plus a compassionate release program for seriously ill inmates who have served most of their time—a smart move for the BOP, since it would shift its costliest medical cases onto Medicaid. But there's no guarantee that these program offsets will pass, especially given that Congress nixed similar proposals last year.

Conspicuously absent from the Obama budget is an item the administration requested for [2011](#) and [2012](#): money to purchase and retrofit a disused Illinois prison to serve as Gitmo North, a home for detainees now held at Guantanamo Bay. Since late 2009, Obama has [floated plans](#) to buy Thomson state prison and convert it into a second supermax for Gitmo residents who were tried and convicted on American soil. But Congress has yet to come through with the cash, and it seems, at least in this budget, that the White House has thrown in the towel.

If the federal government acquires Thomson, it will not be for the purpose of replacing Guantanamo, but to meet critical federal prison capacity needs, a Department of Justice spokesperson [told TPM](#). In other words, we could end up with Gitmo on top of a new federal supermax like the one in Florence, Colorado—the closest thing to a [torture chamber](#) that exists in America today.

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.

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October 25, 2022

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October 13, 2022

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September 29, 2022

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I cant understand how the President cant see what is right under his nose when it comes to saving billions of dollars by just cutting the time federal prisoners serve, its crazy and who does it benefit to keep these men and woman locked up for so long, caring for them, and dont forget about the familys that the states are helping because the bread winner is locked up, what will it take for the President and congress to see this, we are in debt and this is a sure way of reducing some of it, come on Mr. President at least take a look.

lol i not sher whats next betty but i not sher i want to know that lol but we not fare off from becomeing the united plane of justice if we keep going like this i do not need a court to run my life i no ward of the court or will i ever be by by owen will lol but as for building more supermaxes come on we do not want to pimp there prison lol solitary hurts us all we do not need to do this we should not do this and no good comes from it do we want to be know for solitary in a nashion that calls it self humane oddly this nashion follow the same three thing that are saecred dootys to followers of the tribunal in EQ pashints they say if you convit a insent the court will judge them for doing so secont is puniment and therd is retchabueshion as in eye for a eye oddly dose the not seem to fit this nashions ways in justice pratices now days we try to judge based on the laws from were the person came from like if ny then ny law oddly out of nashion things they try to get them tried by there laws as well as there owen but in much sens we are a lot like the six hammer or the tribunal as for are thouts on justice we try to be fare thats good but takeing no sides is good but yet we not amune to despshion like the hammers but nuthing good comes from following the tribunals ways of law there is no merdy and is only going to keep the prison growing bigger even more oddly is it not a court that has the moest power in this nashion that interprets what are rights are what the constatushion means and can step on any thing it finds to vilate what they say are are rights or to permit what they say is ok by there finedings of what are rights are they say we have the power to over thow the government if needed in the decklerashion yet you try to and they will come down on you will the power of justice we are all inmate all prisoners in a way still we born they give you a number you do what they say you can not they come down on you with the force of justice yes we need laws and order but not justice that harsh oddly in EQ you kill a sentry a gard of the plane of justice and you get a text that ses the justice of the tribunal will be upon you justice is swift and sher oddly it is the same if you mess with any of this nashions or states or andy of justices gards hear the 7th hammer messenger and balif to the tribunal lol we to have those as well i fear the day solitary is the normel thing we do when there is no way out of solitary when we even out side the wall pull the not so nuch that it can not be undone and we build the wall or they build the walls of justice round us so high that we start to loose the freemdoms we still have and are no beter off then those we thow in prison i fear the day we all become prisoners of justice the day usa becomes poj is the day it is fare to late for this nashion we can not ever let us hit the tribunals age we are built on the rights freedoms and pride of doing right by all humans so how can we want or let them keep bulding supermaxes we need to bring a end to the missuse of solitary dare in school tot you to say no to drugs well now i dare you all to say no to solitary confinement we can still heal this nashion we do not need to over thow the govment as a hole we still can fix the holes in are walls but wate to long and it will fall on us all we have more rights then others we may not do things that other places do to there inmates but that dose not later we still need to stand to are word of humane not more humane then your prisons but dead point blank humane all the way so we can look at the flag and be proud of all this nashions doings not just some i say let there be light in the darknes of justice

whats next?

<http://www.apfn.org/apfn/camps.htm>

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