

American Prison:

The Largest Sinkhole of Taxpayer Dollars in History

A recent report called "Follow the Money of Mass Incarceration" says taxpayers spend approximately 182 billion dollars per year on incarceration. That is 182, followed by 9 zeros. Numbers that large are difficult to comprehend. I mean a lot of calculators don't have screens that wide! I'm not going to parse that report, (it's available on the internet at www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html) instead I'm going to tell you how much money the government wastes on me.

I was born in 1973 in rural Oklahoma. Like most Okies, we were dirt poor. My dad was a roustabout, totally dependent on the oil industry. Mom worked several different jobs over those years including house cleaning for people slightly better off than we were. My parents were poor but honest. I'm writing this from prison so I clearly didn't inherit the honesty part! I did however learn a lot of life lessons from watching my parents pinch pennies. The government in general and the BOP specifically could use some of those lessons.

My German Shepherd was hit by a car. It was an accident but his hind legs were obviously broken. Mom, who struggled to keep food on the table, didn't hesitate to scoop Baby Huey off the bloody asphalt and rush him to the vet. Baby Huey whimpered, I cried.

Our vet was a nice old man everyone called Dr. Mac. His name might have been McJolly. I'm not sure anymore. I do remember his office always smelled funny. They carried my broken dog into a little room, that's where I learned my first economic lesson: The value of a life.

After a brief but thorough exam, Dr. Mac used words like "x-rays," "broken pelvis," "internal bleeding," and "surgery." I was too young to understand

the meaning of those words but I recognized the grim tone. The torment in mom's voice was even worse when she asked, "How much will this cost?"

Pause here to think about that. There I was, a five year old boy who would've give anything to save my dog. I would've promised ANYTHING. But mom had 3 kids to feed, house payments to make, utility bills due. She asked the right questions.

Dr. Mac understood our financial situation, most of his customers were poor. "Hundreds," he answered quietly, "at least and I can't promise he'll ever walk again."

Mom knelt beside me and put it in terms my young emotional brain could comprehend. "Bobby's in a lot of pain, Dr. Mac is going to end his suffering."

Needless to say, I cried a lot more but the lesson hadn't ended. Later that night, my parents got into a huge fight, not because Bobby Huey was dead but because mom had paid \$35⁰⁰ to put him to sleep. Dad was furious. I'll never forget the way he said, "A bullet only costs 20 cents!"

Those words echoed through my head for years. I loved my dog more than any amount of money. Mom loved me and Bobby Huey, to her \$35⁰⁰ was acceptable. But my Dad spent half his time in the woods hunting for food, the other half working in miserable conditions to provide for his family. To him, my dog was worth 20 cents.

Anyone still reading this is probably wondering what the hell it has to do with prison finance. Well to put it simply, I'm now the dog and the BOP is behaving like an emotional five year old rather than a fiscally responsible adult.

I arrived in BOP custody in 1998, twenty years

ago this week. I was housed in USP's for the first 13 years at an approximate cost of \$30,000 per year. Then I've been in ADX Florence for the last 7 years where the cost has risen considerably to approximately \$75,000 per year.

(These are BOP estimates, I've actually heard much larger figures and I'm not even calculating all the court costs or two years of county jail expense.)

So I'm a dog who's going to die in a cage and the BOP has already spent nearly a million dollars on my confinement. Until recently, I've been healthy but over the last year I've developed some medical issues. I've had countless tests at taxpayer expense including CT scans, MRIs and x-rays. Now I'm scheduled to see a neurologist. I don't have dollar figures for any of this but it can't be cheap. Not to mention the security costs involved anytime someone leaves America's most secure prison for a hospital trip.

Let me be clear, I'm not complaining at all about my level of health care. From what my family has told me, I'm being treated as well or better than the average American but that just magnifies the absurdity of it all. I'm 45 years old and I will eventually die in prison. The BOP will literally spend millions of taxpayer dollars on my long slow march to death. My dad would probably argue 20 cents is more practical.

I'm just one of 184,000 Federal inmates. I'm just one of the 2.3 million ~~000~~ people in US prisons.

I'm trying to keep a narrow focus on me and my own experiences but the medical costs of an aging prison population go way beyond me. I'm still comparatively young and healthy.

At USP Terre Haute, I was on orderly in the "old men's" unit. I knew many inmates who'd already served 30 plus years. Every one of them had some sort of health issue.

Here at ADX, there a dozens of inmates taking Harvoni or other Hepatitis treatments. One inmate has HIV, Hepatitis and cancer. He takes more medication than anyone I know, plus he's already been out for surgery. Another inmate went out 4 times for some sort of throat surgery. Then he died anyway. An 80 year old man just had Glaucoma surgery. These are just the people I know about in this very small prison. And recently here at ADX they began limiting our toilet paper to curb expenses. That's not a joke. They're hemorrhaging money and they try a toilet paper band aid. Are the children making these decisions?

Don't get me wrong, I'm in no way, shape or form advocating for my release. At this point that would be every bit as ridiculous as paying millions to keep me alive. I've spent most of my adult life in a world without technology; a world where violence isn't just accepted but expected; a world where intelligence is frowned upon but aggression is rewarded. My already questionable morals have been warped so badly that regular people are not ~~longer~~ safe around me. I'm no longer just a dog, now I'm a rabid dog living in a kennel full of other rabid dogs.

Most people agree that the system is broken but no one wants to make the hard choices necessary to fix it. Right now we take criminals off the street and toss them into a cage for years or decades expecting this to teach them a lesson. The only lesson we learn is "Don't get arrested." With the system as is, it makes more sense to shoot the police or get shot by the police, than to come to prison. It will continue to get worse until major changes are made.

Those of us who are caged for decades are

left behind by an always evolving world. The things we once knew become obsolete. And if we do get released we find our options so limited that repeat crime is inevitable. You call this recidivism, we call it normal.

This normality has to change. Spend the 20 cents on me and use those wasted millions to rehabilitate the young pups while they still have a chance. Teach them something valuable for life out there, don't let me teach them how things are valued in here.

Make these hard choices now before it's too late. Yes some children will cry but eventually I come to understand the value of Bobby Huey's life. Future generations will come to understand the value of mine.