



Detention Costs Still Don't Add Up to Good Policy

In August 2013, the National Immigration Forum published its most recent version of [The Math of Immigration Detention](#), which detailed our broken immigration system's exorbitant spending on the detention of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who pose no danger to our communities.

While some progress has been made in [implementing alternatives to detention programs](#) and [prioritizing removing immigrants with criminal records](#), scarce resources are still being used to detain and deport aspiring citizens who pose no risk to the general public. Congress, through the appropriations process, continues to [mandate](#) that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) maintain 34,000 detention beds for undocumented immigrants and, ICE has struggled to use its full authority to apply prosecutorial discretion to prioritize the deportation of criminals and repeat immigration offenders.

As detailed in [The Math of Immigration Detention](#), for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, DHS and the White House requested \$1.84 billion for DHS Custody Operations and requested a reduction in detention beds to 31,800. This funding level would have amounted to over \$5 million per day spent on immigration detention and would have allocated approximately \$159 per day to detain each immigrant. Congress eventually declined to reduce the number of detention beds, leaving the mandate at 34,000 beds, and allocated additional funds for detention above and beyond what was requested by the White House.

In [FY 2014](#) (*Congressional Record*, Jan. 15, 2014 at H930), the federal government spent more than \$1.99 billion on DHS Custody Operations, or \$5.46 million per day on immigrant detention. This amounts to \$161 per day on each immigrant in detention. In contrast, the cost of detaining the average inmate in federal maximum security prison is about [\\$90](#) per day.

Figure 1

$$\frac{\$1,933,770,000 \text{ (FY 2014 appropriations for custody and operations)}}{365 \text{ days in a year}} = \$5.46 \text{ million per day}$$

$$\frac{\$5.46 \text{ million per day}}{34,000 \text{ detention beds (detainees)}} = \$161 \text{ daily cost to taxpayers per immigrant detainee}$$

In addition to existing immigration detention costs, the federal government is opening new detention facilities to house the [influx of families and unaccompanied children](#) that have entered the United States in growing numbers in recent months. After curtailing the practice of family detention in 2009, the federal government is revisiting the practice, opening up expansive and costly ICE-run family detention facilities in [Texas](#), [New Mexico](#) and elsewhere. Family detention is even more expensive than standard immigrant detention, costing an average of [\\$298 per person per day](#).



Less wasteful alternatives to detention (ATD) exist. These programs have proven to be effective – with [more than 90%](#) of immigrants participating in ATD programs showing up to their court appearances – and save taxpayer money. In May 2014, the *L.A. Times* reported that requiring detainees to wear a tracking devices and report twice a week to parole officers costs roughly [\\$8 per person per day](#). Other alternative options may cost even less.