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## Alabama's White Elephant

Federal taxpayers have spent almost \$250 million on a **new federal prison for women** in Aliceville, Ala., that should never have been built. The prison is almost completed and, within a year or so, is scheduled to house around 1,500 secure prisoners as well as 250 minimum-security inmates — or about one of every eight women **in federal prison**.

But for many of the prisoners, the rural isolation of this expensive facility will hurt their chances of returning permanently to their families and communities after doing their time. Though it is the newest federal prison for women, Aliceville does not reflect the latest thinking about criminal justice policy for incarceration of women.

Experts have long **argued** that prisoners should be located within a reasonable distance of their families so they can keep connections with their children. Encouraging those connections benefits the criminal justice system by reducing the odds that a prisoner will end up back in prison after she is released. The location of the Aliceville prison works against these goals.

While women make up only **6.5 percent of the inmates in federal prison**, the war on drugs and reduced community services for the mentally ill have led to faster growth in the population of female inmates compared with males in the past decade. The 14,100 women in federal facilities are mostly in for nonviolent crimes, like drug and property offenses. In 2009, **more than half** had minor children, according to a report by the National Women's Law Center.

The federal Bureau of Prisons says the Aliceville prison is needed because federal secure prisons for women, holding around 5,800 prisoners, are 55 percent over capacity. The new facility, it says, will reduce overcrowding by almost half, putting the secure prisons at 31 percent over capacity — still twice as high as the bureau's target.

But from what experts know, many female prisoners do not need to be incarcerated to protect public safety. It would be more sensible to place more of them in community-based facilities near their families and provide treatment for drug abuse and mental health problems for those who need it, as well as education and job training.

The Bureau of Prisons decided the new federal prison for women should be located in the Southeast, and the isolated location of Aliceville is typical of recent federal prisons. Because there are few facilities for women, the bureau says, imprisoning them within 500 miles of home is an acceptable range. Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama pushed hard for Aliceville, promoting the prison as a boon to economic development and a source of jobs for **a needy part of the state**. For a generation, that rationale has helped justify expanding America's prison system.

Now, however, some states, faced with crushing costs, are moving to scale back incarceration. It is time to find better, more cost-effective ways to deal with most female offenders than by isolating them in places like Aliceville.