

Report details abuse at Georgia immigrant detention centers

Shannon Jones
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The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Foundation of Georgia has issued a devastating report documenting widespread abuse at four immigration detention facilities in the state. The facilities investigated by the ACLU included the Stewart Detention Center, the largest in the US.

The 182-page report, titled “Prisoners of Profit: Immigrants and Detention in Georgia,” was released last Wednesday. It details what the ACLU of Georgia characterizes as “systemic violation of immigrant detainees’ civil and human rights while detained in substandard prison-like conditions ill suited for civil detainees.”

The state of Georgia recently enacted harsh anti-immigrant legislation empowering police to check on a suspect’s immigration status as well as providing for stiff punishment for those employing or harboring undocumented workers. The measure was similar to laws passed in Utah and Arizona that have been the object of legal challenges.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has accelerated the arrest and deportation of undocumented immigrants. US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained 442,000 individuals in 2010, more than double the number detained in 2003, the year the ICE was first established. The ICE’s “Operation Endgame” calls for the removal of all deportable immigrants by 2012, leading to increased violations of due process rights. Nationwide, the ICE detains more than 30,000 individuals on any particular day in more than 250 facilities.

Private for-profit businesses operate Stewart and two other detention centers in Georgia. Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), which had annual revenue in 2010 of \$1.7 billion, runs two of the three—Stewart and the North Georgia Detention Center

in Gainesville. Among its findings, the ACLU called for the ICE to stop housing detainees at the Stewart and Irwin County facilities due to their remoteness and allegations of widespread abuse.

The ACLU based its report on three years of research that included interviews with 68 detainees at all four facilities. The ACLU also interviewed family and friends of detainees, as well as immigration attorneys, and conducted on-the-spot tours. The report raised concerns about detainees’ due process rights, living and sanitation conditions, adequacy of medical and mental health care, and abuse of power by those in authority.

The report cited instances of verbal abuse, including racial slurs, and the use of physical violence against detainees. One detainee reported being punched in the head by a guard, resulting in a scar on his forehead and trouble with his vision.

Detainees reported waiting days or even weeks for a visit to the medical unit in their facility. Two facilities, Stewart and the North Georgia Detention Center, do not even employ a doctor. At the two others, there is a doctor, but detainees complain of understaffing and only being able to see a nurse.

One detainee reported suffering two months of pain for gallstones while waiting for treatment. The report states, “One night, when she was feverish and throwing up, she was brought to the medical unit three times before she was finally taken to the hospital.”

As far as mental health care, there is no psychiatrist employed at Stewart, and at two other facilities the psychiatrist is on call and not physically present most of the time. Many detainees reported not being asked any mental health questions at intake. Further, detainees reported punitive treatment of those with mental disabilities, including segregation, even though

the ICE acknowledges that this is not appropriate and “often exacerbates mental illness.”

Detainees at all four facilities reported instances of officials attempting to coerce them into signing orders of removal, which allow for deportation of noncitizens without a hearing before an immigration judge. The ACLU cited cases where immigration officials screamed at detainees and threatened them with permanent detention if they did not sign orders of removal. The report noted that the Stewart facility had the highest rate of deportation in the country, 98.8 percent.

At Stewart at least two detainees were being held more than six months after their final orders for removal were issued. The US Supreme Court has held that detention exceeding six months is a violation of detainees’ rights.

The ACLU related instances of detainees being placed in segregation for refusing to follow orders or as a means of retaliation. The ACLU said that after it interviewed one man at Stewart, he was sent directly to the segregation unit for 29 days. His wife stated she believed he was put in segregation as punishment for talking to the ACLU. Detainees related a pattern of cases where detainees who complained about conditions were sent to segregation “to shut them up.”

Another serious area of concern cited by the ACLU is the lack of interpreters. Many detainees reported instances of not being able to communicate with ICE officers, facility staff or medical personnel. The ACLU reports that it is a common practice to have other detainees interpret.

Detainees at all the facilities complained of lack of access to legal information. At two of the facilities, all visits are “no contact,” meaning detainees and their attorneys must talk by phone, where conversations may be monitored or recorded. There were also reports of difficulty in obtaining access to law libraries at the facilities and the lack of adequate foreign language resources. At one facility, Atlanta City Detention Center, there was only one computer for 300 detainees.

None of the facilities allow contact visits for family and friends. All have limitations on the length of visits, in some cases as little as 30 minutes.

There were numerous complaints about housing conditions, including overcrowding, temperature extremes in the cells, and lack of access to recreation.

The ACLU documented instances of facilities running out of personal hygiene items and several occasions where the water stopped working, making it impossible to flush toilets or take showers. At one facility, women were not given new underwear, causing at least one female prisoner to get a serious infection.

Detainees expressed concern over both the quantity and quality of the food at each facility. There were complaints over the 15-hour interval between dinner and breakfast and the small portion sizes. Some detainees volunteered to work in the kitchen in order to get enough to eat, and one detainee reportedly lost 68 pounds.

Two detention facilities have voluntary work programs where detainees are paid \$1 to \$3 per day. At two other facilities there is no voluntary work program, but detainees must do chores such as cleaning and laundry without compensation.

A spokesperson for the CCA issued a blanket rejection of the report, calling it “An unfortunate example of the lack of seriousness with which ACLU lawyers approach the very real and practical challenges our nation faces in safely, humanely and cost effectively housing our immigrant population.”

The ACLU reports that CCA denied its staff access to parts of some facilities, including the segregation unit. At Stewart, the ACLU was not allowed to see the law library, which, the report notes, “makes it impossible to know if adequate due process protections are being provided to the detainees during their removal process.”

Click here to read the full report.



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