

More than 100 immigrants found locked in Houston, Texas house

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Police and federal immigration authorities found 108 immigrants locked in a squalid home in south Houston on Wednesday. The 93 males and 15 females, including children as young as five years old, came mostly from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, according to authorities. They had been held against their will for days in the small, single-story house with one bathroom, no hot water and little food.

The horrific discovery is an indictment of the immigration policies of the Obama administration, which continues to deport immigrants in unprecedented numbers. Undocumented immigrants and their children, seeking jobs and a better life in the US, become prey of smugglers and human traffickers as they seek entry across the Mexican border.

Houston police were contacted Tuesday evening by a frantic mother who said that an alleged “coyote,” who was paid to bring her 24-year-old daughter and her two small children across the border, had refused to release them until he was paid more money. According to Houston police spokesman John Cannon, the women called for help when the man failed to show up for the exchange.

Police began watching the home at around 10 a.m. Wednesday. It is unclear how the tip led police to the house. According to Cannon, when police opened the door to the home they found “a large, large group of people, some sitting on top of one another; very confined spaces.” They called out the young woman’s name, and she emerged with her seven-year-old daughter and five-year-old son.

The men were shoeless and clothed only in undergarments. Many of the women said they had been in the house for three or four days, while one women said she had been held for 15 days. The group of immigrants were surrounded by filth and trash bags of

old clothing piled high and reported to authorities that they were hungry, thirsty and tired.

Houston police have turned the investigation over to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE stated it was the largest group of immigrants held against their will in the Houston area in more than five years. In 2012, a house with 86 immigrants was found. Authorities said five men have been arrested in connection with the current incident.

The immigrants are presently being held at an immigration detention facility, where authorities plan to question, fingerprint, medically examine them and provide food. Two of the people, a man and a pregnant woman, have been taken to a hospital for unspecified treatment.

Having been “rescued” by authorities, the undocumented immigrants face the threat of imminent deportation. Houston, which lies about seven hours from the Mexican border, is a frequent transit point for those seeking entry to the US. ICE is active in the Houston area and throughout Texas, seeking to round up immigrants for detention and deportation.

ICE spokesman Greg Palmore told Fox News, “Houston is significant for the highway corridors that make up Houston, I-45 and I-40. With those two traffic corridors you can pan out anywhere in the United States.” He added that with the large Hispanic population in the area, “it’s very easy to assimilate into the communities here.”

On Monday, approximately 120 immigrants held at the Joe Corley Detention Facility in Conroe, Texas, about 40 miles north of Houston, began a hunger strike against conditions at the privately run prison. Earlier this month, detainees at Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington, began a similar action. Two prisoners reportedly remain on hunger strike in

Tacoma.

Both facilities are run by GEO Group, a for-profit prison company that operates 98 detention and incarceration centers around the world. Attorney Ellis Muñoz, who represents some of the hunger strikers and has visited the Texas detention center, told *Truthout* that the hunger strikers are demanding a halt to all deportations, just treatment, an end to overcrowding, an end to “double judgment” policies, adequate food and medical care, affordable phone calling prices and lower rates at the commissary.

So-called double judgment policies result in some documented immigrants being detained for prior offenses, despite having served out their sentences. One such program is the ICE’s Operation Cross Check, which utilizes crosschecking of various police databases to track down alleged offenders.

David Vasquez, who has been identified by authorities as one of the “leaders” of the hunger strike at the Conroe facility, is a victim of ICE’s double judgment policy. His wife, Adelina Caceres, told *Truthout* that he is being detained as a result of a prior charge he served time for years ago. “Why do they call him a criminal?” she asked. “He already paid for it. He made a big payment.... He was in jail for almost a month ... and now the law is making him go back and pay again. Why?”

According to attorney Muñoz, ICE officials have ordered Vasquez and another hunger striker to be isolated from the general prison population and placed into cells without blankets, pillows or toilet paper.

President Obama presided over the deportations of nearly 1.6 million immigrants during the first four years of his presidency and is on track to deport a record 2 million people by the end of 2014, surpassing the Bush administration’s record.

While ICE and the Obama administration claim that the majority of those deported are undocumented immigrants with dangerous criminal records, this is clearly not the case. In the 16-month period that ended last October, 48 percent of the 350,000 immigrants transferred to ICE from local jails had no criminal convictions or traffic violations.

The president met with Hispanic politicians last week, telling them he has ordered Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson to conduct a review of his administration’s immigration enforcement policy. He

has insisted, however, that he has no intention of suspending deportations. The proposed federal budget for fiscal year 2015 allots \$1.3 billion for 30,000 “detention beds” per day to hold immigrants.



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