

Government report details human rights violations at US immigration detention centers

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Following outcry from immigrants rights groups and complaints made to the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has recently investigated the conditions faced by over 40,000 immigrants detained each day in more than 200 immigration detention jails throughout the country.

The DHS published its findings in a report following unannounced visits to six ICE Detention facilities: Hudson County Jail (New Jersey), Laredo Processing Center (Texas), Otero County Processing Center (New Mexico), Santa Ana City Jail (California), Stewart Detention Center (Georgia), and the Theo Lacy Facility (California).

Despite its watered-down language, the DHS report, “Concerns about ICE Detainee Treatment and Care at Detention Facilities,” revealed rampant issues at both state- and county-run and private for-profit detention centers regarding inhumane treatment, lack of health, food, and safety provisions, as well as systemic practices which undermined the protection of detainees’ rights. Most detainees are charged with violation of immigration laws and are held in detention pending resolution of their cases and expedited deportation.

“The detention centers are living hells,” a California immigration attorney told the WSW. He wished to remain anonymous to prevent retaliation against his clients. “Diseases spread, guards post racist signs in Spanish for all to see, and even getting a call through to a detainee can take hours of Kafkaesque telephone transfers and dead-end operating boards. One day, this will be remembered as an episode as equally shameful as Japanese internment.”

DHS interviewed detainees as well as ICE and

detention facility workers including medical staff, grievance officers, and key oversight staff. They inspected intake processing areas, medical facilities, kitchens, dining facilities, residential areas, sleeping, showering, and bathroom facilities, legal services areas, recreational facilities, barbershops, and witnessed immigration proceedings and rights presentations.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the report was its findings that in many facilities detainees were incorrectly housed based on their criminal history, or housed before access to documentation could be ascertained, posing a potentially dangerous threat. High-risk criminal detainees had been housed with low-risk ones, the latter category comprised of those who had only broken immigration laws.

The report also found that many facilities failed to provide adequate language services, either denying access to interpreters, or posting policies in English only for many Spanish speakers.

The report also notes that facilities prevent immigrants from speaking to and understanding medical staff. “Staff did not always use language translation services, which are available by phone, during medical exams of detainees,” the report notes. “Some medical consent forms were not always available in Spanish, and staff did not always explain the English forms to non-English speaking detainees. As a result, detainees may not have been providing enough information about their medical conditions to ensure adequate medical treatment while in detention.”

The American Immigration Lawyers Association reports that violations of medical standards played a prominent role in eight deaths in immigration detention facilities from 2010 to 2012. The AILA reports that at

least 10 deaths have occurred so far in 2017.

The DHS report also noted severe issues with regard to food handling and safety, endangering the health of detainees. “We observed spoiled, wilted, and moldy produce and other food in kitchen refrigerators, as well as food past its expiration date. We also found expired frozen food, including meat, and thawing meat without labels indicating when it had begun thawing or the date by which it must be used.” ICE does not require detention facilities to abide by US Department of Agriculture food safety and handling protocols.

A common thread throughout the study was that administration at these facilities failed to keep records in order to cover its actions. Investigators reviewed electronic and paper medical files and grievance logs. It investigated the health, safety, and welfare requirements, the use of segregation, force, restraints, medical and mental health care, as well as translation and interpretation and the processes by which grievances were handled within facilities.

Inspectors often found grievances that, despite being submitted in the appropriate manner, had not been followed up thoroughly, or were collected only to sit untouched. “Some detainees reported that staff obstructed or delayed their grievances or intimidated them, through fear of retaliation, into not complaining. These deterrents may prevent detainees from filing grievances about serious concerns that should be addressed and resolved,” the report noted.

According to the report, staff often neglected to tell detainees why they were being segregated. Detainees were found to be held in “administrative segregation for extended periods of time without documented, periodic reviews that are required to justify continued segregation. Some detainees were locked down in their cells for violations of minor rules without required written notification of reasons for lock-down and appeal options.”

The horrific experience of US citizen Davino Watson, illegally held by ICE for three and half years, gives a glimpse into the outright negligence condoned by government officials.

Detention centers are ostensibly not intended to be places of “punishment,” though every indicator points to the similarly violent, unhealthy, and dehumanizing conditions found within US prisons. Since June there have been four hunger strikes at the private for-profit

Adelanto Detention Center facility in Southern California alone, which houses 1,900 detainees. The strikers’ demands include reduced bond, more time for religious services, paperwork in their native languages, higher quality food, clean water 24 hours a day, and better treatment from guards and staff.

Following a suicide by hanging in August 2017 at Adelanto, detainee Alexander Burgos Mejia, who was first on the scene, reported, “I think doing something like that is something that has crossed the mind of all of us who are locked up here.”

Legislation passed in 2009 required that ICE end contracts with facilities that failed two inspections in a row. However, not one ICE facility has been closed due to multiple failed inspections. The DHS report concludes with toothless recommendations to ICE that function only to provide a veneer of oversight.

Workers and students must advocate the formation of defense committees to protect their friends, families, and communities from the horrors of detention and deportation overseen by Obama and handed down seamlessly to Trump. Supported by both of the ruling parties, ICE is able to act with complete impunity as it subjects immigrants and refugees to conditions worse than those of livestock.



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