

# Immigrants endure inhuman conditions at ICE prison in New Jersey

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Under a service agreement with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Essex County Correctional Facility in Newark, New Jersey, has been detaining immigrant workers in shocking squalor.

A report by the US Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General (OIG) describes conscious, systematic violations and unsanitary conditions that compromise detainees' health and safety. This inhumane imprisonment is the product of the Obama and Trump administrations' bipartisan war on immigrants and assault on the working class.

The Essex County Correctional Facility can house as many as 928 male detainees. It has been holding immigrants awaiting deportation hearings for ICE since 2010. The report summarizes the findings of the OIG's unannounced inspection of the jail in July 2018.

The OIG observed an appalling lack of food safety at the jail. "The food handling, in general, was so substandard that ICE and facility leadership had the kitchen manager replaced during our inspection," according to the report.

Inspectors found raw, spoiled and expired meat in the kitchen. Refrigerators contained "open packages of raw chicken leaking blood all over" and "slimy, foul-smelling lunch meat, which appeared to be spoiled." Inspectors also observed kitchen staff serving these mishandled meats to detainees, potentially exposing them to *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, and *E. coli*. "During dinner service, we observed facility staff serving detainees hamburgers that were foul smelling and unrecognizable," said the inspectors.

In addition, kitchen management had hung a notice warning staff not to dispose of any bread. Kitchen workers told the inspectors that they routinely put all unused bread into trash bags and trash cans so that it could be made into bread pudding every two or three

weeks. Inspectors also found expired and moldy bread in refrigerators. These disgusting practices create the risk of allergic reactions, respiratory problems, and sickness among employees and detainees.

Detainees filed 200 kitchen-related grievances with the facility in the first seven months of 2018. They told inspectors that they repeatedly had been served meat that smelled and tasted bad. Some reported vomiting and having diarrhea after meals, which suggests that they had gotten food poisoning. One detainee said that a nurse had informed him that his stomach infection had been caused by the facility's food. Another detainee found the food so intolerable that he had started taking only liquids and was contemplating a hunger strike.

"Based on the substandard food safety and sanitation practices we observed, ICE cannot ensure detainee health at the Essex Facility," the report observed blandly.

The building itself is no more sanitary than the food. Every unit that houses detainees has ongoing leaks, some of which drip directly onto detainees' beds, according to the report. Inspectors observed several trash cans that had been placed to catch water leaking from the ceiling. These unrepaired leaks promote the growth of mold and mildew that can cause allergic reactions and persistent illnesses.

Facility staff also had failed to perform basic maintenance on the showers. Inspectors observed mildew and peeling paint in nearly every shower. Mold extended from the showers into the adjacent hallways.

Mattresses in the dormitories were so old and worn that detainees had tried to tie their seams together with bed sheets so that the stuffing would not come out. No detainee had a pillow. The mattresses had once had pillows sewn into them, but inspectors found them

“completely flat and dilapidated.” Guards are responsible for inspecting and replacing mattresses, but they told inspectors that they do not request new mattresses until detainees complain.

During the inspection, the OIG learned that a detainee had found a loaded handgun in a staff bathroom. The detainee had been cleaning the bathroom as part of a job for which he was paid \$1.50 per day and immediately notified guards about his discovery. A guard admitted to having left the handgun in the bathroom instead of storing it in his locker as ICE standards require.

Facility supervisors gave the guard a 90-day suspension, but later reduced the penalty to 45 days. Instead of interviewing the detainee about the incident, they warned him not to discuss it with anyone else. The official review of the incident made no mention of the detainee’s discovery of the weapon, and staff never notified ICE about the incident as they were required to do.

ICE stated that this was the fourth detainee-related incident in less than a year that the jail had failed to report. ICE previously had cited the Essex County prison for failing to report issues such as detainee fights and hospitalization for mental illness.

According to ICE standards, detainees must be provided outdoor recreation, but the Essex Facility does not have outdoor space. As a cruel and insulting alternative, supervisors installed large glass enclosures inside detainee living areas as recreation spaces. These enclosures are topped with mesh cages to allow fresh air into the building.

In 2010, ICE proposed building a soccer field at the jail, but it never followed through. ICE has never documented concerns about the Essex Facility’s failure to provide outdoor recreation, nor has it cited the prison for failing to meet its standards.

Officials at the Essex County Correctional Facility responded to the OIG report by pointing with pride to the accolades they have received. Director Al Ortiz noted in a statement that New Jersey has given the jail 100 percent compliance ratings for the past 10 years, and the facility has been accredited by the American Correctional Association. The authorities are thus on record declaring their satisfaction with the unconscionable conditions in which detainees are held.

Nevertheless, Ortiz pretended to take the OIG’s

scandalous observations seriously for the sake of appearances. “We understand the issues raised in the inspector general’s report and have taken steps to address and rectify the conditions,” he said. “We are proud of our proactive approach to meet the needs of our detainees and the high standards of care that we have set for our facility.” If the food in the jail is not enough to make detainees vomit, this statement certainly is.

ICE, for its part, conducts weekly inspections of the Essex Facility and has tacitly endorsed its operations. A spokesman for the agency declared that after the OIG’s unannounced inspection, the jail immediately improved its food storage practices, disinfected the housing units, and replaced the mattresses. ICE apparently expects the public to believe that its systemic, decade-long disregard for human health and dignity was instantly reversed with a snap of the fingers.

Conditions at the Essex Facility constitute torture, as defined by the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Yet the laissez-faire attitude of the jail’s management and of ICE, as well as the official approval granted by the state of New Jersey, show that the facility is operating exactly as intended.

Detaining immigrants in cruel and degrading conditions is part of the ruling elite’s attempt to dehumanize these workers. President Trump denounces immigrants as rapists, murderers and drug dealers, relentlessly beating the drum of national chauvinism and appealing to the most backward and bigoted sections of the population. He has illegally declared a national emergency to circumvent Congress and build a wall along the Mexican border to keep out workers fleeing the violence and instability that have resulted from decades of interventions by American imperialism in Latin America.



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