

Latest Office of Inspector General report reveals inhumane conditions at US immigrant detention centers

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A new report issued on Tuesday by the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) further exposed the horrid conditions which immigrants are being subjected to at facilities managed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

OIG inspectors visited five detention facilities and two ports of entry in the Rio Grande Valley sector during the week of June 10. Their purpose was to review the facilities' compliance with what the federal government refers to as TEDS standards, meaning Transport, Escort, Detention, and Search.

The report stated that from October of 2018 to May of 2019 the Rio Grande Valley sector—which the agency says experiences more migration than any other section of the border—saw apprehensions of migrants increase by 124 percent over the same period from 2017 to 2018. The largest increase was in family units, which grew from 36,773 to 135,812, or 269 percent. The number of children apprehended without their parents or an adult guardian—dubbed Unaccompanied Alien Children (UACs) in the agencies' jargon—increased by 62 percent, from 14,822 to 23,944 in the same eight-month period. The number of single adults apprehended grew from 48,240 to 63,507, an increase of 32 percent.

CBP at the time of the inspection was holding a total of 8,000 detainees across its Rio Grande Valley facilities. According to TEDS standards, detained migrants are to be held for no longer than 72 hours before being transferred to facilities managed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Detained children by law are required to be transferred into the custody of the Department of Health and

Human Services (HHS).

The report stated that of the 8,000 detainees, 3,400 had been held longer than 72 hours and 1,500 had been held for more than ten days. Among the 2,669 children being detained at the five facilities, 826 had been held longer than 72 hours. More than 50 of the total number were under the age of seven.

At three of the facilities inspected, children had no access to showers, and at two facilities they were not provided hot meals until the week of the inspection—they were fed cold bologna sandwiches instead. These children were also provided with few or no spare clothes, or access to laundry facilities.

Adults fared no better, with adults at one facility held in “standing room only conditions” for a full week. Others were crammed into cells with fellow detainees for more than a month at a time. Adult detainees were not provided with showers or changes of clothes. Instead, they were given wet wipes to clean themselves.

Photos attached to the report show that at the Fort Brown facility 51 women were held in a cell designed for 40, while 71 men were held in a cell with a maximum capacity of 41. Detainees have protested these conditions, in one instance clogging toilets with their blankets to flood the cells so that they might be temporarily released. This brought out CBP's “special operations team”—a gang of large and violent guards outfitted in tactical gear—to intimidate the rebelling detainees.

The report's authors had to terminate their inspection of one facility early “because our presence was agitating an already difficult situation. Specifically, when detainees observed us, they banged on the cell windows, shouted, pressed notes to the window with

their time in custody, and gestured to evidence of their time in custody (e.g. beards).”

According to TEDS standards agents are required to provide food in line with inmates’ religious or dietary restrictions but this was also ignored, with the bologna sandwiches they were left to eat instead causing constipation and other medical issues among inmates.

In a response from DHS appended to the OIG report the agency attributes the squalid conditions that migrants face to the increase in those seeking refuge: “In May of 2019, an average of over 4,600 people a day crossed our southern border illegally or arrived at ports of entry without proper documents. For comparison, in May 2017, that number was less than 700 a day. CBP total enforcement actions during May 2019 were 623 percent higher than in May 2017, and 206 percent higher than the May average over the past seven years (2012-2019).”

DHS cites as evidence of its attempts to relieve the overcrowding that from May through the end of July they will have completed three separate “soft-sided structures”—tents—capable of housing 500 migrants each.

The agency also claims that refugees are emboldened to cross the border illegally due to “legal and Judicial loopholes” that encourage migrants to make the treacherous journey across the border because of the “likelihood that families will not be detained during their immigration proceedings.” It concludes that “as more migrants become emboldened by these loopholes, CBP expects this influx to not only continue, but also to escalate.”

The DHS’ effort to justify the inhumane conditions it is holding detainees under is a warning. The inspections conducted by both the OIG and Congress were planned ahead of time, giving the agencies time to clean up and remove detainees who may have even more disturbing stories to tell. The true state of affairs within these prisons is more likely being withheld from the public.

From the report released by *ProPublica* this week detailing the participation of CBP members in a fascist Facebook group that celebrate the torture and humiliation of detainees, followed by the visit from a Congressional delegation to which CBP agents were openly hostile, there can be little doubt that members of ICE, CBP, and other agencies feel that they have support and backing at the highest levels of the state.

The conditions outlined in the report will only worsen in the coming months, as Trump has announced that he will order mass roundups targeting thousands of families following the Fourth of July holiday and has promised to remove “millions” from the country. As the cellblocks operated by ICE fill up with these detainees, the facilities operated by CBP will become even more dangerous and overcrowded.

With the latest exposures of the living conditions within facilities operated by DHS and ICE, the notion advanced by DHS in its response, that immigrants feel emboldened to cross the border illegally because they are confident that they will be treated lightly, is absurd.

The increasingly deadly position in which the Trump administration has placed migrants seeking better life was graphically illustrated last week when photos were published of the bodies of Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his young daughter Valeria, who had drowned trying to crossing the Rio Grande after being blocked from legally crossing into Texas. Yesterday, NPR reported that another child had likely died crossing the river, this time the two-year-old daughter of a Haitian refugee who entered the US through Mexico and reported she had lost the child while crossing the river.



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