

Southern Poverty Law Center report highlights abusive conditions in US immigration detention centers

Adam Mclean
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The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) released a report on Monday titled “Prison By Any Other Name: A Report on South Florida Detention Facilities” detailing the enormous growth in the detention of immigrants, the rise of the private detention center industry, and the abusive conditions immigrants face when detained in these facilities.

The report was based on a comprehensive study of four adult immigrant detention facilities in southern Florida, one operated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), two by county governments, and one by the GEO Group, one of the largest private prison companies in the US, which is also headquartered in south Florida.

There are approximately 2,000 immigrants detained in Florida on any given day, and over 55,000 in the US as a whole. That figure is up from 30,000 people per day five years ago. The SPLC report makes clear that conditions for immigrants in ICE custody, many of whom have not been convicted of a criminal offense, are no better than for an average American prison inmate.

The SPLC interviewed five percent of the inmates at the prisons they studied.

One inmate who contracted hepatitis—according to the inmate, from eating unwashed food—was not seen by a doctor until four months after arriving at ICE’s Krome Service Processing Center. At Monroe County Detention Center, an inmate discovered a friend who had a history of strokes dead one day in his cell, after he was denied a request to go the sick bay. After a female inmate at Glades County Detention Center was diagnosed with uterine cancer, she recounted that ICE did not schedule a follow-up appointment with a doctor

for almost a month. A gay inmate at GEO Group’s Broward Transitional Center was harassed for his sexuality to the point that he attempted suicide. “I don’t know what’s worse, this or death,” he said.

Such are the most egregious stories of the fraction of the inmates the SPLC spoke to. That such stories could be found at every facility the SPLC examined testifies to the prevalence of these conditions and the fact that they are the outcome of deliberate policies pursued by the Trump administration.

The report also reveals that preventative medical and dental care is near non-existent, and that in practice inmates rarely received anything more than ibuprofen or Tylenol to treat pain, and then only in cases of intense pain. Inmates with broken bones and cavities reported those painkillers being the full extent of their treatment.

Solitary confinement, acknowledged by the UN to be a form of torture, is a common practice used by ICE as a cure-all for inmates deemed to be problematic or uncooperative. Of those the SPLC spoke to, about one in five was or had previously been in solitary.

One Ron W. at Monroe County said that he had been in solitary confinement for 16 days for singing Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song”—which includes the lyric “Won’t you help to sing these songs of freedom?”—in the pill line. Akhil A., a Somali immigrant at Krome, was sent to solitary for nearly a week for having an extra water bottle.

The operation of private prisons for immigrants became an extremely lucrative venture with the inauguration of Trump. Housing one detainee costs on average \$280 per day. By diverting money away from the basic needs of the those detained, the owners of

private prisons are able to line their own pockets.

As Javier S., a detainee at Broward Transitional Center aptly put it, “The longer I am here, the more money they make. We know we are being deliberately delayed so they can make more money.” Estimates as to the average length of stay in one of these hellholes vary, but are typically put at just under two months, although some immigrants stay detained for years.

The stock prices of GEO Group and CoreCivic doubled in the aftermath of Trump’s election. George Zoley, the CEO of GEO Group, had an estimated net worth of \$44 million as of November 2018, about half of which was in stock. Both GEO Group and CoreCivic donated significant sums to Trump’s 2016 presidential election campaign.

Those in county custody also take part in a “voluntary work program.” While inmates nominally earn as little as \$1 per day—the justification for the low figure is that inmates are nominally paying in part for their own incarceration—those detained by ICE staying in county prisons report earning less. Some work in what Monroe inmates called a “Trustee” program in which they received no wages whatsoever, but instead received preferential treatment from the guards, such as extra food, or having their cells unlocked during lockdowns.

Other recent developments corroborate the SPLC report. It comes on the heels of the publishing by ProPublica of security camera footage exposing ICE’s negligence in and coverup of the death of a Guatemalan teenager earlier this year. Several days after the SPLC’s report was published, a leaked internal ICE memo surfaced which catalogs 17 cases in which ICE failed to provide basic medical care to detainees, typically resulting in either death, suicide or some other ghastly medical condition.

The reports of the inhuman treatment of immigrants languishing in ICE prisons is an indictment of the Trump administration, which has been deliberately and openly stoking xenophobia and promoting the most backwards elements of society to provide the basis for a fascist movement.

It is also an indictment of the Democrats who in June justified voting to fund ICE to the tune of \$4.6 billion on the specious grounds that it would, in the words of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, “get resources to the children fastest.” Needless to say, not a penny has gone “to the children,” let alone to any immigrant abused in

a detention center. Rather than impeaching Trump for his criminal attacks on immigrants the Democrats are focused solely on questions of foreign policy in relation to Russia leaving the president and his fascist advisors to continue their unrelenting war on immigrants.



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