

Concerns spread over inevitable outbreak of coronavirus in US immigrant detention centers

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The stark reality of the COVID-19 outbreak was made clear Wednesday, with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it to be a global pandemic. Concerns are growing over the potential of the virus to spread rapidly throughout the United States, including in its immigrant detention centers where men, women and children are held in substandard and unsanitary conditions.

Doctors are warning that without immediate, emergency intervention the spread of the coronavirus is inevitable among those detained in the network of facilities run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and private companies contracted by the federal government. The United States' detention centers are infamous for their overcrowding and medical negligence, an environment favorable to the spread of infectious disease.

Multiple reports have revealed severe risks within the network of prisons used to house immigrants, which would facilitate the spread of coronavirus. In the facilities, clean water and soap are not guaranteed, making it difficult to follow the most basic preventive measures against infection.

Dr. Ranit Mishori, senior medical adviser at the Physicians for Human Rights, told the *Guardian* that under such conditions it was only a matter of time before the coronavirus infiltrated prisons and detention centers.

“Looking at what has been happening in immigration detention centers, it doesn’t inspire much confidence in me,” Mishori said.

“We know there have been cases of medical negligence, of lack of access or reduced access to care,

we’ve heard stories about a lack of basic hygiene measures so, no soap, no hand sanitizer,” Mishori noted. “And all these things are important to prevent the transmission of any infectious disease.”

ICE has a troubling record on the handling of infectious diseases. From September 2018 to August 2019, five cases of mumps in detention centers grew to nearly 900 among detainees and staff. In December, officials prevented doctors from giving flu vaccinations to detained children after at least three died in custody from complications of the flu.

Migrant rights advocacy groups have called for the immediate release of detainees who are at high risk from the coronavirus. In a letter sent to ICE on Monday, the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, and Columbia Legal Services requested that ICE release on parole any detainees older than 60, or who are pregnant, or who have underlying health conditions.

Seattle has been an epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the US, with at least 22 deaths and 190 cases. ICE’s Northwest detention center houses more than 1,500 immigrants. It is unclear how many in the facility may be at high risk and ICE has provided no indication that it is considering the release of any detainees.

The GEO Group, a for-profit corporation that runs the detention facility, said Tuesday it has not had any confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the jail. The company declined to say how many detainees or staff had shown symptoms or been tested.

In an emailed statement, ICE similarly stated that it had no confirmed cases and that the agency is following guidelines from the Centers for Disease

Control in terms of when detainees and staff should be tested. ICE said that four detainees had met those criteria as of March 3, and staff are being provided protection equipment such as masks.

Those at high-risk can be kept together in units, the agency said. “The CDC advises self-monitoring at home for people in the community who meet epidemiologic risk criteria, and who do not have fever or symptoms of respiratory illness. In detention settings, cohorting serves as an alternative to self-monitoring at home.”

ICE has left attorneys, advocates, and more than 50,000 daily detainees in the dark about what protocols, if any, it has adopted in response to the coronavirus crisis.

Last month, after an ICE detainee was admitted to a hospital in California for coronavirus testing, ICE said in a statement that it was screening all detainees for infection within 24 hours of their arrival at detention facilities. The agency did not describe its process for screening immigrants or whether immigrants were being tested for COVID-19, nor did it say how any detainee sick with the virus might be treated.

An ongoing quarantine in an immigration detention center in South Florida has also raised questions about the agency's preparedness for an outbreak.

Several immigrants detained at Glades County Detention Center are being isolated in a special ward and barred from receiving visitors or eating with other immigrants in the facility. Last week, an unknown number of those quarantined that displayed “flu-like” symptoms were allegedly sent to a hospital to undergo testing for coronavirus.

Heriberto Hernandez, an immigration lawyer representing Isaac Santos-Mojica, one of the quarantined detainees, has been providing updates from within the facility. Santos-Mojica was placed under quarantine more than a week ago and said he had no idea when it will end.

“Detainees are essentially held hostage to any disease that might be spreading around the facility,” Hernandez told local news. “I’ve stopped shaking hands with my clients, unfortunately. I don’t want to take any risks, especially now.”

In addition to serious health concerns, experts also fear that the outbreak could threaten detainees’ legal rights. Concerns over the disease’s spread could be

used to further isolate detainees and prevent them from meeting with attorneys or advocacy groups. In the event that court hearings are held remotely, trouble with video feed or translations could present serious challenges as well.

Immigrants are among the most vulnerable layers in US society. Crowded into prisons or constantly in fear of being deported if they report a suspected infection to a doctor, the immigrant population is at high risk of being devastated by the spread of the coronavirus. This further exposes the criminal response of the Trump administration, which has used the outbreak to spout xenophobia and virulent nationalism and left the US healthcare system woefully unprepared to confront the pandemic.



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