

# California ICE detainee speaks to the WSWS as coronavirus spreads

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Tens of thousands of immigrant detainees have passed through California's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Processing Centers in recent months. Some are detained when crossing the border, while others, like Jorge, a father in his 50s, lived in the US for decades before being swept up in an ICE raid or a routine traffic stop.

Originally from El Salvador, Jorge lived with his family in California before being arrested during a traffic stop. Though he has lived in the US since he was young, he has spent the last two years of his life in ICE detention facilities. His future and that of his children, who are US citizens, hang in the balance.

The detention facility where Jorge is detained has done next to nothing to protect detainees against the virus, which is taking a deadly toll on the areas surrounding the center.

"We started telling the guards 'forget the deportation, we are just going to die in here.' We are stuck here with inadequate medical care. They are not equipped. All they are going to do is lock the doors."

He explained, "'For weeks guards told us they would provide gloves, masks, cleaning supplies, but it was only within the last week that they began handing out masks. They aren't providing gloves and alcohol wipes. Even the cleaning supplies are insufficient. The disinfectant they give us to clean with is only 30 percent disinfectant and 70 percent water. Everyone is afraid that the chemicals are not strong enough to kill the virus and keep us safe. We are so stressed out in here."

The facility is dirty, and detainees are placed in very close confines with one another, with little attention to social distancing requirements. Food products and waste are strewn about in the dining area, and detainees are forced to sit next to each other.

"We had heard in some facilities dozens of detainees and guards had contracted COVID-19, and then measures were taken to depopulate. But why do we have to get to that situation?" he asked.

Despite the fact that detention centers are petri dishes waiting for the virus to bloom, Jorge noted, "The population is decreasing at my facility, not because they are releasing people, but they are moving them and carrying out deportations on flights to Haiti, Uganda, and Central America."

Jorge's first year detained was spent at a different facility, where he was locked in a tiny two-man cell for 23 hours a day.

In 2019 Jorge was transferred to his present facility and was among a diverse immigrant population. Some have lived in the US for decades with careers, mortgages, families, and children. Others were caught in the desert making their way back to the US for a second or third try. Some were first generation immigrants fleeing extortion, death threats, or poverty.

"The suffering goes well beyond those of us who are detained.

When I got picked up a few years ago and lost my job, my children lost their medical coverage. My son has serious underlying health problems, and he really suffered physically and mentally as a result."

The facility where Jorge is detained is well known for its abuses, including denial of medical and dental care, the use of punishing confinement prior to conclusive rulings on allegations of inmate infractions, and inmate suicides.

Jorge described the already inadequate medical facilities at the detention center, causing grave concern to detainees as the pandemic unfolds. "They don't have any real medical facilities, and it takes forever to be seen. You have to be so sick for them to even see you.

"These are already the conditions, and then the coronavirus hit. On top of that there are many who are really sick. There are a lot of elderly. Some have heart murmurs, kidney issues, and hepatitis."

ICE has begun directing field offices nationwide to assess custody of anyone over 60, as well as detainees with chronic illnesses that compromise their immune systems. The moves to lower the numbers of detainees in facilities is not for health concerns but are made to dissolve ICE of any liability for death or the contracting of the virus in its facility.

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, all visits from family members have been cancelled, and all sports and recreation activities have been suspended. "We are so stressed out in here. Many of the timetables have been changed and staggered or are simply running late because they are short staffed. We live by a clock, and it was hard to have dinner pushed two or three hours when they conditioned us to be hungry at a certain time."

According to ICE, the total national detained population has "dropped by more than 4,000 individuals since March 1, 2020 with a more than 60 percent decrease in book-ins when compared to this time last year."

Despite the numbers provided by ICE that would lead the public to believe they are releasing large numbers of detainees to their families, Jorge noted, "They are deporting people to other states and shipping them off."

The Trump administration has been pushing its aggressive anti-immigration agenda, deporting thousands of people to their home countries, including many who are sick with the virus.

According to agency records, in March ICE completed 17,965 removals. Guatemalan authorities have charged that Washington is sending infected people in large numbers to Central America. A total of 95 unaccompanied minors traveling without their parents were deported to Guatemala in March, a figure that is up 500 percent from 16 in January, according to the Guatemalan government. So far a total of 92 have been deported to Guatemala during the first half of April.

Guatemalan officials have put the number of coronavirus-positive deported immigrants between 30 and 43, most of them appear to have arrived aboard two flights, on March 26 from Mesa, Arizona and on April 20 from Brownsville, Texas.

Last week, Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei said that several community councils in Quetzaltenango in the western highlands of the country were making plans to burn down a government building where 80 deportees were being quarantined, fearing that the deportees posed a health threat to the community. "They wanted to burn the people," Giammattei said.

Jorge said he was afraid to be deported and become one of the many deportees who end up killed after landing in a foreign country. He described a friend who was deported, a 29-year-old father who had two children, four and nine years old.

"After he arrived in Honduras he planned to make a U-turn and come back, cross the border to reunite with his family and get a job in construction, join a union and get benefits for his children. He told his kids he'd be away for a while but would make his way home and celebrate all the birthdays missed. His family had sent him a bit of money to help with the journey back.

"A local gang where he landed knew he was from the US. He spoke differently, dressed differently, walked differently. You stick out. The newspaper stated that it was a robbery gone wrong. They robbed him and cut off his arm when he protested. To make an example of him they shot him in the head three times and left him in the street for all to see if you protest... This kid was trying to turn his life around. He was different. He played soccer, kept away from the bad crowds, hung out with us older guys, and had different conversations.

"Things are so brutal in Central America. The way this kid died was horrible. Many of us are worried about ending up like this, ending up another statistic."

Jorge's parents brought him to the US fleeing the civil war in El Salvador when he was young. He is afraid of being sent to the country which has the highest murder rate in the world. "It's impossible for the guys who get deported there. You're an outsider. The government won't give you a job because you're a deportee, you have no status, no education. Maybe at best you can work in customer service. That's if you don't run into trouble with locals."

He described the stress that weighed on his mind and the minds of the men in ICE custody. "Not only are you worried about what is going to happen when you are deported, but you are constantly worried about your family, how you could be helping them.

"I met an older guy who had been in the US for decades. He was a really nice man, had a family and a mortgage out there. He was so worried about his family and mortgage he couldn't sleep. He begged medical for sleeping pills and ended up given psychiatric medication when all he needed was help getting to sleep. The pills caused a seizure, and he was taken out on a stretcher. He had only been there a short while so none of us got to know him and get his contacts, so we never found out if he lived or died, but we never saw him again."

A wave of hunger strikes and sit-in protests continue to spread throughout US immigrant detention centers across California and beyond in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The crowded facilities detain over 55,000 people and, like the US prison system, are proving to be epicenters of the deadly disease.

Petitions and protests for protection are circulating in facilities throughout California and the US.

At the Mesa Verde detention center, detainees wrote a petition declaring, "Many of us have underlying medical issues from asthma,

diabetes, tuberculosis, and valley fever to heart issues like Ahn [a detainee], who is 75 and suffered a heart attack last week. This will turn our detention into a death sentence because this pandemic requires social distancing, and that is impossible in this environment."

The Mesa Verde detention center is owned and operated by the GEO Group, which runs close to 50 private prisons and detention centers around the country.

The Otay Mesa detention center in San Diego, California owned by CoreCivic, also began hunger strikes this past month following revelations that dozens of detainees and staff tested positive for COVID-19. As of Friday, April 24, a staggering 111 people in custody, 17 CoreCivic staff, and eight medical staff have tested positive for COVID-19.

This last week the McFarland Planning Commission agreed to allow GEO Group to expand nearby Adelanto Detention Center, another detention center located in the High Desert east of Los Angeles, to add 750 beds in addition to the 1,940 already at Adelanto. Initially, GEO was denied after community outcry protesting the potential expansion in a February meeting. After firing a planning commissioner JayShawn Johnson, who raised opposition and suggested illegal backroom deals between the City of Adelanto, the remainder of the McFarland Planning Commission and GEO group were able take advantage of social distancing and a stay-at-home order and pass the measure to expand the facility.

"There's a lot of time in there to think about things, the way these companies profit from us," Jorge said. "The private prison companies and the government make billions of dollars off us. We have committed no crime. That kind of talk can affect people differently. It may be harmful for some to think about, but I've always been interested in deeper issues.

"Recently we watched this movie *Free State of Jones*," he added. "I related to that whole movie ... and felt just like the black slave escaping." Afterwards me and a bunch of guys had a really good discussion about it. I'm Latino, but the group I hung around they were from all over. We had guys from Haiti, Uganda, a Canadian guy originally from Iran, and even a guy from Seychelles, an island off the coast of Madagascar.

"I've learned a lot about the world in there. I was even learning Armenian. Just think of it, when this is all over, I can walk into a restaurant and say, 'hello, how are you?' They'll be surprised to see a Latino guy with tattoos speaking Armenian.

"Some Armenian guys were teaching me. They said once we're out they'll invite me to their place for dinner with them. They taught me there's nothing more humbling than inviting another to your table. All the guys in there, we are all normal Joes. Many of us worked in office jobs, restaurants or construction."

As of April 11, ICE claimed it had released more than 160 people and identified nearly 600 detainees who were suffering from severe health issues. The fact that hundreds are slated for release points to the fact that the detained immigrants, like so many of the two million in the US jail and prison system, are detained for punitive and profit-driven measures and have never posed any threat to society.



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