

Deaths in ICE custody rise as pandemic rages across the United States

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) reported last week the deaths of two men in custody in detention centers in Louisiana and Florida. While reports regarding the cause of death are still pending, one of the men who died, 51-year-old Onuval Perez-Montufa, who originally hailed from Mexico, had tested positive for COVID-19 two weeks prior. The second victim, Luis Sanchez-Perez from Guatemala was pronounced dead at Ochsner LSU Monroe Medical Center in northern Louisiana where he had been receiving inpatient care since February 26.

Perez-Montufa, who had been held in ICE custody since mid-June, was taken to a Palm Beach, Florida hospital on July 1 after he had complained about shortness of breath. He remained in the hospital after being diagnosed with COVID-19.

Meanwhile, Sanchez-Perez had been hospitalized since February 26th, and though hospital staff ruled the preliminary cause of death to be “septic shock leading to cardiopulmonary arrest,” there have been no detailed reports of what might have caused the hospitalization or contributed to the septic shock.

The deaths of these two men are only the latest official reports of casualties among ICE detainees, as the pandemic rages across the United States. The last reported case was that of Santiago Baten-Oxlaj, who died of COVID-19-related complications on May 24. Baten-Oxlaj, a 34-year-old worker from Guatemala, had been held in the Stewart Detention Facility in Lumpkin, Georgia since early March, and had been admitted to the hospital in mid-April for treatment of “decreased oxygen saturation levels.”

According to ICE, the agency has been taking all necessary precautions to ensure the safety of those held in its detention centers around the country. The federal agency boasts that high-level experts are monitoring

“best practices” and “issuing guidelines” on how to separate vulnerable populations and screen those entering the various facilities. These claims are hard to believe, given the well-publicized and highly unsanitary conditions in the detention centers prior to the pandemic, as well as what has been disclosed by immigrant advocates and former detainees over the past few months.

On May 6, Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejia, 57, became the first ICE detainee to die of COVID-19-related complications. Escobar Mejia, who had a history of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart problems and an amputated foot, had been complaining about feeling sick for weeks prior to his death. However, officials at the Otay Mesa detention center outside San Diego, California gave no urgent attention to his situation. Other detainees from Otay Mesa spoke of continued unsanitary conditions, even as the pandemic took root. Neither guards nor detainees were provided masks, and as new inmates kept being processed, keeping a safe distance became an impossibility.

Speaking to the *Guardian* in the aftermath of Escobar Mejia’s death, former detainees disclosed the callousness of ICE officials and guards in dismissing the health concerns of detainees, including many who showed symptoms of COVID-19. Briana, a 25-year-old migrant from Honduras, released in April, told reporters: “They didn’t care. People were detained in there like animals.”

The Trump administration now claims that there are slightly over 850 cases of COVID-19, among the nearly 23,000 detainees currently held by ICE.

However, the Otay Mesa situation should put these numbers in perspective. At the time of Escobar Mejia’s death in early May, Otay Mesa had 144 confirmed COVID-19 cases among its roughly 630 detainees, by

far the most of any ICE facility. What is truly frightening is that only 181 detainees had been tested for the virus.

As of May 16, when ICE reported that 1,201 immigrants in its custody had tested positive for COVID-19, only 2,394 had been tested. Given the paucity of testing among the detainees it is highly likely that the numbers of infected is significantly under-reported.

As early as March, immigrant rights advocates pointed out that the conditions in ICE detention centers made the risk of a deadly outbreak among the inmate population highly likely. Their calls for the release of at least the most vulnerable populations have been supported by federal judges across the country. As US District Judge Judith Levy noted in her order freeing two immigrants from an ICE detention center in May: “COVID-19 does not respect prison walls. The raging global pandemic outside of Calhoun County Correctional Facility and a confirmed case within the facility pose a serious risk to those inside.”

In the past few months, ICE has claimed that it has released over 900 detainees, bringing its detention numbers to the lowest they have been in many years. However, these court ordered moves have not addressed the fact that thousands of men and women—a majority of whom have not committed any serious crimes—are still being held in conditions that heighten their susceptibility to a highly infectious and dangerous disease. At a time when coronavirus cases are increasing at an alarming rate around the country and existing public health services are already being stretched to the breaking point, this situation is nothing short of criminal.



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