

Despite severe overcrowding and rising death totals, ICE continues to pack immigrants in holding cells, concentration camps

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At least 53 immigrants have died in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) since Donald Trump returned to the White House 18 months ago, an unprecedented death toll produced by the deliberate overcrowding of holding cells and detention centers, the denial of medical care and the transformation of immigration detention into a sprawling system of for-profit concentration camps.

Fifty-two of the deaths occurred during the administration's first 500 days, according to a June report by Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights. The organizations found that the mortality rate in ICE custody has more than doubled since Trump's return and is now nearly four times what it was under the Biden administration.

Since the report's June 4 cutoff, 45-year-old Venezuelan immigrant Jesús Manuel Arenas-Silva died while being transported between ICE detention centers in Georgia. His family said immigration officials had repeatedly denied him necessary medication. He was the 22nd immigrant reported dead in ICE custody during the first seven months of 2026.

The deadly conditions documented by Human Rights Watch are not confined to the network of massive detention centers and private prisons. A *Washington Post* investigation published Wednesday revealed that the Trump administration is also cramming thousands of immigrants into temporary holding rooms wholly unequipped for prolonged detention.

The report is based on records supplied by ICE to the Deportation Data Project, a research initiative at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, Los Angeles. The data show that the average number of people confined in ICE's 177 temporary holding rooms skyrocketed from fewer than 500 under the Biden administration to more than 1,500 in 2026.

These rooms were designed to hold people for only a few hours while they are processed. Workers and their family members are now being imprisoned in them for days or even weeks.

Conditions inside are predictably abhorrent. The rooms have no showers, forcing detainees to languish in filth for days on end. They have no beds. Those imprisoned in what are essentially windowless rooms furnished only with benches must sleep sitting upright, often with nothing more than a foil blanket.

Leaked cellphone footage from 26 Federal Plaza in New York

City showed dozens of men crammed into a room containing only three toilets. Based on the footage and statements from detainees, the *Post* estimated that during the first four days of June 2025, the population of one holding room jumped from approximately eight people to 86. The room reeked of sweat, feces and urine.

In court filings and public statements, former detainees have described lack of medical care and substandard or nonexistent food. Even the Trump administration has admitted in court that people confined in these rooms are not always provided three meals a day.

The *Post* reported on Daniel Quevedo Silva, a Venezuelan immigrant who was kidnapped by ICE after leaving a court hearing at 26 Federal Plaza on June 25, 2025. He was confined for nine days with more than 70 other men in a square holding room measuring roughly 30 feet (9 meters) on each side. The cell had hard floors, concrete benches and only three metal toilets.

"There were not enough toilets, and there were no beds; we slept on the floor. The officers gave us aluminum-type blankets, but I was freezing the entire time. ... I felt horrible. I did not know what was going to happen," Silva testified in court.

Oscar Pascual Lopez, another person held at the facility, testified in court he developed a fever while held at 26 Federal Plaza but was refused medical care. "I did not get any medical help at 26 Federal Plaza. ... I saw people who were sick, with a cold or the flu and stomach pains. ... It was clear to me that it was not possible to get medical care."

Emails obtained by the *Post* through the Freedom of Information Act reveal that ICE officials knew the conditions they were inflicting were dangerous and potentially deadly.

"We desperately need to get some detainees out of 26 fed," Carla Calidonio, an ICE assistant field director, wrote in a June 14 email concerning conditions inside 26 Federal Plaza.

"We have had multiple hospital stays this week," ICE Assistant Field Director Nancy Zanello wrote in a July 11 email. 26 Federal Plaza had no doctors on site and all other medical staff left the facility every night by 9:30 p.m., according to ICE.

"Hopefully we don't wait until something negative happens," Lige Hampton, an ICE supervisory detention and deportation officer, warned in an August 7 email.

Despite these warnings, the mass detentions continued.

The Trump administration has defended imprisoning people in

rooms without adequate medical care, access to lawyers, showers or edible food by claiming that it lacks sufficient space to hold the thousands being kidnapped by its immigration Gestapo. In other words, the administration cites the scale of its own mass deportation operation as justification for subjecting its victims to conditions known to endanger their health and lives.

Following the federal occupations of Chicago, Los Angeles and Minneapolis, immigrants, and in some cases protesters, were seized by ICE thugs and confined inside federal buildings for hours or days. Family members, friends and lawyers were frequently given no information about where their loved ones or clients had been taken.

The same policy is being carried out on an even larger scale at Camp East Montana, the country's largest immigration concentration camp. Located on the grounds of Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas, the camp can imprison up to 5,000 people in five so-called "soft-sided" structures—large canvas tents divided into cell-like pods.

A joint report issued last week by Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union begins with the testimony of Javier C., who was interviewed at Fort Bliss in December 2025.

"I have never felt racism the way I have felt it inside this camp. When I first got here the guards told me, 'When you get to El Paso, Texas, there's no going back. You're only getting out deported or dead.'"

The statement expresses the backward and brutal character not only of ICE but of the Trump administration and the American ruling class it serves.

During World War II, the Democratic administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt used Fort Bliss as one of several Texas military bases for the incarceration of people of Japanese descent, along with German and Italian immigrants. In 2021, the Biden administration used the same base to detain unaccompanied children who had crossed the US-Mexico border.

Then as now, thousands were imprisoned on a military base because of their nationality or immigration status. Camp East Montana is also home to the headquarters of the U.S. Army's 1st Armored Division, further erasing the line between military operations abroad and police state repression within the United States.

Immigrants are forced to live for months inside canvas tents in the El Paso desert. The temperature reached 98 degrees Fahrenheit (36.6 degrees C) on Wednesday and is forecast to climb to 104 degrees (40 degrees C) on Thursday and 106 degrees (41 degrees C) Friday.

Based on interviews with detainees, Human Rights Watch and the ACLU concluded that conditions at the camp amounted to "enforced disappearance, cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment, excessive use of force including one extrajudicial killing, life-threatening medical neglect, barriers to legal representation, and coercive third-country removals."

In "interview after interview," detainees reported being "beaten by guards, denied necessary medical care, and prevented from contacting family members or lawyers." One woman was denied

emergency treatment and now risks permanently losing her eyesight. Another man said guards groped his testicles while beating him and arbitrarily placed him in solitary confinement.

Detainees described overcrowded housing areas, bathrooms covered in feces and urine, and living quarters flooded with filthy water and dust. The failure to clean the pods, provide adequate ventilation or distribute basic hygiene supplies, including soap and hand sanitizer, has produced infections and other illnesses.

These conditions are deliberately employed to terrorize immigrants into abandoning their legal cases and accepting deportation. At least 50 detainees told investigators that the government used violence, threats and deception to pressure them into giving up their immigration claims. Guards threatened immigrants with indefinite imprisonment or deportation to countries where they had never lived and could face persecution, torture or death.

Between August 2025 and early March 2026, the Department of Homeland Security transferred nearly 1,350 people from Camp East Montana to Mexico, including immigrants from countries other than Mexico. Human Rights Watch documented cases in which shackled Cuban and Venezuelan immigrants were taken to the border in secret and ordered to cross without deportation orders or hearings.

One Cuban immigrant recalled being told: "Your country won't take you; leave now or we'll lock you up for life." Those who resisted were threatened with criminal charges and, in some cases, beaten by guards.

The defense of immigrants and democratic rights is therefore a class question. It cannot be entrusted to the Democratic Party, which built and funded the deportation apparatus now wielded by Trump, or to the courts and politicians responsible for legitimizing it.

Workers of the world have no country. Workers have a right to live and work in the country of their choice, with full citizenship and democratic rights. The immigration concentration camps must be abolished through the independent political mobilization of the international working class against capitalism and its historically outmoded nation-state system.



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