



How Expanded Migrant Detention Drives Profiteering and Leads to Tougher Immigration Policies

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The United States has the largest immigration detention system in the world, with the current capacity to hold 40,000 immigrants per day. In order to act on President Donald Trump's promised "mass deportations", his second administration has announced plans to more than double detention capacity. Our research suggests that such expansions, past and present, prove extremely difficult to roll back. Once the infrastructure is in place, many companies, local governments, and individuals gain a stake in the continued detention of immigrants. More detention capacity, in short, creates incentives to institute even harsher enforcement practices to keep the detention centers filled.

Increasing Detention Despite Widespread Abuses, Debunked Rationales, and Profiteering

U.S. detention capacity has increased steadily since the late 1980s, regardless of the political party in power. Political rhetoric provokes fear and distrust of immigrants, leading to laws that criminalize immigrants while fueling electoral success. Policymakers have also embraced the idea that detention, more than simply serving a temporary holding purpose, deters future migration. Whereas detention and other punitive measures may slow migration in the short term, in the long term claims of deterrence do not bear out. Expansions of detention capacity are not, therefore, a necessary or effective response to undocumented immigration.

After the terrorist attacks of 2001, laws passed under President George H.W. Bush significantly increased the use of detention. During the administration of President Barack Obama, "guaranteed minimum" contracts and annual "detention bed quotas" were written into yearly funding bills, requiring the development of a permanent detention capacity of at least 34,000. In President Donald Trump's first administration, when unauthorized crossings of the U.S.-Mexico border had actually decreased, detention capacity ballooned to over 52,000 through "emergency" contracting practices that allowed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to bypass routine licensing and safety procedures, and use temporary facilities like poorly adapted warehouses and tent structures.

After the COVID-19 pandemic hit prisons and detention centers especially hard, the daily detention population reached a low of around 13,000 in April 2020. But as the pandemic subsided and the number of arriving migrants increased—and amid attacks on President Joseph Biden's policies as the presidential race against Trump escalated—the Biden administration tried to demonstrate control of the border. Biden's "crack down" included caps on asylum seeker arrivals, expanded use of tech-focused "alternatives to detention", and filling existing detention centers again. The detention population climbed to nearly 40,000 in the fall of 2024, with

plans to further increase permanent detention capacity.

The federal government currently pays around \$150 per day for each adult immigrant detainee, and \$315 per person in family detention. The detention budget for fiscal year 2024 was \$3.4 billion. Around 120 facilities around the United States detain immigrants for ICE. Currently, over 90 percent of detention “beds” are contracted to private companies aiming to make a profit. As a result, private prison corporations regard immigration detention as an area of growth, lobbying for tougher enforcement practices that lead to more detention. The remaining facilities are operated by county and state governments that view detention as a critical boost to local budgets.

Additionally, an expansive network of companies and individuals has become financially involved in detention. Detention centers rely on a vast array of private companies for routine operations. Contracts are awarded for food provision, medical treatment, transportation, and security. Commissaries charge detainees inflated prices for food items, toiletries, clothing, and over the counter medications. All of these industries and their employees become financially interested in ongoing detention practices.

Facility operators reduce their costs and increase profits by running detainee labor programs, employing detainees in jobs vital to the operation of the facility. Detainee workers may do cleaning, laundry, maintenance, and kitchen work, in exchange for \$1 per day—which they then spend in the commissaries or to make phone calls.

The involvement of so many companies, local governments, and individuals in the business of detention not only creates vested interests in continuing the system, but also harms detainees’ safety, health, and human rights. Detainees often receive inadequate food and medical care, leading to sickness and even death. Although there are guidelines intended to protect detainees, efforts to enforce existing standards have been weak. At the same time, the routine use of detention immunizes staff and the broader public to moral concerns, and normalizes the imprisonment of migrants.

Plans to Dangerously Expand the Detention System

During his 2024 campaign, President Donald Trump intensified his hyperbolic rhetoric about a border crisis and repeatedly described immigrants as “invaders” and “terrorists,” claiming that all undocumented immigrants are “criminals.” A central pillar of this campaign was his call for “mass deportation”, and from day one of his second term, appointees and cabinet members have acted swiftly to make good on that call. This includes revoking prohibitions on ICE agents entering sensitive locations such as schools, hospitals, and churches; setting new arrest quotas for all ICE field offices; threatening to prosecute any officials who refuse to cooperate with ICE; using military planes to transport deportees; and promising heavy tariffs against any countries who hesitate to accept deportees.

Enacting Trump’s deportation plans will involve a substantial increase in detention capacity. ICE documents indicate plans to increase capacity by over 50,000, with four massive 10,000 bed detention facilities, plus 14 smaller facilities. In addition, the administration announced plans to detain migrants on military bases, including establishing a 30,000 bed facility on the Guantanamo Bay military base in Cuba. It is likely that such aggressive capacity expansion will entail heavy use of private operators, inadequate facilities, inadequate care, poorly trained personnel, abuse of detainees’ human rights, and weak oversight.

Policy Alternatives

Ineffective and riddled with abuse and rights violations, immigration detention is extremely costly to the federal government. But it is lucrative for private companies, local governments, and individual employees. Many stakeholders become financially dependent so that once detention capacity is expanded, it is almost never reversed.

Decreasing profit margins for detention contractors will make the business of locking up immigrants less attractive, which will lead to a decrease in lobbying for policies that lead to more detention. ICE should reduce contracting with private companies and local governments, to prevent creating vested interests in this ineffective approach. Standards of appropriate care and operation should be closely monitored and enforced. All companies involved in operating and serving detention facilities, as well as shareholders who invest for financial gain, should be held responsible for violations. Detained immigrants should be paid competitive wages for any work they do. Litigation remains an important tool to fight abusive and inadequate conditions for detainees.

The long-term strategy must be to end detention at the national scale, through networking and campaigning across state lines for legislative action. Effective, sustainable policy alternatives will reject detention as an economic opportunity and center the development of alternative strategies for community and economic development.

Read more in Deirdre Conlon and Nancy Hiemstra, "Examining the Everyday Micro-Economies of Immigrant Detention in the United States." *Geographica Helvetica* 69 (2014): 335-344.