



THE DETAINEES

Deaths in custody. Sexual violence. Hunger strikes. What we uncovered inside ICE facilities across the US

A USA TODAY Network investigation revealed sex assaults, routine use of physical force, poor medical care and deaths at facilities overseen by ICE.

Monsy Alvarado, Ashley Balcerzak, Stacey Barchenger, Jon Campbell, Rafael Carranza, Maria Clark, Alan Gomez, Daniel Gonzalez, Trevor Hughes, Rick Jervis, Dan Keemahill, Rebecca Plevin, Jeremy Schwartz, Sarah Taddeo, Lauren Villagran, Dennis Wagner, Elizabeth Weise, Alissa Zhu, USA TODAY Network

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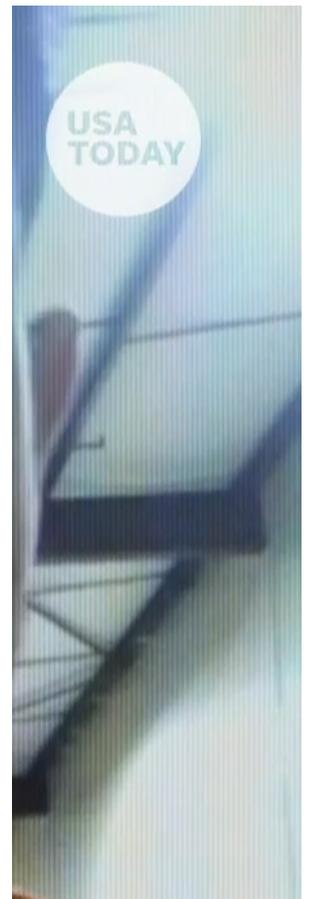
stepped inside and found the lifeless body of Roylan Hernandez-Diaz hanging from a bedsheet.

The 43-year-old Cuban man had spent five months in immigration detention waiting for a judge to hear his asylum claim. As his time at Richwood dragged on, he barely answered questions from security or medical staff, who noted his “withdrawn emotional state.” He refused to eat for four days.

The day after his death, 20 other detainees carried out what they say was a peaceful protest. They wrote “Justice for Roylan” on their white T-shirts, sat down in the cafeteria and refused to eat. Guards swooped in and attacked, beating one of them so severely he was taken to a hospital, according to letters written by 10 detainees that were obtained by the USA TODAY Network and interviews with two detainees’ relatives.

Before that day, detainees at Richwood had chronicled a pattern of alleged brutality in the Louisiana facility. Detainees complained of beatings, taunts from guards who called them “f--ing dogs” and of landing in isolation cells for minor violations.

Exclusive: Listen to USA TODAY Network interviews with detainees in ICE detention



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in here.

Milanes

Irrael Arzuaga-Milanes fled Cuba with his uncle to escape political persecution, but he's been detained at the Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, New Mexico, for more than three months waiting for an asylum hearing.

The USA TODAY Network uncovered the Richwood episode during an investigation of the rapidly growing network of detention centers used by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The investigation revealed more than 400 allegations of sexual assault or abuse, inadequate medical care, regular hunger strikes, frequent use of solitary confinement, more than 800 instances of physical force against detainees, nearly 20,000 grievances filed by detainees and at least 29 fatalities, including seven suicides, since President Donald Trump took office in January 2017 and launched an overhaul of U.S. immigration policies.

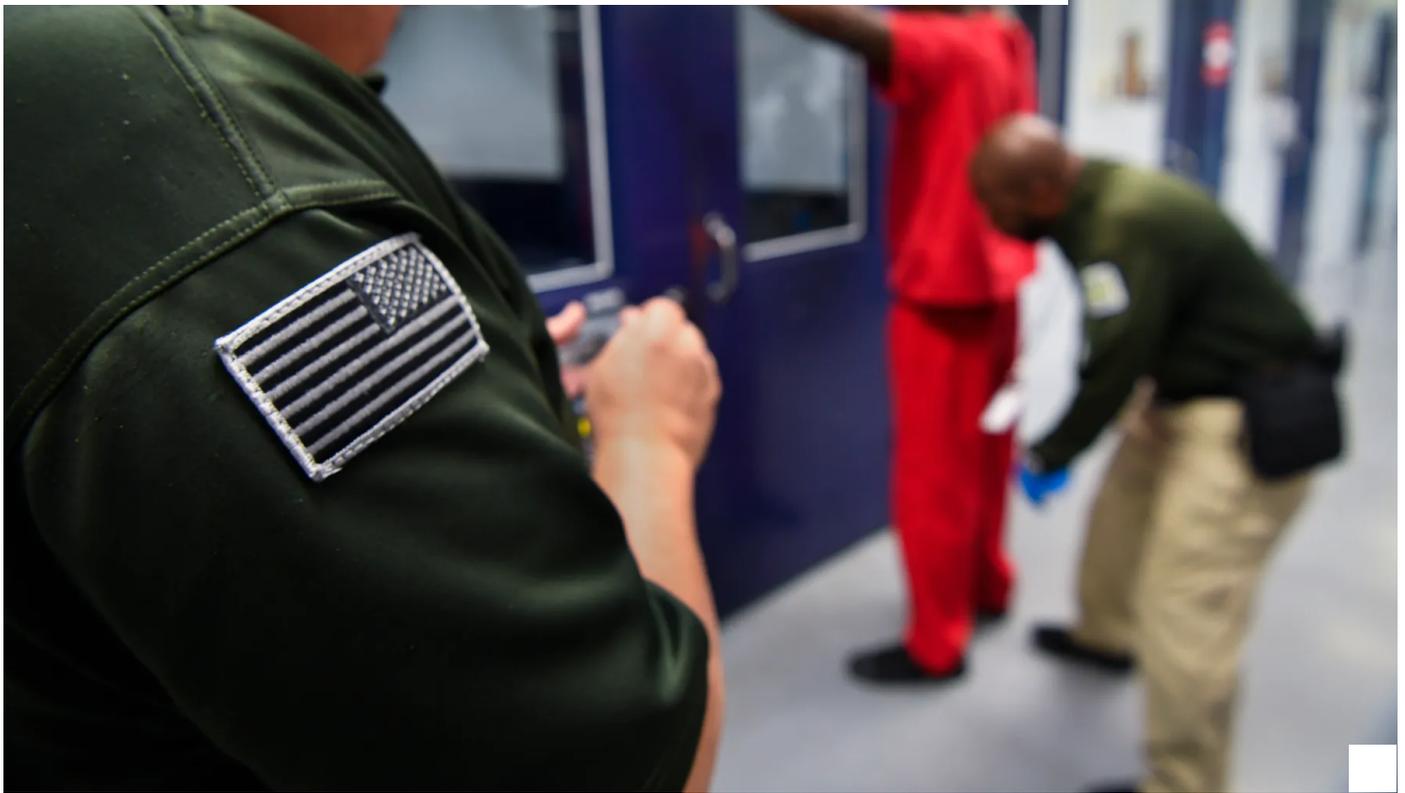
Combined with an analysis by a government watchdog, the USA TODAY Network analyzed inspection reports since 2015 and identified 15,821 violations of detention standards. Yet more than 90% of those facilities received passing grades by government inspectors. Network reporters interviewed 35 former and current detainees, some conducted using video chats from inside an ICE detention center. They reviewed hundreds of documents from lawsuits, financial records and government contracts, and toured seven ICE facilities from Colorado to Texas to Florida. Such tours are extremely rare.

“severe pain,” according to its manufacturer. Other centers received passing marks even after inspectors chronicled widespread use of physical force or solitary confinement. Richwood was one of the centers that passed inspections.

Vicente Raul Orozco Serguera, one of the Richwood detainees who protested after Hernandez-Diaz died, told outsiders that the death and violent confrontation with guards punctuated a terrifying stay at Richwood that began with detention center officials forcing him to sign a document listing who would recover his body if he died in custody.

“The United States has appointed itself the country of liberty, the land of opportunity, the defender of human rights and the refuge for people oppressed by their governments. All that ends once you’re detained,” Orozco Serguera wrote in a letter from Richwood that was delivered to a lawyer in hopes of finding someone to help him. “We want our freedom to fight our cases freely and leave this hell, for Louisiana is a ‘Cemetery of living men.’”

Ray Hanson, the warden at Richwood, did not respond to calls for comment. Brian Cox, an ICE spokesman in Louisiana, said “there is no evidence to support the allegation” that guards abused or mistreated detainees who protested the death. And LaSalle Corrections, the private company that runs Richwood, issued a statement that did not address the allegations, saying only the facility has a grievance process that detainees can use to register complaints.



Incoming and outgoing immigration detainees are processed at the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami, Florida. Krome is an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility housing over 650 ICE detainees per day.

JACK GRUBER, USA TODAY

For the past year, much of the nation's attention on immigration issues has focused on how the Trump administration polices the southern border and how Border Patrol agents treat migrants arriving there. But away from that spotlight there is a separate detention system overseen by ICE that has continued to grow with far less scrutiny. It is now a \$3 billion network of 221 facilities, the largest of which are operated by private companies under government contract. Combined, those facilities detain more than 50,000 women, men and children who wait months or years for immigration court proceedings.

Two-thirds of detainees have no criminal records, ICE records show. About 26% are detained solely because they are requesting asylum in the U.S. That is why ICE policy mandates that immigration detention be civil in nature - an administrative hold on detainees as they await deportation or their next hearing - as opposed to a punitive, corrective prison system. But the USA TODAY Network review found that the ICE system operates in many ways like a prison system; detainees wear red and orange jumpsuits that sometimes read "inmate" on the back.

consent from their relatives. Death reports also show detainees died of pneumonia, heart attacks and internal bleeding. In several instances, the cause of death remains “unknown.”



Detainees say they are denied toothbrushes, toilet paper and warm clothing in the winter. Some say they have been forced to drink water that reeks of chlorine. Others allege that guards respond to peaceful protests with rubber bullets and tear gas, and that staff has cut off their recreation time, family visitations and other basic services without explanation.

Critics say Trump’s rapid expansion has only exacerbated long-standing problems in the detention system, which is long overdue for real oversight and a massive overhaul.

During an interview with the USA TODAY Network this month, [Henry Lucero, ICE’s second in command over detention](#), said ICE runs a top-notch detention system that strictly enforces federal standards, provides quality medical care, responds to every grievance filed by detainees, and reviews every use of force incident. ICE detention standards prohibit guards from using force as punishment, but allow them to use force to “gain detainee cooperation” and only using a series of approved techniques.

Lucero also made clear, however, that there are dangerous individuals in ICE custody, and that guards must strictly enforce its rules to protect the safety and security of each facility.

“Similar to a criminal justice system, while you’re in our facilities, there are still rules that you have to comply with,” Lucero said. “It’s not anarchy, you can do what you want. To maintain order of the facilities, you have to comply.”

But Allegra Love, executive director of the [Santa Fe Dreamers Project](#), a nonprofit that provides free legal services to immigrants, said there is ample evidence that “we are torturing and killing people inside these detention centers.”

“We have all the evidence we need to say this is not a good use of tax money,” said Love, an attorney who has visited detainees in ICE detention. “It has to stop being an economic and political issue because it is a moral issue.”

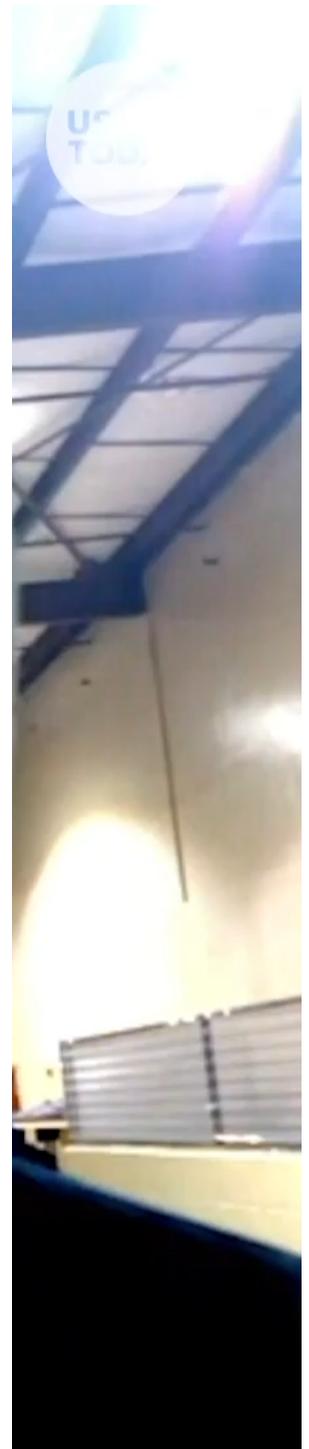
Read letters written by detainees in ICE detention centers

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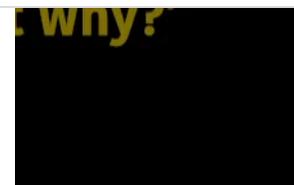
Immigration detention or private prison?

President George W. Bush, operating in a post-9/11 environment, expanded the number of detention centers used by ICE to more than 350 nationwide. President Barack Obama consolidated that system, cutting roughly 150 facilities while instituting reforms to improve living conditions. But the overall ICE detention population continued to grow under his watch, reaching 34,000 detainees in his last term.

Exclusive: Listen to USA TODAY Network interviews with detainees in ICE detention



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Alberto Fernandez, a dancer from Cuba, says he was ejected from the communist country's national dance company because of his family's anti-regime activism. He's been detained at the Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, New Mexico, for more than three months waiting for an asylum hearing.

Trump vowed as a presidential candidate to detain more undocumented immigrants than any of his predecessors and he has lived up to that promise. The number of detainees under his administration has increased by 5,263 on average each year. President Bill Clinton oversaw the second-highest increase, adding 1,691 ICE detainees on average per year.

Under Trump, ICE also has added new detention facilities at a rapid pace, signing contracts with 24 facilities to start accepting immigration detainees since 2017.

ICE owns and operates five detention centers in four states: Florida, Arizona, New York and Texas. Private companies operate at least 60 facilities where 75% of all ICE detainees are held. Others are detained in city and county jails, where they await civil proceedings alongside convicted criminals and those awaiting criminal trials.

The [U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Inspector General](#), an independent office within DHS that audits the department's activities, analyzed inspection reports of all ICE facilities from October 2015 to June 2018 and identified 14,003 "deficiencies" – instances where staff violated detention standards that govern the treatment of detainees. Over that time, ICE issued two fines against facility operators. One was levied against a private contractor for not adequately paying staff; the other was assessed against a facility for substandard medical and mental health care.

The USA TODAY Network then analyzed all publicly available ICE inspection reports from July 2018 to November 2019. That review identified an additional 1,818 deficiencies at 98 facilities.

The problems documented by ICE inspectors ranged from moldy food and filthy bathrooms to high numbers of sexual assault allegations, attempted suicides and claims of guards using force against detainees. A central theme identified by government inspectors was the failure

Prisons are designed to be corrective or punitive in nature; immigration detention centers are not. The introduction to ICE's detention standards, which have been in effect in different forms since the creation of the agency in 2002, makes that clear: "ICE detains people for no purpose other than to secure their presence both for immigration proceedings and their removal."



'If this isn't a prison, what is it?' ICE detainees talk about conditions in custody

ICE detention is meant to assure immigration compliance only, but detainees describe desperation, and punitive measures that resemble prisons.

HANNAH GABER, USA TODAY

When federal inspectors visited the Clinton County Jail in New York, a local jail that has a contract with ICE to detain immigrants, they found that guards didn't recognize the difference.

"The setting is that of a typical jail, and the concepts of civil detention are largely not incorporated into the daily operation," inspectors wrote. "Most facility personnel were not familiar with the requirements of the (ICE detention) standards."



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more strip searches, use chemical agents like tear gas against detainees and limit the information provided to detainees about their medical conditions.



ICE said it sanctions facilities and even terminates contracts for repeat violators. But the agency refused to provide any examples of fines or facility closures when questioned this year by the inspector general, members of Congress and the USA TODAY Network.

Lucero, the ICE official, said the contracts the agency signs with private prison operators and local jails prohibit ICE from publicly disclosing any fines or facility closures due to poor ratings during inspections. But he said he would consider making them public in the future.

“We want to be fully transparent with what we're doing,” he said.

Health care denied, putting detainees at risk

When Suzanne Moore first arrived at the Baker County Detention Center outside Jacksonville, Florida, in July 2018, her breast cancer was in remission.

The disabled mother of two had spent 21 months in state prison after she pleaded guilty to selling some of the morphine and oxycodone left over from her cancer treatments. She was picked up by ICE as soon as her state prison term was completed. Moore’s family moved from Jamaica to the U.S. when she was 2 years old and she became a legal permanent resident, but her felony convictions triggered deportation proceedings.

ICE officials sent her to Baker, a county jail that has a contract with ICE to hold detainees. When she first arrived at the facility, which is evenly split between immigration detainees and county inmates, she was given an orange jumpsuit that read “Inmate” on the back.



Medical facilities at the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami, Florida.

JACK GRUBER, USA TODAY

Once ICE takes custody of a person, it assumes responsibility for medical care.

In Moore's case, she said medical staff told her at times they had run out of the Tamoxifen medication she took daily to keep cancer from returning. At one point, Moore said, she went 20 days without receiving the medication.

"I would let ICE know and they'd say, 'That's Baker's problem,' and Baker would say, 'That's ICE's problem,'" said Moore, 56. "They'd just point the finger at each other."

Such complaints are common throughout ICE's detention system.

Kenneth Thomas, a legal permanent resident from England, was picked up by immigration officers last year for an 18-year-old conviction of credit card fraud and is now being held in the Adams County Correctional Center in Natchez, Mississippi. Thomas, a diabetic, said he's lost 20 pounds in ICE custody because of a combination of medical errors and questionable food preparation. He said he's gone up to two weeks without receiving his diabetes medication and was fed a diet not suited for an unmedicated diabetic.

Janamjot Sodhi, 44, a native of India who is being detained at the Aurora ICE Processing Center in Colorado, said most trips to the infirmary, no matter how serious the injury or illness, usually lead to the same result.



Medical facilities at the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami, Florida.

JACK GRUBER, USA TODAY

“Basically all they give you is ibuprofen,” said Sodhi, a stockbroker who pleaded guilty in 2013 to running a \$2.3 million Ponzi scheme. He spent 57 months in federal prison and was detained by ICE immediately upon his release.

Salvatore Pipitone, a pizza maker from Italy, said he had to be admitted to a hospital after a three-week stint in ICE detention at the York County Prison in Pennsylvania. He said he refused to drink the water because it tasted foul, leading to him losing 25 pounds and treatment for dehydration.

Immigration detention is no place for somebody with serious health needs, physical or mental.

Hayley Gorenberg, legal director for New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

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Pipitone said he was detained for missing an immigration court hearing to convert his conditional green card into a permanent one, which he blamed on a scheduling mistake by federal immigration agents.

“I had never heard of immigration detention,” said Pipitone, who now lives with his wife in Pennsylvania. “I did everything legal and followed the rules and did nothing wrong in this country. I was so mad because I was arrested like a criminal.”

In New Jersey, Yuri Espada, 33, of New York City, was held at the Hudson County Correctional Center on ICE violations for nearly a year. Espada was born in Honduras and came to the United States in 1997 when she was 11 years old. She later became a ward of the state and was in foster care for years.

She said she was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, a chronic mental health condition, four years ago. But after she was jailed in 2018, she asked for her medication for weeks to no avail, she said.



“It made me go into a mental health breakdown,” said Espada, who was released from custody in October and now lives in New York City. “I was not mentally stable. I was hearing voices, I talked to myself at times, I was disoriented (by) my surroundings and I was severely depressed.”

The questionable medical conditions inside ICE facilities inspired the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, a civil rights organization, to form a specialized team of doctors and other medical professionals to rapidly respond to troubling cases. The group of volunteers was created five years ago and has grown to 90 members since Trump came into office because “conditions are worsening” inside ICE facilities, according to Hayley Gorenberg, legal director for the group.

Gorenberg and her team have sued and won two settlements against ICE this year - totaling more than \$1.7 million combined - in cases where ICE agents dumped detainees on the streets of New York without providing them temporary medications or any plan for their medical treatment, as is required by ICE’s detention standards. Both of the released detainees ended up checking themselves into local hospitals for help.



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In Florida, Moore languished at Baker. She said she was handcuffed each time she was taken to the medical wing and handcuffed each time she was taken back to her dorm.

In April, she was sent to an oncologist for a mammogram. The doctor took a biopsy. After missing all those medications over her 10 months at Baker, Moore said, she wasn't surprised to learn that her breast cancer had returned.

Officials at Baker said they could not discuss the medical treatment of its detainees, citing medical privacy laws. But Lucero, the ICE official, said many detainee complaints about medical care in ICE facilities are "not accurate." He said detainees often refuse medication and then turn around and complain that they were denied medication.

"When we review the allegations they generally show this," Lucero said. "We feel like we have a very, very good medical program with a lot of oversight."

Right after Moore's diagnosis, ICE released her from custody.

ICE detainee died with sock in throat

Kamyar Samimi's final days were agonizing.

The father of three, who got legal residency shortly after arriving in the U.S. from his native Iran more than 40 years ago, had battled opioid use disorder ever since his grandfather gave him opium following a tooth extraction at four years old, according to his family. For most of his life in the U.S., Samimi had been prescribed methadone to manage his disorder.

immigrants - even those who have legal permanent residence or become U.S. citizens - can have their status revoked and be placed into deportation proceedings if they commit certain crimes.

The GEO Group, which runs the Aurora facility, attributed Samimi's building anguish to withdrawal but refused to prescribe him any methadone per their policy of banning opiates within the facility, according to an ICE report on his death.

Exclusive: Listen to USA TODAY Network interviews with detainees in ICE detention



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Ariel Guzman-Acosta, 45, a Cuban who passed the initial stage of his asylum application but has been denied parole, says he has not seen an immigration judge in the three months he's spent at the Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, New Mexico.

His condition worsened to the point where he died over a two-week period, vomiting, bleeding and crying out in pain, according to the ICE report. The detention center's medical staff skipped routine health checks that could have highlighted his rapidly failing health, and ignored ICE's standards that say he should have been taken to a hospital for evaluation, the report said.

"There's not the proper attention, medical care or training in these detention facilities, and I would want everyone who is reading to know that this is happening," said his daughter, Neda Samimi-Gomez. "It's right in our backyards. And the more people who know, the more chance we have to bring change and prevent this from happening again."

The ACLU filed a lawsuit in November against the GEO Group over Samimi's death. An ICE official at the Aurora detention center refused to discuss Samimi's case with the USA TODAY Network.

In Arizona, Jose de Jesus Deniz-Sahagun tried to repeatedly kill himself inside the Eloy Detention Center.

Federal immigration agents knew something was wrong with him when he tried to run through a Border Patrol station in Arizona in 2015. After being arrested and taken into custody, the Mexican man twice launched himself off a bench and landed on his head inside a Border Patrol station, according to a review of his death by ICE's Office of Detention Oversight. He banged his head against the walls. He talked of coyotes and cartel members coming to kill him.

The suicidal behavior worsened after he was transferred to the Eloy Detention Center. A doctor at Eloy declared him delusional and ordered he be kept on suicide watch on May 19,

Within hours, Deniz-Sahagun was dead, an orange sock lodged in his throat and a nine-centimeter piece of a toothbrush handle in his stomach, according to the ICE report.

His family in the U.S. sued CoreCivic, the private company that operates Eloy, and won a settlement for an undisclosed sum, according to Daniel Ortega, the Phoenix lawyer who handled the case, and CoreCivic.

“

There's not the proper attention, medical care or training in these detention facilities, and I would want everyone who is reading to know that this is happening.

Neda Samimi-Gomez, daughter of Kamyar Samimi, who died while detained at the Aurora Detention Facility

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In Georgia, Jeancarlo Alfonso Jimenez Joseph showed similar mental problems after entering the Stewart Detention Center. The 27-year-old had been accepted into the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the Obama-era program that has protected from deportation undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children.

Jimenez Joseph had been diagnosed with acute psychosis and schizoaffective disorder-bipolar type and had attempted suicide on several occasions. But according to an ongoing lawsuit filed by his family, officials at Stewart didn't pay close enough attention to his worsening symptoms, leading to his suicide by hanging in his cell on May 15, 2017.

Andrew Free, an attorney who is representing the families of eight detainees who died in ICE custody, said the increase in deaths is a direct result of the government's unchecked expansion of the ICE detention system without ensuring facilities can properly care for detainees.

Last year, Yazmin Juarez, a Guatemalan woman, and her 19-month-old daughter, Mariee, spent time in the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas, one of the few ICE facilities that can detain parents and their minor children together. Six weeks after their release, Mariee was dead, the result of a respiratory infection she developed while at the center, according to a lawsuit filed on behalf of the toddler's mother.

Another case not counted in ICE's official death toll is that of Jose Luis Ibarra Bucio, a 27-year-old who was held at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center outside of Los Angeles.



An empty cell at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Adelanto processing Center in Adelanto, California.

JAY CALDERON, USA TODAY

On Feb. 7, Bucio collapsed at the detention center and was transferred to a local hospital. When his family visited him at the Loma Linda University Medical Center, they learned he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and had slipped into a coma.

comatose body,” said Shannon Camacho of the Coalition for Humane Immigrants Rights of Los Angeles, an immigration advocacy group that learned of the details of his death from Bucio’s family.

Fifteen days later, as Bucio remained unconscious, ICE officials left a letter in his hospital room stating he was no longer in custody.

ICE spokesperson Lori Haley said he was released “with respect to humanitarian concerns.” GEO referred questions to ICE.

Camacho interpreted that decision another way: “ICE and GEO essentially wiped their hands clean of any involvement with his case.”

A month later, on March 20, Bucio’s family decided to take him off life support. He died the next day.

'Leave as cadavers': Detainees complain of solitary confinement, pepper-spray attacks

Every detainee interviewed by the USA TODAY Network alleged mistreatment by guards.

At the Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, New Mexico, an ICE facility run under contract by Management & Training Corporation, 18 Cubans led a sit-in after they became so frustrated over their inability to get a hearing before an immigration judge. After they staged a second sit-in, detainees said the guards had seen enough. According to some of the participants, guards at Otero responded by throwing them into solitary confinement, followed by weeks of “quarantine” in which benefits like outdoor recreation time were restricted.

“We were threatened again by the officers, who pointed their weapons at us and told us that ICE wasn’t coming anymore,” said Irrael Arzuaga-Milanes, an asylum-seeker from Cuba who has passed the first phase of his asylum review. “We were shut in for a week in ‘the cave.’”

When asked about Arzuaga-Milanes’ claims, ICE said detainees may be placed in administrative segregation when their actions are “disruptive,” if they pose a threat to the general population, or for “the secure and orderly operation of the facility.”



The segregation unit at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Adelanto processing Center in Adelanto, California.

JAY CALDERON, USA TODAY

Jose Cuadras, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, spent seven weeks at the La Palma Correctional Center outside Eloy, Arizona, earlier this year. Cuadras said guards conducted strip searches after each visit with his family, stopped providing him soap for no reason, and even screamed at a detainee who couldn't understand the English directions delivered during a fire drill.

The guards were so verbally abusive, Cuadras said, detainees were convinced they must have worked as prison guards before. Turns out, they were right.

Amanda Gilchrist, a spokeswoman for CoreCivic, the company that runs La Palma, said the facility uses many of the same employees, including guards, from an earlier period when La Palma was a medium-security prison.

of training before working with immigration detainees.

“We have a zero-tolerance policy for all forms of abuse and harassment, and every allegation of this nature is reported to our government partner and investigated fully,” Gilchrist said.

Similar complaints about abusive guards have emerged throughout the country.

Daljinder Singh, a native of India who is being held at the Adams County Correctional Center in Natchez, Mississippi, an ICE facility run by CoreCivic, said guards regularly interrupt his prayer times by purposefully doing head counts while he worships.

At the Farmville Detention Center in Virginia, an ICE facility run by Immigration Centers of America, detainees became concerned over an outbreak of the mumps that infected at least 24 people this year. They were angered by the detention center’s decision to place the facility on quarantine and ban all visitors. They also refused to eat meals from the cafeteria, worried that improperly washed utensils and dishes would allow the mumps to spread.



A half-portion meal at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Adelanto processing

As tensions mounted, David de la Cruz Grajales, a detainee, said about 20 guards entered their dormitory in “riot gear,” ordering detainees to go to their beds for a second morning count. When some objected, the guards showered them with pepper spray, zip-tied their hands, and placed them into a “segregation unit,” he said.

Grajales said he suffered an asthma attack while his hands were bound and was refused an inhaler for 15 minutes. Later, when he showered, the pepper spray washed down his body and burned his skin. When he asked for a change of clothes, the shift commander responded, “No, you’re going to be burning for at least two days,” Grajales said in an affidavit as part of a lawsuit he and other detainees filed against the facility over their treatment by detention center guards.

Farmville’s warden, Jeffrey Crawford, and ICE argued in court papers that de la Cruz Grajales and the other detainees were disciplined for failing to follow orders, not for the hunger strike. U.S. District Judge Rossie D. Alston Jr. of Alexandria sided with the facility.

The detainees later dropped their lawsuit against the detention center after they won their asylum claims.

In Florida, detainees in other ICE facilities are threatened with a transfer to the Baker County Detention Center if they act up.

The facility holds ICE detainees and county inmates in two separate wings, but guards work in both sides of the facility. During a recent tour of the center, Sgt. Brad Harvey, who works for the county sheriff’s department, described a setup that poses challenges. None of the guards speak Spanish, he said, and rely on “verbal judo,” one- or two-word commands to communicate with Hispanic ICE detainees.

A recent tour of the facility showed that Baker does not provide any outdoor recreation, just a narrow room with a ping pong table, two exercise bikes, an XBOX, and a small window high above the room. The detainees never go outside. They spend most of their days in pods that hold 32 detainees, two detainees per cell.



Immigration detainees are moved in secure groups back to a housing unit on the Krome detention facility campus.

JACK GRUBER, USA TODAY

Michael Meade, ICE's field office director for the state of Florida, did not dispute that detainees hate being transferred to Baker since other ICE facilities in the state provide outdoor recreation time and more freedom of movement.

"I wouldn't want our staff using that as a threat, but if somebody does act up, if they can't abide by the rules, we're going to have to find you a more secure facility," Meade said.

Harvey put it more bluntly.

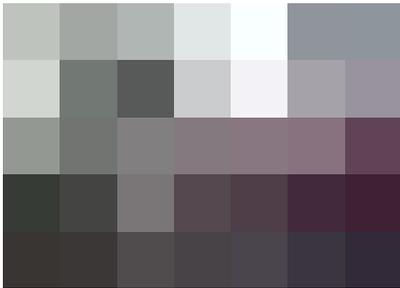
"We are probably more stringent than some of the other facilities," he said.

Back in Louisiana, questions remain about the death of Hernandez-Diaz, the Cuban man found hanging while in solitary confinement, and the response by guards to detainees who protested his death.

Sulima Baigorria Valdez was released from ICE custody earlier this year, while her husband remains locked up in Richwood. The Cuban couple is seeking asylum, but for now, Valdez simply wants her husband to make it out of Richwood alive.

Her husband says the guards taunt him and others, telling them they will soon be deported. They complain of rotten food, of not being able to go into the sunlight. Last time Valdez saw her husband in October, he had lost 50 pounds, she said.

“I was thinking this isn’t him, this can’t be him,” she said. “They are going to leave as cadavers.”



One deadly week reveals where the immigration crisis begins — and where it ends

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Detainees forced to work for \$1 a day

Detainees also complained of being treated as free or cheap laborers.

ICE’s detention standards allow for detainees to voluntarily sign up to work and sets a baseline payment of “at least \$1.00 per day.” But detainees said they are forced to work.

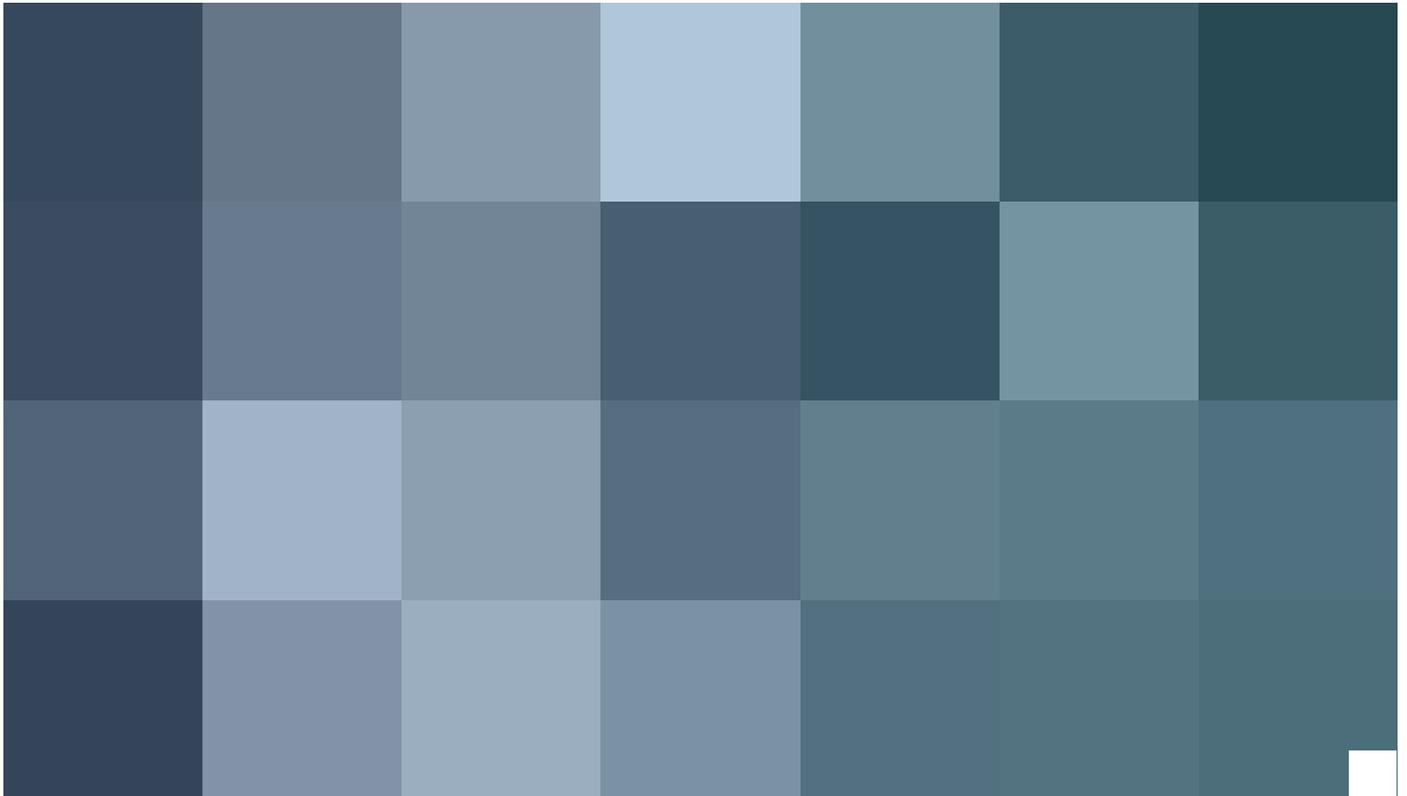
Cesar Sandoval was disgusted by his job inside the Northwest ICE Processing Center, an ICE facility run by the GEO group in Tacoma, Washington. During the 14 months he spent there, he worked in the laundry room and cleaning dishes in the kitchen.

He was paid \$1 a day for the effort.

Project South, an Atlanta-based human rights nonprofit organization, filed a class-action lawsuit challenging the practice of forced labor inside the [Stewart Detention Center in](#)

detainees listed in the Project South complaint are paid between \$1 and \$4 a day, that leads to huge savings for private prison operators at the expense of the detainees' constitutional rights.

Those rates are similar to wages paid to inmates in federal prisons, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit organization that researches and advocates against mass incarceration.



An informational video plays as Incoming and outgoing immigration detainees are processed at the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami, Florida.

JACK GRUBER, USA TODAY

Azadeh Shahshahani, legal director for Project South, argues that forcing ICE detainees to work violates myriad labor laws and the 13th Amendment, which bans slavery or indentured servitude “except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.”

Damon Hininger, CEO of CoreCivic, said nobody in Stewart or any of the other facilities they operate are forced to work.

Hininger said they are simply following ICE's standards by offering detainees the chance to work.

for the foodservice.”



Concertina wire tops the fences at the Bluebonnet Detention Center (BBDC). The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) newest detention facility in Anson, Texas, will...

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RONALD W. ERDRICH, USA TODAY

Detention center with 16 deaths praised for Zumba classes

When federal inspectors visited the Eloy Detention Center this year, they were entering a facility where at least 16 people have died, including five by suicide, since 2005. During February's tour, which looked at conditions over the previous year, inspectors cited 35 sexual assault or abuse allegations, 41 use of force incidents, 881 grievances filed by detainees, and one death as a result of illness.

Officials at Eloy, which is run by CoreCivic, deemed most of the sexual assault allegations – including staff members assaulting detainees and detainees assaulting each other – “unsubstantiated.”

Exclusive: Listen to USA TODAY Network interviews with detainees in ICE detention





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Maxiel Milanes-Sanchez, 46, fled Cuba after being detained by police more than 15 times. He says he has been detained at the Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, New Mexico, for more than three months waiting for an asylum hearing.

But they confirmed 17 cases where staff used pepper spray to subdue detainees, which is restricted in many kinds of ICE detention facilities, and in one case, a facility review

The result? The Eloy Detention Center was given a passing grade by ICE inspectors with just a single deficiency for not ensuring that tools used in the facility are protected from detainees. Otherwise, inspectors raved about the “calm” atmosphere at the facility and guards who exhibited “a professional demeanor in both attire and attitude.”

“The facility provides a robust schedule of activities including karaoke, basketball tournaments, piñata contests, soccer tournaments, holiday tournaments, crochet programs, cleanest pod contest and Zumba classes,” inspectors wrote.

In Louisiana, at the River Correctional Center, an ICE facility run by LaSalle Corrections, an October inspection found that detainees carried out 48 hunger strikes over the previous year. Inspectors dismissed the hunger strikes as being “due to the presence of a large number of detainees from India that use hunger strikes as a request for release.”

In Iowa, at the Linn County Correctional Center, a county jail that has a contract with ICE to hold immigration detainees, inspectors found that staffers were strip-searching all incoming detainees rather than only those they had a reasonable suspicion were carrying contraband, as required by ICE detention standards.

Yet those facilities received passing grades from inspectors. The problem, some say, is the inspection process itself.

“So much of the system is set up to reaffirm itself,” said Silky Shah, executive director of the Detention Watch Network, a group that advocates against immigration detention. “The way the inspection process is set up is a complete sham.”

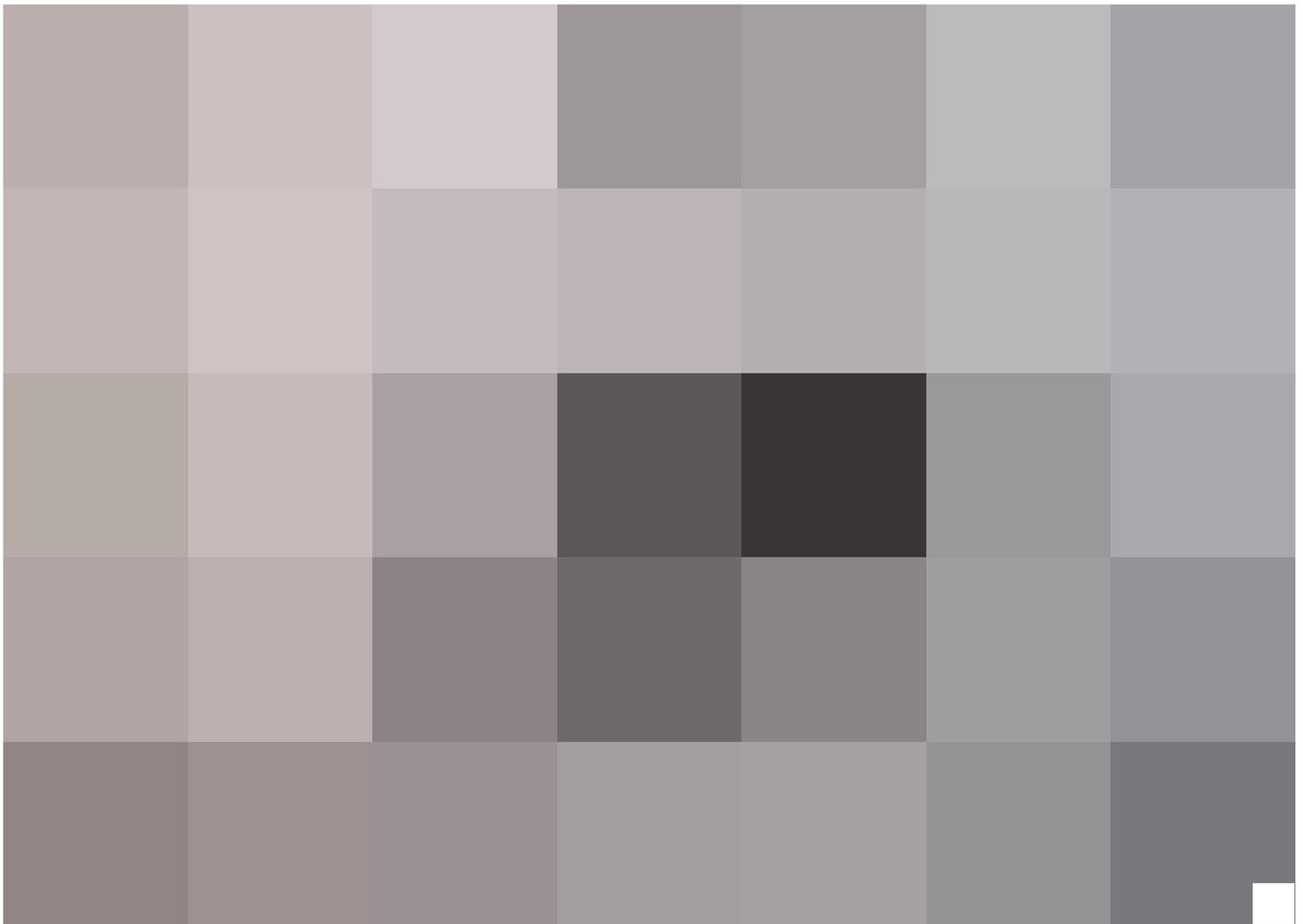
Most ICE inspections announced ahead of visit

ICE uses several methods to inspect or monitor facilities, including ICE officials stationed permanently at detention centers and occasional inspections conducted by government and private inspectors under contract with ICE.

The DHS Inspector General said that combination may appear to create a robust process, but identified problems at each step. Some inspectors can identify problems but have no power to correct them. Others do inspections too infrequently.

agencies and has received more than \$22 million over the past decade for its ICE inspections, according to federal contracting data. The inspector general found that Nakamoto inspections are inefficient because they try to check every single detention standard – more than 600 of them – during their three-day visits to each facility, a process that is “too broad” and results in findings that “do not fully examine actual conditions” at each facility.

The process has yet to receive much attention from Congress. During an October hearing on ICE’s inspection process before a House committee, only four representatives – three Democrats and one Republican – attended.



A telephone inside a dormitory inside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas.

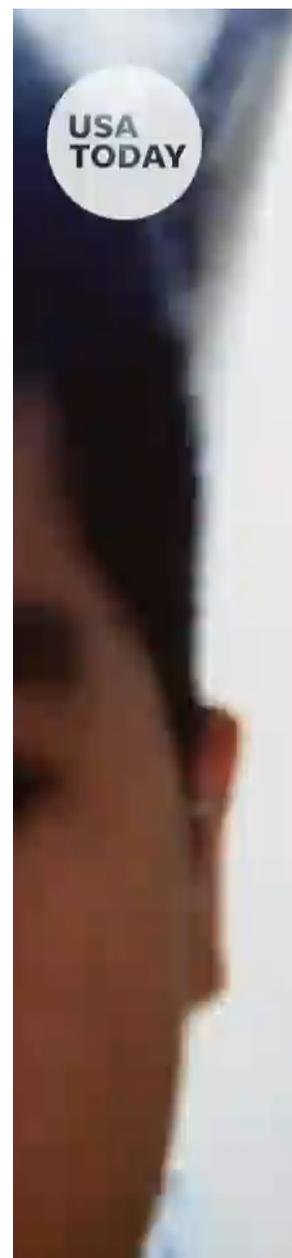
COURTNEY SACCO, USA TODAY

inspections a year.

U.S. Rep. Xochitl Torres Small, a New Mexico Democrat, wondered why Nakamoto Group inspections are announced ahead of time. The Inspector General also raised the issue in its report, writing that pre-announced inspections “allows facility management to temporarily modify practices to ‘pass’ an inspection.”

Torres Small explained how her committee staff toured ICE detention centers in four states earlier this year and learned that employees at the facilities painted walls, put up curtains and spruced up the sites before they arrived.

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Guatemalan national Rodomiro Ramos, 24, said he crossed the southern border with his wife and twin boys to request asylum. His family was released to family in Virginia, but Ramos remains in the Otero County Processing Center in Chaparral, New Mexico, waiting for an asylum hearing.

“Even flower beds were placed outside,” Torres Small said.

Nakamoto said her company is simply abiding by the contract it has with ICE, which calls for announced visits of its facilities. Nakamoto has a separate contract to inspect facilities run by the U.S. Marshal’s Service, but that contract calls for unannounced inspections.

When asked if unannounced tours are more effective at revealing the true conditions inside a facility, Nakamoto nodded her head. “I think so,” she said.

David Venturella, a vice president at the GEO Group, told the USA TODAY Network he would welcome unannounced ICE inspections of his facilities.

“We think we run a very good operation and if they wanted to do unannounced audits, that’s fine, that’s their right to do,” he said. “We think we would fare very well in those audits.”

Hininger, the CoreCivic CEO, agreed. He said his company has already been conducting its own internal unannounced inspections of its facilities since 2004.

“It’s a badge of honor for our team,” he said. “If they decide to do unannounced visits, we’ve been doing it for 15 years.”

Lucero, the ICE official, told the USA TODAY Network that the agency is considering shifting to unannounced inspections for all its facilities. But he cautioned that doing so could “be a disruption” for staff and could lead to situations where key personnel are on vacation or taking a day off when inspectors arrive.

'I couldn't remember how many days I was in there'

Fernando Aguirre says he saw it all during his time at the [Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma, Washington](#).

He recalled seeing rocks and pebbles sprinkled into the beans he was served from the cafeteria and green spots dotting the lunch meat. He remembered joining other detainees in hunger strikes, feeling overwhelming stomach pangs, only to end up in solitary confinement as punishment for the protests. He remembers wondering how he could be forced to work for just \$1 a day.

He remembers his cell number: 203.



Fernando Aguirre looks through notes he made about his time in detention at his home in Kennewick, Washington, Dec. 8, 2019. Aguirre pleaded guilty to...

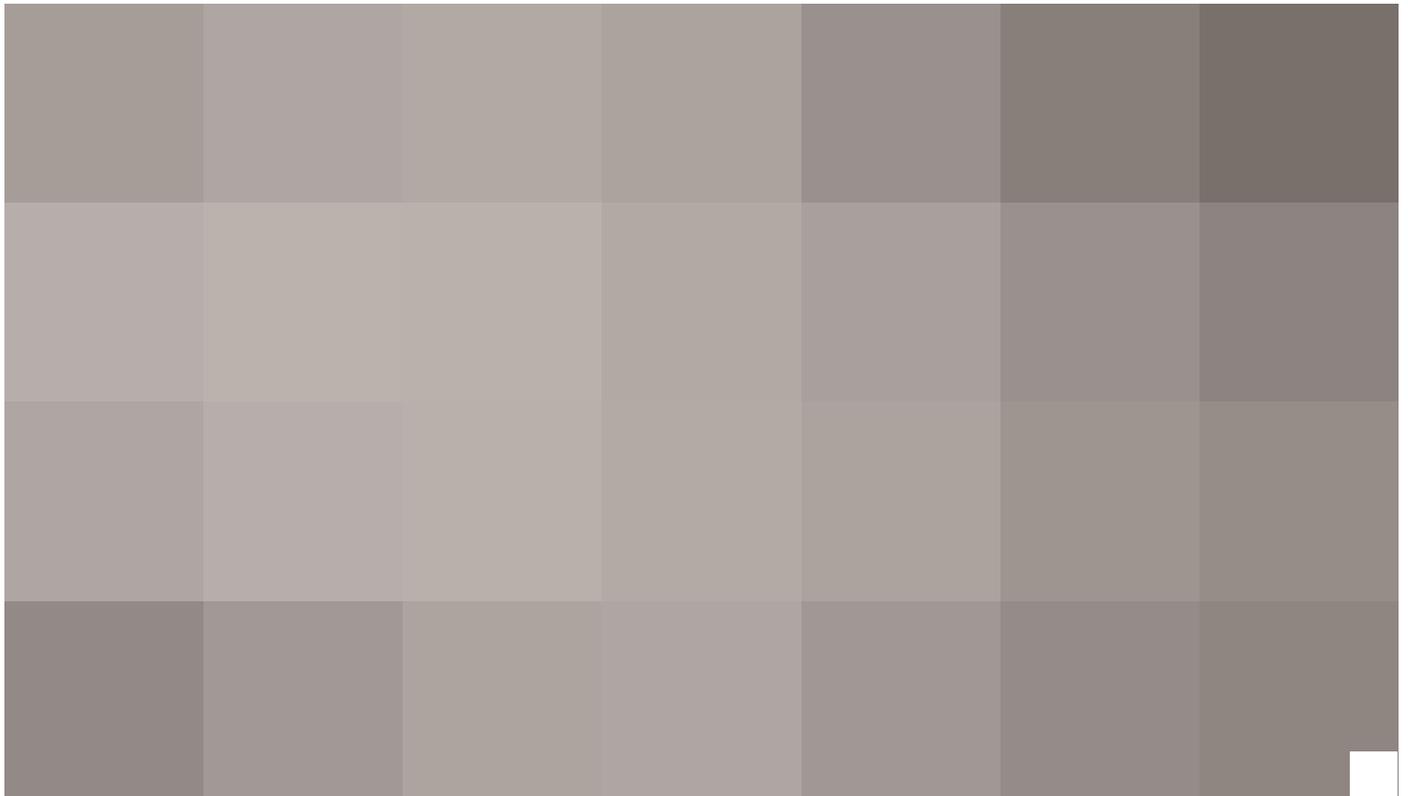
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KELLY JORDAN, USA TODAY

– 2,469 days – in ICE detention while waiting on deportation hearings, the longest stretch uncovered by the USA TODAY Network. He was finally released in June, reuniting with his wife and children in Washington state. But Aguirre said the trauma will never go away.

Government prosecutors justified his prolonged detention based on Aguirre’s criminal record – in 2012, he was convicted for methamphetamine and marijuana possession with intent to deliver. He entered into a plea agreement with prosecutors and served eight months of a one-year sentence in state prison, court records show, shifting over to ICE detention as soon as his state sentence was completed.

His defenders say his unfathomable stretch in ICE detention amounted to a violation of his human rights. They appealed to the [United Nations](#) for help and are suing ICE over what they describe as his forced labor while inside. And they are still fighting ICE, which remains intent on deporting Aguirre.



Fernando Aguirre looks through notes he made about his time in detention at his home in Kennewick, Washington, Dec. 8, 2019. Aguirre pleaded guilty to...

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