

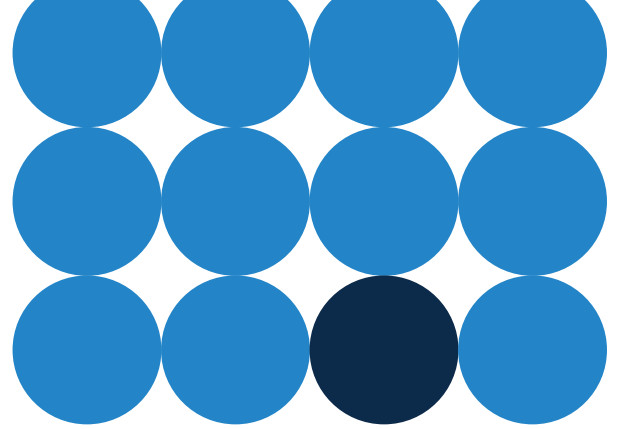
Social Justice Brief

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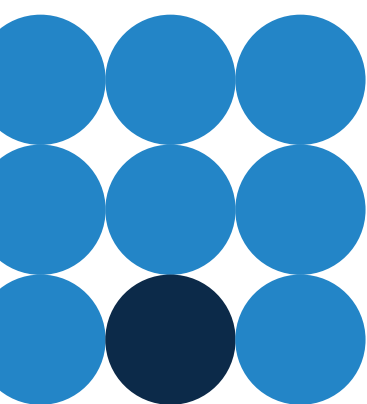
National Association of Social Workers



Migrant Detention in the Era of Mass Deportation

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.





Migrant Detention in the Era of Mass Deportation

Almost immediately after being sworn in for his second term, President Trump issued his Mass Deportation Executive Order (EO). Since that time, the order has been transformed into a full-fledged, actionable policy under the direction of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Immigration and Customs Enforcement administration. In the planning for a nationwide mass deportation program, an essential part of such a plan is building the capacity to house detained migrants. As many as 11 million people fit the profile of an unauthorized resident. Mass deportation is a massive task requiring an expanded detention capacity. Therefore, no one would be surprised that the landscape of migrant detention in the United States is undergoing a dramatic expansion and intensification.

The increase in beds should essentially be looked at from two viewpoints: (1) family and child detention centers and (2) single adult detention facilities. Of course, family, and single adult migrant facilities have been around for many years. However, in the era of mass deportation, there is deeper scrutiny and—for the Trump administration—far more urgency to develop a cohesive and manageable system for housing migrant detainees. For the immigration advocacy community, the urgency is more focused on ensuring humane daily living conditions along with physical and emotional support for detainees. All of this is coupled with addressing questions about oversight, cost, and legal due process. This brief examines the evolving infrastructure, legal frameworks, and ethical implications of migrant detention.

More Context

Being unlawfully present in the country is a civil violation—not a criminal offense. This legal nuance is often obscured by proponents of mass deportation, but it is crucial to understand how immigration law is enforced and debated. It is also crucial information for deciding to use alternatives to detention as opposed to incarceration-like custody.

That said, a crucial contextual background on the daunting challenges facing the administration in actualizing its mass deportation agenda is the sheer size of the unauthorized migrant community being targeted for deportation. For example, as of 2023, there were 47.1 million immigrants residing in the U.S. This number includes an estimated 11.5 million who are not legally present in the U.S. Added to that group of immigrants are those who currently have

lawful statuses but are at risk for deportation under aggressive new policies: the nearly 1.2 million immigrants who either have or are eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS); the over 530,000 active DACA recipients; and individuals in the U.S. with pending asylum cases.

To understand what will be required of the administration to remove over 11 million migrants, the following facts are helpful:

- »□ As of early 2025, ICE detention facilities hold about 41,500 people per day, which is already near capacity.
- »□ Trump administration officials have proposed expanding detention space to 100,000 beds, more than doubling current capacity.
- »□ One of ICE's private prison contractors has reportedly offered to provide 28,000 additional beds, and discussions are underway to use Guantanamo Bay to house up to 30,000 detainees.

Given those numbers, the challenge of detaining as many as 11.5 million people is indeed daunting for the administration. The following projections drive home that fact: (1) deporting 11.5 million people would require detention turnover at unprecedented speed, or a massive increase in long-term detention space; (2) for example, if only 10% of the targeted 11.5 million migrants were detained at any given point in time, ICE would still require 1.15 million beds, nearly 28 times current ICE capacity. The point is that, to complete this enormous undertaking, it will require an almost impossible overhaul of ICE's current logistical and organizational abilities, legal processes, and funding.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration remains undeterred by these obstacles. It has asked Congress for \$175 billion to ramp up ICE operations, including detention expansion. Also, ICE is assuming that it will take many years to significantly reduce the 11.5 million current unauthorized migrants. Under that assumption, ICE aims to deport 1 million (or more) people per year.

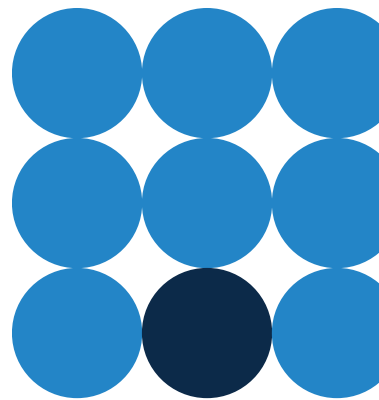
With the certainty that DHS—through ICE—will greatly expand migrant detention capacity, the next areas for this analysis are (1) the adequacy (structural and environmental) of the detention facilities, based on standards for housing single adults, families, and children; (2) the presence (or absence) and quality of health care and behavioral health services; and (3) access to legal services, including on-site attorney visitation. The analysis will be from the perspective of the three main components of migrant detention: family centers, unaccompanied migrant children facilities, and single adult detention facilities.

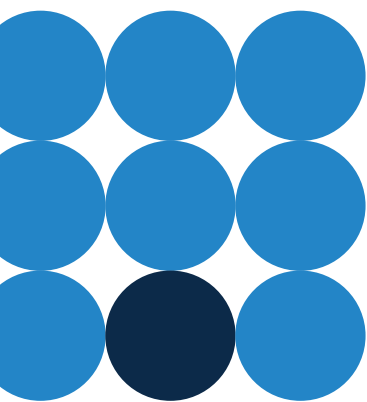
Family Detention

The evolution of migrant detention for families and children since the era of mass deportation has been marked by sharp policy swings, legal battles, and growing public scrutiny. If we look at family and children migrant detention from a historical context, we can see how ICE's policies and practices have evolved over the last 7 or 8 years. This evolution begins with Trump's first administration and moves into the current time of mass deportation. The following is a quasi-timeline on recent federal policy on family and children detention.

Trump Administration (2017–2020)

- »□ Expanded detention capacity, including family detention centers.





- » Reinstated and intensified family separation policies under Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy.
- » Terminated protections like Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for several countries, increasing the number of families vulnerable to detention.
- » Detention conditions for children were widely criticized—reports cited malnutrition, inadequate medical care, and mental health neglect.

Biden Administration (2021–2024): Family-Related Reforms

- » In an effort to address issues of family separations and inadequate family detention centers, Biden ended the use of family detention facilities in 2021.
- » Biden introduced Alternatives to Detention (ATD) programs—such as electronic monitoring and case management—which proved both humane and cost-effective.
- » Under Biden, ICE continued to comply with the Flores Settlement Agreement (1997), which limits the detention of children to 20 days and mandates safe conditions.
- » The Biden administration also advocated for community-based solutions and expedited case processing to reduce prolonged legal limbo.
- » Moreover, Biden relied on alternatives to detention, such as electronic monitoring and case-management programs, so families with children did not need to be held inside detention facilities. By many measures, alternatives to detention were successful. In one program, for example, 99 percent of families complied with their immigration check-ins, and the cost was significantly less than detention.

Family and Children Detention Policy and Programmatic Developments (2017–2025)

- » In July 2025, Congress passed the Reconciliation Budget Act, which allocated \$45 billion for new immigration detention centers, including family detention facilities.
- » This raises questions about a potential return to large-scale family detention and the future of Flores Agreement protections.
- » Emerging research shows the threat of deportation and detention is now recognized as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), linked to long-term trauma, developmental delays, and chronic health issues.
- » In keeping with its uncompromising commitment to the mass deportation paradigm—at any cost—Trump jettisoned alternatives to detention for migrant families. This act was an initial indicator of Trump’s plan to reverse all policies from the Biden administration that even hinted at reforms aimed at protecting the legal rights of families and children who are not legally present in the U.S.

Shifting Priorities for Managing Migrant Families and Children in the Aftermath of Mass Deportation

The bottom second Trump administration has made major shifts in the approach to processing asylum seeking families. Previously, ICE worked in a collaborative—though uneasy—inter-agency agreement with the Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to house and process the families until their claims for asylum were adjudicated.

However, today the relationship between ICE and ORR has become tenuous. The interactions

between the two agencies have become increasingly strained, particularly as their missions differ and pressures grow due to the politics of mass deportation.

These fundamental differences create friction when enforcement priorities override child welfare or humanitarian protections. While deportation enforcement actions are broadly focused on all undocumented immigrants, they impact families more traumatically—often in the form of family separation and related economic distress.

Overall, the ripple effects on those living in immigrant families—including U.S.-born citizen children—can have long-term implications. We should be reminded that many undocumented immigrants live in families with mixed immigration statuses. For example, as of 2023, 19 million, or one in four, children in the U.S. had an immigrant parent, including one in ten (12%) who are citizen children with a noncitizen parent. Additionally, an estimated 4.4 million U.S.-born children live with an undocumented immigrant parent. While the dilemmas facing mixed status families were quite uncertain and anxiety provoking prior to Trump’s mass deportation EO, it has become untenable since January 2025.

Unaccompanied Children’s Facilities Under Mass Deportation Policies

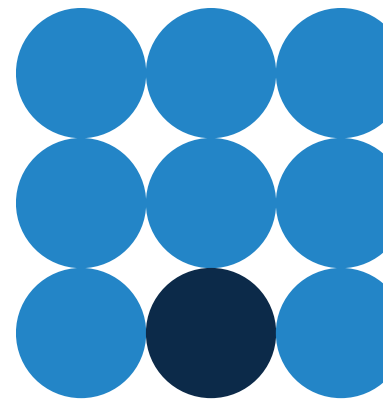
Management of unaccompanied migrant children under mass deportation policies—particularly those advanced by the Trump administration—has shifted dramatically in 2025, raising urgent legal, humanitarian, and operational concerns.

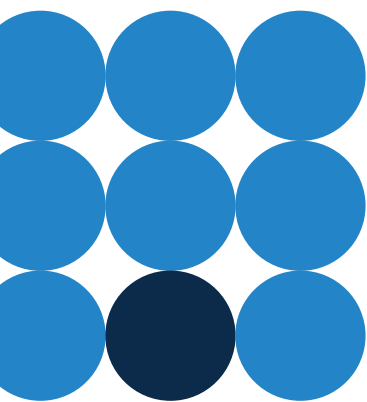
ICE Targets Unaccompanied Migrant Children: A Growing Concern for Families

In an unprecedented shift, U.S. immigration authorities are now intensifying efforts to locate and deport unaccompanied migrant children as part of the president’s mass deportation effort, aiming to meet the high deportation targets set by President Donald Trump. This new strategy marks a significant change from traditional practices that primarily focused on adult offenders, stirring both controversy and concern among legal and humanitarian advocates.

For many reasons, the flow of unaccompanied migrant children has slowed, but they still continued to arrive at the U.S. southern border in 2025. In March 2025, for example, 665 unaccompanied children were encountered at the southwest border—this number was significantly down from the 8,829 children who presented at the border in March 2024. Most of these children are coming from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico.

As a matter of process, once taken into ICE custody, these minors—who are officially classified as Unaccompanied Alien Children (UACs)—and transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), as mandated by federal law. However, post-mass deportation, the Trump administration has introduced new policies that assigned authority to ICE to directly send unaccompanied children in federal custody back to their home countries—even if they have relatives in the U.S. who could sponsor them. The new policies reflect a serious departure from the provision of human services and legal protections of





previous years—the change also raises the likelihood of deportation for the children without due process for eligibility for asylum in the U.S.

The White House—through immigration Deputy Chief of Staff for policy, Stephen Miller—stated that the children were being reunited with their parents. But official Guatemalan government report and court filings show many families did not want their children sent back to the country.

In a clear intent to exert this new “authority”—and in defiance of a previous court order—in August 2025, the Trump administration attempted to deport over 600 unaccompanied Guatemalan children who were in ORR’s custody, thereby bypassing the children’s standard legal protections.

This case represented a purposeful and heavy-handed attempt by DHS/ICE to exercise an “executive power of the presidency” to deport the children despite pre-existing policies against such actions. As of this writing, a federal judge issued a restraining order blocking the Trump administration from deporting 10 unaccompanied migrant Guatemalan children and potentially hundreds more in federal custody. At the hearing, the Judge stated “I have the government attempting to remove minor children from the country in the wee hours of the morning on a holiday weekend, which is surprising, but here we are,” the judge was obviously perturbed by the administration’s arbitrary exercise of a power about which the court is dubious.

Some of the children are as young as 10 years old.

It must be noted that it does not appear that staff from the ORR or other child welfare professionals were present on the planes to support the unaccompanied Guatemalan children during their attempted deportation on August 31st. This suggests that the kids were completely alone without any guarantees that they would be met by a family member or reliable significant others once they would have landed in Guatemala.

The attempt by ICE to remove the children was so arbitrary and obviously in violation of their human rights that some of the contractors who manage ORR child detention facilities resisted the orders to turn them over to ICE. This report is supported by an August 31 memo, issued by HHS’ Office of Refugee Resettlement, that threatened civil lawsuits and possible criminal prosecution against any ORR contractors who fail to comply with “lawful requests” from ORR.

New Policies Change Workforce and On-Site Services for Migrant Child and Family Centers

It is reasonable to expect that with emerging administration policies of rapid mass deportation, health and behavioral health professionals—including social workers, psychologists, and pediatric clinicians—will play a critical role in ORR facilities serving migrant children and families. Their responsibilities are expanding not just in scope, but in urgency, as enforcement escalates and trauma intensifies. These traumas care interventions include:

- »□ Acute Crisis Intervention related to family separations, sudden detention, and fear of deportation which increased risk for PTSD, anxiety, and depression among children and caregivers.

- »□ Grief & Loss Counseling: Social workers will be tasked with helping children process the disappearance or deportation of parents, often without closure or legal clarity.
- »□ Behavioral De-escalation: Facilities must deploy trained staff to manage panic attacks, dissociation, and behavioral outbursts tied to trauma and uncertainty.

ORR Budget Restriction as a Barrier to Maintaining Key Social and Behavioral Health Staff

Though there are no specific ORR restrictions preventing its contractors for expanding social work and other behavioral health staff to address these emerging needs, such expansions may be prevented due to overall budget cuts—including Medicaid cuts. The Trump administration’s FY 2026 budget proposals do not include increase in ORR contractor funding specifically earmarked for hiring or retaining medical and behavioral health professionals in migrant family and child facilities. In fact, broader budget trends suggest the opposite:

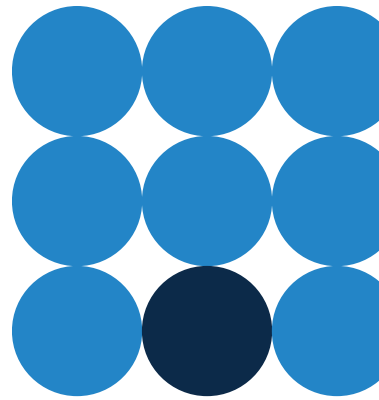
- »□ The proposed budget includes \$28.6 billion in cuts to behavioral health and science-related agencies, including SAMHSA, HRSA, and NIH. These agencies often support ORR contractors through grants, training, and technical assistance.
- »□ The Office of Management and Budget’s leaked “pass back” memo to HHS shows no new discretionary funding for ORR contractor surge staffing or health services in response to mass deportation policies.
- »□ The restructuring of HHS under Trump’s plan consolidates behavioral health programs into a new entity called the Administration for a Healthy America,

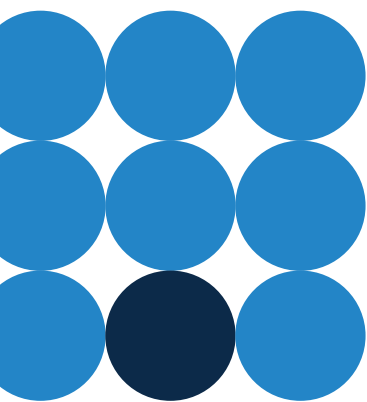
which critics say could reduce oversight and funding for trauma-informed care.

All of which means that ORR child detention contractors are being asked to address increased trauma, behavioral health, and medical needs without proportional budget increases. This lack of stable, earmarked funding for health professionals means contractors must rely on patchwork grants or reallocate internal budgets.

Additional considerations ORR contractors and their staff include policy conflicts associated with ORR’s child-centered mandate being in tension with ICE’s enforcement-first posture. Such conflicts can create ethical dilemmas for clinicians caught between care and compliance with the Trump administration’s mass deportation mandates. Given that ICE’s enforcement priorities have become a dominant factor in federal spending, the risk of mission drift is real for ORR. It is not a stretch to suggest that—using the pretext of budget priorities—ICE could insist that contractors cut “non-essential” services like behavioral health to stay competitive. In such a scenario, ethical advocacy by social workers and other clinicians may be necessary to pushback against mission drift—when child welfare goals are subordinated to enforcement priorities.

An apprehension within the immigration/migrant rights community is that ICE family detention centers during mass deportation will be guided by ICE’s own standards—not those of ORR. The divergence in policy and oversight mechanisms has led to serious concerns about the treatment of children and families in custody.





Detention of Single Adult Immigrants

In reacting to emerging impacts of mass deportation on detention of single adult migrants, it is immediately clear that these centers are evolving into a sprawling and operationally murky infrastructure that is shrouded in secrecy. As federal policies increasingly prioritize interior enforcement and rapid removals, ICE is quickly expanding detention facilities—many of them unlisted or repurposed spaces like hotels, hospitals, and military bases. ICE routinely detains individuals with varied legal statuses, including long-term undocumented residents and asylum seekers as well as those with Temporary Protection Status (TPS). There are frequent reports that single adult facilities are often overcrowded, have under-resourced physical conditions, and a paucity of medical, behavioral health and legal support for residents.

Aggressive ICE Interior Targeted Arrests of Migrants: Key to Expansion of Detention Centers

The situation with single adult migrant detention cannot be adequately discussed without fully considering its intersection with Trump's Mass Deportation Executive Order (EO). This is because the EO was motivated by the Trump administration's single-minded near obsession with removing all the over 12 million unauthorized residents and those with TPS status from the U.S. The only avenue for the administration can even get close to achieving those numbers is through aggressive raids and other means—mostly in the U.S. interior—to apprehend suspected undocumented individuals, a vast majority of whom are single adults. It is also deeply concerned that the ICE raids are not limited to Home Depots. The raids also include previously off-limits protected areas such as churches, public schools, and

hospitals. Lastly, there is little doubt that ICE employs racial profiling as a tool for targeting communities, neighborhoods, and work sites frequented by those of Hispanic descent.

Expedited Removal (Rapid Deportation)

Expedited removal, aka, rapid deportation serves two purposes for the administration (1) the policy—in the administration's interpretation—allows ICE to circumvent basic due process protections. However, while rapid deportation is an allowable tool for the administration, it is problematic for detainees for the following reasons: (a) Individuals in expedited removals are not eligible for bond. This means that they are held without judicial review; (b) Critics argue that rapid deportations increase the likelihood of wrongful removals, especially for asylum seekers who may not receive adequate screening and (c) There is a fear that the unpredictability of expedited removal can destabilize immigrant communities, particularly when ICE uses it to bypass immigration court proceedings.

(2) Individuals subject to expedited removal are typically detained for briefer periods compared to those in full removal proceedings, which can drag on for months or even years. Because rapidly deported detainees cycle through facilities more quickly, each bed can be used multiple times over the course of a year. This artificially inflates the system's capacity without expanding more physical infrastructure. Facilities can detain more individuals annually even if the total number of beds remains constant. This is especially attractive to private prison contractors paid per bed per day.

Single Adult Immigrant Detention Facilities Physically and Service-Related Below Standards

As of June 2025, the system is holding about 59,000 immigrants—the highest number in U.S. history. This is well above the congressionally funded capacity of 41,500 beds, meaning many facilities are overcrowded and operating under strain. Additionally, it is common knowledge that the physical conditions of single adult migrant detention centers are below standards. Specific examples of this problem are:

- »□ Repurposed Facilities: Most ICE detention centers for single adults are retrofitted jails or prisons, not designed for civil detention. This leads to punitive environments that contradict the non-criminal nature of immigration detention.
- »□ Overcrowding: Some facilities, for example, have held up to 15,000 detainees in spaces designed for 4,000, creating unsafe and unsanitary conditions.
- »□ Inadequate Infrastructure: Many facilities lack proper ventilation, lighting, and access to outdoor recreation. Some are in remote areas, limiting oversight and legal access.
- »□ Service-Related Deficiencies: (1) Medical and Mental Health Care: Reports consistently cite delays in treatment, lack of qualified staff, and poor mental health services. This violates the constitutional obligation to meet detainees' basic human needs. (2) Food and Hygiene: Detainees often receive substandard meals and insufficient hygiene supplies. Access to showers, clean clothing, and sanitary products is frequently restricted. (3) Legal and Language Access: Many

facilities fail to provide adequate access to legal materials, interpreters, or confidential attorney-client communication.

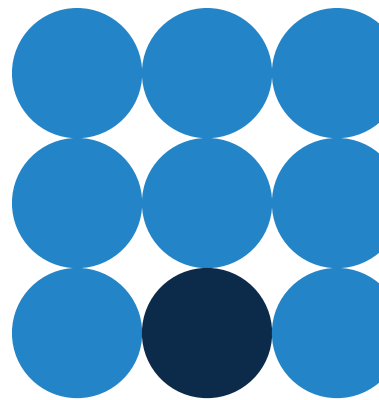
Standards for Oversight of Day-to-Day Detention Facilities Operations

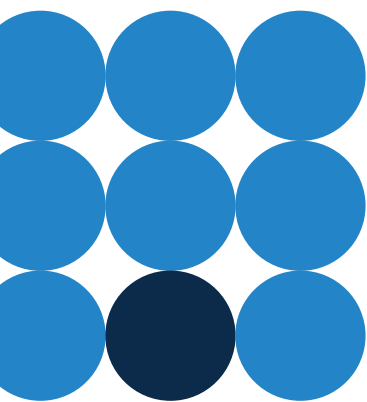
- »□ National Detention Standards (NDS): These standards apply to non-dedicated facilities. However, they are often minimal and inconsistently enforced.
- »□ Performance-Based National Detention Standards (PBNDS): These are more rigorous but apply only to dedicated ICE facilities. Even then, compliance is uneven.
- »□ Constitutional Protections: Under the Fifth Amendment, civil detainees must not be subjected to punitive conditions. Yet, many facilities operate as if detainees were criminal inmates.

The responsibility for meeting all the standards mentioned above is with DHS and HHS—primarily overseen by ICE. However, it is the private contractors who have day-to-day operational control over facilities management, staffing, and services. This makes that accountable for meeting national standards for detention facilities—especially given the sizable profits they receive from ICE contracts.

Cruelty is the Point: Over Emphasis on Degrading Humanity

There is a growing point of view that failure to adhere to national standards in migrant detention centers is not simply an oversight or benign neglect. There are those who feel that the Trump administration—namely Tom Holman, Kristi Noems, and Stephen Miller—embrace detention conditions that border on cruelty. As stated by a prominent critic of the administration's immigrant detention policies, "Passage of President Donald Trump's 'Big





Beautiful Bill’ will fuel a dramatic increase in the capacity of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to detain migrants awaiting deportation. Without adequate judicial supervision and political pressure, the facilities that will be added to the ICE arsenal are likely to join the existing detention centers as locations of human suffering and cruelty.”

Florida’s “Alligator Alcatraz” is a prime example of that cruelty. Alligator Alcatraz is the nickname for the immigrant detention center that Governor DeSantis hastily constructed in the Florida Everglades—the center is officially called the South Florida Detention Facility. It was built on a remote airport site and designed to hold up to 3,000 undocumented immigrants for expedited removals. After much bragging and media seeking public statements by President Trump and Gov. DeSantis, the facility proved to be an environmental and physical disaster—deemed by many as an uninhabitable “hellhole.” Fortunately, for environmental reasons, a federal judge ordered the facility temporarily closed.

Another test of whether or not the Trump administration has a penchant for favoring excessive conditions of confinement is the newly opened wing of the Louisiana State Penitentiary formerly known as Angola—notoriously known as one of the worst prisons in the nation. The prison will host a new detention center named “Camp 57.” The facility will house individuals who ICE officials are calling “the worst of the worst”—meaning murders, rapists, or drug dealers. The problem with that claim is it is the same rationale the administration used to describe the initial rollout of its Mass Deportation Executive Order. This is why many opponents of mass deportation are concerned.

Private Prison Contractors: History and Present Role

The rise of private prison providers in U.S. immigration detention reflects a decades-long shift toward outsourcing federal enforcement functions to profit-driven entities. Beginning in the 1980s, companies like CoreCivic: (formerly Corrections Corporation of America) and GEO Group secured contracts to manage detention facilities for the Immigration and Naturalization Service—ICE’s predecessor—under the rationale of cost efficiency and rapid capacity expansion. By the mid-2010s, nearly three-quarters of ICE detainees were held in privately operated centers, a dramatic increase from earlier reliance on local jails and public institutions.

These corporations have since become deeply embedded in the infrastructure of immigration enforcement, lobbying for detention-heavy policies—while facing persistent allegations of abuse, neglect, and lack of oversight. Critics warn that the historical role of the private prison industry is not merely operational—it is political, economic, and deeply intertwined with the expansion of civil detention as a tool of immigration control.

The cozy relationship with ICE and members of Congress has paid off for CoreCivic and GEO Group. In 2025, Congress approved \$170 billion for immigration enforcement, including \$45 billion for detention center expansion. GEO Group and CoreCivic reported record profits, with GEO earning \$636.2 million in the 2nd Quarter of 2025 alone.

Conclusion

Aggressive detention leading up to mass deportation of immigrants is nothing new in America. We need only to look at state-based

immigration policies that produced explicitly racist Chinese exclusion laws of the 19th century; the systematic deportations of Mexican Americans in the mid-20th century; and the criminalization of immigration policy in recent decades. But after 8 months of Donald Trump's second term in office—which exposed a penchant for an authoritarian power grab that includes a racist dehumanization of migrants—has the immigration rights community struggling to fully grasp the profound heartlessness of the administration's policies. We must not lose sight of the fact that migrant detention is in fact a form of incarceration—regardless of whether it involves single adults, families, or children.

The harsh reality for directly impacted non-citizens, members of mixed-status families and individuals being denied asylum is that the Trump administration is deadly serious about deporting 12 or more million migrants—no matter how long it takes. The massive increase in ICE's budget for thousands more ICE agents and the capacity have over 100,000 individuals in detention on any given day tells us that—to the Trump administration—expedited removal of 1 million detainees each year is an achievable goal.

This reality means that the immigrant rights community—which includes NASW—must work in coalition to mobilize against this threat to social justice and human rights. While we can hope that the federal courts will force the administration to adhere to constitutionally supported due process laws—however there are no guarantees that will happen.

This is why the upcoming mid-term Congressional and state-level elections are of

extreme importance. These elections offer the only remaining reliable guardrail for preventing authoritarian immigration policies—such as expansion of overly punitive detention, driven by mass deportation edicts. It is incumbent on NASW and other national voting and civil rights organizations to inform their members or constituents of urgency of participating in the voting process.

Resources

Bolts: [The Past and Present of Immigration Detention: Your Questions Answered | Bolts](#)

Brennan Center for Justice: [The Detention of Families Facing Deportation Proceedings | Brennan Center for Justice](#)

The Forum: [Explainer: U.S. Immigration Detention and Custody Standards](#)

The Forum: [Family Detention Under the Second Trump Administration - National Immigration Forum](#)

History News Network: [The History Behind the Border and Immigrant Detention Centers — History News Network](#)

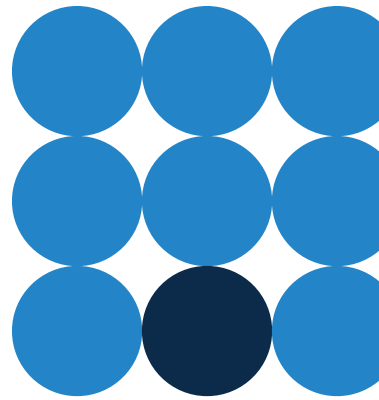
Human Rights First: [The Flores Settlement and Family Incarceration: A Brief History and Next Steps - Human Rights First](#)

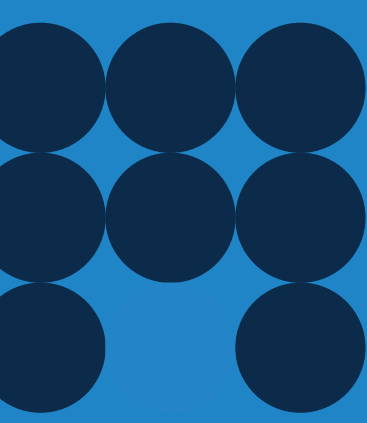
Migration Policy.org: [Profiting from Enforcement: The Role of Private Prisons in U.S. Immigration Detention—Article: Profiting from Enforcement: The Role of P. | migrationpolicy.org](#)

National Immigration Law Center (NILC): [NILC Statement on Federal Court Order Blocking the Trump Administration's Attempt to Unlawfully Remove Guatemalan Children](#)

Truthout: [Immigration Detention Has Become a Booming Business for Private Prison Giants](#)

VisaVerge: [Inside America's Booming Immigration Detention Industry in 2025- Inside America's Booming Immigration Detention Industry in 2025](#)





NASW Resources

NASW » [SocialWorkers.org](https://www.socialworkers.org)

NASW Foundation » [NASWFoundation.org](https://www.naswfoundation.org)

NASW Press » [NASWPress.org](https://www.naswpress.org)

NASW Assurance Services, Inc. » [NASWAssurance.org](https://www.naswassurance.org)

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