

How ICE's Budget Boom Is Changing Immigration Detention

Last year's multibillion-dollar funding package has allowed the government to put more immigrants behind bars, often in worse conditions and with little oversight.



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Criminal Justice

As Congress is at an impasse over funding and reforms to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the agency's main enforcement arm, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), is fully funded until 2029 thanks to the \$75 billion cash injection lawmakers [approved](#) ^[link-1] for it last July. The money, which included \$45 billion for new immigrant detention centers, [more than tripled](#) ^[link-2] ICE's annual budget and made it the largest federal law enforcement agency. ICE has since expanded its detention system at an unprecedented pace, creating a vast deportation ecosystem rife with abuses.

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When President Trump took office, ICE held [fewer than 40,000 people](#) ^[link-5] in detention in a scattered network of facilities across the country, including local jails, ICE processing centers, prisons, and detention centers. Today, that number has ballooned to [70,000](#) ^[link-6] — the highest ever — and the agency appears to be on track to add [more than 100,000](#) ^[link-7] new detention beds by [November 30](#) ^[link-8].

To justify this massive infrastructure, the Trump administration has shifted away from historical approaches to immigration detention by putting more immigrants behind bars and rapidly expanding detention capacity through private contracts and investments in its own

infrastructure. At the same time, it is finding new ways to evade oversight, leading to greater risks to the health and safety of the people in the government's custody.

Increased Detention

Unprecedented resources have made it possible for DHS to treat all immigrants without lawful status as equally subject to mandatory detention and deportation, regardless of whether they have criminal records or are considered a flight risk.

This includes some [1.6 million people](#) [\[link-9\]](#) who were in the country legally but suddenly had their Temporary Protected Status revoked, such as refugees from Haiti and Venezuela.

Previous administrations prioritized detaining unlawful immigrants with criminal records while releasing most others pending a court hearing.

Today, however, [74 percent](#) [\[link-10\]](#) of those in ICE detention have no criminal record, and many of the remainder have nothing in their records more serious or violent than a speeding ticket.

Additionally, to increase the number of immigrants in custody, the administration is using a [questionable](#) [\[link-11\]](#) legal theory to deny requests for release. Federal law mandates detention for immigrants who are considered “applicants for admission” — meaning people who enter the United States illegally. For decades, courts and ICE have interpreted this mandate to apply only to those who entered the country recently.

Immigrants already living in the United States were subject to detention only if they were deemed a flight risk or a danger to society. The current administration has flipped that on its head and is now locking up immigrants on the theory that they are still “applicants for admission” even if they entered the country many years or even decades ago.

Move to No-bid Contracts

The federal government outsources the procurement of goods, services, and construction projects to more than 100,000 companies every year. Contractors typically respond to requests for proposals and compete against one another based on price, expertise, and the services they can provide. This process provides transparency and fairness in addition to ensuring the government does not waste taxpayer dollars.

Trump's declaration of a border emergency in January 2025 has [allowed](#) [\[link-12\]](#) ICE to largely stop using competitive processes and instead [award](#) [\[link-13\]](#) no-bid contracts to massive private prison [contractors CoreCivic and GEO Group](#) [\[link-14\]](#). It has expanded existing detention contracts (such as for the [Delaney Hall Facility](#) [\[link-15\]](#) in Newark, New Jersey, and the [Dilley Immigration Processing Center](#) [\[link-16\]](#) in Dilley, Texas) and established new contracts for new, existing, or reactivated facilities. In a notable

example, ICE awarded CoreCivic a [six-month](#) [\[link-17\]](#) no-bid contract last March to reactivate a notorious 1,033-bed [former federal prison](#) [\[link-18\]](#) in Leavenworth, Kansas. In September, ICE issued CoreCivic a [24-month contract](#) [\[link-19\]](#) for that facility and a California facility that is expected to bring the contractor [approximately \\$60 million in annual revenue](#) [\[link-20\]](#).

ICE also entered into a no-bid 15-year contract with GEO Group worth \$1 billion for the management of Delaney Hall, a 1,000-bed facility in New Jersey. A 15-year term is exceptionally long for a private detention contract, which typically ranges between one and five years.

Expanding Government Capacity Using Warehouses, Military Bases, and Planes

The federal government has historically relied on others to confine people across a vast network of carceral facilities. For decades, ICE has contracted not only with for-profit companies like GEO Group and CoreCivic but also with local jails that [rent bed space](#) [\[link-21\]](#) to the federal government. ICE typically pays jails between [\\$70 and \\$110 per bed per day](#) [\[link-22\]](#), far more than counties usually receive to house their local populations, with some counties [overbuilding](#)

[\[link-23\]](#) jail [capacity](#) [\[link-24\]](#) to take advantage of this revenue stream.

But a new trend has emerged since Trump took office: The federal government is attempting to build its own capacity to hold people, reducing its reliance on private contractors and local jails. City officials in Social Circle, Georgia, recently [met](#) [\[link-25\]](#) with representatives from DHS about the federal government's plans to transform a 1-million-square-foot warehouse the administration just purchased for \$129 million within the city limits into a new "mega center" to house ICE detainees. City officials [revealed](#) [\[link-26\]](#) that DHS indicated that it plans to "transition the ICE detention system from private operations to government-owned facilities." ICE reportedly [plans](#) [\[link-27\]](#) to spend [\\$38.3 billion](#) [\[link-28\]](#) of the funds from the July budget bill to acquire and retrofit 24 warehouses, including 16 regional processing centers and 8 "mega centers" capable of holding up to 10,000 people each.

The Trump administration has already [acquired](#) [\[link-29\]](#) other large manufacturing warehouses, each intended to house between 5,000 and 10,000 people. In January 2026, ICE bought two [warehouses](#) [\[link-30\]](#), paying over \$100 million for a site in Hagerstown, Maryland, and more than \$70 million for another in Surprise, Arizona. In February, the agency paid approximately \$87 million for a [warehouse](#) [\[link-31\]](#) in Upper Bern Township, Pennsylvania. The agency also recently

paid \$123 million for an [826,000-square-foot warehouse](#) [\[link-32\]](#) near El Paso, Texas. ICE is reportedly looking at [multiple](#) [\[link-33\]](#) other properties across the country, and the process has been shrouded in secrecy.

Some local jurisdictions are successfully pushing back against these sales. For example, a warehouse owner in Oklahoma City decided not to move forward with a sale after [local protests](#) [\[link-34\]](#) and a heated city council meeting. And a real estate developer in Utah responded to protests by [disclaiming rumors](#) [\[link-35\]](#) that it planned to sell a Salt Lake City warehouse to ICE for use as a 7,500-bed detention center.

The approach of purchasing warehouses — many of which will be difficult to properly ventilate, were not built to house thousands of people, and are likely to create conditions for the rapid spread of disease — dovetails with the administration's inhumane and punitive tactics for expanding immigrant detention and deportation. Notably, ICE's acting director, Todd Lyons, [said](#) [\[link-36\]](#) at a conference in April 2025, "We need to get better at treating [deportation] like a business . . . like [Amazon] Prime, but with human beings."

Another likely reason for the federal government's push to own these warehouses is to potentially try to claim federal immunity from local zoning restrictions and local oversight rules in the event of [legal challenges](#) [\[link-37\]](#) from communities.

ICE is also managing ad hoc tent encampments at military bases. One of these massive [makeshift detention centers](#) [\[link-38\]](#) was set up in less than two months in 2025 at the Fort Bliss U.S. Army base in El Paso, Texas, on a site formerly used as an [internment camp for Japanese Americans](#) [\[link-39\]](#) during World War II. It now holds more than 3,000 people [in three large tents](#) [\[link-40\]](#) and can expand to hold 2,000 more when additional tents are erected.

Currently, there are at least [two active cases of tuberculosis](#) [\[link-41\]](#) and almost 20 cases of Covid-19 among the people housed in the complex. Detainees have [reported](#) [\[link-42\]](#) inhumane conditions, including rotten food, inadequate access to water, improper medical care, and physical abuse. Temperatures in El Paso are brutal, with [70 days over 100 degrees](#) [\[link-43\]](#) Fahrenheit and [27 days below freezing](#) [\[link-44\]](#) reported in 2023. According to an inspection report [obtained](#) [\[link-45\]](#) by *The Washington Post*, ICE's own inspectors cited dozens of violations of federal detention standards in the camp's first two months of operations, and more violations have been [described by observers](#) [\[link-46\]](#). Three people have died in the camp since it opened in August 2025, one by [homicide](#) [\[link-47\]](#).

ICE is also [planning](#) [\[link-48\]](#) to house detainees at Joint Base McGuire–Dix–Lakehurst in New Jersey, and Camp Atterbury in Indiana, as well as to expand existing facilities at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

In another marked shift in DHS’s detention and deportation efforts, the department is using funds from the July 2025 budget bill to purchase six Boeing 737s, the first airplanes to be owned independently by ICE. DHS [indicated](#) [\[link-49\]](#) this purchase will allow the agency to “operate more effectively, including by using more efficient flight patterns.” Traditionally, deportation and intra-US transport (“shuffle”) flights have been managed by [ICE Air Operations](#) [\[link-50\]](#) through contractors and subcontractors like CSI Aviation.

Evolving Role for Private Contractors

Though GEO Group’s and CoreCivic’s stock prices [soared](#) [\[link-51\]](#) following Donald Trump’s reelection, in anticipation of big government contracts, these [valuations](#) [\[link-52\]](#) have become more [volatile](#) [\[link-53\]](#) in recent months. The federal government’s push to purchase its own planes and warehouses and manage makeshift detention centers on military bases has introduced new uncertainties for private prison companies looking to cash in. For a start, the administration’s [goal](#) [\[link-54\]](#) of detaining another 100,000 people requires capacity that these

companies do not have. Moreover, the federal government has been slower than expected to fill the idle beds contractors currently have available.

That said, there is still an outside role for contractors in this vast ecosystem. Just last week, GEO Group Executive Chairman George Zoley told investors that the company has about 6,000 idle beds at six of its facilities that, if fully utilized, would produce [more than \\$300 million](#) [\[link-55\]](#) in annualized revenues. Looking forward, the industry seems to anticipate that the federal government’s plans to transform warehouses into detention centers require staffing, security, and other capacities that these firms can provide.

Zoley [shared](#) [\[link-56\]](#) that GEO Group is “cautiously participating” in new procurement opportunities to “retrofit and operate these potential sites.”

Abusive and Inhumane Conditions

Besides bolstering its immigration detention and removal capacity independently and via contract, the Trump administration has focused on reducing oversight of its operations. Barely two months after the inauguration, DHS effectively [eliminated](#) [\[link-57\]](#) the Office of the Immigration Ombudsman and the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, which performed critical oversight of ICE operations. Without these oversight bodies, it is unlikely that any agency is monitoring the conditions of immigration detention, including

compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act and its [DHS counterpart](#) [\[link-58\]](#).

ICE has [denied](#) [\[link-59\]](#) access to detention facilities and field offices to numerous members of Congress attempting to check on conditions, even though federal law provides lawmakers the legal right to do so. There are also gaps in oversight of private detention facilities, including being exempt from requests under the Freedom of Information Act.

The lack of oversight comes amid numerous reports of inhumane immigration detention conditions. 2025 was the deadliest year for those in ICE custody in two decades, with at least [32 deaths](#) [\[link-60\]](#), and at least [six deaths](#) [\[link-61\]](#) have been reported so far this year. There are also major concerns with the large number of children in ICE detention, along with the conditions in which they're held. As the Brennan Center noted [previously](#) [\[link-62\]](#), in 2021, the Biden

administration effectively halted the practice of holding families with children in immigration detention, which was common during the first Trump administration. An analysis by *The Marshall Project* found that the current Trump administration has revived the practice, holding about [170 children per day](#) [\[link-63\]](#) in ICE detention. A significant number of them are detained at the Dilley Immigration Processing Center in Texas, where detained families [report](#) [\[link-64\]](#) a lack of reliable medical care as well as worms and mold in their food.

As the government builds its own infrastructure, on top of relying on contractors, it will be difficult to dismantle the detention and deportation machine, even if future administrations aspire to a more humane agenda. Longer detention contracts, more government-owned warehouses, and a fleet of dedicated transport planes — all paired with almost no real oversight of conditions — are the perfect recipe for a human rights disaster.

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Links

link-1: approved <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/1/text>

link-2: more than tripled <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ice-funding-big-beautiful-bill-trump-deportations/>

link-3: Prisons and Jails <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/criminal-justice/prisons-and-jails>

link-4: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) </taxonomy/term/71>

link-5: fewer than 40,000 people <https://www.ice.gov/detain/detention-management>

link-6: 70,000 <https://tracreports.org/immigration/quickfacts/>

link-7: more than 100,000 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/trump-administration-using-no-bid-contracts-boosting-big-firms-to-get-more-ice-detention-beds>

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