

# Detention at Any Cost: Profit and Harm in U.S. Immigration Enforcement

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March 2026

## INTRODUCTION

The United States operates the largest immigration detention system in the world. What began as a system holding roughly 5,000 people per day in the early 1990s expanded to more than 35,000 by 2024. In 2025, the first year of the second Trump administration, detention capacity surged to roughly 70,000 people held daily across hundreds of facilities nationwide, with plans to increase to over 130,000. In July 2025, Congress passed the “One Big Beautiful Bill,” allocating an additional \$45 billion for immigration detention through 2029, accelerating this growth at unprecedented speed.

Conditions in U.S. immigration detention have long been abusive and dangerous. However, the current push for rapid expansion—paired with weakened oversight, no-bid contracting, and deepening political-corporate entanglements—has led to a sharp deterioration in detention services and accountability. Deaths in detention have risen dramatically, alongside mounting evidence of neglect, exploitation, and systemic harm.

## BACKGROUND

This brief draws on more than a decade of collaborative research by Nancy Hiemstra and Deirdre Conlon, conducted since 2012 and synthesized in [\*Immigration Detention Inc: The Big Business of Locking Up Migrants\*](#) (Pluto Press, 2025). Our work focuses on immigration detention facilities in New York and New Jersey, but situates these sites within national and transnational systems of governance, finance, and enforcement.

Using mixed qualitative methods—including public records and FOIA requests at federal and state levels, analysis of inspection and investigative reports, media coverage, and interviews with formerly detained people, advocates, lawyers, and organizers—we examine how financial interests fundamentally drive detention. Rather than treating detention as a neutral tool of migration management, our research reveals how webs of private corporations, local governments, public agencies, and investors profit from confinement while shifting costs and risks onto detained migrants, their families, and communities.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Detention is sustained by interlocking webs of profit, not just private prison companies.**

While companies such as GEO Group and CoreCivic are well known, detention expansion depends on a far broader network of stakeholders. Counties and municipalities rent jail space to ICE and use detention revenue to fund local services. Subcontracted corporations provide food, medical care, commissary services, and communications. Together, these arrangements entangle communities and industries in financial dependence on detention.

### **Profit is generated by providing less—and extracting more.**

The federal government pays around \$200 per day to detain a single adult, and \$500 per day for unaccompanied minors and members of detained family units. These costs are exponentially higher than alternatives like the Family Case Management Program, which costs approximately \$38 per day per family unit. Yet contractors maximize profits by cutting costs on food, medical care, and safety.



Our research documents how “bad food is the business model”: food providers win contracts by bidding extremely low per-meal rates and face few meaningful checks on what is actually served. Medical contractors operate under a logic of “cost containment,” where profits increase when care is delayed, denied, or minimized—contributing directly to preventable illness and death.

**Detainees are transformed into captive consumers and coerced workers.**

Because basic needs are unmet, detained people rely on commissaries, where prices for food, hygiene items, and medicine are often four to seven times higher than outside detention. To afford these essentials, detained migrants are pushed into so-called “voluntary” work programs, performing jobs essential to facility operations for as little as \$1 per day. These practices reduce operating costs while extracting value from detention and incarcerated migrants. Corporate ownership structures further intensify exploitation, as food, medical, and commissary services are often vertically integrated within the same holding companies and private-equity-controlled corporate networks.

**Accountability mechanisms are largely performative—and increasingly dismantled.**

While detention standards exist and facilities are supposed to be bound by them, checks and balances on adherence are riddled with problems. Inspections are typically pre-announced, infrequent, and reliant on facility self-reporting - essentially rubber stamps. Accreditations function as pay-to-play systems that confer legitimacy without verifying conditions. Under the second Trump administration, oversight has eroded further through the closure of civil-rights and oversight offices within DHS, fewer inspections, expanded no-bid contracts, and new limits on access by elected officials and monitors. Even this deeply flawed system of checks is now being weakened, creating near-total opacity as detention rapidly expands.

**Immigration detention is not inevitable**, it is a policy choice sustained by profit, political influence, and eroding accountability. Ending detention abuse and expansion requires cutting financial incentives, restoring transparency, and redirecting public resources toward humane, rights-based approaches to migration governance and community development.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

***To the US Congress:***

**Halt funding streams that expand detention capacity.**

- Block allocations authorized through the One Big Beautiful Bill.
- Impose an immediate freeze on new detention contracts and facility expansions.
- Redirect public funds toward community-based legal representation, housing, healthcare, and case management programs that consistently demonstrate high compliance rates without confinement.

**Dismantle the economic incentives that make detention profitable.**

- End coercive detainee labor programs by requiring payment of federal minimum wage
- Impose strict price controls on commissary goods and communication services
- Mandate comprehensive public disclosure of contractor profits, subcontracting arrangements, and investor relationships tied to immigration detention.



**Mandate and enforce transparency in all relationships between DHS, contracting entities, and policymakers.**

- Prohibit no-bid contracts and emergency procurement practices that bypass public scrutiny.
- Investigate and regulate revolving-door relationships between detention contractors and government officials
- Require disclosure of lobbying and political contributions
- Enact safeguards to prevent corporate influence of immigration policymaking processes.

***To the Department of Homeland Security:***

**Restore and strengthen independent oversight and transparency.**

- Fully fund oversight and civil rights offices within DHS and empower them to enforce penalties.
- Conduct frequent, unannounced inspections by non-ICE inspectors.
- Require and monitor real-time public reporting of detention populations, facility conditions, medical incidents, and deaths in custody.

***To state and local governments:***

**Challenge and dismantle local and state incentives that funnel migrants into detention.**

- Discourage and disallow law enforcement cooperation with ICE.
- Investigate municipal financial dependence on detention revenue.
- Support initiatives for divestment of public funds from detention-related businesses.
- Invest in alternative forms of community economic development that do not rely on migrant incarceration for fiscal stability.

**Prioritize public investment in humane, non-carceral responses to migration.**

- Reject surveillance-based “Alternatives to Detention” that add to private companies’ profits.
- Fund community-centered programs that emphasize legal support, stability, accompaniment, and care, recognizing that safety, compliance, and dignity are best achieved outside systems of confinement.