

Beyond the “Worst of the Worst”: The Human Cost of the Detention Surge

The administration promised to target the worst criminals. Instead, business owners, longtime residents, children, and people with serious medical conditions are filling a rapidly expanding detention system.

Seamus Culleton had been living in the United States since 2009. He ran a plastering business in the Boston area, married a U.S. citizen, and held a valid work permit while completing the final stages of the green card process. In September 2025, after a federal agent ran his license plate outside a Massachusetts Home Depot, he was arrested. Within days, he was transported more than 2,000 miles away to Fort Bliss, Texas. Months later, he remained there, unable to attend the very interview the government had scheduled to resolve his status. His family described overcrowded conditions and prolonged uncertainty. Culleton himself compared the experience of detention to torture.

Cases like Culleton’s don’t fit the story the administration tells about itself. The messaging has been consistent and unmistakable. Detention and removal efforts, officials say, are focused on criminals, particularly violent offenders described as “the worst of the worst.” The phrase frames enforcement as a targeted public safety measure, reassuring the public that detention expansion is aimed at people who pose obvious danger.

The numbers tell a more complicated story.

Detention populations have risen sharply over the past year, yet recent data clarify what is actually driving that growth. Nearly 74 percent of individuals currently held in ICE custody have no criminal record at all. Roughly three out of every four detainees are being confined for civil immigration matters rather than criminal convictions. The expansion of detention capacity is not, in any straightforward sense, a response to rising criminal activity. It reflects a decision to detain a far broader population.

How people enter detention helps explain this shift. Many detainees now arrive directly from civil immigration processes, often while attempting to resolve their legal status. Attorneys and detainees increasingly describe arrests during routine administrative interactions rather than following criminal proceedings. Individuals have been taken into custody at green card interviews, immigration check-ins, and courthouse appearances. For those individuals, the paradox is direct: following the rules becomes a point of exposure.

The character of enforcement operations also strains the “targeted” framing. Multi-agency sweeps involving tactical gear, armored vehicles, and large-scale raids are difficult to reconcile with the image of a system narrowly focused on known dangerous individuals. While such

operations are often described as efforts to locate specific people, reports repeatedly describe broader encounters in which bystanders are stopped, questioned, or detained along the way.

Legal changes have compounded the consequences. For decades, detainees with strong community ties were often eligible for bond hearings. Immigration judges assessed flight risk and danger to the community, and many individuals were released while proceedings continued. Recent rulings have significantly narrowed those pathways. In states including Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, large categories of detainees may now be held without any meaningful opportunity for release. Immigration proceedings are rarely swift, and cases often stretch for months.

For long-time undocumented residents, the implications are profound. Individuals who have lived in the United States for decades can now be detained and remain confined for extended periods while awaiting adjudication. These are people with jobs, families, neighbors, and longstanding ties to their communities. Their sudden removal is experienced not as an abstract administrative action, but as the disappearance of coworkers, parents, caregivers, and friends. The shift materially alters detention's character, blurring the boundary between civil custody and prolonged punishment.

Immigration detention operates under civil administrative authority. Individuals are not serving criminal sentences. They are held to ensure appearance at proceedings or to facilitate removal. That legal distinction is real and consequential. But it does not change what detention actually is: loss of freedom, often for months, under conditions that frequently resemble prison.

The scale and speed of expansion have reshaped not only who is detained, but where detention occurs. In early 2026, Fort Bliss became home to Camp East Montana, now widely described as the largest immigration detention site in the country. The facility is a sprawling tent complex constructed under emergency contracting authority, designed to hold thousands of detainees.

Emergency shelters are designed to provide temporary refuge during crises. They are not built to hold people for months. Facilities intended for prolonged civil confinement require stable infrastructure, durable environmental controls, medical systems, and oversight capable of supporting large populations over time. Tent complexes offer none of that. Repurposing them for long-term detention is not an improvisation. It is a policy choice with predictable results.

Reports from attorneys, detainees, and inspection findings describe overcrowding, severe temperature conditions, limited privacy, and mounting health concerns. Public health reports and inspection findings have documented infectious disease outbreaks, including tuberculosis and COVID-19. Within weeks of operation, inspectors from ICE's Office of Detention Oversight identified dozens of violations of federal detention standards. An autopsy by the El Paso County medical examiner later classified one detainee's death as a homicide, intensifying scrutiny of conditions inside.

Camp East Montana is not an anomaly. Across the country, federal authorities have pursued the rapid conversion of warehouse-style buildings into detention centers. Industrial spaces

repurposed for mass confinement prioritize scale over suitability. Together, they mark the outlines of a system expanding faster than it can be built.

At the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, children wrote letters. A 9-year-old Venezuelan girl wrote about missing school, missing friends, and worrying about her parents. A 14-year-old Colombian girl described anxiety, sleeplessness, and the exhaustion of not knowing what would happen to her family. The detention center administration confiscated the letters.

Public health authorities have also confirmed measles infections at the facility, underscoring the well-understood risks contagious diseases pose in crowded custodial environments where vaccination histories may be incomplete or unknown.

Health risks within detention are not limited to outbreaks. Javier Abreu-Vasquez was detained in Minnesota while delivering groceries for a church mutual aid program. He had previously undergone kidney transplant surgery. After transfer to a Texas detention facility, his family reported delays in access to essential medication.

Detention facilities are custodial institutions rather than medical centers, yet individuals with serious health conditions become entirely dependent on them for continuity of care. In custodial settings, interruptions in medication are well-understood clinical risks.

Deaths in detention, though statistically uncommon, clarify what is at stake. Oversight investigations have repeatedly identified the same failures: delayed treatment, inadequate monitoring, and breakdowns in emergency response. These are the foreseeable consequences of overcrowded custodial systems without adequate medical infrastructure.

The administration's preferred framing asks the public to evaluate this system on a single dimension: are dangerous people being removed? But the costs don't distribute that neatly.

Start with the person arrested and released. Hours in custody, sometimes days — handcuffed, loaded into an unmarked vehicle, transported somewhere their family cannot immediately find them. Then released, perhaps with nothing but the experience itself. The official ledger records this as a non-event. The person who lived through it knows otherwise. Trauma does not require duration.

Move outward. The family that spent those hours not knowing. The child who watched a parent taken from a doorstep. The neighborhood where the sweep happened and people stopped gathering, stopped attending, stopped being visible — because visibility had revealed itself as risk. The witness who had to calculate, in real time, whether documenting what they saw was worth becoming part of it. These costs appear in no enforcement statistic. They accumulate invisibly, in withdrawn participation and contracted civic life.

The administration understands the mechanism. It has said so in the language available to it. When Seamus Culleton's detention drew attention — a plasterer, a husband, a man doing exactly what his government had required of him — a DHS response made the operational logic explicit: if he finds the conditions harsh, he could return to Ireland. His suffering is not a

regrettable byproduct. It is an offer. Leave, or endure this. The term the administration uses without embarrassment is “self-deport.” What it describes is the extraction of a legal waiver under duress — surrender your right to have your case heard, or remain in a tent facility with inadequate medical care and no clear timeline for release. Attrition through enforcement is not a phrase critics invented. It is the phrase the strategy’s architects used when they published it as policy.

The masks are part of the same architecture, and they deserve more attention than they typically receive. The visible justification is officer protection — agents shielded from identification cannot be targeted for harassment or retaliation. That concern is real. But anonymity does not only protect. It emboldens. Philip Zimbardo’s research on deindividuation — the process by which anonymity dissolves the internal constraints that normally govern behavior — finds that masked individuals don’t merely feel permitted to act differently. They feel released. The accountability that identity imposes operates not just externally, through oversight and consequences, but internally, through the knowledge that what you do will be associated with who you are. Remove that association and you have not simply reduced the risk of punishment. You have altered the psychological conditions under which decisions get made. Abu Ghraib did not require sadists. It required anonymity, diffuse responsibility, a dehumanized detainee population, and the absence of meaningful oversight. The conditions were sufficient. A system concerned about officer conduct would require identification, publish its rules of engagement, and ensure independent review of use-of-force incidents. None of that is in place. What is in place is a documented pattern of weapons drawn in situations that don’t require them — drawn at people who are not resisting, in front of cameras. The gun out is not only a response to threat. It is a message.

For many detainees, prolonged confinement is not the end of the process. It is a stage preceding removal.

Removal increasingly extends beyond the conventional image of returning individuals to countries they know well. Longtime residents, including individuals brought to the United States as children, may face deportation to countries they barely know. In some cases, individuals are removed to third countries with which they have little or no meaningful social connection.

For people whose families, language, education, and livelihoods are entirely American, removal can mean not only geographic displacement, but profound social and cultural dislocation. Within this broader reality, detention is not merely a procedural step. Confinement, uncertainty, family separation, and prolonged loss of freedom reshape lives in ways that are immediate, destabilizing, and often enduring.

The outermost cost is the hardest to measure and the most important to name. Democracy does not run on institutions alone. It runs on the willingness of ordinary people to participate — to show up, speak out, bear witness, and trust that doing so will not invite retaliation. Every arrest of a bystander, every confiscated letter, every masked agent with a drawn weapon on a street corner teaches a lesson about what participation costs. Some people absorb that lesson and withdraw. They stop attending the meeting, stop filing the complaint, stop standing on the

corner with a phone. That withdrawal is invisible in any enforcement statistic. It shows up only in what stops happening.

That erosion belongs to all of us — not as immigrants, not as protesters, not as the direct target of anything, but as people whose democratic life depends on a baseline of civic courage. When that baseline is deliberately tested, when the experience of paying attention is made frightening enough that people decide it isn't worth it, something is lost that removal statistics will never capture and that no subsequent administration can simply restore. The damage to democratic participation is not a side effect of the detention surge. In the most important sense, it is the point.