Unhealthy Numbers

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In 2013, the Detention Watch Network posted the most current statistics for the number of people detained each year. Across the country, there are 441,000 immigrants being held in 209 jails and prisons, 62 percent of which are operated by private companies. And since 2003, 160 people have died while in immigration detention. Who is accountable for their deaths?

Many people believe that the individuals in detention are all undocumented immigrants. But there are many other folks the Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) arm of Homeland Security has jailed for being convicted of crimes that happened, in some cases, more than 20 or 30 years ago and for which they have already served their time. Besides illegal immigrants, many lawful permanent residents (some of whom have lived in the United States for decades) who have committed crimes classified as aggravated felonies or crimes of moral turpitude are subject to mandatory detention in facilities where they're often given subpar medical care that jeopardizes their lives. (Because the government has given its OK, ICE can pick up these individuals days or even years after they've served their sentence and been released from prison.)

But not enough people are paying attention to the abuses in detention facilities. In a number of these harsh settings, immigrants are routinely denied access to adequate medical care, legal counsel and family contact. True, there are mechanisms for filing complaints, but often these measures are meaningless gestures within a circular system designed to remain self-contained and free from oversight.

For example, ICE conducts inspections of these facilities using standard-based guidelines that on paper offer detainees a way to report abuses, voice concerns about shortcomings in the system and request the health care services they need.

According to reports, these standards read well but translate much differently in the real world of detainees who don't receive medical care as described in the guidelines of the Performance-Based National Detention Standards. In the section on medical care, the first standard states: "Detainees shall have access to a continuum of health care services, including screening, prevention, health education, diagnosis and treatment."

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But efforts made by detainees to receive humane treatment have met with little success. On the whole, the administrative and bureaucratic procedures followed at these detention facilities are time-consuming and frustrating and fail to meet many of the medical needs of detained

individuals.

The standards in use are, essentially, unenforceable. Jails and prisons face few, if any, consequences when they fail to meet inspection standards and place the lives of detainees at risk.

There is some hope that change will come eventually, but right now there’s no political will to institute change. Therefore, the outcome for immigrants remains poor.

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