

Detained immigrants living in trash and forced to eat spoiled meat in US detention centers

By Genevieve Leigh
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The 528 immigrant detainees who are imprisoned at Theo Lacy jail in Orange County have been fed spoiled meat, forced to use moldy showers, and endured harsh solitary confinement punishments, according to a report released Monday by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General. The report is based on a surprise facility check-in conducted by federal inspectors in November, 2016.

The facility uses solitary confinement to punish prisoners at the discretion of sadistic guards. The investigators determined through observation and interviews that detainees under solitary confinement are not permitted any recreation time, visitation, access to religious officials, or telephone use. These prisoners are permitted access to one book from the library for the duration of their solitary stay, which can last up to 30 days.

During a review of the food services at the prison, investigators found different types of unwrapped lunch meat being stored in unlabeled, uncovered containers with no information describing contents, processing dates, or expiration dates. Detainees told inspectors that their lunchmeat was often so rotten they had to wash it before eating.

The facility also intentionally houses immigrants without criminal histories with hardened criminals in order to create dangerous and intimidating conditions for detainees. Detainees are prevented from using telephones and are charged for each minute when allowed to make calls. The report confirmed that multiple phones booths for detainee use were unusable and that communication with family and attorneys is nearly impossible.

The report said day-to-day living quarters for the

inmates are unkempt and cluttered with trash due to lack of regular cleaning by the jailers. Inspectors documented shower stalls that contained trash, mildew, and mold. According to Orange County Sheriff Department (OCSD) regulations, detainees are required to clean their showers daily, but the inspectors' report revealed that detainees are not provided with proper cleaning equipment to combat mold and mildew.

A class action lawsuit filed by detainees of a privately owned, for-profit facility in Colorado recently alleged that the facility regularly required forced labor and placed immigrants in solitary confinement if they refused.

The inspectors also report that "ICE personnel do not document or track oral grievances from detainees, and detainees do not receive a documented response." Through interviews with OCSD staff, the inspectors found that grievances are maintained in a database owned by a private contractor that is not accessible to ICE officials. Detainees complained that they were not given the opportunity to appeal their grievances with ICE.

The Orange County Sheriff's Department and ICE have responded to these claims with sneering disdain for the lives of migrants. Tom Dominguez, president of the Association of Orange County Deputy Sheriffs reacted to the investigation by saying, "We are pleased that the Inspector General's findings were not of a more serious nature."

The snail's pace at which the Inspector General's office has reacted to the findings reveals a similar sentiment. The criminal activities of ICE and Theo county jail became known to government investigators in November 2016. The 18-page government report

took four months to be published. Predicted deadlines to rectify the grievances laid out within the report are scheduled as far out as October of 2017. This means that the prisoners of Theo County jail may have to wait almost a full year before they are provided clean showers and unexpired meat.

These conditions are neither new nor unique. In 2013 this same jail was investigated by an Orange County grand jury, which found sheriff's deputies regularly dodged duties by sleeping in the guard station, playing video games and encouraging criminal inmates to punish other inmates.

In 2015, a group of immigrant inmates at the Theo county jail filed a federal lawsuit alleging that sheriff's deputies physically abused and denied medical treatment to detainees. Allegations of similar crimes and worse at detention facilities have become a daily occurrence since Trump's executive orders. However, there is a long documented history of these crimes since the onset of immigration detention over three decades ago.

There currently exists virtually no oversight to the 200+ ICE facilities scattered throughout the United States. Every single one, without exception, has had complaints of a similar nature filed against it.

The inspections process for each facility is incredibly limited and underenforced. The jails adopt the standards by which they are monitored, eliminating any genuine oversight.

ICE officials pointed out in Monday's report on the Theo Lacy jail for example, that the facility was in fact meeting ICE standards regarding food services, despite the service of rotten meat. ICE does not require that facilities abide by US Department of Agriculture methods or protocols.

Legislation was passed in 2009 that required ICE to stop contracting with any facility that failed two inspections in a row. The Obama administration boasted this fact as proof of its humanitarian credentials. Recently released documents from a Freedom of Information Act request reveal that not a single facility has been closed as a result of failing two inspections in a row.