

Twenty-two deaths reported in immigrant detention centers since Trump took office

By Niles Niemuth
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At least 22 immigrants have died in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) since Donald Trump took office in January of 2017, according to a review of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) documents by NBC News.

The deaths come as the Trump administration has escalated the assault on immigrants in the United States, increasing the number of people held in its sprawling network of some 200 jails and detention camps to 42,000 per day in 2018.

Under Trump the population of the immigrant prison network has risen 30 percent over the average under Obama and twice that under George W. Bush, filling many jails to capacity. The rapidly rising number of immigrants held in federal custody has contributed to the recent rise in deaths. Despite this, the administration has requested that the capacity be expanded to 51,000 as it continues its anti-immigrant rampage in 2019.

Reports of unsanitary conditions, spoiled food, abusive guards and lack of medical staff are common. Detainees are treated like convicted criminals and are frequently placed in solitary confinement regardless of their age or health. A report published by Human Rights Watch last year found that “dangerously substandard care in immigration detention” contributed to the deaths of 15 people in ICE custody between December 2015 and April 2017.

“You’ll see someone who is clearly an asylum seeker who came into custody with a serious medical condition, whether a heart condition or otherwise, and you have to ask, ‘Why is this person in jail?’” Heidi Altman, director of policy at the National Immigrant Justice Center, told NBC News. “There’s no reason for it.”

Ten deaths were recorded in 2017 and the 12 reported

in 2018 matched the number of migrants who died in 2016, the last full year of the Obama administration. In total there have been 188 deaths in immigration detention centers since 2003 when DHS began to oversee the operation of ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

This grim tally for the first two years of the Trump administration does not include the recent deaths of 7-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquin and 8-year-old Felipe Alonzo-Gomez, who both died after becoming ill in the custody of CBP last month. Nor does the total include Mariee Juarez, a one-year-old who died in early 2018 after being held in detention along with her mother. It also does not count those who have died or been killed shortly after their release or deportation.

The largest number of immigrants to die in US custody since 2017 were from Mexico (4), Cuba (4), Honduras (3) and Russia (2), with one each from Armenia, Eritrea, India, Vietnam, Iran, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama and Jamaica.

The Southern US state of Georgia had the highest number of deaths with four, followed by Florida, California and Texas which each recorded three deaths. Deaths were also reported in Louisiana, New York, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Washington.

A review of the circumstances leading to the death of each person in ICE custody reveals that most died as the result of criminal neglect or abuse.

Roxsana Hernandez Rodriguez, a 33-year-old transgender woman from Honduras seeking asylum in the US, died in New Mexico in August 2018 after being arrested at the border in San Diego and shuffled around detention centers. Hernandez, who was HIV positive, became severely ill in ICE custody and did not receive any treatment for several days before being transferred to the hospital where she died. An

independent autopsy found that she had been subjected to physical assault while in detention.

Sergio Alonso Lopez, a 55-year-old man from Mexico, died in February 2017 of internal bleeding after medical staff failed to give him several doses of the methadone he had been taking to treat his addiction.

At least five men died by suicide in US detention facilities in the last two years and a sixth was the victim of an apparent suicide after being transferred to Egyptian custody.

Osmar Epifanio Gonzalez-Gadba, a 32-year-old asylum seeker from Nicaragua, died of suicide by hanging in March 2017 after being placed in solitary confinement at the Adelanto Detention Center in California. A review of his death found that despite becoming withdrawn and reporting hallucinations, Gonzalez-Gadba did not receive appropriate medical attention. A surprise visit by the inspector general to Adelanto in 2018 found nooses hanging in multiple cells.

Jeancarlo Jimenez-Joseph died of a suicide in May 2017 while in solitary confinement at a detention center in Georgia. A fellow detainee told investigators that he had heard Jimenez-Joseph tell guards that he was suffering from psychosis.

Zeresenay Ermias Testfatsion, a 34-year-old asylum seeker from the east African country of Eritrea, was found dead of an apparent suicide in the shower area of Cairo International Airport in Egypt. He had been transferred by ICE into the custody of the brutal Sisi dictatorship, notorious for its torture and murder of prisoners, for repatriation to Eritrea. Testfatsion had told immigration officials that he feared returning to his home country where citizens are conscripted into indefinite military service.

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