

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/immigrants-detained-under-inhumane-conditions-etowah-county-alabama/>

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An immigration detainee writes in his cell at the Etowah County Detention Center. Photo by Hannah Rappleye/NBC News

Rotten and insufficient food, isolation from their families and lawyers, denial of medical care and access to the outdoors are among the inhumane conditions protested this summer by 100 of the more than 300 men confined at the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden, Alabama, under a contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The Etowah county jail is one of more than 250 detention facilities around the country that hold tens of thousands of immigrants detained each year by ICE while they await court dates or deportation. [NBC News reported](#) this week that even those accused of relatively minor infractions, such as overstaying a visa, can be held for months or even years fighting their cases without the benefit of rights and resources guaranteed to those accused of criminal acts.

Those detained by ICE at Etowah include asylum seekers, immigrants fighting deportation or seeking special status to remain in the country, and immigrants whose home countries refuse repatriation. They are not being detained for punishment, yet they are treated as prisoners, wearing uniforms, confined in small cells and forced to mingle with general inmate populations, and they face long, open-ended stays in a jail designed for short-term inmates.

Like the rest of the jails inmates, ICE detainees are not allowed contact visits with family or friends; the commissary, where they can purchase extra food or toiletries, is prohibitively expensive; phone calls, often their sole link to far-away family members, cost up to \$1 a minute. Immigration lawyers, and courts, are difficult to access from Etowah, and many detainees described inadequate medical care.

ICE's own reports, as well as inspections by third parties, have noted deficiencies. A 2008 ICE inspection report noted two suicides by county inmates within a six-month period. ICE records from that year also indicate that a female detainee tried to hang herself in her cell. The food supply was the subject of a grand jury investigation in 2010. Jurors concluded it was sufficient.

The expense of transporting detainees to and from court and lack of access to ICE staff and attorneys were among the reasons why ICE announced it would stop using Etowah in 2010. But ICE pays \$40 per detainee daily to the county, adding up to \$5 million annually. The federal government also paid the majority of the cost of renovating the jail. Losing that federal money would be a devastating blow to the county budget, Etowah Sheriff Todd Entrekin told the Gadsden Times in 2011.

Alabama Representatives Robert Aderholt and Mike Rogers and Senators Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions, all Republicans, reacted swiftly, emailing and meeting personally with high-level ICE officials. Rep. Aderholt became chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security in January 2011, giving him power to shape ICE's budget. Gary Mead, ICE's executive associate director, wrote after meeting with Aderholt, I do not believe we will be allowed to leave Etowah without serious repercussions against our budget.

Control of the Etowah facility was transferred to ICE's New Orleans field office. About 100 female detainees once housed at Etowah were moved out and new male detainees were moved in. Many are expected to spend long terms at Etowah.

The food quality improved temporarily. But by July, detainees staged a brief hunger strike after complaints that the facility had reverted back to serving food that was rotten and nutritionally inadequate were ignored.

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