

El Paso Immigration Center Is Dangerously Overcrowded, Inspector General Warns



The Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General used this photo in a report to show crowded holding cells at an immigration facility in El Paso. The government shielded the faces of detainees. Credit: Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General

By Mihir Zaveri

- May 31, 2019

Severe overcrowding at an immigration facility in El Paso presents an immediate risk to the health and safety of hundreds of migrants being held there, with some of those detained standing on top of toilets in crowded rooms just to find air to breathe, a federal watchdog said this week.

In [a report issued Thursday](#) in which it calls for immediate action, the United States Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General detailed several striking observations about the conditions at the El Paso Del Norte immigration processing center gathered during unannounced inspections in early May.

Despite federal standards saying that people should generally not be detained for more than 72 hours, some people were held in "standing room only" cells for weeks, the report said. Investigators found that there was limited access to showers and clean clothes, the report said. Some people were "wearing soiled clothing for days or weeks," the report said.

Investigators found 155 people in a cell that was supposed to hold 35, and 41 people in a cell that was supposed to hold eight. Nine hundred people were being held at the center on one day in May — far exceeding its capacity of 125.

“We are concerned that the overcrowding and prolonged detention represent an immediate risk to the health and safety not just of the detainees, but also D.H.S. agents and officers,” the report said.

The Department of Homeland Security declined to comment on the findings on Friday night.

But in a May 28 letter responding to the inspector general’s findings that was included in Thursday’s report, the Department of Homeland Security said it had been taking steps to address the overcrowding but was “not equipped to accommodate a migration pattern like the one we are experiencing now.”

The department said that since early May, it had operated “a weatherproof and climate-controlled soft-sided structure” at the El Paso center that could hold up to 500 additional people. Officials will begin operating a new holding facility with room for up to 800 people at the end of July, the department said.

The department said it was planning to build another processing center in El Paso that could hold an additional 1,800 people and would be ready in about 18 months.

“Congress can also help by working on targeted solutions to restore integrity to our immigration system and remove the incentives for families and children to cross our border illegally,” the department said in the letter.

In response to the department’s plans for expansion, the inspector general’s report reiterated that the “dangerous overcrowding” required “immediate action.” The report said that the crowding could increase the spread of illnesses, and that “rising tensions among detainees could turn violent.”

The report did not recommend any specific actions for the department to take.

The report was yet another illustration of how a surge of Central American migrants arriving at the country’s southwestern border in recent months, particularly as families, has strained the capabilities of America’s immigration system and fueled concerns about the migrants’ care.

El Paso in particular has displayed many of those challenges. On Thursday, [immigration officials said](#) that the Border Patrol took 1,036 people into custody there after they had arrived at the border together in the largest group ever encountered.

In March, immigration officials set up [a makeshift encampment under](#) a bridge in El Paso to detain hundreds of migrants in a military tent.

Such encampments are just one way that immigration officials have responded to the influx of migrants.

To some, the report's findings were not surprising, but instead supported claims about the substandard treatment of detained migrants.

"This has been happening for a really long time," said Erika Andiola, chief of advocacy for the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, or Raices, a nonprofit organization that provides low-cost legal defense services to immigrant and refugee families in Texas.

Ms. Andiola said federal officials needed to stop detaining migrants at the border. She said money should be diverted from the "militarization of the border" — for example, increased surveillance — to more humanitarian goals like providing food or medical care to migrants.

"We've been sounding the alarm on this for a while now," she said.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/us/el-paso-border-overcrowding.html>