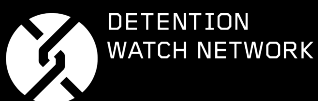


# ANTHOLOGY OF ABUSE

Violence and Neglect at the  
**Winn Correctional Center**



DETENTION  
WATCH NETWORK



FREEDOM  
FOR IMMIGRANTS



## Background

ICE began detaining immigrants in the Winn Correctional Center in 2019. A private prison run by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA)—now known as CoreCivic—Winn was already notorious from a 2016 investigative journalism piece by a Mother Jones reporter, who got hired as a guard there in late 2014.<sup>1</sup> That piece revealed shocking practices, including guards regularly beating and pepper spraying inmates, widespread tolerance of sexual abuse, and dangerously inadequate mental health services and protocols.<sup>2</sup>

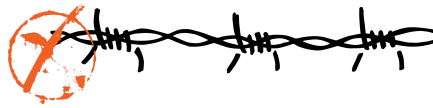
LaSalle Corrections took over Winn in 2015, and a few years later switched to detaining immigrants, following some state-level criminal justice reforms that decreased Louisiana’s prison population.<sup>3</sup> But people detained at Winn under LaSalle’s management and the ICE contract did not fare better, and reports of abuses began “[a]most immediately.”<sup>4</sup> Following the outbreak of COVID-19, a Marshallese man detained there died of the disease, as did two facility employees.<sup>5</sup> Other people detained there have suffered severe violence, torture, and resulting physical harm – including three men whose necks and wrists were injured after guards kneeled on them to force them to fingerprint their own deportation orders, a common practice at Winn.<sup>6</sup> Complaints from advocacy organizations on behalf of detained people also brought to light widespread and virulent racist abuse, as

well as frequent use of homophobic and transphobic slurs and threats of violence against LGBTQ+ and HIV positive people. Such complaints also exposed facility officials’ frequent retaliation against people exercising their rights or for any perceived “insubordination” with tear gas and prolonged solitary confinement.<sup>7</sup> In June 2021, ICE even unlawfully detained with adults at Winn a Black 13-year-old unaccompanied child seeking asylum. Officers at multiple points failed to notify the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) of his case and, on at least one occasion, hid him during an inspection. The Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, an oversight office within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), issued a scathing report in August of 2021, decrying a “culture and conditions that can lead to abuse,” advocating for the immediate cessation of any transfers or new bookings into Winn, and further recommending that ICE draw down the population to zero until conditions were improved.<sup>8</sup>

Belatedly, but to the relief of advocates and detained people alike, the Biden Administration slated the facility for a serious reduction in population in early 2022.<sup>9</sup> Yet Winn remains open at full capacity today,<sup>10</sup> while the reasons for its closure likewise remain the same: Winn Correctional Center is still a “horrific” and unimproved pit of violence, rights violations, deprivation, and abuse.<sup>11</sup>







## Purpose

ICE insists through internal inspections that Winn is in compliance with “strict detention standards” despite years of evidence exposing the facility’s inhumanity. Winn is proof that regardless of the amount of oversight conducted, complaints filed, and legal battles endured, ICE detention is rotten to its core and incapable of improvement. The facility must be shut down.

This brief is intended to provide an evidence bank for this argument and gather in one place the litany of harms that Winn has caused over the course of the four years it has served as an ICE detention

facility. For years, people detained at Winn, advocates, lawyers, government agencies, and journalists have witnessed, investigated, and detailed the horrors of confinement at the facility, creating a long paper trail of abuse. Yet as we approach the contract deadline on May 15, 2024, ICE continues to transfer more people to the facility.

We cannot settle for oversight and promises to address conditions. The damning trail of evidence shared in this brief demonstrates that the only solution is to shut down Winn, release the people inside, and stop using the facility to jail any population of people again. What follows is a comprehensive, but by no means exhaustive summary of evidence and collection of resources from various perspectives substantiating the ongoing demand for closure.

## The Paper Trail

### Advocates and Directly Impacted Individuals

People detained at Winn as well as other immigrant rights advocates and organizers have for years decried the extensive human rights abuses at the facility. Its short history as an ICE detention facility is littered with both individual and systemic reports of horrific conditions and egregious





**BuzzFeed News**

IMMIGRATION

## **Internal Investigators Told ICE To Stop Sending Immigrants To A Prison In Louisiana Because Of A Culture That Can Lead To Abuse**

“By the time I get them out, they are half the person they used to be.”

violence and abuse of authority. A coalition of advocates in Louisiana—the Southeast Dignity Not Detention coalition—has formed to support people detained at Winn and other facilities under the New Orleans ICE Field Office, amplify their stories and demands, and call for closure of the network of deeply entrenched jails in the region. Groups in this coalition have highlighted Winn as one of the clearest examples of the grievous inadequacies and culture of violence in immigration detention.

One of the major issues consistently named is a troubling pattern of deliberate medical neglect. Advocates who represent and otherwise support people detained at Winn

have found that staff there consistently fail to provide adequate medical care to immigrants in their custody and deny necessary services and medications, including insulin for diabetes, inhalers for asthma, and hormone therapy for transgender migrants.<sup>12</sup> Medical staff often only provide ibuprofen in response to medical requests, no matter the condition, if they address the requests at all. One attorney reported that her client with a circulatory disorder and visible blood pooling in his leg received no medical help at Winn, nor did a client with hernias so severe he could barely walk or sit.<sup>13</sup> Another client had to remove his own cyst from his stomach to prevent infection.<sup>14</sup> Immigrants





## Detainees and advocates decry 'horrific' conditions at Louisiana ICE detention center

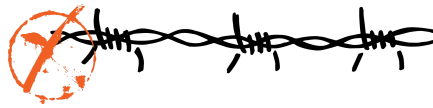
were similarly unable to access mental health care, despite repeated requests for support.

A 2020 report from the ACLU, Human Rights First, and the National Immigrant Justice Center found through touring Winn and interviewing dozens of immigrants detained there that people with disabilities suffered particularly high levels of abuse and neglect and that staff would conceal people with disabilities during facility inspections.<sup>15</sup> For example, Manuel Amaya Portillo, an asylum seeker with disabilities affecting his ability to walk requested a wheelchair multiple times, only to be ignored by Winn staff.<sup>16</sup> Without a wheelchair, Manuel could not access the shower, toilet, or sink without assistance from other detained immigrants.<sup>17</sup> Then, when government-contracted inspectors came to Winn in November 2019, staff sedated Manuel against his will and locked him in a small medical room to hide him from view.<sup>18</sup>

Conditions at Winn further exacerbate existing health issues and cause new illnesses, both physical and mental. The facility deprives immigrants of basic human needs, including clean drinking water and food.<sup>19</sup> Immigrants detained at the facility can see that the water is “yellow” and they receive cold, expired, raw, and rotten food.<sup>20</sup> The living spaces are “filthy,” with black mold and water leaking through the roof onto sleeping areas.<sup>21</sup> During an ICE stakeholder tour in 2023, the facility confirmed to advocates that there is no air conditioning in the kitchen or the recreation room. The conditions are so poor and dehumanizing that many immigrants express suicidal ideation and a few have attempted suicide while imprisoned there.<sup>22</sup>

Many accounts at Winn highlight the consistent use of physical and psychological abuse against detained individuals, including as retaliation for protesting conditions or prolonged





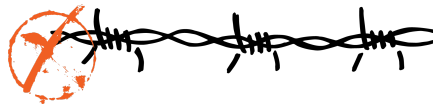
detention. In August 2020, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) submitted a letter to the Office of Inspector General (OIG) demanding an investigation into officials throwing pepper and tear gas bombs into dorms and closing the doors in response to immigrants protesting lack of information about their immigration cases.<sup>23</sup> The tear gas caused individuals to vomit blood and suffer asthma attacks.<sup>24</sup> In 2019, officers similarly used pepper spray and tear gas against detained immigrants protesting their prolonged detention without a court date.<sup>25</sup> Winn staff often also use forced isolation as punishment for minor conflicts, protesting, speaking to reporters, or otherwise speaking out about conditions at the facility.<sup>26</sup> They threaten solitary confinement for “any behavior they consider insubordination”—in one instance documented by the ACLU and other organizations, an immigrant was punished with solitary for 30 days simply because he took a shower at 11 p.m.<sup>27</sup> The solitary confinement cells provide no access to sunlight or communication with attorneys or families, and migrants are confined there for days, weeks, even months at a time.<sup>28</sup> Instead of releasing them to be with their communities, ICE also places vulnerable immigrants — including LGBTQ+ individuals facing harassment and abuse at the facility, individuals expressing suicidal ideation or other mental health concerns, and individuals hunger striking — in segregation, under the guise of “protective custody.” However, migrants placed in

segregation allegedly for their own protection have also faced horrific physical and verbal abuse from guards while confined there, and many express that being subject to solitary only increases their suicidal ideation.<sup>29</sup>

The August 2020 SPLC letter also included details of ICE officials violently and physically forcing asylum seekers to sign their deportation orders, which they do frequently and with impunity.<sup>30</sup> In February 2021, a group of Cameroonian migrants detained at Winn similarly filed a civil rights complaint about the use of violence to force them to sign or fingerprint deportation documents.<sup>31</sup> ICE officers threw the individuals down to the ground, held them down and choked them, making it difficult for them to breathe, and handcuffed them, brutally beat them, and tortured them by twisting their limbs and inflicting other forms of physical pain until they submitted to fingerprinting.<sup>32</sup> Other explicitly racist, homophobic, and transphobic harassment and abuse are also rampant at Winn. In addition to physically assaulting migrants, guards joke about lynching Black migrants and sling racist slurs,<sup>33</sup> and they spit on LGBTQ+ migrants while calling them hateful names as well.<sup>34</sup>

The abuse and assaults continue to this day. In June 2023, an officer at Winn verbally abused and physically assaulted a Nigerian human rights attorney detained there. The officer punched him in the chest while calling him the “N word,” and the man





had to later be transported to an outside medical center for treatment of his injuries. His chest remained bruised, swollen and in pain for well over a week following the assault. In August 2023, a LaSalle Corrections officer sexually harassed this same Nigerian individual on at least two separate occasions. The New Orleans ICE Field Office was not only aware of these incidents, but they claimed to have investigated them, only to then subject the man to several retaliatory transfers, failed deportation attempts, and eventually deportation.

All of these issues are compounded at Winn because ICE chronically refuses to release individuals detained there and holds them for prolonged periods of time with limited access to counsel.<sup>35</sup> Nearly all requests for release on parole at Winn are denied, an issue in Louisiana generally that became the topic of a lawsuit in 2019, as a result of which a federal judge ruled that ICE was unlawfully refusing to release asylum seekers in the state.<sup>36</sup> Still, in 2020, the New Orleans ICE Field Office was denying nearly 94% of all requests for redetermination of release on parole, and immigration judges at Winn were denying bond 85% of the time.<sup>37</sup> Migrants at Winn were told that they could not get out on parole unless they were pregnant or had a terminal illness.

### **Government Oversight**

ICE has been on notice of the dehumanizing conditions at Winn from the

very beginning: there were “almost immediate”<sup>38</sup> reports of mistreatment and poor conditions upon the beginning of the facility’s ICE contract in June 2019. Six months later, in February of 2020, the DHS Office of Detention Oversight (ODO) conducted its first compliance inspection to assess whether Winn met the Performance Based National Detention Standards (PBNDS). The PBNDS provide 19 different measures for assessing a facility, and in ODO’s February 2020 report, Winn fully complied with only four of them. The agency tallied 49 “deficiencies,” compromising the safety and well-being of people detained there.<sup>39</sup> Of particular concern, ODO noted severe deficiencies in the facility’s medical care, including a medication distribution process that discouraged people from receiving their medications, and people with mental health referrals who had not been seen by a provider or who had been seen only after significant time had passed.<sup>40</sup> Follow up inspections by ODO in March<sup>41</sup> and August<sup>42</sup> of 2021, as well as March<sup>43</sup> and August<sup>44</sup> of 2022, and another inspection in January<sup>45</sup> of 2023 continued to find an alarming number of deficiencies.

ODO, of course, cannot report incidents or “deficiencies” that the facility deliberately obfuscates, as appears to be the case with Manuel, the asylum-seeker with disabilities that Winn staff sedated and locked in a medical unit during facility inspections.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, ODO is ICE’s compliance body, which conducts inspections rather than







directly investigating complaints of abuse from people held in ICE facilities or their advocates. That responsibility belongs to another sub-agency within DHS, the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL). Advocates have issued numerous extensive, detailed complaints to CRCL regarding conditions and abuse within Winn. The complaints documented the deprivation of appropriate medical care, “widespread mistreatment” of LGBTQ+ and HIV-positive people, and abuse of pepper spray with lasting harmful effects.<sup>47</sup> They further stated that ICE detained a person who was on suicide watch in a roach-infested solitary confinement cell, and fed him only bread for days; and provided testimony about the group of Cameroonian immigrants “physically forced to give their fingerprints on deportation documents,” because officers had “tripped them,...put their knees on their necks and stood on their backs, causing them to have difficulty breathing, and that they felt like the officers were trying to break their ankles and fingers.”<sup>48</sup> The men “felt this was racist and due to them being [B]lack. They reported that they had lasting pain afterwards and were traumatized by the incidents.”<sup>49</sup>

In response, the agency conducted an investigation in late July of 2021. The Expert Action Memoranda resulting from this investigation and follow-up, issued in August and November of 2021, concluded that Winn had a “culture and conditions that can lead to abuse, mistreatment, and

discrimination.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to issuing 88 action items, the memos further recommended, in no uncertain terms, that “[n]o new detainees should be added to the facility; and the detainee population should be drawn down to zero until immediate health and safety concerns can be corrected.”<sup>51</sup> It went on to state that, “[a]t a minimum, the population must be halved immediately to address the major plumbing deficiencies,” noting that Winn only had half the appropriate number of showers and toilets for the size of the population it housed.<sup>52</sup> The reports corroborated many of the complaints from advocates and detained individuals, and in addition found serious pest issues (noting many cockroaches and spiders), defective fire doors, and widespread use of force misconduct, as well as subjecting people on suicide watch to solitary confinement in dirty and unfurnished cells.<sup>53</sup>

And yet, between August when CRCL issued the report and December of 2021, ICE detained more people at Winn.<sup>54</sup> In March 2022, ICE finally seemed to be willing to take action, and announced that it would reduce the population at Winn.<sup>55</sup> However, ICE has since continued to detain around 1,000 people at Winn.<sup>56</sup> While the agency claims significant renovations, advocates say that the conditions have not changed.<sup>57</sup>

Agencies within DHS are not alone in raising the alarm: both a group of Senators and a group of Representatives issued joint letters advocating for facility closures and







further investigations into detention conditions and specifically cited Winn.<sup>58</sup> Despite the robust efforts of CRCL and the disturbing findings of ODO, as well as the concerns of members of Congress, Winn has proven immune from oversight, growing its detained population even as abuses and unsafe conditions within the facility have continued unabated.

## **The Media**

Winn has long been the subject of media reports exposing the abuses inside, including before its use for ICE detention. At the time of one of its most infamous media moments, the 2016 exposé by Mother Jones writer Shane Bauer, Winn was the largest privately run medium-security prison in the country.<sup>59</sup> Bauer worked undercover as an officer at Winn for four months, and he observed first-hand the widespread violence against prisoners, medical neglect, and further mismanagement of the facility, including employees falsifying records. In 2015, after CCA found out Bauer was an investigative reporter, it decided to end its contract at Winn, but later that same year LaSalle Corrections took it over.<sup>60</sup> It was only a few years later that, on the heels of Louisiana criminal justice reform aimed at decreasing the prison population in the state, LaSalle announced it would house ICE detainees there.<sup>61</sup>

Since then, journalists have continued to reveal a similar pattern of mismanagement and abuse, often through the use of

Freedom of Information Act requests, and to bolster the many reports of advocates and impacted individuals. For example, BuzzFeed News obtained documents issued internally by CRCL to ICE officials that supported their recommendation that ICE stop placing immigrants at Winn given the “immediate health and safety concerns.”<sup>62</sup>

The media has also uplifted the voices of people organizing and fighting for their lives inside Winn and amplified demands to close the facility by reporting on advocate complaints to government agencies<sup>63</sup> and reviewing complaints by detained immigrants for systemic issues.<sup>64</sup> For example, last year, Insider confirmed the reports from multiple facilities in Louisiana, including Winn, of anti-Black racism and violence.<sup>65</sup> At Winn, this included the statements about ICE personnel joking about lynching Black men detained there and officers attacking Cameroonian asylum seekers without provocation.

## **The Solution**

Directly impacted individuals, advocates, government oversight bodies, and journalists have all documented the years of abuse at Winn Correctional Center. As we approach the contract end date for the facility, we urge the administration to side with immigrant communities over the interests of a private prison corporation.

The detention system has always been plagued by egregiously poor conditions and a culture of violence, and Winn is no





exception. Years of inspections, protests, and reporting have proven that there is no fixing it. When it comes to detention, we demand decisive action. Closing Winn is a critical step for the administration to make good on its promise to protect immigrants and move us towards a more humane immigration system.

**We have only one recommendation for Winn Correctional Center: the administration must immediately release everyone currently detained at the facility and shut it down.**

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