

## Internal ICE records reveal widespread use of force in detention centers

By [Douglas MacMillan](#), [Andrew Ba Tran](#), [Drea Cornejo](#) and [Luis Melgar](#)

May 5, 2026 at 5:01 a.m. EDT

The reports detail how guards have increasingly used chemical agents and physical tactics on detainees, including groups demanding adequate water, food and medical care.



Pedro Cantú Ríos was among detainees affected when guards used chemical agents known as pepper balls in a communal space at a detention facility in Alaska last year. (César Rodríguez/For The Washington Post)

Pedro Cantú Ríos was eating lunch when he felt the chemicals rush into his lungs.

Like many of the immigrant men held in a cramped Alaska jail last summer, Cantú Ríos, then 68, had grown frustrated and restless, locked in a small cell with no windows and no access to his personal belongings, he recalled in an interview conducted in Spanish.

As he ate in the communal room, he overheard some detainees complaining to a guard about needing their things. Minutes later, according to documents and interviews, a throng of guards arrived wielding gun-like weapons. They fired plastic spheres the size of gumballs into the room, which burst into orange clouds of chemical dust.

Cantú Ríos, who suffers from a lung condition, said he was left gasping for air. He stumbled to his cell and put a towel over his face.

“I thought I was going to die,” he said.



*Cantú Ríos suffers from a lung condition and uses an inhaler. (César Rodríguez/For The Washington Post)*



*Cantú Ríos handles a form he used to request a medical checkup for respiratory problems. (César Rodríguez/For The Washington Post)*

The incident was one of at least 780 in which staff members at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities used physical force or chemical agents to control immigrant detainees during the first year of the Trump administration, a Washington Post investigation has found, based on a trove of ICE records obtained from a government employee. They shared the records on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the disclosures. Ask The Post AIDive deeper

The Post reviewed hundreds of internal ICE emails, called the “Daily Detainee Assault Report,” which summarize every incident in which staff members reported using physical force against detainees at 98 ICE detention facilities. The reports reviewed by The Post, dating from January 2024 to February 2026, covered the last year of the Biden administration and the first year of President Donald Trump’s second term in office.

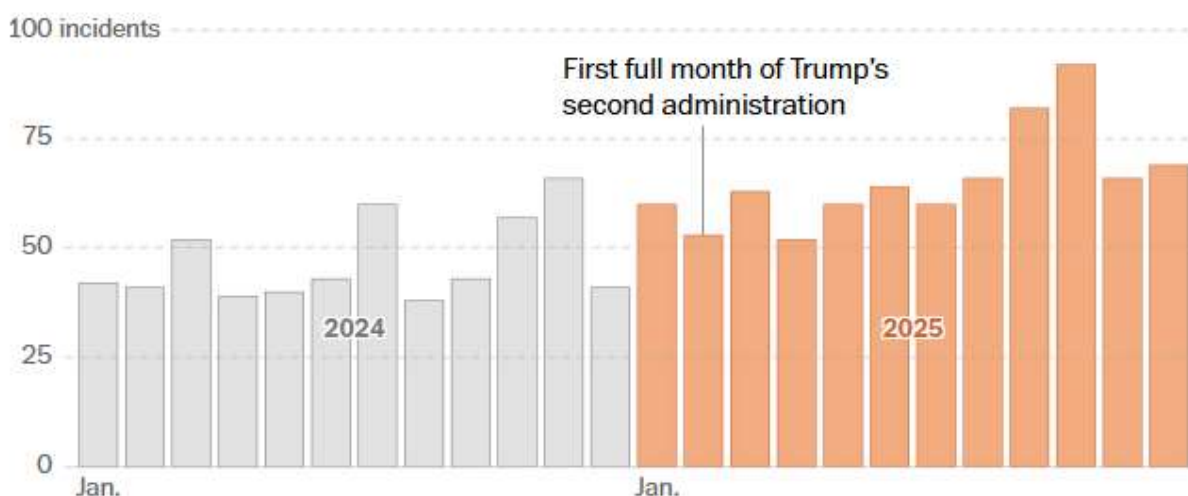
Taken together, the reports offer an unprecedented look at the treatment of ICE detainees as the Trump administration has carried out the biggest expansion of immigration detention in decades. As ICE’s crackdown on illegal immigration has flooded detention centers with record numbers of detainees, guards inside those facilities have increasingly resorted to acts of physical force, The Post’s analysis of the reports found. Detention guards have used punches, kicks,

takedown maneuvers, restraint holds and restraint chairs, as well as less-lethal weapons such as Tasers and pepper spray, according to the reports.

During the first year of Trump’s second term, detention staff used force 37 percent more times than the previous year, the reports show. The number of people subjected to force rose even more sharply, to 1,330 individuals — a 54 percent increase from the previous year, under President Joe Biden — as officers increasingly used these tactics with groups of detainees, the reports show.

In the same period, the detained population of these facilities increased 45 percent, according to population figures estimated by Maryland-based research group Relevant Research, based on its analysis of ICE’s publicly released data.

### Monthly use-of-force incidents in ICE detention facilities



“Why are they resorting to this use of force in such bigger numbers?” said Jeff Schwartz, a police trainer and associate professor of law and justice at Rowan University in New Jersey, after reviewing The Post’s findings.

“It could be the overcrowding, it could be the lack of staff, it could be the lack of training — or a combination of all of them,” he added.

Lauren Bis, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE, declined to comment on The Post’s analysis of use-of-force incidents, saying she was unable to verify the data. The Post provided her samples of the reports and detailed questions about some of the incidents.

“ICE law enforcement officers are trained to use the minimum amount of force necessary to resolve dangerous situations to prioritize the safety of the detainees, the public, and our officers,” Bis said. “Officers are highly trained in de-escalation tactics and regularly receive ongoing use of force training.”

Bis said that ICE has worked to maintain “a higher standard of care than most prisons that hold U.S. citizens.”

1:17min [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/inside-the-records-ice-doesnt-want-public/2026/05/04/f67fde86-8a1d-4a43-93b6-dc3b949a8154\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/inside-the-records-ice-doesnt-want-public/2026/05/04/f67fde86-8a1d-4a43-93b6-dc3b949a8154_video.html)

Use-of-force incidents at ICE detention centers rose 37% last year, with staff increasingly targeting groups of detainees, records show. (Video: Drea Cornejo, Daron Taylor, Joshua Carroll/The Washington Post)

In several incidents covered by the reports, guards forcibly handled detainees who repeatedly asked staff for things to which they are legally entitled, including food and water, medical care and personal belongings, according to interviews with the detainees or witnesses to these events.

ICE detention [standards](#) stipulate that force can be used only as a last resort, “after all reasonable efforts to resolve a situation have failed,” to regain control of a detainee who “acts violently or appears on the verge of violent action.” Ask The Post AI Dive deeper

Force is never to be used as punishment, the standards say.

“We weren’t violent people — we were all fighting our cases,” said Cantú Ríos, a Mexican national who came to the United States as a teenager more than 50 years ago. “No one was causing trouble.”

Moments before the guards in Alaska deployed chemical agents known as pepper balls, some of the detainees were loudly cursing at staff, demanding their property and refusing to obey orders to return to their cells, according to an [incident report](#) that a staff sergeant filed that day, which was obtained through a public-records request by the American Civil Liberties Union of Alaska and shared with The Post.

Nowhere in the incident report did the sergeant indicate that any of the men acted violently or appeared on the verge of violence.

Bis said that “at no point was any detainee directly impacted by pepper ball rounds” and that, following the incident, employees left a door to the outside open “to assist with decontamination and ventilation of the housing unit.”

Betsy Holley, a spokeswoman for the Alaska Department of Corrections, which oversees the jail, said in an email that her department “has nothing to contribute to this story.”

During another incident, at the Stewart Detention Center in Georgia in April 2025, a group of 35 immigrant detainees “refused to enter their cells for count, stating they had not been seen by medical,” one of the ICE [reports](#) says. After guards removed those not protesting to the recreation yard, staff members pepper sprayed the remaining people.

The reason: to “gain compliance and control of the pod,” according to the report.

Bis said that staff worked with the detainees to gain voluntary compliance and only resorted to pepper spray eight hours after their initial refusal.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2026/05/04/ice-detention-centers-force/>

Guards also used pepper spray on 65 detainees at the Torrance County Detention Facility in New Mexico, according to the [reports](#). According to Gerald Angye, a Cameroonian immigrant who says he witnessed the March 2025 incident from a neighboring housing unit, the detainees were holding a hunger strike to protest inadequate food, as well as water shutoffs that sometimes forced them to go days without a shower.

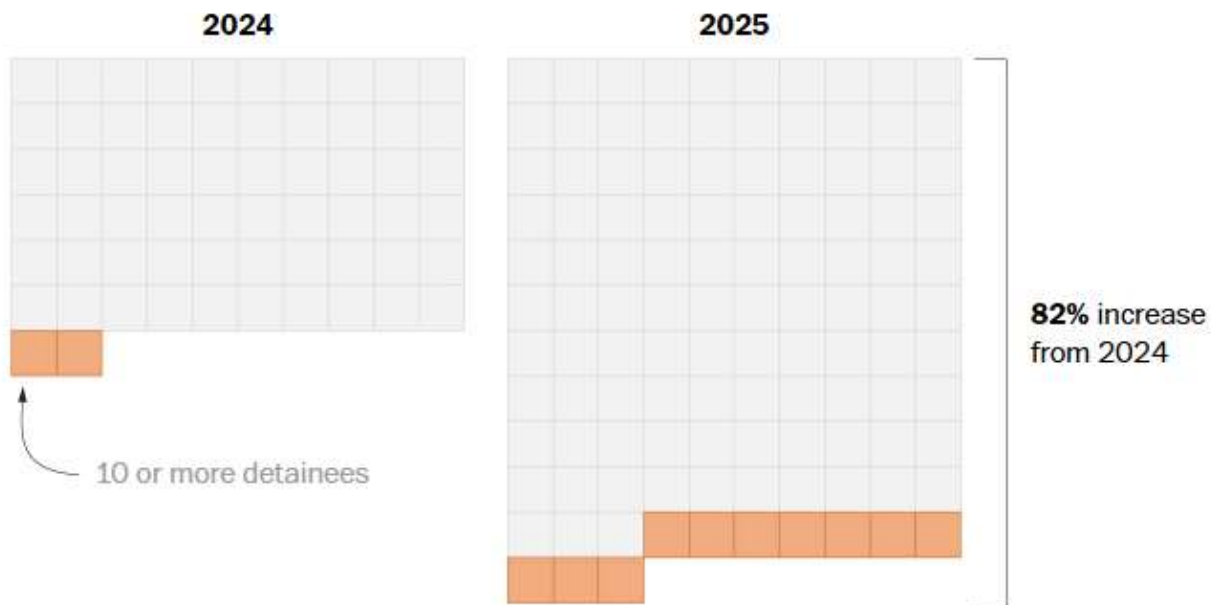
“Anything you do, they put pepper spray on your body,” Angye, 36, said in a phone interview from the detention center. “Nobody is questioning them. They keep doing it.”

Bis said that in this instance, the detainees “refused to comply with lawful commands and became aggressive toward facility personnel.” She said the incident was not related to access to water.

Ryan Gustin, a spokesman for CoreCivic, the company that operates both Stewart and Torrance, said in a statement that in both of those incidents, “force was applied in response to groups of detainees actively refusing to comply with verbal directives” and not “in response to peaceful requests.”

Use of force, Gustin added, “is authorized only when necessary to ensure the safety of those in our care and our staff, and only at the lowest level required to gain compliance. It is never used as punishment.”

### Use-of-force incidents involving multiple detainees

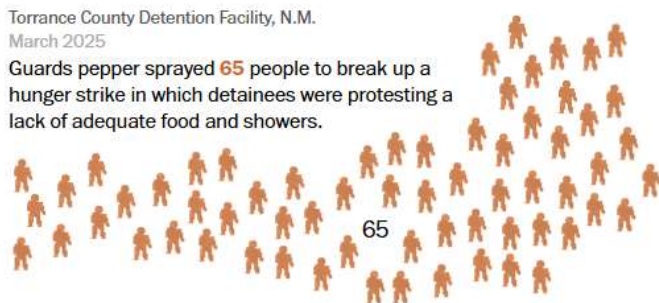


2025 includes incidents reported in the 12 months following Trump's inauguration on Jan. 20, 2025. 2024 includes incidents in the preceding 12 months.

## Incidents with 10 or more detainees

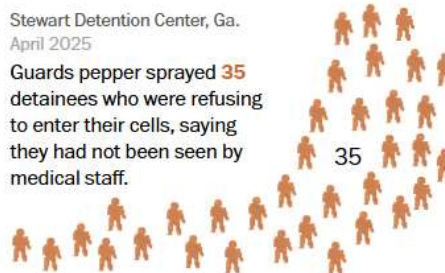
Torrance County Detention Facility, N.M.  
March 2025

Guards pepper sprayed **65** people to break up a hunger strike in which detainees were protesting a lack of adequate food and showers.

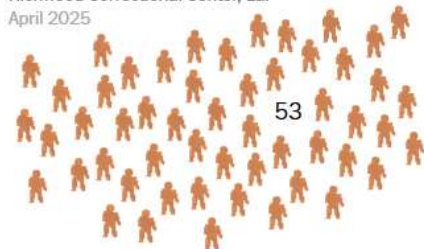


Stewart Detention Center, Ga.  
April 2025

Guards pepper sprayed **35** detainees who were refusing to enter their cells, saying they had not been seen by medical staff.

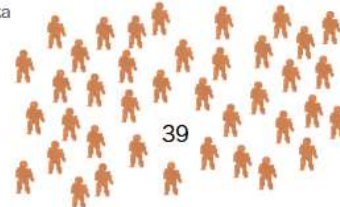


Richwood Correctional Center, La.  
April 2025



Anchorage Correctional Complex, Alaska  
June 2025

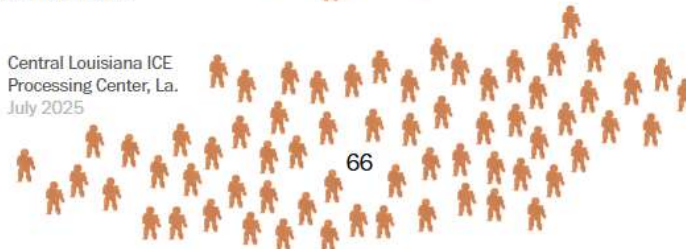
Guards fired pepper balls into a communal room of **39** detainees after some of them refused to return to their cells, complaining that they could not access their personal belongings.



Golden State Annex, Calif.  
July 2025



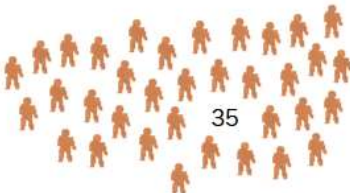
Central Louisiana ICE Processing Center, La.  
July 2025



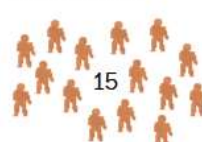
Central Louisiana ICE Processing Center, La.  
August 2025



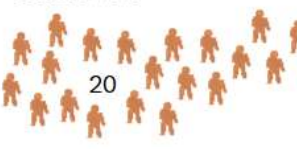
South Texas ICE Processing Center, Texas  
October 2025



South Texas ICE Processing Center, Texas  
December 2025



Adelanto ICE Processing Center, Calif.  
December 2025



The reports help illuminate a practice the government has shielded from scrutiny for years. ICE has long required detention centers to file reports on all uses of force in their facilities. These reports, which are summarized in the daily emails sent to a group of ICE employees, are one of the main ways the agency monitors problems that arise at the centers.

The majority of facilities reporting use-of-force incidents last year were run by private contractors, The Post's analysis found. These companies are responsible for hiring their own security guards, training them on ICE standards and ensuring their actions adhere to these rules, according to interviews with former ICE officials.

ICE requires facilities to report every time force is used and then review each incident to determine whether guards acted appropriately. However, the reports analyzed by The Post do not indicate whether those reviews happened or what they found.

The government has long fought legal efforts to make the use-of-force reports public, arguing in court that doing so would expose the private information of detainees or the confidential details of active law enforcement investigations, according to Andrew Free, a researcher and lawyer who has sued DHS for access to these records.

Advocates for immigrants say a full accounting of these incidents is necessary to help the public understand the conditions of ICE detention and hold staff members accountable for their actions.

The Post has [published](#) the summary reports of all 1,460 use-of-force incidents in an altered format, removing names and contact information.

ICE says on its website that immigration detention is “non-punitive,” and 71 percent of detainees have no criminal convictions, according to data that ICE published last month. Yet many of the facilities rely on the same kinds of tools and tactics that jails and prisons use to maintain control, The Post’s review found.

At least 106 detainees have been injured in use-of-force incidents since the beginning of 2024, according to the reports, which detail seizures, dislocated shoulders, broken arms, head injuries and eye injuries.

The actual number of injured is probably higher, because injuries are sometimes omitted in the reports, The Post’s reporting found.

Earlier this year, when pepper spray was used on a group of 47 detainees inside a temporary holding facility at the airport in Mesa, Arizona, the facility said in its [report](#) that “no injuries were reported.” However, in a recording of a 911 call that The Post obtained through a public-records request, an ICE officer said that a man was having seizures after being exposed to pepper spray.

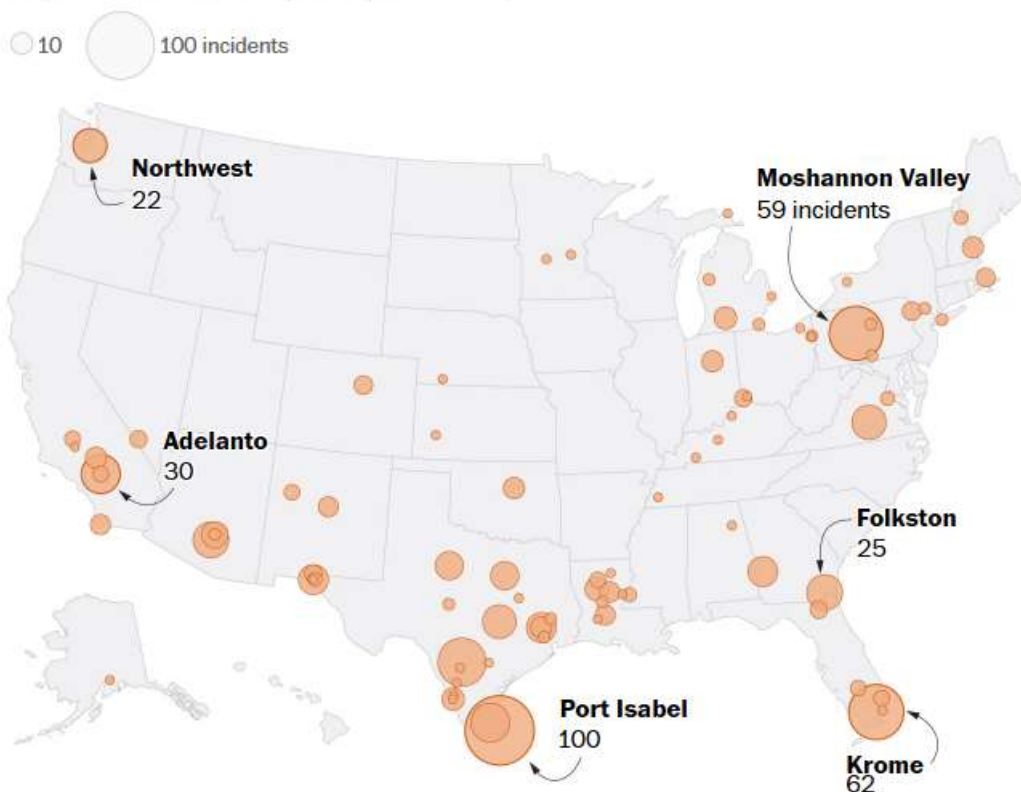
In her statement, Bis of DHS said, without evidence, that nobody had a seizure as a result of this incident. She said one detainee was taken to a hospital because of an asthma episode, but there was no evidence that it was caused by exposure to pepper spray.

The Post’s analysis is likely an undercount of use-of-force incidents.

While the records cover the facilities where 86 percent of ICE detainees were held last year, according to The Post’s analysis of ICE population data, 140 facilities do not appear in the reports. These are predominantly county jails that contract with ICE to hold a small number of detainees. It’s unclear whether force was not used at these places or whether they failed to report it.

## Use-of-force incidents reported at ICE facilities

Reported between Jan. 21, 2025, and Jan. 20, 2026



Source: ICE, Relevant Research, analysis by The Post

## Use-of-force incidents reported at ICE facilities

Reported between Jan. 21, 2025, and Jan. 20, 2026

The reports omit a Jan. 3 incident in which Geraldo Lunas Campos, a 55-year-old Cuban man, died following a struggle with guards at a Texas tent encampment. A medical examiner [ruled the death a homicide](#), and a fellow detainee has said in a [sworn declaration](#) filed in federal court that he heard staff members choking Lunas Campos.

Bis said in her email that the guards were trying to prevent Lunas Campos from killing himself.

It's unclear why the incident is not included in the reports.

ICE's acting director [testified](#) on April 16 that the FBI is investigating the death. An FBI spokesperson declined to comment.

### Minimal details

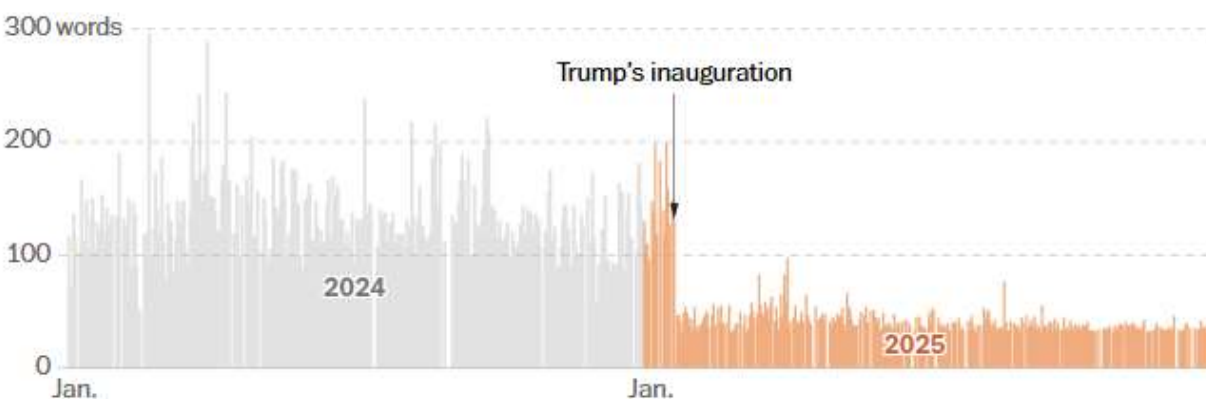
Unlike ICE agents in the field, who are now frequently followed and recorded by a [network of cellphone-wielding citizens](#), detention centers and their employees are largely shielded from public

scrutiny. ICE facilities are closed to the public, and ICE rarely releases surveillance videos taken inside them.

Although the daily assault reports help shed some light on this world, many of the reports are written in vague language or omit key information. For example, five of the reports say officers “guided” detainees to the ground — a term the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties said one detention officer [used misleadingly in 2022](#) to describe an incident in which he picked up a detainee in a bear hug and threw him to the ground.

The reports became even harder to discern after Trump was sworn into office last year, when facilities switched from writing descriptive narratives of incidents to producing short, formulaic sentences with minimal details, The Post’s analysis found. In 2025, the average narrative contained 40 words, about one-third as long as the previous year.

### Average word count in narratives of use-of-force incident reports



One of the biggest black boxes for this information may be Camp East Montana, the El Paso tent encampment where Lunas Campos died.

Since opening in August, and rapidly growing into one of the nation’s most highly populated facilities, it has reported just three use-of-force incidents, according to the reports. An [ICE inspection report](#) published last month, based on a February review of Camp East Montana, found that the facility violated 22 federal standards relating to how staff members used force and restraints, including not documenting medical checks after altercations, not recording incidents on video and not submitting written reports to ICE.

In October 2025, a nurse at Camp East Montana called 911, seeking medical help for a man who she said was experiencing back pain after “an altercation” with “a security guy,” according to an audio recording of the call that The Post obtained through a public-records request. Around the same date, a 35-year-old Cuban detainee said he was beaten by several guards after repeatedly asking them for his medication, according to a [sworn statement the man gave](#) to a group of advocates including the ACLU.

“They threw me to the ground and my clothes were torn off me,” the man said in the statement. “I was left bruised and bloody.”

There is no record of this incident in the use-of-force reports reviewed by The Post.

Bis said she could not comment on the 911 call or the man’s allegations without more identifying details about him.

### **‘Jail and prison models’**

Some of the conflicts documented in the daily assault reports arose from detainees protesting what they saw as mistreatment — and security staff treating them as a threat.

ICE detainees resort to hunger strikes and protests because they have few options to challenge the conditions of their confinement, said Michelle Brané, a former head of the federal Office of the Immigration Detention Ombudsman, an independent government watchdog that previously performed inspections and responded to detainee complaints.

Unlike American citizens who are charged with crimes, ICE detainees are not guaranteed legal representation, cannot have their civil immigration cases heard before a jury and may remain detained for an indefinite period, until an immigration judge decides they can be deported or released.

Some of the few protections for ICE detainees were eroded last year, as the Trump administration [guttled](#) two oversight offices that had been responsible for investigating problems at detention centers and proposing alternatives. Bis said that these offices were closed because they added “bureaucratic hurdles” by going beyond their missions. Ask The Post AIDive deeper

ICE’s detention standards instruct staff to attempt to de-escalate conflicts, and, when there is no immediate threat, consult medical professionals to discuss who is being targeted and how it might impact their physical and mental health.

Still, many ICE detention facilities are housed in former prisons and run by former corrections officers and officials, who may use force as a primary response to people who are not complying, said Claire Trickler-McNulty, a former senior official at ICE who served in the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations.

“All immigration detention is premised on jail and prison models,” Trickler-McNulty said. “Control is a primary function, and if people don’t comply, there is often a strong response.”

The entire incident last year at the Anchorage Correctional Complex in Alaska lasted just a few minutes, according to interviews with three of the detainees and sworn statements that a dozen of them provided to the ACLU of Alaska.

When some detainees refused to return to their cells, insisting on their rights to access their belongings, guards rapidly escalated the conflict, rather than de-escalating or consulting with



supervisors, as ICE rules require, said Cindy Woods, an attorney with the ACLU of Alaska who visited the facility after the incident and spoke to many of the people involved.

Cantú Ríos walks home from work. (César Rodríguez/For The Washington Post)

As the chemical haze still hung in the air, all of the detainees were confined to locked cells for at least two days, unable to change their soiled clothes or take a shower, several of the men said in statements and interviews. Right after the incident, Cantú Ríos asked to see a doctor about his breathing, but was not able to do so until at least a day later, he said.

Cantú Ríos was deported to Mexico, where he works as a street sweeper in a small town in the northeastern state of Nuevo Leon. Because his breathing never fully recovered after the incident, he says, he has to move slowly and rest frequently throughout the day.

“They made a serious mistake, and I am suffering because of it,” he said.

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## METHODOLOGY

*The Post obtained reports on 1,460 use-of-force incidents at ICE detention centers dated Jan. 1, 2024, to Feb. 28, 2026. Reporters extracted dates, numbers of detainees involved, facility names, law enforcement agencies and whether the report indicated that oleoresin capsicum (pepper spray) was deployed.*

*Reporters used Google Pinpoint’s AI to help identify reports in which a detainee may have been injured and then verified the injury descriptions manually. If an injury appeared to be caused by self-harm or a fight with another detainee, it was not counted. Some narratives included multiple dates. For the purpose of this analysis, only the first date of each narrative was counted. Incidents during*

*the last year of President Joe Biden's term occurred between Jan. 21, 2024, and Jan. 20, 2025. Incidents during President Donald Trump's first year of his second term occurred between Jan. 21, 2025, and Jan. 20, 2026.*

*For facility populations, the Post used the median of [Interval Average Daily Population](#) figures calculated by Relevant Research. These estimates better represent current population figures than ICE's publicly released population numbers, because Relevant calculates and accounts for rates of change each month, as opposed to ICE's single rolling annual average. We limited our calculation of population change to the 98 facilities that had reported use of force.*

*Much of the data behind this story can be found on [GitHub](#).*

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*Aaron Schaffer, Teo Armus and Eric Lau contributed to this report.*