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ICE wasted millions on unused detention space, report says Poor internal standards potential put migrants at risk, study finds

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has been wasting millions of dollars each month on unused detention space in contracts often made without following proper procedures, according to a new report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The lapses in procedure have cost taxpayers millions and potentially put detainees at risk because they may be put in facilities unsuited to their needs or with poor safety track-records. The report, released publicly on Friday, details how the immigration agency often used guaranteed minimum contracts, which pay detention operators regardless of how much capacity is needed at a given moment, and resulted in millions spent for empty space. "ICE spent \$20.5 million in May 2020 for over 12,000 unused beds a day, on average," the GAO reported in a summary of its findings. Between fiscal year 2017 and May 2020, the agency entered into 40 contracts and agreements for new detention space, many with state and local officials who contract detention facilities out to private companies. According to the GAO, 28 of these deals broke ICE's own requirements and "did not have documentation from ICE field offices showing a need for the space, outreach to local officials, or the basis for ICE's decisions to enter into them". ICE did not respond to a request for comment from The Independent. It told the GAO it uses guaranteed minimums and subcontracts with state, local, and private detention providers to meet its often dynamic needs for detention space. The ICE review, based on data analysis and interviews with officials, also reported that ICE's leadership ignored safety concerns from its field offices about new detention agreements. In one example, field staff warned a new detention facility was in a remote area which would make serious medical care more difficult for detainees to access, but were ignored for a deal the GAO found had "minimal justification." In another, field officials said they "strongly disagreed" with adding a new facility which had a previous record of "chronic understaffing in correctional and health services," which a previous Department of Justice watchdog report had concluded lead to a 2012 prison riot that killed a corrections officer and injured 20. "The field officials we interviewed said they were directed by headquarters to retroactively write a white paper to support using the facility after the agreement terms (including a nearly \$4 million a month guaranteed payment for 1,100 detention beds) had already been negotiated," the GAO report said. Civil rights advocates reacted to the report with outrage. "At the end of the day, immigration detention is an inhumane, brutal, and unnecessary system that allows continued death, misery, and abuse," said Eunice Cho, staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project in a tweet. "Private prison corporations and local law enforcement agencies profit by the billions. Shut it down." The problems didn't end once deals for housing immigrants were agreed to, according to the review's finding. The GAO found that ICE could do more to scrutinize its own data on contracts, where, in one case, the agency had recommended penalizing the same three facilities 12 different times for things like detainee deaths, escapes, and excessive force. The report also broke down the economics of immigrant detention, which can often be a boon to local authorities. Federal authorities pay state and local ones to house inmates, and these authorities in turn often contract private companies to hold them. The companies, meanwhile, also pay the local authorities fees for helping administer the detentions. For example, the report noted, since 2016, the city of Adelanto, California, gets about \$1m per year from GEO Group, an investment trust which invests in prisons and mental health centers, as well as \$1 per bed per day. Other ICE contracts pay between \$.50 to \$3.50 per bed per day. Private immigration facilities have been criticized for mishandling Covid-19, including using solitary confinement as a means of quarantining, and excessive use of force. ICE detention is nominally administrative, where individuals are held while the government decides whether to deport them, but often resembles a traditional prison.