

REPORT: CONDITIONS AT WEST COUNTY DETENTION FACILITY

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This research study provides critical details and evidence of the systemic and degrading violation of human rights that exists in immigration detention and in many jails across the U.S.

The truth is in the details of the daily assault on a person’s basic human rights, dignity and due process. This requires a moral and human response to demand alternatives and a better way.

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Rev. Deborah Lee, Executive Director,
Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity



Photo by David Bacon

ABOUT

The Immigrant Defenders Research Group (IDRG) conducted this participatory research project in the fall of 2018 in order to illustrate the conditions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention at West County Detention Facility (WCDF) in Richmond, CA.

The IDRG is made up of six co-researchers who were formerly in ICE detention at WCDF and directed this project utilizing participatory research methodology. Because not all of their immigration cases have been resolved, they have declined to share their names publicly at this time to avoid retaliation from ICE.

FINDINGS

The IDRG chose the six most concerning issues at WCDF to highlight in this report:

- 1) Disrespectful treatment from detention facility officers;
- 2) Inadequate and unhealthy food
- 3) Inadequate free time and programming;
- 4) Disturbed sleep and medical neglect
- 5) Unacceptable working conditions through the “voluntary work program.”
- 6) Barriers to maintaining ties with family and friends.

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Photo by David Bacon

“ Though it was a difficult and sometimes painful process for the researchers to revisit and learn of the traumatic experiences others face in detention, the work these results can do to shed light on the realities of the conditions at WCDF is invaluable.

The findings point to a need to create actionable changes for the wellbeing and dignity of those still detained. ”

Dr. Carolina Prado

METHODOLOGY

The IDRG worked with Dr. Carolina Prado, Freedom for Immigrants, and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity (IM4HI) to first create a list of the detention conditions that they identified to be of the greatest concern.

Because the IDRG had themselves been detained at WCDF and thus are experts in the experience of detention there, they were able to collectively determine which lines of investigation should be prioritized.

The IDRG then participated in a training conducted by Dr. Prado on interviewing methods, data collection, and the basics of informed consent in qualitative researching.

On August 12, 2018, the IDRG began to conduct phone surveys to other people who had been formerly detained at WCDF. Because these people had been released from ICE detention and were no longer detained at WCDF, they no longer felt fear of retaliation from the detention facility guards and could speak freely.

Forty-three phone surveys were completed by September 6, 2018. After the surveys were concluded, Dr. Prado, Freedom for Immigrants, IM4HI, and the IDRG worked on data input, organized the data, and participated in a collective data analysis meeting to determine which findings to highlight.

PART 1: DISRESPECTFUL TREATMENT FROM DETENTION FACILITY OFFICERS

"There was a lot of mistreatment."

"Yes, I was discriminated against because of my race."

"[The officers] would make fun of us for not speaking English."

"The officers are very racist - they would make comments and call us names."

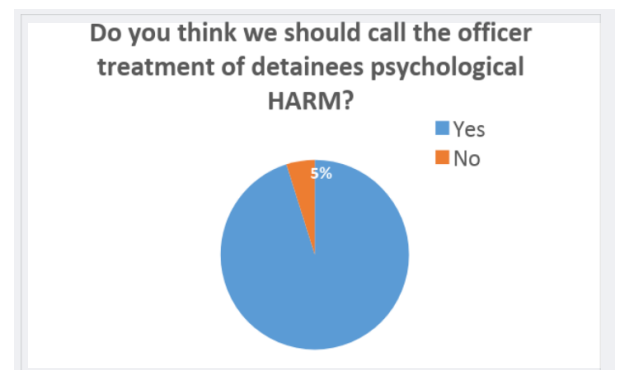
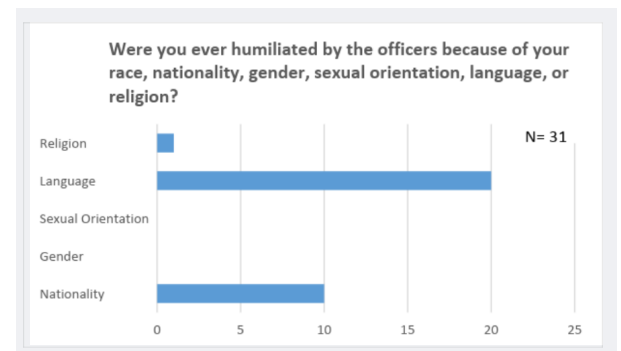
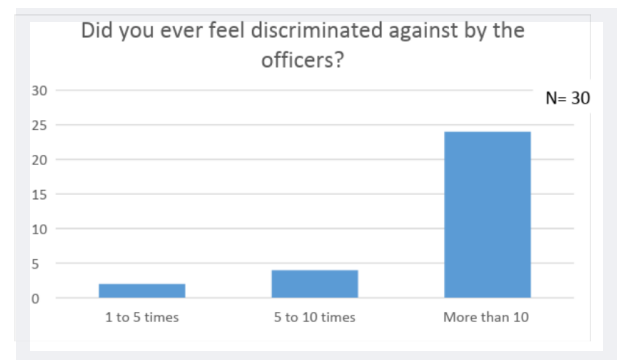
-Currently and formerly detained individuals

During our initial discussions around what priorities should be focused on for interviews with other former ex-detainees the researchers found that folks believed they were deeply mistreated by the officers in the detention center.

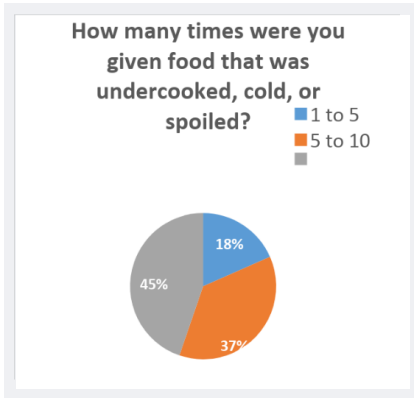
Eighty-one percent (81%) of the 42 interviewees stated that they had felt discriminated against by the detention facility officers. Of those interviewees who said that they had felt discriminated against, 24 said they had experienced discrimination more than 10 times.

When asked if they had ever been humiliated by the officers because of their race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, language, or religion, 72% of respondents answered yes. Most of them (20 respondents) identified language as the reason for which they were discriminated against.

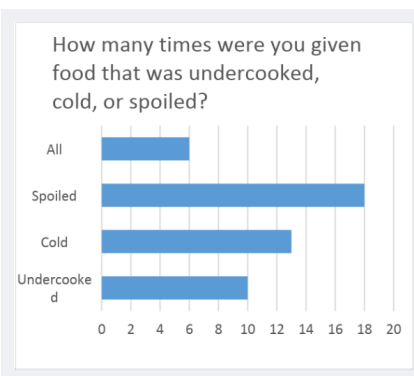
Ninety-five percent (95%) of respondents believe that the treatment by officers at WCDF inflicts psychological harm.



PART 2: INADEQUATE AND UNHEALTHY FOOD



"Everyone is still hungry after eating; it is very little food."



Another key finding was the lack of adequate and nutritious food in the detention facility. Most participants felt that they were not given large enough portions of food; 27 out of 31 participants described their food portions as inadequate.

The food is often poor quality: either cold, spoiled or undercooked.

Ninety percent (90%) of the 42 participants indicated that the food was not nutritious. One person shared that there were not nearly enough fruits and vegetables. [Another likened the detention facility food to canned dog food.](#)

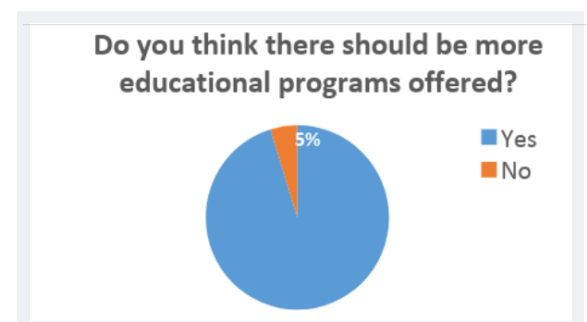
PART 3: INADEQUATE FREE TIME AND PROGRAMMING

Participants highlighted the need for more free time out of their cells. Interviewees reported being granted an [average of only 1-3 hours per day outside](#) of their cells, during which they got to eat, bathe, make phone calls, and/or complete any other tasks.

Eighty-five percent (85%) of all interviewees felt that they did not have enough time for their personal hygiene due to their lack of free time.

Furthermore, 95% indicated that the free time they were afforded was routinely not respected by facility officers and was shortened or denied altogether.

"A couple times I had to go to the bathroom in my room because they wouldn't let me out. I had to defecate in a red [biohazard] bag."

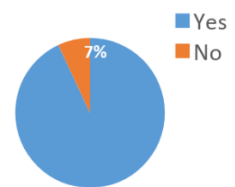


PART 4: DISTURBED SLEEP AND MEDICAL NEGLECT

"My sleep was interrupted all the time. When the officers passed by the cells they were always yelling at us."

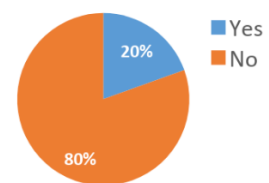
Sleep was routinely interrupted by officers who would wake people up several times each night by shining bright lights in their faces. Some people reported not being able to sleep a single hour some nights. The average number of hours that people slept each night was 4.4 hours

Did you ever get lights shined on you while you slept by the officers?



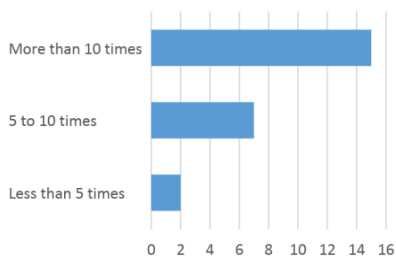
N= 43

Did the officers respect your sleep?



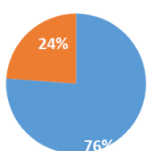
N= 41

Were you ever refused hygienic products like menstrual pads, toilet paper, soap, shampoo, etc?



Were you ever refused hygienic products like menstrual pads, toilet paper, soap, shampoo, etc?

■ Yes
■ No



N= 42

Regarding the medical attention at the facility, most individuals' needs were not met. Eighty-three percent (83%) of interviewees stated that they were not given medication that they needed. When asked how long it took for their medical issues to be addressed, the response time ranged from 1 day to 15 months.

However, on average people had to wait two weeks to have their medical issues addressed through an appointment with a medical representative. One individual shared that when she got into the detention center she told the guards that she had kidney stones and "it took about a month to get medical attention."

In addition, 93% of participants agreed that detainees should be given vitamins because the food is lacking in substantial nutrition.

Another concern is the uneven provision of basic hygienic products like toilet paper, menstrual pads, soap, and shampoo. Seventy-six percent (76%) of participants reported that they had been refused hygienic products by the guards.

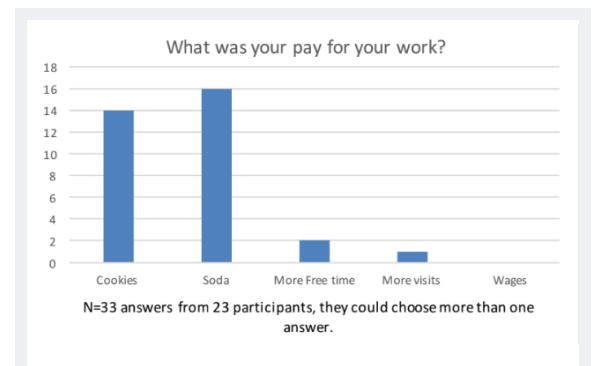
PART 5: UNACCEPTABLE WORK CONDITIONS THROUGH VOLUNTARY WORK PROGRAM

Some people in detention at WCDF participate in the voluntary work program, for example, working in the kitchen or the laundry room.

There is no pay for the work that people in detention at WCDF do - not even a single dollar a day. This is usually the case in other ICE detention facilities.

Most respondents reported that they were “paid” with some extra food, or more free time; some participants said they were not given anything at all.

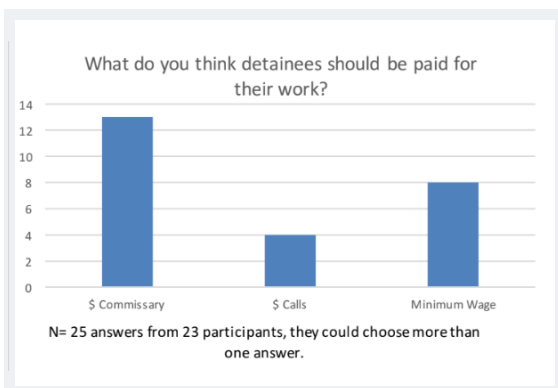
"We just got better food than the others would get to eat."



When asked what they thought that people should be paid for their work in detention, 13 interviewees responded that at the very least they should be given money for their commissary accounts, and 8 responded that minimum wage would be just pay.

Many felt that they were coerced into working because they were threatened by officers. Eighty-three percent (83%) of participants reported that they would be threatened with punishment if they didn't want to work.

Seven people shared that the guards would threaten to move them if they didn't want to work to another building where they were at greater risk of abuse.

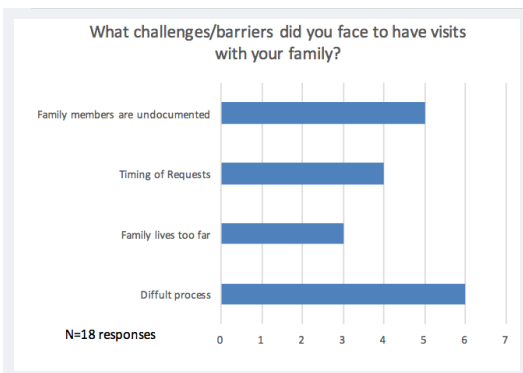
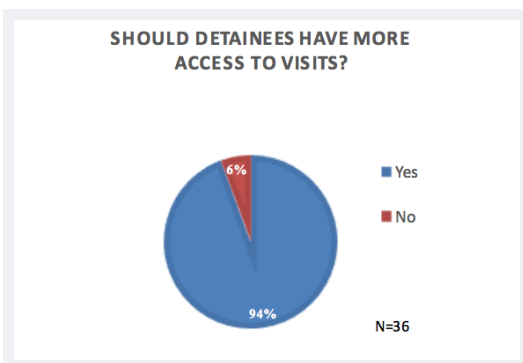
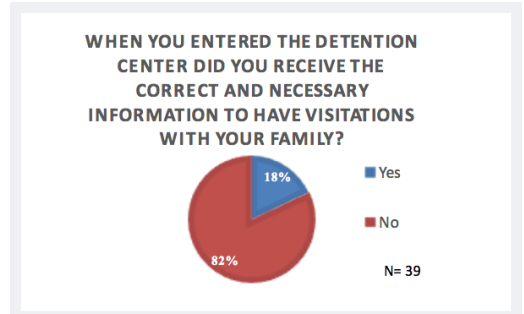
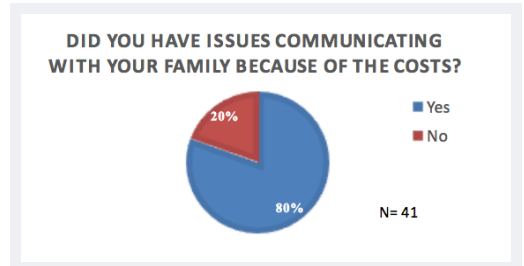
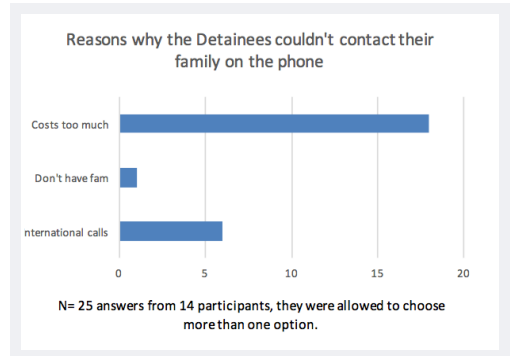


PART 6: BARRIERS TO MAINTAINING TIES WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

People who had been detained at WCDF also shared several barriers to maintaining ties with family and friends, such as through telephone calls or visitation. Such contact is especially critical to the mental health and wellbeing of people who spend prolonged periods of time incarcerated.

Twenty percent (20%) of survey participants described having trouble communicating with their family over the phone because of the exorbitant costs. The second most common barrier to making calls to family was the inability to make international calls from the facility, which particularly affects people in ICE detention and is in fact a violation of ICE detention standards.

Arranging in-person visits was especially difficult. Eighty-two percent (82%) of survey participants noted that when they entered the detention center, they did not receive the correct and necessary information to have visitations with their families. Participants explained, "You have to make your visitor list a long time beforehand," and, "The responses would come too late to let your family know they can come."



The difficulty of the process was identified as the greatest barrier to receiving visits, over the immigration status and distance of family members.

Several participants also expressed distress at how their families were treated by facility staff when they were able to visit. One individual described, "One time the officers yelled at my kids and kicked my wife and kids out," while another shared, "They disrespected them as if they were the ones detained."

In a clear sign of the importance of visitation for people while inside, and the inadequacy of the current visitation policies, ninety-four percent (94%) of survey participants stated that people should have more access to visits.

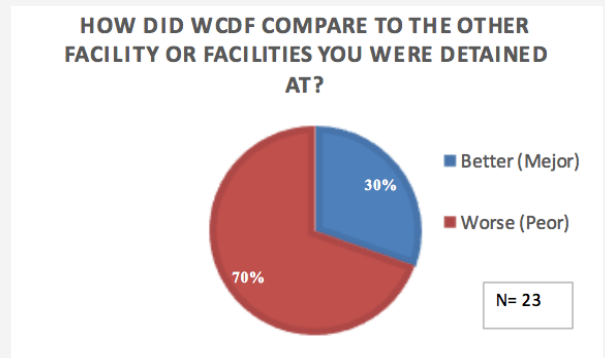
CONCLUSION

This report illustrates that West County Detention Facility is rife with human and civil rights violations. While the abuses at WCDF have been reported by community organizations and the media for many years, this is the first independent study to systematically survey people who were previously detained there and publicly release the results. The IDRG sees this report as both a tool for archiving the past and advocacy for the future.

The findings of the investigation clearly depict a jail filled with harm, illness, exploitation, and despair, and speaks to the strength and resilience of those who suffered and survived lengthy ICE detentions there. We strongly believe these results at WCDF confirm a widespread pattern of deplorable conditions at immigrant jails and prisons across the nation.

That said, this investigation demonstrates that the experience of ICE detention at WCDF was, in fact, much worse than at other ICE detention facilities. Seventy percent (70%) of survey respondents who had been in ICE detention at other facilities said that WCDF was the worst facility they were ever detained in.

We remain in solidarity with the people still detained at WCDF who continue to face these intolerable conditions.



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People in ICE detention at West County Detention Facility have told us for years that the conditions there are intolerable, all the more so when people have to spend months or years inside.

While we are grateful that the ICE contract at WCDF has ended, we remain deeply concerned about our families, friends, and neighbors who remain locked up there awaiting trial or serving sentences.

Abuses are continuing to take place behind those walls, and the community demands justice.

Rebecca Merton, National Visitation Coordinator,
Freedom for Immigrants

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It is important that this type of work continues, so that people realize what is really happening inside detention centers.

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Participant researcher of the IDRG