

DETENTION IN YOUR DISTRICT

STATE: Alabama

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: 4

FACILITIES: Etowah County Jail
Dekalb County Detention Center

COMBINED CAPACITY: 447 (approx.)

Etowah County Jail

This facility is owned and operated by the Etowah County Sheriff's Office. In 1998, the United States Marshals Service and the Etowah County Sheriff's Office signed an Intergovernmental Service Agreement ([IGSA](#)) to detain immigrants in the Etowah County Jail. In 2014, the contract was renewed and updated. The updated contract set the [per diem rate](#) that ICE pays Etowah County at \$45. There is no explicit termination date for the contract. According to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Office of Detention Oversight (ODO) inspection in [December 2016](#), the Etowah County Jail could accommodate 350 male immigrants in detention, and held 291 immigrants on average. Men detained in Etowah for immigration reasons are held [separately](#) from people detained on criminal charges.

In December 2016, the Office of Detention Oversight (ODO) inspected the Etowah County Jail and found eight [deficiencies](#). These included: limited access to legal material, communication barriers, restricted phone access, medical neglect, and inappropriate use of administrative and disciplinary segregation. Inspectors also documented that not all of the meals met the daily caloric totals required by ICE. According to a 2018 [press report](#), Todd Entrekin, who was then Etowah County Sheriff, took in over \$750,000 of unused funds allocated to provide meals for people in criminal and immigration detention over a three-year period. In the year preceding the December 2016 ODO inspection, eleven people were placed in solitary confinement. During the course of its inspection, ODO officers found that weekly administrative segregation reviews did not include a written record of the decision or justification for segregation.

A July 2019 [inspection](#) by the Nakamoto Group, a private company contracted by ICE to carry out third party inspections of detention facilities, documented 57 grievances made by people in detention. The inspection documented one incident of alleged sexual abuse/assault from a staff member during a pat-down search on a person in detention. Inspectors from the Nakamoto Group also noted that, during the inspection period, two people began hunger strikes, lasting one and four days. The inspection documented use-of-force in response to alleged altercations between detained individuals. These included use of tasers, pepper spray, a pepper ball, and a restraint chair to control immigrants in detention.

Freedom for Immigrants [phone surveys](#) discovered that around one in six immigrants held at Etowah have been detained for at least six months. According to a May 2019 Associated Press article, one individual reported being detained at Etowah for over five years. According to Freedom for Immigrants staff who have visited Etowah in 2019 with local volunteers, detained individuals have no access to the outdoors.



Credit: U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE)

Areas of Concern

- Medical neglect
- Sexual abuse
- Inadequate food
- Due process violations
- Use of force
- Barriers to visitor access

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Freedom for Immigrants has filed multiple complaints with the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) on behalf of persons detained or formerly detained at Etowah. In July 2015, Freedom for Immigrants filed a [formal complaint](#) alleging widespread medical neglect and inadequate and rotten food as well as specific allegations of abuse by officials from ICE and the Etowah county sheriff's office. These allegations included use of physical force to coerce detained individuals into signing travel documents. Parties to the complaint reported that ICE officers routinely assaulted men who did not sign travel documents. According to the complaint, ICE officers used thumbprints for signatures after physically subduing men who refused to sign travel documents.

In May 2016, Freedom for Immigrants filed an additional CRCL [complaint](#) regarding medical neglect at Etowah, including one case resulting in death. The complaint alleges that Tekla Gulema, an Ethiopian national, contracted a treatable infection at Etowah and was denied treatment, leading to paralysis and his eventual death. According to the complaint, ICE transferred Mr. Gulema to a hospital where he remained in ICE custody for a year. Several weeks before his death, ICE released Mr. Gulema from their custody. As Mr. Gulema was not in ICE custody when he died, his death was not reported by the agency. Also according to the complaint, in May 2014, a Jamaican national named Miguel Williamson suffered a massive heart attack that led to double kidney failure while in detention at Etowah. A June 2019 [press report](#) quoted Williamson's former cellmate saying that the facility medical staff accused Williamson of faking his illness. The press report also cited reports from medical professionals that an untreated urinary tract infection had spread throughout Mr. Williamson's body, nearly killing him. In a phone interview to reporters, Mr. Williamson, who was ultimately deported, said he still suffers from complications from his time at Etowah.

According to a 2017 CRCL [complaint](#) filed by Freedom for Immigrants, of all the facilities that detain immigrants in the U.S., Etowah County Jail ranks sixth for sexual and physical assault reports. Compared to other county-run detention facilities, Etowah has the highest number of reported sexual assaults. Between October 2012 and March 2016, immigrants made 14 calls to ICE's Detention Reporting and Information Line (DRIL) to report sexual and physical assault, which represents about one call per 20 people in detention.

Resources

- [Etowah Visitation Project](#)
- [La Casita](#)
- [Southern Poverty Law Center Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative](#)
- [Adelante Alabama](#)
- [Shut Down Etowah](#)

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A group of concerned community members called the [Etowah Visitation Project](#) visit immigrants in detention weekly, with each visit lasting 25 minutes maximum. The facility only allows video visitation, meaning volunteers and family members must communicate with immigrants through [video calls](#) from a nearby building. Facility general rules require community and family to be placed on a pre-approved list for visitation, in direct violation of the Performance Based National Detention Standards Etowah County Jail is under contract to meet. This, along with the short visitation duration, make the facility's visitation policy both out of compliance and one of the most restrictive in the country. The Etowah Visitation Program, which holds a formal agreement with the facility to visit individuals requesting support, was shut down in 2015 following the filing of Freedom for Immigrants' CRCL report. It was reinstated in 2015 with legal intervention on the part of Southern Poverty Law Center based on first amendment rights violation. The program was then shut down again November 2019 following community protest in front of the facility. The most recent closure again raises first amendment rights violation arguments for legal dispute.

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Dekalb County Detention Center

This facility is owned by the DeKalb County Commission and operated by the DeKalb County Sheriff. The DeKalb County Detention Center began detaining immigrants in 2008 through an [IGSA](#) with the United States Marshals Service. According to an ODO inspection in [March 2018](#), the Dekalb County Detention Center could accommodate 97 immigrants in detention, and held 13 immigrants on average. At that time, there were eight men in detention, and no women. The average length of stay is three days. The [per diem rate](#) that ICE pays DeKalb County is \$47.

In the course of the previously referenced March 2018 ODO [inspection](#), inspectors found 16 deficiencies in nine categories, an increase since the previous ODO inspection in 2014. Recorded deficiencies included inadequate grievance procedures, inconsistent food service, lack of storage, and safety issues. Inspectors found that the DeKalb facility handbook did not include procedures for appealing grievance decisions made by the officers. Inspectors also noted that there are 16 hours between two meals services on weekends, in violation of ICE's standards on frequency of food service. Inspectors noted that, in one of the women's units, the bathroom had only two functional toilets for 22 women in detention.