

IMMIGRATION

It's the deadliest year for people in ICE custody in decades; next year could be worse

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

By Ximena Bustillo, Rahul Mukherjee

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People detained by federal agents walk into a suburban Chicago ICE detention center in Broadview, Ill., on Sept. 19.

Dominic Gwinn/Middle East Images via AFP/Getty Images

Immigration and Customs Enforcement has recorded its deadliest year since the early 2000s as agency officials push to increase the number of people in its custody.

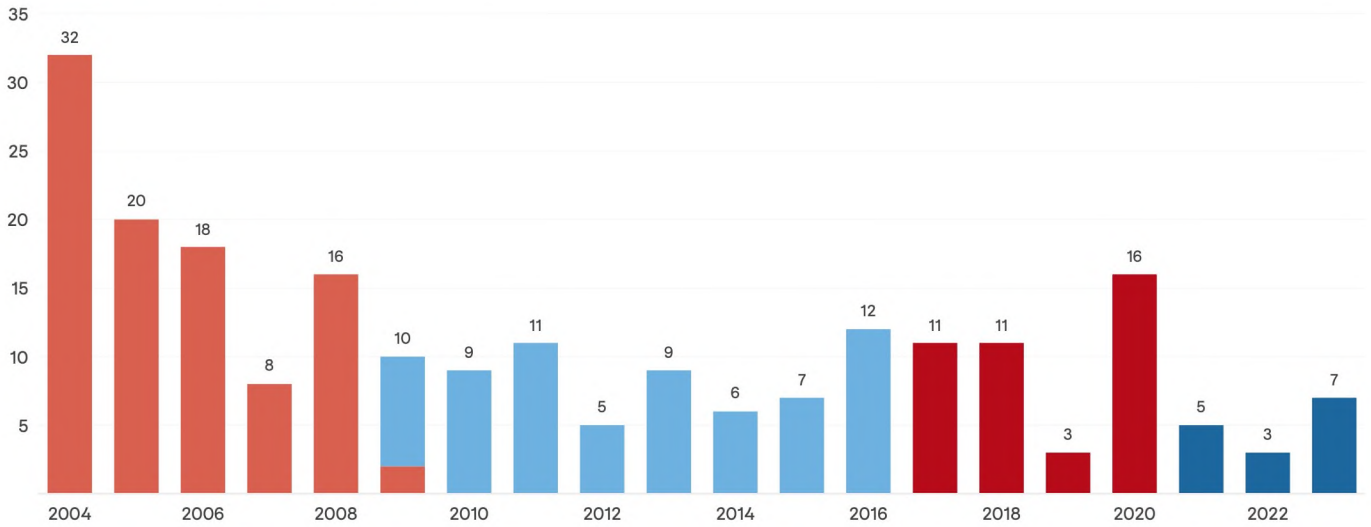
According to a review of deaths by NPR, at least 20 people have died in ICE custody so far this year. The number comes as ICE is also holding nearly 60,000 people in immigration detention, the highest number in several years.

20 people have died in ICE custody so far this year — the most since 2005

Deaths in Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities, by calendar year. 2025 data is through Oct. 18.

Administration

■ Bush ■ Obama ■ Trump ■ Biden



Notes

2025 data does not include two deaths from a Texas shooting and a death during an apprehension in Illinois

Source: ICE.gov, American Immigration Lawyers Association

Credit: Rahul Mukherjee/NPR

Deaths reached a peak in 2025 for the first time since 32 deaths were recorded in 2004, and 20 deaths were recorded in 2005.

Former agency officials are warning that increased detention population, decreased oversight, an increase in street and community arrests and continued difficulties staffing medical teams will result in more deaths. This summer, ICE received about \$70 billion to hire more staff, including deportation and detention officers, and increase its detention space. Across the country, media and immigration advocates have reported overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and issues with food and health care access — a byproduct of a rapid scaling-up of immigration arrests.

"Can staffing actually keep pace with the increase in population? And that becomes particularly challenging in more remote locations where it was already difficult to find qualified staff willing to come out and work," said Peter Mina, who worked at ICE for nearly a decade and then six years as a deputy officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at DHS. "And that just places risk all across the system, including, unfortunately, individuals in detention facing medical conditions that might result in their death."

ICE did not respond to an immediate request for comment on the count.

Mina's former office at DHS was among those that would conduct investigations following a detainee death. Additional investigations were conducted by the ICE Health Services Corps and the Immigration Office of Detention Oversight. CRCL was among the oversight offices at the department that saw hundreds of staff cuts earlier this year. Other CRCL employees have previously told NPR that the gutting of their office could result in more deaths in custody.

During the ongoing government shutdown, DHS has confirmed, the Office of Detention Oversight is not working.

So far this month, two more detainees have died in custody. Medical conditions surrounding deaths over the last calendar year have included tuberculosis, strokes, respiratory failure and about three possible suicides. Each preliminary report includes a synopsis of the detainees' immigration and criminal histories, as they have for past administrations, as well as the events leading to the time of death.

One reason for the rise in deaths, former employees said, is that there are just simply more people in detention.



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"With that kind of spike in population, there's going to be a need for additional staffing both on the medical and mental health side, as well as even from an officer standpoint," Mina said.

The types of arrests being made by federal immigration officers this year are different, too. Claire Trickler-McNulty, a former ICE official who worked under former Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, said that previously most of the agency's detainees either came from the border or from local law enforcement custody.

In these cases, she said, those coming from the border tended to be younger and healthier; or health care records were generally established for those who had been previously detained in prisons or jails.

"Whereas when you pick somebody up on the street, it's a lot of unknowns. Do they have chronic medical conditions they're not even aware of? Do they have addiction issues?" McNulty said. "The systems and triaging and maybe even the resources to really appropriately care for people when taking in such a varied population probably should increase."

Since the early months of the administration, officials have touted focusing their arrests in the "interior" of the country, as numbers of crossings at the southern border have steadily decreased.

DHS Spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin told NPR in a statement that detainees receive medical, dental and mental health intake screening within 12 hours of arriving at each detention facility, a full health assessment within 14 days of entering ICE custody or arrival at a facility and access to medical appointments and 24-hour emergency care.

"With all these healthcare services and access to medical care ICE provides illegal aliens in detention, it should come as no surprise to the media that as we expand detention space, we need to hire more medical professionals," McLaughlin said.



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But both Mina and McNulty said that hiring medical staff at immigration detention facilities has long been a challenge for the agency. According to a review of detainee deaths since 2004, three detention facilities have held the most deaths: Eloy Federal Contract facility just outside Phoenix; Krome Services Processing Center in Florida; and Stewart Detention Center in Georgia.

A 2021 DHS Office of Inspector General report identified "remote locations, a cumbersome hiring process, and competing opportunities" among the challenges to retaining and recruiting medical staff. The Eloy and Stewart facilities were specifically mentioned as among those experiencing these difficulties.

DHS has begun a process to hire more medical professionals including nurses and pharmacists as it expands its hiring across ICE, including deportation officers and detention personnel.

"ICE is actively recruiting healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, pharmacists, and health administrators, to support the expanded detention capacity enabled by the historic funding provided under President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill," McLaughlin told NPR in a statement.



NATIONAL

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"Just like with the general population, unfortunately, people will die over a period of time for any series of medical ailments," Mina, former deputy officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at ICE, said. "But the real question is: In a given case, were there circumstances or actions taken or not taken that suggest that that death may have been preventable?"



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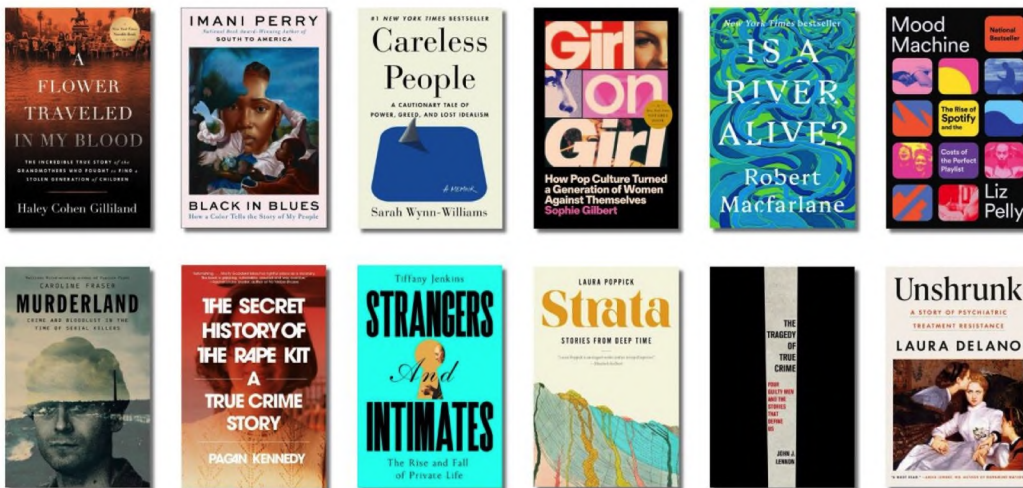
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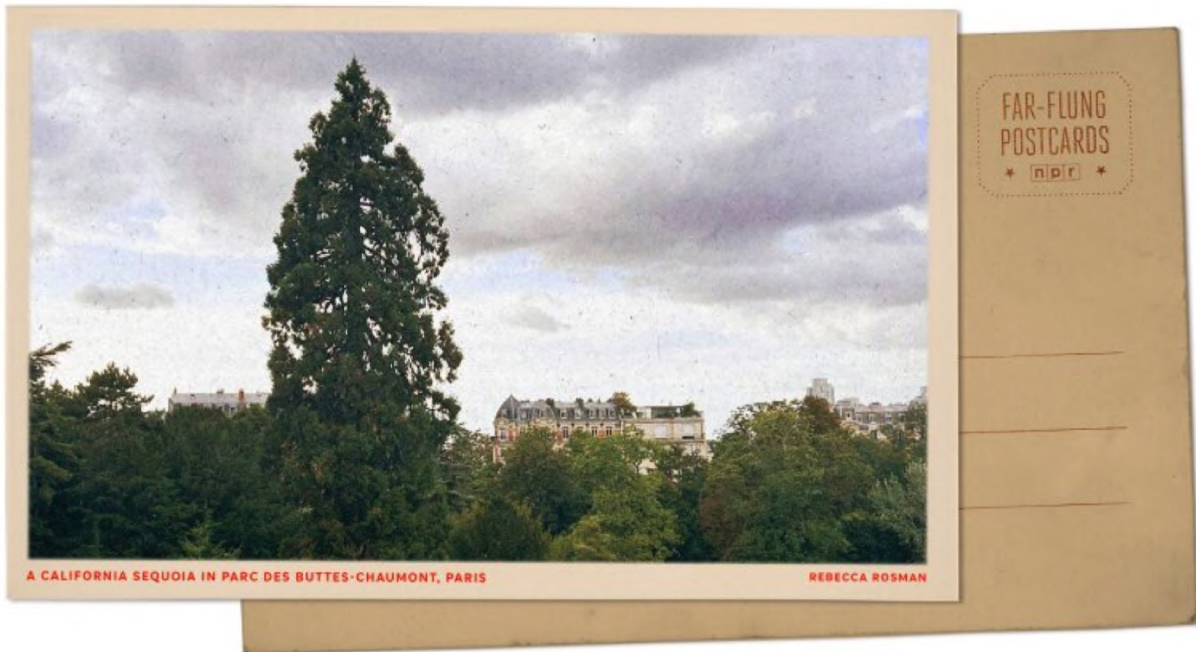
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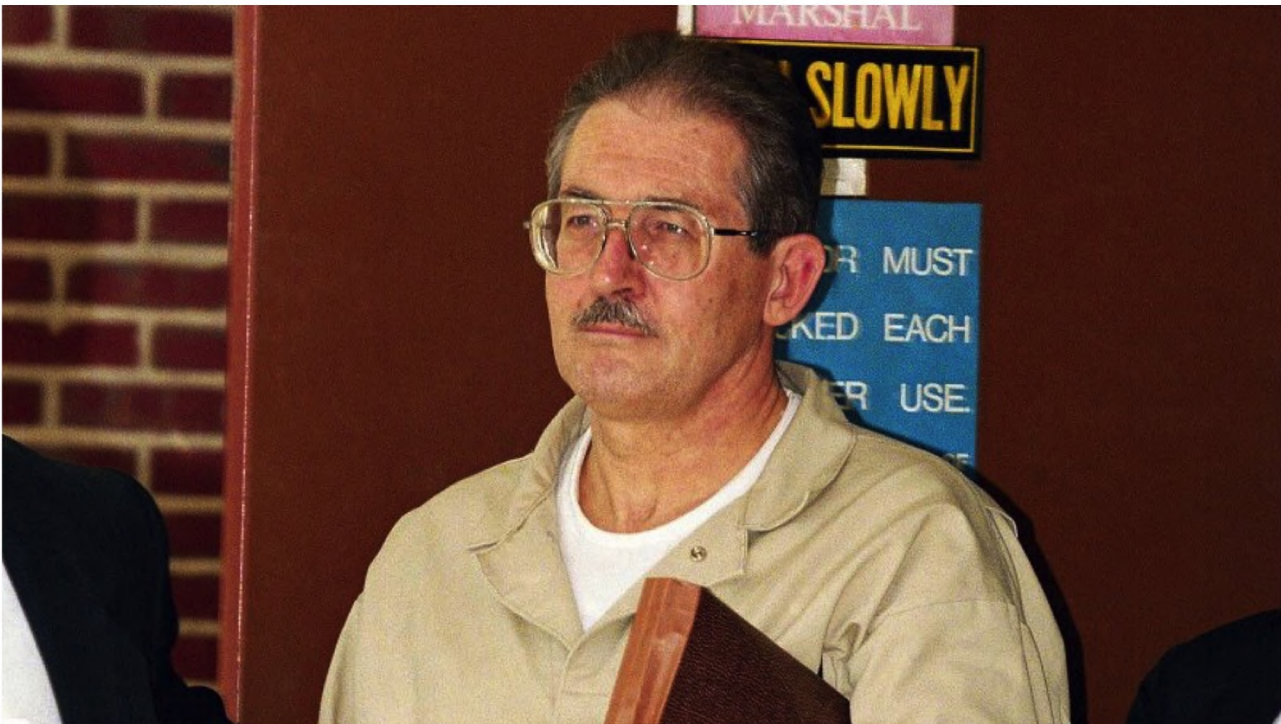
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