

A cluster of Customs and Border Protection jails stretches from the Rio Grande to the Pacific; farther north, they dot the woods and mountains along the Canadian frontier. Most of the jails are austere, even by the grim standards of detention centers. The communal cells are generally concrete rectangles, without beds or other furnishings. They weren't built to hold people even overnight, though some migrants have been locked up for weeks at a time. Some of them called the jails *hieleras*, which means "ice boxes," or *perreras*, which means "pounds"—as in, the place you'd keep dogs. Inside, people often get sick, and they sometimes die.

In the 2022 fiscal year (the most recent year for which we have comprehensive data), fifty-two people—an average of one per week—perished in C.B.P. custody. Deaths like these rarely make headlines. However, in December of 2018, there were two exceptions, for an awful reason: the victims were children. On December 8th, Jakelin Caal Maquin, a seven-year-old girl, died of a bacterial infection. On Christmas Eve, Felipe Gómez Alonzo, an eight-year-old boy, died from complications of influenza. Both came from Indigenous communities in Guatemala. Gómez had spent almost a week in detention before he got rushed to the hospital.

Photos of Caal and Gómez, shared by their families, went viral after their deaths. In one, Caal stands on a patch of grass in front of a thick grove of trees and ferns, wearing a blue shirt and pink sneakers, with a shy, patient look on her face. It is an image many will remember, and it helped fuel a backlash against the Trump Administration's crackdown on migrants. A month after the two children died, [a Gallup poll](#) found that Americans were the most pro-immigrant they'd ever been since at least the nineteen-sixties.

Jails are dangerous places, and Donald Trump plans to lock up more immigrants than ever before. Right now, Immigration and Customs

Enforcement jails around forty thousand people at any given time. The new Administration intends to more than double that, to a hundred thousand people—close to the number of Japanese Americans kept in internment camps during the Second World War. Immigrants will be held in hastily prepared detention centers and military bases; more than a hundred have already been sent to Guantánamo Bay. Expedience will be prioritized above all else. Last month, Tom Homan, Trump’s “border czar,” told an annual gathering of the nation’s sheriffs that the Administration planned to lower federal immigration detention standards so they could find more room in local jails. Children won’t be exempt. The Administration is re-starting family detention.

When people—especially unaccompanied children—die, we may not know about it. Many migrants travel from remote villages that have little internet access, and many speak only Indigenous languages; when they die, or go missing, their families sometimes never learn what happened to them. C.B.P. reported Caal’s and Gómez’s deaths; if it hadn’t, they might not have become public. Indeed, when Caal died, many assumed that she was the first migrant child to die in custody since 2010. But that wasn’t true. That September, Darlyn Valle, a ten-year-old unaccompanied minor from El Salvador, had died in government care without any media finding out. Nearly eight months passed before the Department of Health and Human Services, the agency in charge of unaccompanied minors, admitted, in response to questions from CBS reporters, that the girl had passed away.

No law requires H.H.S. to publicly report the deaths of unaccompanied children in its care, and there’s reason to doubt that the agency will do so voluntarily. Just days after Trump’s Inauguration, he fired the H.H.S.’s inspector general, Christi Grimm. In 2020, her office released a report that found H.H.S. woefully underprepared to care for the children separated from their parents under Trump’s “Zero Tolerance” policy. Reviewing the facilities holding a fast-growing number of children, the office found scores of rule violations. By removing Grimm, Trump has gotten rid of the official

watchdog who might have raised the alarm about children dying. (H.H.S. did not respond to a request for comment.)

The law does require C.B.P. to publicly announce deaths in its custody, and ICE has even stricter reporting requirements. Both agencies now answer to full-throated Trump loyalists, and, if they want to conceal fatalities, they have a generous loophole that they can exploit. Both agencies have broad discretion to *release* people from their custody before their death. In April, 2019, Border Patrol arrested a Guatemalan mother and her two-year-old son, Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, in West Texas. The two were kept in C.B.P. custody for three days, sleeping on the floor, until his mother warned their jailers that her son was very sick. Agents took Ramírez to an emergency room in El Paso. He died in the hospital weeks later. An autopsy found that he suffered from influenza, E. coli, and multiple gut parasites in his final days. C.B.P. never reported his death. The agency released the boy while he was still in the hospital. (C.B.P. did not respond to a request for comment, but has said that it takes seriously its role in insuring the health of detainees.)

Ramírez's death was widely reported, and the family's lawyers pushed for an independent investigation. Other migrants are more isolated. In 2020, during the depths of COVID, Martin Vargas Arellano, who had emigrated from Mexico as a toddler, was held in the massive Adelanto ICE detention center, in Southern California. He was fifty-five, but his attorney, Margaret Hellerstein, recalled that he appeared much older. Vargas sat in a wheelchair, listless and gaunt; Hellerstein said that his body looked like it had been "sucked in on itself." He had spent years homeless, alienated from his family, and he was suffering from schizophrenia, diabetes, hypertension, and hepatitis C, among other conditions. Hellerstein petitioned ICE to parole Vargas, but the agency repeatedly refused. In December, he caught COVID, and his symptoms stretched on for weeks. On the phone with Hellerstein, Vargas, wheezing and scared, begged her to get him out of Adelanto. Then, in March, he stopped calling. When Hellerstein pressed ICE about what had happened, officials stonewalled her for a few days, then said that Vargas was

no longer in custody.

Eventually, Hellerstein filed a missing-persons report with the local police department. When she called the coroner's office, she finally discovered what had happened: Vargas had collapsed with a stroke and been taken to a hospital, where doctors declared him brain-dead. There, ICE finally paroled him. Vargas died three days later. According to an A.C.L.U. complaint, ICE has paroled multiple other migrants with life-threatening health conditions days before their deaths. (In the lawsuit, ICE denied those allegations. It did not respond to a request for comment.)

In his first weeks back in office, Trump has taken an extreme approach to getting migrants out of custody—forcing detainees off of U.S. soil entirely. Using unvarnished threats, Trump has persuaded the governments of countries such as Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador, Mexico, and Costa Rica to accept migrants from all over the world who were arrested in the U.S. In Costa Rica and Panama, migrants have been kept in hastily arranged detention facilities, where some will remain indefinitely. (Both governments have said that they're protecting migrants from smugglers and defended conditions in the facilities.)

The New York *Times* reported that in Panama the first flights of these migrants included Christians fleeing persecution in Iran and Chinese nationals seeking asylum. The Panamanian government is forcing some of them into a camp in the muddy rural south of the country, at the edge of the hostile jungles of the Darién Gap. Press has not been given access, but a Chinese citizen, who smuggled in a cell phone, managed to tell the Associated Press that she was locked in with migrants from Afghanistan and Russia. Putin and the Taliban are unlikely to send diplomats to insure the well-being of these exiles; if migrants die in these camps, they'll die stateless and alone. Maybe journalists will hear about some deaths. But the overwhelmed anglophone press does not have the resources to cover what happens day to day in remote detention centers in multiple countries.

We've already seen one version of this strategy for keeping migrants, and whatever might befall them, out of the public eye. The first Trump Administration forced asylum seekers back across the southern border to wait for their court dates, in a program known as Remain in Mexico. Hundreds were raped, assaulted, kidnapped, or held for ransom, according to documentation kept by the watchdog organization Human Rights First. In 2019, C.B.P. pushed a thirty-five-year-old Salvadoran man, his wife, and their two children into Tijuana to await the outcome of their asylum case. While they were still waiting, the man was stabbed in the neck. The San Diego *Union-Tribune* reported the story, but, because the murder happened in Mexico, it didn't seem to much affect American readers. At least one other asylum seeker died under Remain in Mexico, and we may never know the total number. Once the Trump Administration dumped them across the border, it did not keep track of them.

In the coming months, if families of dead migrants mourn publicly, if undeterred journalists get the story, will Americans care? We are a long way from 2019, when photos of Jakelin Caal Maquin and Felipe Gómez Alonzo, shared by their families, appeared for weeks on the news. In 2023, Anadith Reyes Álvarez, an eight-year-old Panamanian girl with Honduran parents, died after spending nine days in C.B.P. detention. Democrats in the Senate opened an official probe, which found that there were "systemic problems in the delivery of medical care that led to Anadith's death." But Reyes's death got little attention; a photo of her in a blue bow, holding a white Teddy bear, was just a flicker in the press.

Trump officials could easily conceal migrants' deaths, whether they perish in the mud in Panama or in rural hospitals outside of remote detention centers. In the end, they might not need to. Since Trump returned to the White House, ICE has reported three deaths in its custody: Genry Ruíz Guillén, a twenty-nine-year-old Honduran, died in Miami on January 23rd; Serawit Gezahegn Dejene, a forty-five-year-old Ethiopian, died in Phoenix on January 29th; Maksym Chernyak, a forty-four-year-old Ukrainian, died in

Miami on February 20th. All three passed away in hospitals, but ICE kept them in custody; when they died, they were all still officially detainees. Authorities likely didn't feel much angst about publicizing their deaths. The death of children can—sometimes, in the right conditions—provoke outrage. Few will ever care when adult men die in the deportation machine. ♦