



DOCUMENTING DETENTION

Part I: Photographing the U.S.
Detention System - A Conversation
with Greg Constantine

About the Global Detention Project

The Global Detention Project works to achieve a world free of the arbitrary detention of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. We combine investigative research and human rights advocacy to end harmful migration-related detention practices, to enhance protections for at-risk and vulnerable groups, and to ensure that all non-citizens are treated with dignity and respect.

Global Detention Project

3 rue de Varembé

1202 Geneva

Switzerland

Email: admin@globaldetentionproject.org

Website: www.globaldetentionproject.org

About Greg Constantine and the “Seven Doors” project

Greg Constantine is an independent documentary photographer whose work focuses on human rights, injustice, and inequality. His “Seven Doors” project, a long-term documentary project, documents the impact of immigration detention worldwide. In particular, the project explores how governments are increasingly using detention as a significant component of immigration and asylum policy, and exposes the impact, trauma, and human cost detention has on asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people, and migrants around the world. “Seven Doors” is a multiple-year project, spanning several different countries and regions, including Malaysia, the United States, Mexico, the UK, and several countries in Europe. His three chapters examining immigration detention in the United States are available below:

[American Gulag - Part 1](#)

[American Gulag - Part 2](#)

[American Gulag - Part 3](#)

Website: <https://www.7doors.org/home>

Front cover image: Northwest Detention Center, Tacoma, Washington © Greg Constantine/*Seven Doors*

This report is also available online at www.globaldetentionproject.org

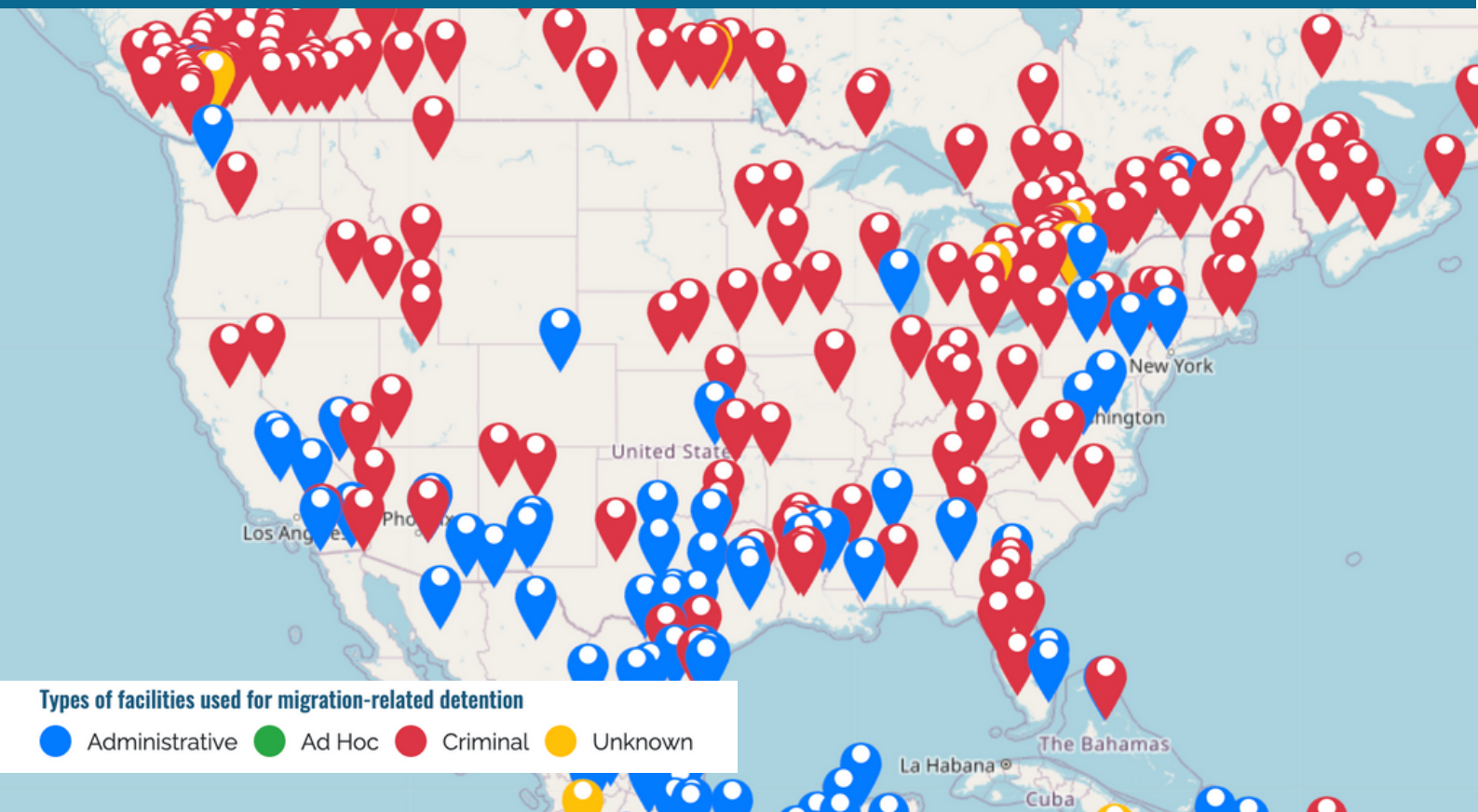


PHOTOGRAPHING THE U.S. DETENTION SYSTEM - A CONVERSATION WITH GREG CONSTANTINE

The [United States](#) operates the world's largest immigration detention system. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detains migrants and asylum seekers in some 200 facilities, including privately operated detention facilities, local jails, juvenile detention centres, field offices, and “family residential centres.” On any given day, it can have upwards of 30,000 non-citizens in detention, which includes the tens of thousands of people apprehended every month on the U.S.-Mexico border by a separate enforcement agency, Customs and Border Protection. The costs of ICE's detention operations are astronomical: The FY2023 detention budget was 2.9 billion USD.

As part of the Global Detention Project's (GDP) “Documenting Detention” series, the GDP's Katie Welsford speaks to the acclaimed independent documentary photographer, Greg Constantine, about his work photographing the United States' vast detention estate.

Greg's “[Seven Doors](#)” project explores how governments are increasingly using detention as a significant component of immigration and asylum policy and seeks to expose the impact, trauma, and human cost detention has on migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers around the world. By combining photography with the testimonies of those affected by detention—former detainees, their friends and families, volunteer visitors, attorneys—Greg hopes to, as he puts it, “expose the injustices and opaque and Kafkaesque policy structures governments put in place that fuel the detention of vulnerable non-citizens.”



The Global Detention Project has investigated and recorded more than 730 facilities across the United States that have been used for immigration detention purposes since 2007. This map shows facilities that have been used at some point since 2022.

GDP: What drew you to start photographing immigration detention in the United States?

Greg: I first became interested in immigration detention while I was working on the [Nowhere People](#) statelessness project. I started meeting with individual stateless people who shared stories of their experiences in detention. I thought I had heard everything there was to hear about the abuses stateless people face, but these stories were unlike anything I had heard before. It became clear that for many people who have had to leave their homes and endure traumatic journeys to “safety,” the experience of immigration detention is often their breaking point. I realised, though, that the visual translation of detention systems that most people know is usually limited to infographics or maps. Nobody had used photography to show what detention systems as a whole look like—they are essentially formless. And this is common for systems of oppression and injustice. So I wanted to photograph facilities so that I could show the huge scale and nature of detention systems. Alongside, I wanted to interview those whose lives have been impacted by detention—be that former detainees, their friends and relatives, volunteer detention visitors, attorneys—to highlight the personal, and often psychological, impact of detention. So that is the Seven Doors project: to document detention through images and testimonies.

GDP: The photographs in this project only depict the exteriors of detention centres. Why is this?

Greg: Early on in the project, I spoke to a lot of former detainees. Something that they commonly described was the moment when they arrived at a detention centre and were forced to remove their clothing and put on a colour-coded jumpsuit or prison uniform. Nearly everyone that I spoke to remarked on how the people you associate with such uniforms are those who have committed the worst of crimes, and so by being made to wear these clothes themselves, they were being forced to assume a criminal identity. It's an imposition of criminality by the system, and it's deeply traumatic. So had I decided to take photos inside detention centres, I would inevitably have captured detainees in their orange, or red, or blue jumpsuits, and would have completely gone against how these people themselves wish to be represented.

GDP: They also capture a real sense of desolation. Was this intentional?

Greg: Yes, and it's another reason why photographing the exteriors is important to me. All too often, detention centres in the United States are built in remote locations—isolated far from society. They are buried in nothingness—in industrial zones, or farmland, or desert—mirroring the experience of detention itself that detainees have described to me: that experience of being isolated from families and society, that mental isolation. There are architectural elements, too, that are common across purpose-built detention centres: a lot of them have no windows, no outdoor space that you can see from the outside, and they are heavily fortified. I remember one of the first visits I made for the project, which was to the immigration detention facility in Karnes, Texas. The centre is located right next to the Karnes Correctional Facility. Driving up to the correctional facility, you could see windows and prisoners playing basketball outside—in other words, there were signs of human life. But next door at the immigration detention facility, there were no windows and no visible outdoor space, it felt completely lifeless. The juxtaposition between the two was so disturbing. It seems that the way that immigration detention centres are constructed is not just an attempt to hide detainees away, but an attempt to tell detainees that they don't belong here, they don't even have a right to see the country in which they are seeking sanctuary. I want my photographs to capture this isolation and desolation.

GDP: You also photograph county jails that detain non-nationals, but these facilities tend to be in town centres—not “nothingness.” What is the rationale for including them in this project?

Greg: Although county jails are often right in the middle of a town and people walk past them every day, many have no idea that these jails are also confining immigration

detainees, or that the use of these facilities for immigration detention is a huge source of income for that county. The migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers detained inside are essentially hidden in plain sight. So I think it's important to photograph these buildings too, as it's by highlighting the "ordinary" that you reveal the "extraordinary."

GDP: Do you think the experience of detention varies according to the facility in which someone is confined?

Greg: Amongst those that I have spoken with, the trauma of detention is shared—whether they are confined in a sprawling purpose-built detention centre on the border or in a small county jail. Isolation, uncertainty of when they will be released, confusion regarding why they have been detained—these are traumas shared by nearly every person I spoke to. But the stories behind this trauma can be different. Those that I spoke to who had been detained in county jails in the Midwest—often they were people who had been living in the United States for a long time. They had homes, they had families, they had friends, they were part of communities. But for some reason or another they were undocumented and found themselves targeted by the Trump administration in its sweeping ICE raids. It broke families—or in fact, entire communities. They are often detained far from their friends and families, and are moved from facility to facility—part of an ICE strategy to disorient people and to complicate lawyers' efforts to assist them.

GDP: Did you ever encounter any problems when photographing facilities?

Greg: On several occasions, detention centre security came out to speak to me. But I knew the boundaries: if I am on public property, I am safe and it is within my rights to take photographs of these facilities. Sometimes I would get into interesting conversations while photographing jails in towns—passersby would ask why I was photographing a jail and some responses were quite hostile. Many of these jails were deep in Trump-supporting counties, so the reactions were interesting.

GDP: Do you have any advice for others who want to visually document detention - be that in the United States or elsewhere?

Greg: I think that merging human stories with images can be a very powerful tool, as the human story can help fill in what might be missing from the photograph. It is also important to be creative in the way that you photograph immigration detention—or other human rights-related issues. When I was working on this project in the United Kingdom, I met a man from Kuwait who was terrified of having his photograph taken. This is not uncommon. As we were standing there talking, I noticed his shadow on the wall, and he agreed to my photographing that instead. It created a very powerful image—far more so than had I photographed his face. Sometimes finding a creative, alternative way of capturing something can be a really effective way of narrating a story. It leaves the viewer thinking, and this can create more meaningful engagement.

Northwest Detention Center

Tacoma, Washington



Greg: Northwest demonstrates exactly what I mean about detention facilities being “buried in nothingness.” It is right in the middle of an industrial zone, and I suspect that most people in Tacoma have no idea that it is even there. In fact, when I was trying to find the right vantage point from which to photograph the facility, I went into the adjacent railroad yard, which is just next to the centre, to ask if I could photograph it from their land. The man I spoke to said: “Yeah, no problem. But what are you taking a photograph of?” I explained that I was photographing the huge immigration detention facility, and he responded: “I have been working in this railroad yard for 20 years and I had no idea that that building is an immigration detention centre.”

DATA CARD

Name	Northwest Detention Center
Facility Type	Immigration Detention Centre (Administrative)
Location	Tacoma, Washington
Capacity	1,181 (2022)
Average daily population	373 (2022); 1,432 (2017)
Management	The GEO Group (2022)
Demographics	Adult men and women
Conditions complaints?	Yes
Reports of inadequate healthcare?	Yes
Migrant deaths in custody?	Yes

Otay Mesa Detention Center

San Diego, California



Greg: Otay Mesa is another huge detention centre. Right on the U.S.-Mexico border, it is ground zero for U.S. immigration policy, and is close to an extremely busy border point—Tijuana. But at the same time, the centre feels like it's in the absolute middle of nowhere. The first person to die of COVID while in immigration detention, an immigrant from El Salvador, was in Otay Mesa. It prompted detainees to go on a hunger strike. The facility also has a long history of abusing immigrant detainees—decades of medical abuse, physical and sexual assault, and labour exploitation are well documented here.

DATA CARD

Name	Otay Mesa Detention Center
Facility type	Immigration Detention Centre (Administrative)
Location	San Diego, California
Capacity	750 (2022)
Average daily population	718 (2022); 995 (2017)
Management	CoreCivic (2022)
Demographics	Adult men and women
Conditions complaints?	Yes
Reports of inadequate healthcare?	Yes
Migrant deaths in custody?	Yes

Bluebonnet Detention Facility

Anson, Texas



Greg: The history behind [Bluebonnet](#) is really interesting. It was originally constructed as a criminal detention facility in 2010, and millions of dollars were pumped into it. But just before it was due to open, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice called the county and said that it no longer needed to use it as a prison. So it stood empty for almost a decade. And then in 2019, amidst the Trump administration's assault against immigrants, the centre was bought up by ICE and was repurposed as an immigration detention facility. So it was built to detain those in the criminal justice system, but is now confining immigration detainees.

DATA CARD

Name	Bluebonnet Detention Facility
Facility type	Immigration Detention Centre (Administrative)
Location	Anson, Texas
Capacity	750 (2022)
Average daily population	390 (2022); 258 (2020)
Management	Management and Training Corporation (2022)
Demographics	Adult men
Conditions complaints?	Yes
Reports of inadequate healthcare?	Yes
Migrant deaths in custody?	Unknown

South Louisiana Detention Center

Basile, Louisiana



Greg: Louisiana used to detain more criminal prisoners per capita than any other state. But in 2017, it passed a series of criminal justice reforms which would decrease detention rates. Minimum sentences were reduced and prison populations decreased. But while prisons were emptying and incarceration rates were decreasing, ICE stepped in and began to massively increase its detention capacity in the state, using the newly vacated jails and prisons. So criminal justice reform in the state actually led to the proliferation of immigration detention. The [South Louisiana Detention Center](#) is an example of this—it was built in 1993 to detain criminal inmates. But after the criminal justice reforms, it signed a contract with ICE, and it has solely been detaining immigrants since then.

DATA CARD

Name	South Louisiana Detention Center
Facility type	Prison or Pretrial Detention Centre (Criminal)
Location	Basile, Louisiana
Capacity	700 (2022)
Average daily population	418 (2022)
Management	LCS Corrections Services Inc. (2022)
Demographics	Adult men and women
Conditions complaints?	Yes
Reports of inadequate healthcare?	Yes
Migrant deaths in custody?	Unknown

Elizabeth Contract Detention Facility

Newark, New Jersey



Greg: **Elizabeth** is buried in Newark Airport, within the airport industry and infrastructure. Driving around the airport, you would not know that it exists because it is a warehouse that has been transformed into a detention centre. Visually, it is very non-descript, and it could be any other warehouse in the area. But it is owned and operated by CoreCivic and several hundred people are held there. I spoke to a number of women who had been detained here, and their stories were incredibly traumatic. They described having their freedom completely stripped away from them, but at the same time, hearing airplanes coming and going. The sound represented the freedom that they had been denied. It was torture for them.

DATA CARD

Name	Elizabeth Contract Detention Facility
Facility type	Immigration Detention Centre (Administrative)
Location	Newark, New Jersey
Capacity	285 (2022)
Average daily population	93 (2022); 294 (2017)
Management	CoreCivic (2022)
Demographics	Adult men and women
Conditions complaints?	Yes
Reports of inadequate healthcare?	Yes
Migrant deaths in custody?	Yes

Clay County Jail Brazil, Indiana

Greg: In 2021, Illinois passed a bill known as the "Illinois Way Forward Act," which would end immigration detention in the state's county jails. Although some municipalities contested the law, several county jails released immigration detainees. However, many of those released were simply transferred to facilities in other states—like [Clay County Jail](#) in Indiana. This jail has been approved for a 25 million USD expansion, clearly intended to enable the facility to absorb people released from Illinois. I

spoke to the local sheriff who was very transparent—he said that "If ICE has immigrants, we will take them because it provides revenue from the Federal Government for our county." It just shows how immigrant bodies become financial transactions—whether that's private companies profiting, or counties receiving increased revenues from the Federal Government.



DATA CARD

Name	Clay County Jail
Facility type	County Jail (Criminal)
Location	Brazil, Indiana
Capacity	Unknown
Average daily population	49 (2022); 56 (2017)
Management	County (Sheriff)
Demographics	Adult men and women
Conditions complaints?	Yes
Reports of inadequate healthcare?	Yes
Migrant deaths in custody?	Unknown



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