

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-414](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Detention facilities can present a challenging environment to manage the risk of transmission of infectious diseases, including COVID-19. ICE, within the Department of Homeland Security, is the lead federal agency responsible for providing safe, secure, and humane confinement for detained individuals of foreign nationality while they wait for resolution of their immigration cases, or removal from the United States. As of March 2021, ICE confirmed over 10,000 cases of COVID-19 among detainees within its detention facilities nationwide and recorded eight deaths.

This report examines: (1) ICE's policies and procedures for responding to COVID-19 in immigration detention facilities and how they were implemented at select facilities; (2) ICE's mechanisms for conducting oversight of COVID-19 related health and safety measures; and (3) ICE's data on COVID-19 cases and identified high-risk health factors among detainees. GAO interviewed officials in ICE headquarters and from a non-generalizable sample of six ICE detention facilities selected on the basis of geographic location, facility type, and average population. GAO reviewed ICE's Pandemic Response Requirements for detention facilities and oversight mechanisms, and analyzed ICE data on COVID-19 cases and high-risk detainees in its custody between January 2020 and March 2021.

View [GAO-21-414](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gablerr@gao.gov.

June 2021

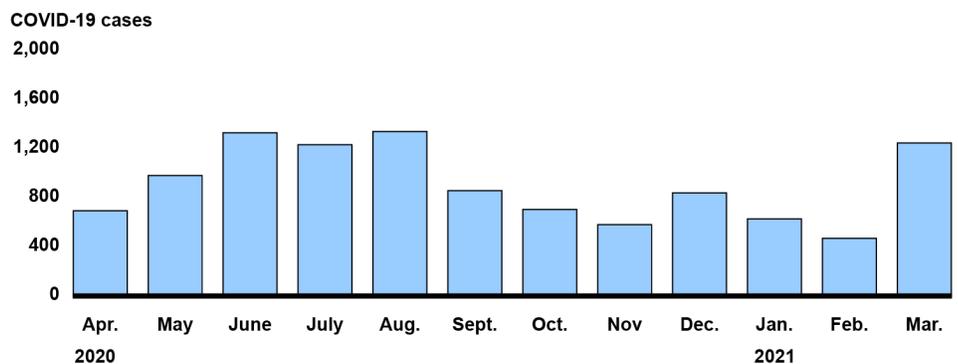
IMMIGRATION DETENTION

ICE Efforts to Address COVID-19 in Detention Facilities

What GAO Found

To guide immigration detention facilities' response to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) developed the *COVID-19 Pandemic Response Requirements*. These protocols address facility intake processing, screening and testing, and social distancing, among other requirements. According to officials from six selected facilities, these requirements were routinely implemented. However, some reported that quarantine of detainees was difficult at times due to infrastructure limitations, and detainee compliance with mask wearing was an ongoing challenge. As of March 2021, individual facilities were generally responsible for working directly with state and local health authorities to administer COVID-19 vaccines to detainees.

Number of Reported COVID-19 Cases among Detainees in ICE Detention Facilities



Source: GAO analysis of ICE data. | GAO-21-414

To oversee detention facilities' management of COVID-19, ICE administers a recurring survey to assess their implementation of the *Pandemic Response Requirements*. According to ICE, field officials review the survey responses and follow up with facilities on areas requiring attention. Officials told GAO the survey helped identify areas of potential noncompliance, but also noted some challenges, such as a lack of on-site facility monitoring to validate responses. In December 2020, ICE revised the survey to obtain more information on facilities' adherence to requirements and implemented an on-site compliance check. As of March 2021, officials reported three monthly surveys were completed, plans for corrective actions were initiated at 11 facilities, and they plan to review survey data more systematically for trends.

ICE identifies and tracks COVID-19 cases among detainees in its custody as well as those detainees determined to be at high-risk for severe illness due to COVID-19. In calendar year 2020, ICE tested 80,200 detainees for COVID-19, identified 8,622 positive cases (10.8 percent), and recorded eight deaths. ICE further identified 14,729 high-risk detainees in its custody nationwide among whom 528 (3.6 percent) tested positive for COVID-19.