

Imprisoned, Forgotten, and Deported

Immigration Detention, Advocacy, and the Faith Community

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

On October 13 and 14, JSRI joined six other organizations in presenting an in-depth look at the realities and character of immigration detention in the United States, particularly in the South. The goal of the conference was to increase public awareness of the detention system and its impact on families and communities, show how faith communities are ministering to detained immigrants and their families, and explore how more progressive and just policies towards immigrants and detention can emerge. The detention of immigrants in the U.S. is a dire human rights issue that calls out to people of faith and other people of good will for a just response.

Since enactment of draconian immigration laws passed by Congress in 1996, the number of immigrants detained and deported every year has skyrocketed. During FY 2010, almost 363,000 immigrants were detained in a patchwork network of facilities—mostly penal institutions—in more than 250 locations run largely by county authorities or private contractors with little direct federal oversight at a cost of \$1.77 billion. The number of immigrants detained and deported has skyrocketed 80 percent in recent years from 202,000 in 2002. The total number of detention beds grew 86 percent from 18,000 in FY 2003 to 33,400 detention beds in FY 2010. As of September 12, 2011, the Obama administration had deported 1.06 million persons. At the end of two terms, the number of persons deported during the George W. Bush administration totaled 1.57 million persons.

Although the focus of the deportation process is an administrative task and immigration detention is supposed to be “civil,” not criminal, most immigrants are detained in harsh, punitive conditions in jails and prison. Immigrants in detention are regularly denied due process rights. There are no government appointed attorneys for individuals in deportation proceedings and immigration detention centers look, feel, and operate like jails. Human rights abuses occur in these harsh conditions, such as lack of access to proper nutrition and exercise, medical care, legal and educational materials, phones, and visitation.

In addition, the detention system is virtually invisible. Many detention centers are located in remote and isolated areas. As a result, the public is generally unaware of the high numbers of immigrants detained across the nation or within their home states. For example, four large detention centers in Louisiana are located in remote areas, including two of the largest detention centers in the country: Jena/LaSalle Detention Center and Oakdale Federal Detention Center.



Panel on The Realities of Immigrant Detention: Politics and Economics. From left to right: Dr. Aaron Schneider, Tulane University Department of Political Science, panel moderator; Dora Schriro, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Corrections, author of the 2009 “Schriro Report” on detention reform; Alger Kendall, Jr., retired judge, private prison proponent from Karnes County, Texas; and Bob Libal, Senior Organizer for Grassroots Leadership in Texas and leading activist in movement to oppose private prisons.

Conference speakers and panels focused on: the economics of prison and immigration law; the politics and economics of immigrant detention; race, illegality, and detention; a liberationist response to immigrant detention; religious responses to detention; advocacy strategies; and changing the conversation in the public square. Among the notable visiting presenters were: Laura Sullivan, investigative reporter for National Public Radio; Miguel De La Torre, Professor of Social Ethics, Iliff School of Theology; Frank Sharry of America’s Voice; Don Kerwin of the Center for Migration Studies; and Andrea Black of Detention Watch Network. Loyola University speakers included: Bill Quigley and Hiroko Kusuda of the College of Law and Law Clinic; Ted Quant of the Twomey Center; and Sue Weishar, Alex Mikulich, Mary Baudouin, and Fred Kammer, S.J., of JSRI.

Co-sponsoring the conference, made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation, were: the University of Florida Center for Latin American Studies and The Initiative for Immigration, Religion, and Social Change in the U.S. South; the Loyola University College of Law and the Stuart H. Smith Law Clinic and Center for Social Justice; the Loyola University Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies; JSRI; and the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University.

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