

DETAINING DEMOCRACY: TOTALITARIAN  
IMPLICATIONS OF UNITED STATES DETENTION  
CENTERS

by

LAUREN MONKEWICZ

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Approved: Matthew Norton, PhD  
Primary Thesis Advisor

This study examines healthcare violations in ICE detention centers through the critical sociological lens of state making. It aims to answer: do the violations that occur within these centers have an effect on the United States' state making process? Are there any intersects between the way ICE treats detainees and the actions of a totalitarian government? To assess the nature of the state through this lens, this paper examines government reports, third party investigations, and various accounts of life as a detainee, relying on previous scholarship on typologies of the state to guide its definitions. Ultimately, this research suggests that there are totalitarian implications behind the egregious healthcare transgressions that occur in ICE detention centers. The nature of the abuse towards detainees has inherent connections to fundamental totalitarian traits, demonstrating that these actions leave a stain on the United States' democracy.

*Keywords:* Totalitarianism, democratic regime, detention centers, state, healthcare

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## **Introduction**

The United States (U.S.) proudly considers itself a beacon of democracy. The country takes this self-characterization to heart, having even gone so far as to use its defense of democracy as a justification for war. However, the U.S. democratic regime has historically been far from a pure democracy. The country has enforced incredibly non-democratic traits throughout its 246 years of formal statehood, including periods such as the internment of Japanese-Americans and the Jim Crow era. This research highlights the latest stain on our democracy's purity: the healthcare violations within ICE detention centers. It asks: can abuses sponsored by the state reflect elements of its character that corrupt its perceived identity? What do violations towards a vulnerable population indicate about the ever-changing nature of the state they occur in?

By focusing on immigration detention policies and practices during the past decade, this paper reviews evidence suggesting that ICE's human rights violations align with historic definitions of totalitarianism. It considers how the state's abuse of people under its care demonstrates a connection to the actions of a totalitarian state, reflecting non-democratic values within the democracy. The research focuses on a comprehensive view of healthcare to examine the lives of individuals within these centers, comparing this data to the core totalitarian traits, including the denial of individual liberties and state-sponsored internment. Ultimately, this research shows that healthcare violations within U.S. detention centers reflect historically totalitarian characteristics, calling into question the alleged purity of our democracy.

## **Goals**

Current research on the sociological construction of totalitarianism sees a focus on cultures and societies such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalinism. This paper aims to turn the lens towards the culture of the United States and consider the current state of immigration detention centers through a totalitarian lens. Furthermore, it hopes to expand the working definition of totalitarianism by looking at the care of individuals within detention centers, and how their state-sponsored struggles reflect on the character of the nation.

While there are many facets of the U.S. Southern border of interest in this regard, this paper will focus on specifically detention centers in the last twenty years in particular, from 2002-2022, for the sake of scope and clarity. Within this context, identifying the tangible impacts of shifting statehood will be critical. This paper will explore events within and surrounding these centers, relying on different facets of healthcare as a means to explore divergent violations of human rights. Ultimately, this investigation aims to answer: how do the events and violations within detention centers align with totalitarian traits and practices? How do these state sponsored actions reflect and contribute to the process of state making? This paper will demonstrate that the United States' extreme and violating actions within detention centers have been a vehicle for the infiltration of totalitarian characteristics and practices in the country's politics.

Importantly, it should be noted that it is not the aim of this paper to characterize the U.S. state as a whole. Rather, the goal is to illuminate how the abusive treatment of a subpopulation under government care reflects an aspect of the larger state's nature, as

do all official actions of the United States government. The state-subjected experiences of vulnerable populations might not reflect the experiences of the entire state, but they can reflect changing elements of its character that are representative of other forms of government.

## Literature Review

This thesis addresses the degradation of U.S. state making towards totalitarian trends. The central research concerns how happenings in detention centers in the past decade have potentially incited an integration of totalitarian characteristics into U.S. politics. The framework for this analysis will be the existing expert theories on sociopolitical state making. It's entirely necessary to understand these fundamental concepts this paper implements in its research before continuing further. There are a few key sociological terms of interest to dissect, including: the state, state making, forms of state making, and healthcare. This section will explore these terms and their scholastic implications, as well as their background and context. This being said, it's important to acknowledge each term's transient nature. As research continues on all of these concepts, they are prone to grow or change in meaning, moving with the trends of the current academic dialogue. This literature review will discuss the works containing these theories, overviewing them and drawing them into conversation with one another in order to gain a clearer understanding of their significance

### The State

The first topic to consider, the "state," lays a basis for the rest of the concepts to be discussed. In sociological terms, the "state" does not refer to a singular political party or region, rather, it is the entirety of the political unit. There are many works incorporating this subject, and a handful that focus on defining it specifically. One piece, *The Sociology of the State*, considers it in the following light: "The state should rather be understood as a unique phenomenon, an innovation developed within a specific geographical and historical context" (Badie and Birnbaum 1983). Crucially,



these authors consider the state and “invention,” rather than some inevitable consequence – granting agency and responsibility to the state making process (Badie and Birnbaum 1983). One thing that these authors could do to acknowledge more in their research is that there are no such things as entirely “pure” states in any form of practice. For example, no completely “pure” (by theoretical standards) democratic regime has ever existed. States have multitudes of traits existing within them at once in “never ceasing clashes” (Duzsa 1989). While they often have a typology, it’s possible to have the traits of multiple typologies while still being classified under one nomenclature.

Understanding this definition of “state,” the term “state making” is in many ways defines itself in the language of its name. State making is the process by which states are formed. For example (in a simplistic case), the Founding Fathers engaged in state making when they wrote the Constitution. However, state making is ever-occurring, as states are ever changing. When people and groups add new laws, policies, and characteristics onto the state, state making is happening and in its unceasing manner (Duzsa 1989).

### **Totalitarianism**

Forms of state making play an integral part in the construction of this paper, with a heavy emphasis on three main kinds: totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democratic regimes. The first of these, totalitarianism, is a primary focus and has been built upon by a number of different scholars. In simple terms, totalitarianism has been defined by scholars as a type of state dominated by a need to “completely control

political, social, and intellectual life” (Passerini 1992). These states are known for charismatic leaders with strong central values or philosophies, usually working towards an ideal or stylized future -- people who “embody the masses” (Arendt 1951). Hence, it would be typical to see one strong central leader under a totalitarian state, rather than dispersed or decentralized leadership. Use of state-sponsored violence, silencing of dissent, and popular control are typical. (Arendt 1951). In extreme totalitarian states, it would be characteristic to replace all existing political institutions with new institutions that subscribe to the created ideology. A famous example of a totalitarian state would be Nazi Germany. This basic definition is built off of multiple works, the primary two of which being *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* and *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Before discussing the next concept, it is necessary to examine the merits and pitfalls of each work that significantly informed this definition of totalitarianism.

The first piece that builds the understanding of totalitarianism for this research in a major way is *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* by Juan Jose Linz. Linz famously created typologies for totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, attempting to comprehensively outline their characteristics. Totalitarian regimes, for example, are claimed to have a monistic center of power, an ideology, and a large-scale center of power (Linz 70). Linz’s piece is a critical contribution to the discourse because it lays the groundwork for future taxonomic pieces of the same nature. This being said, it is limited in some capacity by the confines of history itself -- being published in 1975, it has not had the power to extensively review recent discourse or events. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* will be an excellent contributor to theoretical and academic

groundwork for this discussion, although further evidence needs to be provided by more contemporary pieces – hence the supplemental incorporation of Passerini’s work.

The second major informant for this research is Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which cannot be overlooked in creating a definition. It is considered classic piece, widely renowned for its comprehensive picture of totalitarianism rooted in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Arendt’s book discusses totalitarian states both in theory and actuality, dipping in and out of each end of the academic spectrum to create an analysis that gives life and meaning to the typology. This piece serves as a critical foundation for establishing and characterizing totalitarianism. It's defining traits of totalitarianism differ slightly than Linz's, in the sense that it observes microsociology (by looking at the individual). It discusses the value of voicing individuality, and how it combats the creation of forced mass-unity that can occur in totalitarian states. Where Linz's piece remains heavily theoretical, *Origins of Totalitarianism* uses examples to connect to real-life historical political states. This fleshes out an aspect of research that is mostly absent from the aforementioned pieces. The key use for *Origins of Totalitarianism* will be Arendt’s renowned statement that a central aspect of totalitarianism is state-sponsored internment, or “concentration camps” in Arendt’s words (Arendt 1951).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt’s categorization of totalitarian “concentration camps” was purposely broad, scaling from “Hades,” to “Purgatory,” to “Hell.” Less abstractly, she asserts that internment camps such as those in the U.S. during WWII fit the mild description, whereas Nazi concentration camps fell on the more severe end of this spectrum.

## **Democratic Regimes**

A democratic regime would be considered a “democracy” colloquially, or a state in which the highest power belongs to the people. Free and fair elections are an essential trait of democracies (O’Donnell 2010). Democracies also have governance decisions made directly or indirectly by the people through voting (O’Donnell 2010). A famous example of a democratic regime would be Ancient Greece. The United States of America also famously reports itself to be a democracy, and most accurately fits the typology of a democratic regime, or a “political democracy.” The sociological definition of a democratic regimes varies and isn’t always fully focused on in texts that involve it because oftentimes, modern individuals are informally aware of what it means and looks like. However, there are pieces that are (importantly) dedicated to this definition, such as “Democracy, Agency, and the State: Theory with Comparative Intent,” referenced above. O’Donnell’s piece acknowledges the fundamentals, including certain political freedoms, but specially acknowledges that democracies have traits outside of their indispensable components. This is critical to this research, which takes care to acknowledge the versatile nature of states.

## **Authoritarianism**

Authoritarianism, unlike a democratic regime, is type of state dominated by a need for blind submission from citizens (Duignan 2021). The executive typically has vague or shifting powers. Instead of relying on popularity, this state type justifies itself to its populous by considering itself a necessary evil (Henderson 1991). A famous example of an authoritarian state would be Cuba, under Fidel Castro. These traits are

widely accepted by the scholastic community and adopted as guidelines for identifying these regimes, though one source in particular was used to uncover what truly distinguishes democracy from authoritarianism: “20 Lessons from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century About How to Defend Democracy from Authoritarianism.”

Timothy Snyder’s “20 Lessons from the 20th Century About How to Defend Democracy from Authoritarianism” examines authoritarian regimes by looking at them through the lens of combatting them. This piece assists this research by outlining which political characteristics (or events) negatively influence democratic regimes. By outlining these characteristics, it is contributing the known data of the traits in each typology. While Snyder’s work lacks in length, it exceeds in the quality of its content, doing a solid job of establishing authoritarian characteristics. This is done so by highlighting methods of opposition, successfully outlining traits through the constructed juxtaposition. He asserts that authoritarian regimes infiltrate institutions, rely on perceived threats, and thrive in disguising the truth (Snyder 2017). Democracy, on the other hand, he suggests can be saved through defending the truth, staying calm in the wake of attack, and denouncing one-party states (Snyder 2017). Snyder’s introduces the notion of tactical topics and building off of Linz’s typology of authoritarianism with increased specifics. Together, both of the pieces interact to create a picture of authoritarianism to serve as a contrast and backdrop for the chief discussion of totalitarianism.

## Healthcare

The final piece of the puzzle that informs this research is the idea of healthcare. Distinguished from state making and typologies (though significantly not entirely separate), the sociological definition of healthcare is ever evolving. In simplest terms, healthcare is seen as a “fundamental human good” pertaining to multiple aspects of human life, including physical, mental, and reproductive well-being (AMA 2022). This definition comes from the American Medical Association, although it leans more into a legal and ethical framework than a sociological one.

One established work on this topic, *The Sociology of Healthcare*, incorporates the topic into the sociological sphere by acknowledging that “health, illness and disease not only are biological and psychological conditions but can also be viewed as social states” (Clarke 2010). This piece is one of the more comprehensive pieces dedicated to solely exploring what healthcare means in a sociological sense. Clarke attempts to demonstrate the vast evidence that points to healthcare existing outside of an individualist sense and very much inside a societal sense as well. This is essential: the existence of healthcare in the social state and its demands that it have a larger role in the consideration of the breakdown of democratic norms within a society. Its intrinsic existence as a human right further strengthens connection to societal wellbeing, making it an essential axis of this examination. While Clarke’s analysis on the subject is encompassing of many subtopics, his piece and the scholarship on the topic leaves room for the exploration of how this complex topic drives this paper.

These sources all help contribute to the broader understanding of the sociopolitical intersection this research examines. It is necessary to note that a healthy

portion of research moving forward in the paper will involve primary sources and documents. A comparative meta analysis will be conducted on everything from public and official discourse to reports, interviews, news articles and more. This will create a comprehensive picture of the erosion of democratic qualities in the American state as they relate to healthcare and detention. These primary sources will paint the picture to assess current state making with the support of aforementioned and additional secondary sources.

## **Methods**

The primary research question is: why does ICE provide egregiously substandard healthcare to detainees? In addition to this, it considers: Have these events and policies affected the alleged purity of U.S. democracy?

To answer this main question (and the subsequent ones), this research relies on content analysis, reviewing both primary and secondary sources. For primary sources, there is a review of materials such as: lawsuits against ICE regarding detention centers, ICE third-party center reports, ICE official statements, and administrative addresses to the public. The largest samples of data are taken from lawsuits and reports, while a smaller sample for feasibility's sake is taken from policies and administrative addresses. For secondary sources, this research reviews a range of scholarly works, including renowned texts and journal articles on the subject. Investigative news articles and exposes from non-governmental organizations are also examined, with their information might supplementing that which ICE might not give.



## **Findings**

The aim of this study is to explore the healthcare practices within ICE detention centers and their potential implications on our democracy. It asks: do the healthcare violations within these institutions affect the character of U.S. democracy? Each section discusses a pivotal facet (and subsequent violation) of the detainees' wellbeing, exploring the connection to traditional definitions of totalitarianism. This exploration, framed broadly by a holistic definition of healthcare, draws together the known wrongdoings into a larger uncovering of their sociopolitical implications. Ultimately, it shows that the abysmal conditions and healthcare within the detention centers introduce characteristics of totalitarianism into U.S. democracy.

### **Bodily Autonomy**

Before studying the data points within detention centers, it's important to establish the relationship between bodily autonomy and totalitarianism. The reduction of bodily autonomy is implicit in established definitions of totalitarianism, acknowledged in the generally accepted description that totalitarianism aims to control "all vital aspects of a man's existence" (Friedrich 1965). The innate thirst of totalitarianism to manifest total control is intrinsically adversarial to bodily autonomy. Control is indeed the issue: when it comes to having authority over one's own healthcare, patient autonomy has been outlined as a critical facet of maintaining this power (Bernstein 2018). Perhaps because of this innate conflict between control and autonomy, totalitarianism has historically been deeply connected to the idea of bodily

autonomy. This link ranges broadly from the infamous Nazi concentration camps to Mussolini's statement that "'outside of the state...no human or spiritual values can exist'" (Mussolini 1932). This total mandated control of personhood and choice arguably falls on the more extreme side of the spectrum of totalitarian behavior that scholars have outlined. Whether forged through historical events or scholastic conversations, the established connection between bodily autonomy and totalitarianism is vital to note when regarding the following findings on violations of autonomy in detention centers.

### *Wrongful Detention*

From 2005 to 2017, ICE was projected to have wrongfully detained as many as 3,506 U.S. citizens (Bier 2018).<sup>2</sup> In itself, the existence of state-sponsored internment without reason or proper justification echoes totalitarian behavior. Because detention centers specifically exist to detain "Non-U.S. citizens," the detention of any citizen becomes automatically baseless and consequently illegal (ICE 2022). While the codified illegality of this action could be considered democratic, its continued happening dangerously borders on the totalitarian trait of controlling the being and denying basic liberties. As such, wrongful detention cannot be overlooked. The democratic legal protections promised to all citizens only exist for some. This gap in the rule of law is only exacerbated by the incredible hurdles that come with proving

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<sup>2</sup> This information comes from an investigative report from CNN. Investigative reports have the potential for biased language and motives, although have been necessary in this research to supplement all that ICE's readily available information lacks. In the case, ICE has removed from their website detention statistics from before 2019.

citizenship – which result in wrongful detention being frequent, prolonged, and violating.

The culture of mistrust surrounding wrongful detainees that has been both ingrained and codified. On an interpersonal scale, simply the claim of citizenship is not enough. One former ICE lawyer noted that – after reviewing hundreds of cases of citizens in custody – agents “generally assumed [citizens] were lying” (Watson 2018). This assumption by state-sponsored agents is not an anomaly –it has been institutionalized within the court systems. While the US generally applauds itself for the presumption of innocence, this does not apply to everyone, and is not a constitutional right (Cornell 2020). In cases where a citizen has been wrongfully detained, they are guilty until proven innocent. In other words, the burden of proof falls upon the citizen to demonstrate their citizenship (Cornell 1997). This becomes especially difficult when considering that any person accused of illegally entering the country for the first time does not have the right to any attorney (Peralta 2016). The result of these high burdens of proof and wrongful assumptions combine to create a state-sponsored kidnapping: holding hundreds of citizens against their will with no legal justification for extended periods of time. This is incredibly reminiscent of totalitarian systems of “justice,” which dispense “‘justice’ through administrative processes from which there was no appeal” (Friedrich 1965). The lack of resources for these citizens to regain their autonomy combined with the codified stripping of liberties becomes dangerously totalitarian.

### *Physical abuse*

There are two facets of concern within the realm of physical abuse that occurs in ICE detention centers: physical assault, and reproductive abuse. In terms of physical assault, there are records of ICE agents assaulting detainees over minor requests (SPLC 2016). One young immigrant, Stanley, was reportedly assaulted after requesting on behalf of other detainees to adjust the air conditioning. Guards slammed Stanley's head against the concrete floor, tied him to a chair and covered his head – an incident that necessitated several stitches (SPLC 2016). Other reports involve detainees returning from meetings with agents “beat up,” agents using stun guns on weaponless detainees, and detainees being dragged in chains (SPLC 2016). The agent's use of weapons is not uncommon, pepper spray has been used in multiple accounts. In one case, it was to the extent to which a detainee, Castillo, threw up from the pain – after agents intensified the pain with hot water (Martinez v. GEO 2019). These types of physical violence – those perpetrated by the hands of the state – are so integral to totalitarianism that it often goes unstated in pursuit of the more nuanced traits. Nevertheless, state-sponsored violence is a pivotal feature of totalitarianism. Using force to “crush opposition” is historically a tactic employed by Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's Italy. In short, these incidents of assault and violence in detention centers invoke similarities to some of the most infamously totalitarian regimes in history, Such a connection has concerning implications for the democratic fortitude of the U.S. regime.

## *Reproductive Abuse*

Reproductive abuse can occur more covertly than physical abuse, with coercion and power playing a role. In the realm of reproductive abuse, individuals with uterus' issues are especially central, involving both pregnant and non-pregnant persons. Pregnant individuals were detained by ICE at the rate of thousands per year from 2017 on (CBS 2021). This posed an innate healthcare issue, as there are multiple reports of ICE facilities not being adequately staffed with employees qualified to treat a pregnant person's issues. In one case, a woman who was bleeding during her fourth month of pregnancy (a symptom requiring medical attention) was simply told that the facility was "not a hospital" (PHR 2022). Another woman bled profusely and had to wait five days for medical attention, which didn't involve giving her an ultrasound (PHR 2022). Two days later, she was told she miscarried (PHR 2022). In 2021, the Biden administration issued a policy that prevents the detention of individuals "known to be" pregnant, nursing, and postpartum (ICE 2021).

Outside of pregnancy complications, there have been numerous other kinds of reproductive abuse in the centers. At one detention center in Georgia, a gynecologist forcibly sterilized immigrant women without their informed consent, denying them their ability to have biological children for life (GDW 2020). In detention centers across the country, individuals who desire an abortion do not have access to one (*University of Cincinnati* 2022). This is a direct violation of every detainee's constitutional right.<sup>3</sup> These specific violations go to show that within ICE centers, people are being denied

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the United States Constitution does not only apply to U.S. citizens (*Penn State* 2022).

their democratic and human rights without justification or due process. Biopolitics has a historic connection to totalitarianism, being used to justify bodily harm, forced sterilization, and other racialized attacks on the individual's corporeal being (Sofair and Kaldjian 2000). Forced sterilization in particular has been a feature of regimes with a racial ideal that have implemented this procedure as a tool to shape their ideal racial society (Sofair and Kaldjian 2000). Reproductive abuse in detention facilities does not only deny democracy, it reinforces ties to the totalitarian characteristic of dominating the body.

## **Nutrition**

The control of nutrition has been a historical precedent in totalitarian state-sponsored internment. In Auschwitz, prisoners received only two meals a day that were at best described as “unappetizing” (ABMM 2022). In the US Japanese Internment camps, food shortages, spoiled food, and too few meals were reportedly not uncommon (UW 2022). These examples of two totalitarian incidents demonstrate how the pervasive necessity of control permeates every facet of society in a fully totalitarian setting – especially when it comes to food. Multiple scholars have identified how everything from agricultural conquests to manufactured food shortages have been used as a tool for advancing the totalitarian state's mission (Heim and Blunden 2003). Reflecting on past regimes and events, it's clear that nutrition has consistently had close ties to totalitarian state making and control. Moreover, the removal of food choices within internment centers at large has cultural, physical, and mental implications on the

prisoners – violating autonomy in an entirely new way. Acknowledging these ties, the exploration of food within detention centers is eye-opening in every sense of the word.

### *Physical Violations*

When dissecting nutrition within detention centers there are a few focal points to examine. The first facet of nutritional control is the distribution and quality of meals. While ICE alleges that detainees get distributed three square meals a day, this is not always the case (ICE 2011). A class action lawsuit from California alleges that detainees were fed “sandwiches” consisting of two slices of bread, with nothing else on them or inside (ACLU 2018). In one case, a detainee lost 15 pounds in two months from malnutrition (ACLU 2018). Lacking meals are not an isolated incident. Multiple reports of spoiled food from Washington to New Mexico have surfaced, including spoiled milk fed to children (*New York Times* 2018). Food poisoning from these conditions and maggots within food were similarly reported from one center in San Diego (Carney 2013). Incidents of food poisoning especially stand out, as they convey the physical toll taken on detainees – a direct result of a forced lack of nutrition. Moreover, the denial of food itself creates an atmosphere of the denier’s supremacy and a social injury to the detainees, imposing a harmful standard of control.

### *Personal Violations*

Outside of physical violations concerning a lack of nutritious food, there were a number of personal violations regarding religious and cultural observances concerning

food and the body. To begin with, there were multiple accounts of those who were vegetarian for faith-based reasons being denied vegetarian meals and served meat (Selsky 2018). Additionally, those who cite food as an important cultural expression outlet and exercise of free will have noted the mental and personal pain in being misfed and malnourished (Carney 2013). This treatment of nutrition in detention centers causes food to be a source of depersonalization for detainees. On the other side of the issue, it allows ICE a sense of control over how detainees can physically feel, how detainees can practice their religion, and when detainees can fulfill their desires, such as eating a good meal. When looking at these nutrition violations in summation, a broader picture of issues around control and violations arise, fitting into the totalitarian standard of stripping individual liberties and denying individualism as a whole.

### **Bodily Harm and Disease**

The relationship between the body and totalitarianism has been touched on within other sections of this research. Disease in particular has a fascinating history with totalitarianism, often as the unfortunate consequence of overly oppressive control of the individual's body. Neglect of the individual in favor of control systems have historically led to disease, especially within internment camps. This depersonalization and bodily suffering affects caregiving and wellbeing as a whole. As one healthcare scholar put it: "If we are to resist the secular totalitarianism of contemporary healthcare, [those administering healthcare] must reinstate the missing person at the center of what we do" (Heath 2017). The 'missing person' in this context refers to the individualism and emotionality humans hold within, which can be dangerously disregarded by caregivers.



In the case of detention centers, this section will discuss the full consequences of physical neglect in the form of disease and bodily harm.

### *COVID-19 and Communicable Diseases*

In a 2020 study conducted of more than a dozen ICE detention centers it was found that vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks were repeated and sustained (Kurtzman 2020). Some of the diseases include the chickenpox and mumps, the latter of which the CDC uncovered hundreds of cases in the year 2018 alone (Leung et al 2019). By 2019, the combined cases of chickenpox and mumps had hit 5,200 in the one year span (McSwane 2020). Notably, not only have there been outbreaks of preventable diseases within centers, but there have been outbreaks caused specifically by ICE's neglect. COVID-19 was atrociously handled within these centers, with several independent reports finding failures on ICE's part. In one investigation by *The New York Times*, it was found that: "pattern of neglect and secrecy that helped fuel outbreaks both inside and outside ICE detention facilities" (Niu and Rhyne 2021). Similarly, in a lawsuit on the half of detainees in the Tacoma facility, the statement was issued that: "Immigrant detention centers are institutions that uniquely heighten the danger of disease transmission" (ACLU 2020). These mishandlings were not without consequence. A study in May of 2020 found that "more than 50% of ICE detainees have been positive for COVID-19" (Openshaw and Travassos 2020). By the end of 2021 cases were surging into the tens of thousands, and not without fatalities (Turcotte 2021). In 2021, COVID-19 cases and suicides had caused the death toll in detention centers to be sevenfold the rate of 2018 (Hopper 2021). COVID-19, unfortunately, is not the only

killer in these centers, as multiple people have died from medical neglect surrounding communicable diseases. One 16 year-old boy in a South Texas facility died from the flu, in “a small concrete holding cell,” after not receiving adequate medical attention (*American Oversight* 2021).

The common denominator amongst the diseases and deaths in these incidents is the general preventability. Under ICE’s haphazard regard for safety, detainees were subject to undue pain and loss of life. This is consonant with totalitarian systems and their intentional disregard for human life. In order to manage the influx of immigrants and disease, the Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly admitted that ICE was “looking at lowering our standards” to meet private rental standards (IA 2017).<sup>4</sup> The intentional denigration of the detainee’s wellbeing during internment echoes totalitarian policies of pervasive control and otherment.

### *Mental Health*

The mind factors in as an aspect of holistic wellbeing and healthcare. The relationship between psychological health and totalitarianism is longstanding. Psychological warfare aside, totalitarianism has historically used mental health both as an excuse for persecution and as a tool of it (Buoli and Giannuli 2017). As one scholar notes on the relation between tyranny and mental health: “The totalitarian regime relies on the loneliness of the individual” (Abed 2003). The degradation of mental wellbeing

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<sup>4</sup> Note: Private rental standards needed to be met because the federal government began renting private facilities to operate out of, when their own began to be overwhelmed and overcrowded with too many detainees.

paves the way for the control and manipulation that totalitarian systems rely on. This relationship must be duly noted when examining the following evidence regarding diminishing mental health in ICE detention centers.

Dozens of studies have shown “robust and consistent” evidence that immigration detention in any setting has negative effects on mental health – including detainees developing anxiety, depression, and PTSD (von Worthen et al 2018). These effects have been demonstrated to be especially difficult on families and young children. Cases of suicidal thoughts, depressive episodes, and developing a combination of disorders have all been reported in mothers and children who were forcibly detained (HRW 2018). Children especially, influenced by their stages of development, are prone to developing PTSD because of the traumas endured within detention centers (DeWitt 2021). The evidence is clear and undeniable: detention centers can be a breeding ground for mental health calamities.

The fact alone that mental health degrades within detention centers doesn’t prove a connection to totalitarianism. However, the intentionality of certain mental abuses speaks to a prior knowledge that has totalitarian implications as the abuse is carried out. Solitary confinement, for example, has been acknowledged by many countries and experts as torture (UN 2011). Despite this, solitary confinement is one of the experiences ICE has subjected individuals to. A report from the Department of Homeland Security noted 1,200 allegations pertaining to solitary confinement concerns within these centers were received on their OIG hotline (Cuffari 2021). One woman reported being behind bars, behind a steel door for 23 hours a day over an extended period of time (Ortega 2018). Notably, the system within ICE detention centers is

designed to prevent knowledge about these confinements leaking. According to the DHS: “ICE’s own reporting policy prevents transparency with Congress and the public about the prevalence of [solitary confinement] use” (Cuffari 2021). In short, the system is designed to protect itself against knowledge of these abuses. This evidence, combined with the fact that this ongoing abuse occurred in the first place, stains the character of U.S. democracy. It is quite serious: the implication is that a U.S. government agency subjected marginalized persons to known torturous situations and took advantage of a policy system to misconstrue the facts. This becomes more serious when recognizing that loneliness specifically is used as a tool by totalitarian regimes to “paralyze resistance” (Friedrich 1965).

While commonly overlooked in the interest of dissecting physical abuse, the mental and psychological toll on detainees in ICE centers is perhaps one of the largest indicators of totalitarian traits intersecting the U.S. democracy. In the words of Friedrich, depriving an individual of their sense of self-expression and independent action “is by all odds the most dangerous form of terror because it dehumanizes the victim” (Friedrich 1965). Depersonalization, dehumanization, and mental degradation are not to be taken lightly. So long as mentality degrades under sponsored abuse, democracy degrades with it.

## **Limitations**

The scope of the project is narrowed to detention centers, rather than immigration at large, so it's important not to generalize and to acknowledge the contextual size of the scope. Additionally, with content analysis, there won't be any direct conversation with people experiencing the hardships the research examines, or with those enforcing the laws. These findings rely on official statements and third party sources, acknowledging the limitation that statements from government agencies are polished and delivered with the intent of being heard by the public. As research continues on typologies, it will be necessary to acknowledge the artificiality of typologies, recognizing the non-existent of pure statehoods in actuality. It will be critical to specially recognize how democracies can house totalitarian elements and retain their majority status as a democracy.

Future research would be recommended on the relationship between healthcare and totalitarianism, as there is a need for further examination outside of this specific context. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to examine how other facets of U.S. immigration might or might not be introducing totalitarian elements into the U.S. democratic regime; including but not limited to political rhetoric and historic policies.

## **Significance**

This study's significance is twofold. Firstly, it hopes to contribute to existing knowledge of U.S. state making by defining a new moment of ideological permeation. In other words, it identifies a new era in which totalitarian traits infiltrate the current democracy. While previous scholars have suspected impurities in state making during periods of strife (such as the internment of Japanese Americans), there is yet to be a significant investigation of this particular nature into the past half-decade of detention center circumstances. An acknowledgement of an increase in totalitarian traits in our statehood could influence both policy and further research by providing a more informed viewpoint on the current state of affairs.

The second significance is a contribution to the academic conversation surrounding state making typologies. With specific focus on the kind of totalitarian traits in existence, this study has the potential to add new knowledge by examining totalitarianism through a holistic healthcare lens. Specifically, the violations of reproductive healthcare in detention centers and their correlation with traits has the possibility of opening a new dialogue on the subject. As the traits themselves of totalitarianism are ever being redefined, this research might produce an addendum to add to the definition.

## Conclusion

Understanding that state making is an ongoing process, it is pivotal that the United States shapes itself with the utmost care in order to protect the purity of its democracy. This research shows evidence of egregious healthcare violations in detention centers, which echo the actions of past totalitarian regimes and put the character of our state in question. There is an answer for the central research question: why does ICE impose subhuman healthcare standards on detainees? These findings paint a clear picture that this treatment is part of a broader system of dehumanizing the detainee through humiliating treatment intrinsically connected to totalitarian ideals. This treatment, these circumstances, and these abuses are not accidental. These centers – in which one can be served maggots, beaten, abused, denied medical treatment and their constitutional rights, and more – are a place in which collection of intentionally abusive actions create a dynamic between the agents and detainees. This dynamic, while incredibly complex, is also very simple and has been seen throughout history: the detainee is treated as subhuman, and the agents have a totalitarian sense of supreme power and total control. The denial of fundamental rights in a systemic way that's acted out through a government agency is cause for concern.

Regarding the evidence as a whole, the level and permeation of control over detainees demonstrated by this study shows a pattern of totalitarian actions that jeopardizes the sanctity of the democratic regime. Actions carried out by state-sponsored agents within state facilities against a vulnerable population must be seen as meaningful, and their larger connotations must be considered. The circumstance is not that these centers are introducing totalitarianism into the state's democratic regime – in

fact, the situation is quite the opposite. It is the United States' democratic regime that sponsors totalitarian circumstances in the centers, a domain fully under its jurisdiction, thereby allowing the egregious violations to facilitate a dynamic of totalitarian control. Behind every assault, every medical malpractice, and every dehumanizing act that an agent performs, there is the implication that these actions were carried out in the name of the U.S. democratic regime. Herein lies the truth of these findings, of which there is the broader societal implication. These healthcare violations implicate more than a humanitarian crisis. They leave a dark stain on our democracy.



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