

The border is everywhere

For example, it runs right through a detention center in Mississippi.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Tallulah Fontaine)

I've been involved for years in the US immigration system—as a translator, as an observer and witness, as a communications professional for a legal services nonprofit. What began as a few hours of volunteering once a week is now a full-time job, a book, and as close as I've ever come to experiencing a calling. In all these years, I've encountered the border not just in its physical manifestation as a line on the earth in places like Tijuana and Eagle Pass, but in the tentacles that the border spreads across the country—a courtroom in Boston, a legal clinic in New York,

neighborhoods in Chicago. If there was anything I learned from this time, it's this: the border is everywhere, and everywhere it exists, it makes people's lives harder.

No place is this truer than at an immigration detention center. We all heard about quickly thrown together, ad hoc detention centers during the Trump era: tent cities in parking lots or underpasses, big rooms full of people under the kind of shiny aluminum blankets they give to marathon runners, bad food, bad conditions, bad medical care. However, there's another kind of detention center, one that looks much more like a prison. This kind has been in operation since long before the Trump administration and will continue to be in operation long after.

At the end of 2019, I visited one such detention center, in a small town in Mississippi. Mississippi isn't exactly known as a border state, but here was an ICE-contracted detention center, run by a private corporation, that held hundreds of men who had recently crossed the border and, in many cases, were trying to ask for asylum. Other wings of the facility served as a state prison, full of other men who were serving out sentences similarly assigned by a deeply unjust system.

I was at this prison as part of an information-gathering trip with a group of attorneys and immigration advocates, and as we were led on a tour of the facility with the warden and the prison company's lawyers, it truly sunk in that immigration detention isn't *like* prison, it *is* prison. Prison is a windowless room the size of two high school gyms with bright fluorescent lights and bunk beds exactly six feet apart, showers and toilets with no privacy screens so everything is visible from a guard station at one end of the room, TVs constantly on, lights out at midnight and back on at 4 a.m. More specifically, immigration detention is no guarantee that anyone in charge speaks your language, no idea how long your stay might be or who makes the ultimate decisions about your fate.

When I say that the border is everywhere, I mean that it's in hundreds of prisons in towns big and small across the country. Thanks to federal contracts, local county lockups can play host to ICE detainees, reaping profits for the warehousing of human beings. The presence of immigration detention in any given community also has effects far beyond its walls—according to a Detention Watch Network report, the likelihood of ICE immigration arrests in any given county grows alongside ICE's detention capacity in that county.

Each ICE detention and arrest separates a family, puts someone into a situation where they cannot care for themselves or their families and communities, and often puts them in harm's way. Fighting these detentions—and ICE's unjust sway over many of the most vulnerable families in our communities—feels as much a part of my faith as scripture or prayer, a form of worship that returns to the basic fact that each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made and ought to be treated as such.

This fight has taken the shape not only of my job and my book but also my involvement in raising funds and working with the Midwest Immigration Bond Fund, which works to free people from immigration detention on an individual level while fighting for systemic change as a part of the National Bail Fund Network.

In other parts of the country, advocacy against the cruelty of immigration detention can look like site fights: local communities coming together to prevent a new contract with a local jail or to end an existing one. Activists in Berks County, Pennsylvania, for example, recently shut down the family detention center in their area after years of advocacy.

Even if there is no site in your town or county, there is always an opportunity to get involved at the legislative level in your state or broader community by writing letters and placing phone calls to legislators, asking to end immigration detention in your state. Illinois ended all ICE detention within its borders at the beginning of 2022.

Finally, and perhaps most relevant to *Century* readers, there is also always a need for clergy visitations in detention centers, and organizations exist across the country to facilitate these visits. I volunteered for a time doing court observation with Boston Immigration Justice Accompaniment Network, which also organizes these visits and creates a basis for community involvement with detained individuals and their families.

To be clear, every part of the immigration system is awful: from the blunt horrors of the asylum application form to manacled detainees in immigration court being shuffled, one after the other, through pro forma hearings, each part of the system makes clear the horror and dehumanization it visits on those moving through it. And yet, visiting an immigration detention center, talking to the people inside it, radicalized me in a way that no other part of the system had. I want to invite you to be radicalized alongside me, to join me in this struggle.