

## Collusion, Corruption, and COVID-19: Exposing Human Rights Violations by GEO Group

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### Abstract

*The controversial private prison corporation GEO Group has a history of abusing its power to circumvent laws and social norms, and that hasn't changed during the pandemic. Recent campaigns against GEO, from stakeholder initiatives to a grassroots protest outside an individual facility, have successfully weakened its sphere of influence and exposed its human rights violations – and its vulnerabilities. Exactly why and how should we build upon these efforts in the years to come?*

Since early 2020, life in the United States has been dominated by two pervasive threats: COVID-19 outbreaks and racism within the criminal justice system. The fight to overcome them affects corporations as well as individuals; no industry is immune to the pressing need to adapt in the interest of health, safety, and social responsibility. If corporations cannot protect their workers or the public from a deadly disease – or commit to anti-racist business practices – then their profits and public image could be the year's next casualties. However, one industry in particular is getting extra scrutiny because of its pivotal roles in both. The corporations that own and run private detention centers are under an especially big spotlight in 2020, with the brightest bulbs reserved for the controversial corporation The GEO Group, Inc. (also known as GEO).

Complicit (or at the very least, active participants) in both spreading COVID-19<sup>1</sup> and detaining disproportionate numbers of Black and Latinx people<sup>2</sup>, GEO and other private prison companies have understandably drawn negative attention from non-governmental organizations<sup>3</sup>, investors<sup>4</sup>, and civil society as a whole throughout 2020. This scrutiny isn't new,

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<sup>1</sup> The Marshall Project. (2021, February 11). A state-by-state look at coronavirus in prisons. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>

<sup>2</sup> Nellis, A., Rovner, J. (2019, January 10). The color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic disparity in state prisons. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>

<sup>3</sup> Prison profiteers: The GEO Group. *American Civil Liberties Union*. <https://www.aclu.org/video/prison-profiteers-geo-group>

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig, M. (2019, July 23). Big banks are divesting from private prisons, thanks to anti-ICE activism. *Truthout*. <https://truthout.org/articles/big-banks-are-divesting-from-private-prisons-thanks-to-anti-ice-activism/>

of course. Just last summer, shareholders<sup>5</sup> and activists alike held GEO accountable for its inhumane treatment of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainees in its care<sup>6</sup>. Now, a historically hellish year presents an inimitable opportunity to build upon that momentum and continue exposing, questioning, and lessening GEO's political and financial maneuvers.

## **GEO Group: Getting to Know the Enemy**

GEO isn't the only private prison corporation operating in the United States, but it's one of the biggest<sup>7</sup> and most notorious. Only one other corporation compares: CoreCivic and GEO Group both made about \$1.3 billion – about 30 percent of their revenue<sup>8</sup> – from ICE last year. GEO has more than 60 detention centers in the United States<sup>9</sup>, including five ICE facilities.

While human rights activists have long objected to the detention of undocumented immigrants, only in the past decade have they seen progress in the form of lawsuits, boycotts, shareholder proposals, reports, protests, and mass divestments over alleged and documented human rights violations.

Overuse of solitary confinement is one of those violations. According to a Project on Government Oversight (POGO) report, solitary confinement<sup>10</sup> of detained immigrants is more

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<sup>5</sup> Simon, M. (2019, October 12). GEO group running out of banks as 100% of Known banking partners say 'no' to the private prison sector. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/morgansimon/2019/09/30/geo-group-runs-out-of-banks-as-100-of-banking-partners-say-no-to-the-private-prison-sector/>

<sup>6</sup> At today's annual meeting, GEO Group shareholders voice strong concerns about company's respect for inmate/detainee human rights. (2019, May 7). *Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility*. <https://www.iccr.org/todays-annual-meeting-geo-group-shareholders-voice-strong-concerns-about-companys-respect>

<sup>7</sup> Neate, R. (2016, June 16). Welcome to Jail Inc: how private companies make money off US prisons. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/16/us-prisons-jail-private-healthcare-companies-profit>

<sup>8</sup> Merchant, N. (2020, August 13). Private prison industry backs Trump, prepares if Biden wins. *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/private-prison-industry-backs-trump-prepares-if-biden-wins/2020/08/13/a51c8f64-dd8a-11ea-b4f1-25b762cddb4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/private-prison-industry-backs-trump-prepares-if-biden-wins/2020/08/13/a51c8f64-dd8a-11ea-b4f1-25b762cddb4_story.html)

<sup>9</sup> Our Locations. *GEO Group, Inc.* <https://www.geogroup.com/LOCATIONS>

<sup>10</sup> Schwellenbach, N., Hawkins, K., Steinle, M., & Peterson, A. (2019, August 14). ISOLATED: ICE confines some detainees with mental illness in solitary for months. *Project on Government Oversight*.

common than ever before, and nearly half the detainees subjected to it have mental illnesses. Between January 2016 and May 2018, 4,007 detainees were confined for more than 15 days, a form of torture that made headlines<sup>11</sup> and prompted a coalition of U.S. Senators to call for accountability<sup>12</sup>.

Adelanto ICE Processing Center, a GEO facility in California, topped POGO's list of the facilities that use solitary confinement most frequently. In those two and a half years, Adelanto had 1,191 instances of solitary confinement – just 500 fewer than the number of detainees in the entire prison at any given time.

Over the course of the past decade, one series of lawsuits finally shut down a whole GEO facility. In November 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued the Mississippi Department of Corrections for violence, sexual abuse, and other “inhuman acts” at Walnut Grove, a correctional center for men between the ages of 13 and 22<sup>13</sup>. Before approving the settlement they ultimately reached – which included a ban on solitary confinement for minors – Judge Carlton Reeves condemned GEO for allowing “a cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts and conditions to germinate”.

Just a few years later, in 2015, riots prompted another SPLC lawsuit. This time, Judge Reeves ordered the state to end the collusion between guards and gangs, which violated prisoners' constitutional rights and left the prison in a state of “disorder” and “mayhem”<sup>14</sup>. In September 2018, evidence continued to mount – this time in the form of reports directly from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). After an inspection of the GEO-owned ICE processing center in Adelanto, California, the Office of Inspector General issued a report<sup>15</sup> that required immediate action by ICE.

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<https://www.pogo.org/investigation/2019/08/isolated-ice-confines-some-detainees-with-mental-illness-in-solitary-for-months/>

<sup>11</sup> Woodman, S. (2019, May 23). Thousands of immigrants suffer in US solitary confinement. <https://www.icij.org/investigations/solitary-voices/thousands-of-immigrants-suffer-in-us-solitary-confinement/>

<sup>12</sup> Saleh, M. (2019, July 24). In letter to ICE, Sen. Chuck Grassley joins call for answers on solitary confinement. <https://theintercept.com/2019/07/24/solitary-confinement-ice-chuck-grassley/>

<sup>13</sup> Barbaric private prison in Mississippi closes its doors after SPLC lawsuit. (2016, September 15). <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2016/09/15/barbaric-private-prison-mississippi-closes-its-doors-after-splc-lawsuit>

<sup>14</sup> Federal judge in SPLC case holds Mississippi responsible for protecting prisoners from gang violence. (2015, June 11). <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2015/06/11/federal-judge-splc-case-holds-mississippi-responsible-protecting-prisoners-gang-violence>

<sup>15</sup> Office of Inspector General. (2018, September 27). Management Alert – Issues Requiring Action at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center in Adelanto, California. <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/Mga/2018/oig-18-86-sep18.pdf>

In the report, DHS outlined such safety risks as makeshift nooses hanging in cells (a “daily” and “widespread” issue that guards ignored), repeated instances of medical neglect, and solitary confinement without grounds. One year later, Governor Gavin Newsom terminated the State of California’s lone GEO contract<sup>16</sup> in response to these reports. The same year, Towards Justice filed a class-action lawsuit alleging forced labor at GEO’s immigrant detention facility in Aurora, Colorado<sup>17</sup>.

Still, GEO continues to thrive in less liberal states. GEO landed one of two ten-year ICE contracts in Texas this year<sup>18</sup>, and the \$50 million Houston Processing Center opened in March<sup>19</sup>. Until these contracts expire in 2030, GEO will continue to detain immigrants in at least one border state.

## Pay-to-Play Violations

Of course, GEO has built social and political opposition into its business model. As Bob Libal of Grassroots Leadership explains in a documentary about private prisons<sup>20</sup>, “GEO Group has told its investors that [public policies] like the loosening of drug laws and immigration reform could be very bad for its business.” That might be why GEO has spent more than \$11 million on lobbying efforts and \$5.5 million on campaign contributions since the 1990s<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Strode, M. (2019, September 27). CDCR stops housing inmates at 700-bed private prison in McFarland.

[https://www.bakersfield.com/news/cdcr-stops-housing-inmates-at-bed-private-prison-in/article\\_ddf35c9c-e15e-11e9-b8dc-3752744cfc41.html](https://www.bakersfield.com/news/cdcr-stops-housing-inmates-at-bed-private-prison-in/article_ddf35c9c-e15e-11e9-b8dc-3752744cfc41.html)

<sup>17</sup> Fighting Forced Labor in Private Immigrant Detention Centers: Menocal et al v. GEO Group Inc. (2019, May 8.) *Towards Justice*.

<https://towardsjustice.org/fighting-forced-labor-in-private-immigrant-detention-centers-menocal-et-al-v-geo-group-inc-2/>

<sup>18</sup> Detention Watch Network. (2020, August 10). Two notorious Texas detention centers receive new 10-year ICE contracts with private prison corporations.

<https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/pressroom/releases/2020/two-notorious-texas-detention-centers-receive-new-10-year-ice-contracts>

<sup>19</sup> In the midst of COVID-19 pandemic, business as USUAL: ICE awards a nearly \$50 million contract to keep the HOUSTON processing center open for the next decade. (2020, March 24).

<https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/pressroom/releases/2020/midst-covid-19-pandemic-business-usual-ice-awards-nearly-50-million-contract>

<sup>20</sup> *Prison Profiteers*. (2013, October 21). Brave New Films.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMa5odBQsxU>

<sup>21</sup> The Center for Responsive Politics. GEO Group. OpenSecrets.org.

<https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/geo-group/summary?toprecipcycle=2020&contribcycle=2020&lobcycle=2020&outspendcycle=2020&id=D000022003&topnumcycle=A>

Nearly \$10 million of those donations went to Republican candidates<sup>22</sup>, and GEO's motives for that are clear. Two months before the general election in 2016, President Obama's Deputy Attorney General, Sally Yates, acknowledged that private prisons were no longer needed or cost-effective. In a memo to the Federal Bureau of Prisons<sup>23</sup>, she effectively began a slow phasing-out of private prison contracts in the United States. The next day, GEO made \$225,000 in contributions to then-candidate Donald Trump's campaign.

Of course, it worked. On February 21, 2017 – just two weeks after being confirmed<sup>24</sup> into the new administration – Attorney General Jeff Sessions sent a letter<sup>25</sup> directing the Federal Bureau of Prisons to rescind the Obama administration's new strategy and return to its previous approach. Even GEO's annual shareholders meeting that year was at a property owned by President Trump<sup>26</sup>, according to a Washington Post story that called the company "resurgent" in the Trump era after their stock price tripled.

ACLU lawyer Carl Takei posited that rewarding GEO's lobbying, campaign donations, and political influence was "the opposite of draining the swamp", which Trump promised to do throughout his campaign. But GEO's lobbying wasn't just successful; it was illegal. For example, those Texan contract renewals followed tens of thousands in PAC contributions to Republican lawmakers in the state<sup>27</sup>.

Political donations are par for the course for American corporations, but GEO isn't just *any* company; it relies on contracts with federal and state governments in order to operate. In September 2019, when three ICE contracts in Texas (including one for GEO's South Texas

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<sup>22</sup> The Center for Responsive Politics. GEO Group. OpenSecrets.org..  
<https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/geo-group/C00382150/summary/2020>

<sup>23</sup> Yates, S. Reducing our use of private prisons. (2017, February 21.)  
<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/file/886311/>

<sup>24</sup> On the Cloture Motion (Motion to Invoke Cloture on the Nomination of Jeff Sessions, of Alabama, to be Attorney General): Roll Call Vote No. 115. Congressional Record (2017, February 7).  
[https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_lists/roll\\_call\\_vote\\_cfm.cfm?congress=115&session=1&vote=00055](https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=115&session=1&vote=00055)

<sup>25</sup> Sessions, J. Rescission of memorandum on use of private prisons. (2016, August 18.)  
[https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/pdfs/20170224\\_doj\\_memo.pdf](https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/pdfs/20170224_doj_memo.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Brittain, A. (2017, October 25). Private-prison giant, resurgent in Trump era, gathers at President's resort. *The Washington Post*.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/with-business-booming-under-trump-private-prison-giant-gathers-at-presidents-resort/2017/10/25/b281d32c-adee-11e7-a908-a3470754bbb9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/with-business-booming-under-trump-private-prison-giant-gathers-at-presidents-resort/2017/10/25/b281d32c-adee-11e7-a908-a3470754bbb9_story.html)

<sup>27</sup> Ngo, M. (2019, July 10). Texans Cornyn, Cuellar among top recipients of campaign donations from private detention company PAC. *The Dallas Morning News*.  
<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2019/07/10/texans-cornyn-cuellar-among-top-recipients-of-campaign-donations-from-private-detention-company-pac/>

Detention Complex) were up for renewal, four representatives wrote a letter<sup>28</sup> to their fellow members of Congress that urged an investigation before the contracts were granted, citing violations of federal procurement law.

After GEO's Trump donations were revealed, the Campaign Legal Center (CLC) filed a complaint, then a lawsuit, against GEO. The company, they allege, has violated a ban on federal contractors participating in federal elections<sup>29</sup>. The lawsuit is still active.

Other lawsuits have already successfully shut down GEO facilities. In November 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sued the Mississippi Department of Corrections for violence, sexual abuse, and other "inhuman acts" at Walnut Grove, a correctional center for men between the ages of 13 and 22<sup>30</sup>. Before approving the settlement they ultimately reached – which included a ban on solitary confinement for minors – Judge Carlton Reeves condemned GEO for allowing "a cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts and conditions to germinate".

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to Congress. (2019, December 5). Texas Solicitation Organizational Sign-on Letter. [https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/sites/default/files/Texas%20Solicitation%20Organizational%20Sign-On%20Letter\\_12.5.19.pdf](https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/sites/default/files/Texas%20Solicitation%20Organizational%20Sign-On%20Letter_12.5.19.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Private Prison Company GEO Group's Pay-to-Play. *Campaign Legal Center*. <https://campaignlegal.org/cases-actions/private-prison-company-geo-groups-pay-play>

<sup>30</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center (2016, September 15). Barbaric private prison in Mississippi closes its doors after SPLC lawsuit. *The Southern Poverty Law Center*. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2016/09/15/barbaric-private-prison-mississippi-closes-its-doors-after-splc-lawsuit>

<sup>31</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center (2015, June 11). Federal judge in SPLC case holds Mississippi responsible for protecting prisoners from gang violence. *The Southern Poverty Law Center*. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2015/06/11/federal-judge-splc-case-holds-mississippi-responsible-protecting-prisoners-gang-violence>

<sup>32</sup> Office of Inspector General. (2018, September 27). Management Alert – Issues Requiring Action at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center in Adelanto, California. <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/Mga/2018/oig-18-86-sep18.pdf>

State of California's lone GEO contract<sup>33</sup> in response to these reports. The same year, Towards Justice filed a class-action lawsuit alleging forced labor at GEO's facility in Aurora, Colorado<sup>34</sup>.

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## Financial & Political Consequences for GEO

Last year was particularly disastrous for GEO. Incensed over ICE's practice of separating children from their parents – and detaining those children indefinitely in overcrowded private prisons – more than 100 NGOs formed the Families Belong Together Corporate Accountability Committee. Their goal was singular: put pressure on the banks that invest in GEO and CoreCivic<sup>37</sup>, and convince them to end their relationships with these companies permanently.

Fortunately, public opposition to ICE has become too overwhelming to ignore, and the campaign worked. JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo<sup>38</sup> announced they would no longer invest in

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<sup>33</sup> Strode, M. (2019, September 27). CDCR stops housing inmates at 700-bed private prison in McFarland.

[https://www.bakersfield.com/news/cdcr-stops-housing-inmates-at--bed-private-prison-in/article\\_ddf35c9c-e15e-11e9-b8dc-3752744cfc41.html](https://www.bakersfield.com/news/cdcr-stops-housing-inmates-at--bed-private-prison-in/article_ddf35c9c-e15e-11e9-b8dc-3752744cfc41.html)

<sup>34</sup> Fighting Forced Labor in Private Immigrant Detention Centers: Menocal et al v. GEO Group Inc. (2019, May 8). *Towards Justice*.

<sup>35</sup> Detention Watch Network (2020, August 10). Two notorious Texas detention centers receive new 10-year ICE contracts with private prison corporations.  
<https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/pressroom/releases/2020/two-notorious-texas-detention-centers-receive-new-10-year-ice-contracts>

<sup>36</sup> Detention Watch Network (2020, March 24). In the midst of COVID-19 pandemic, business as usual: ICE awards a nearly \$50 million contract to keep the Houston Processing Center open for the next decade.  
<https://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/pressroom/releases/2020/midst-covid-19-pandemic-business-usual-ice-awards-nearly-50-million-contract>

<sup>37</sup> The Families Belong Together Corporate Accountability Committee  
<https://advisornews.com/oarticle/the-families-belong-together-corporate-accountability-committee-responds-to-wells-fargo-decision-to-exit-the-private-prison-industry#.X9Qry9hKiUI>

<sup>38</sup> Wells Fargo divests from private prisons & immigrant detention industry. (2019, March 12). *The Center for Popular Democracy*.  
[https://www.populardemocracy.org/blog/wells-fargo-divests-private-prisons-immigrant-detention-industry?device=1&device\\_type=nexus](https://www.populardemocracy.org/blog/wells-fargo-divests-private-prisons-immigrant-detention-industry?device=1&device_type=nexus)



GEO that March<sup>39</sup>, followed by Fifth Third Bank<sup>41</sup> and France's BNP Paribas SA<sup>42</sup> in July. Ultimately, by October 2019, GEO had lost every single banking partner that was known to the public. According to *Forbes*, this divestment effectively removed 87.4% of the industry's credit and term loans, a shortfall that fundamentally changes their financial operations for good<sup>43</sup>.

At the same time, GEO's attempts to deflect the controversy also fell short when public relations firm Edelman pulled out of a GEO contract they landed two months earlier<sup>44</sup>. Citing objections from their own employees and possible risks to their reputation, Edelman decided not to help reshape GEO's narrative after all. Another public relations firm, Ogilvy, had faced a similar problem a week earlier, when its own staffers learned from a *Sludge* report<sup>45</sup> that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was a client. *Adweek* later released the "Go Beyond" recruitment campaign<sup>46</sup> that was the one and only result of that partnership.

After these human rights and campaign finance violations were exposed, external and internal pressure came to a boiling point last year. The first sign that the seas were changing for GEO came from the shareholders. Citing human rights concerns in early 2019, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) and Glass Lewis submitted a proposal<sup>47</sup> to GEO

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<sup>39</sup> Rueb, E. (2019, March 7). JPMorgan Chase stops funding private prison companies, and immigration activists applaud. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/business/jp-morgan-prisons.html>

<sup>40</sup> JPMorgan to withdraw from dealing with private prison industry. (2019, March 6). Global Banking News. [link](#)

<sup>41</sup> Fifth Third Bank ends ties with private prison industry. (2019, July 16). *Global Banking News*. [link](#)

<sup>42</sup> Moise, I. (2019, July 13). BNP Paribas backs away from U.S. private prison industry. *Reuters*. [link](#)

<sup>43</sup> Simon, M. (2019, September 30). GEO Group running out of banks as 100% of known banking partners say 'no' to the private prison sector. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/morgansimon/2019/09/30/geo-group-runs-out-of-banks-as-100-of-banking-partners-say-no-to-the-private-prison-sector/>

<sup>44</sup> Hsu, T. (2019, July 30). Edelman, public relations Giant, DROPS client over Border detention centers. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/business/edelman-geo-border-detention.html>

<sup>45</sup> Who is making money From CBP in your state? (2019, June 27). <https://readsludge.com/2019/06/27/who-is-making-money-from-cbp-in-your-state/>

<sup>46</sup> Coffee, P. (2019, July 11). Ogilvy leadership confronts staff concerns over Customs and Border Protection contract. *Adweek*. <https://www.adweek.com/agencies/ogilvy-leadership-confronts-employee-upheaval-over-customs-and-border-protection-contract/>

<sup>47</sup> Immigrant detainees – human rights policy implementation. *Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility*. [https://www.iccr.org/sites/default/files/page\\_attachments/detaineeshr\\_geo\\_0.pdf](https://www.iccr.org/sites/default/files/page_attachments/detaineeshr_geo_0.pdf)



shareholders. They focused specifically on riots, forced labor, and poor living conditions at GEO facilities in Colorado, California, and Washington. Surprisingly, the shareholders agreed that GEO should answer for their treatment of inmates and detainees and passed it at their annual meeting that May.

## COVID-19 Outbreaks & Camp Free Them All

2020 marked a new and disturbing chapter in for-profit detention: the year of deadly outbreaks. Soon after COVID-19 began spreading in the United States, the detainees in GEO's "care" started getting sick. Halfway houses throughout the country were the first hotspots, and residents made it clear that GEO had taken zero precautions to prevent them<sup>48</sup>. Immigrant detention centers would be next.

While GEO's official COVID-19 statement<sup>49</sup> claims they implement "best practices for the prevention, assessment, and management of infectious diseases", the reality is very different. According to complaints filed in both Adelanto and Aurora, "prevention" amounted to the frequent use of harsh disinfectant chemicals in small, poorly ventilated cells, resulting in nausea, pain, blisters, burns, rashes, and other horrifying side effects for detainees<sup>50</sup>. The cells were also too small to allow social distancing, but detainees reported receiving no masks – or at best, one disposable mask per week.

The facility in Aurora had already experienced outbreaks of measles and rubella<sup>51</sup> in previous years. Carlos Franco-Paredes, a CU Denver infectious disease specialist<sup>52</sup> who testified against GEO during earlier outbreaks, knew immediately that prisoners and detained immigrants would be the most vulnerable during the pandemic. In a paper he co-wrote about

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<sup>48</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/17/halfway-house-coronavirus-geo-group/>

<sup>49</sup> The GEO Group, Inc. (2020). GEO Group has taken comprehensive steps to address and mitigate the risks of COVID-19 to those in our care and our employees.  
[https://www.geogroup.com/Portals/0/docs/GEO\\_Coronavirus\\_Statement.pdf](https://www.geogroup.com/Portals/0/docs/GEO_Coronavirus_Statement.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Bletcher, T. et al (2020, August 10). In COVID-19 Response, ICE May Be Misusing a Common Disinfectant in Detention Facilities. *Physicians for Human Rights*.  
<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/in-covid-19-response-ice-may-be-misusing-a-common-disinfectant-in-detention-facilities/>

<sup>51</sup> Lotus, J. (2019, March 06). Mumps, varicella quarantines spike at Aurora ICE facility.  
<https://patch.com/colorado/denver/quarantines-expand-aurora-ice-facility-immunizations-planned>

<sup>52</sup> Couch, M. (2020, October). Moving beyond the clinical encounter. *CU Medicine Today*.  
<https://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/deans-office/cu-med-today/profiles/fall-2020/carlos-franco-paredes-protects-detainees-from-covid-19>

the structural vulnerability revealed by the three waves of COVID-19<sup>53</sup>, he warned that prevention *must* include drastically reducing the populations of detention centers.

Fortunately, Colorado activists and politicians have been paying attention to the facility for years. Hundreds of protesters had converged on GEO's property a year earlier, attracting national news coverage<sup>54</sup> for storming the fences and replacing the official GEO flag with a Mexican flag. Because public opposition to GEO is so strong in this community, Rep. Jason Crow (HD-6 D) requests weekly reports about the conditions inside the facility – and full access for inspections at any given time. On May 21, one of those reports<sup>55</sup> confirmed what we had long feared: COVID-19 was inside the Aurora prison<sup>56</sup>.

In March, April, and May, Abolish ICE Denver tried to prevent this by holding a series of COVID-safe car rallies calling for the release of all detainees. On May 23, just two days after the report was published, six members of Abolish ICE Denver decided to pitch tents on the sidewalk just outside the facility. By the end of the weekend, the pop-up occupation had grown to 25 people (including me), and our plan was solidified: we would stay there until they released every detainee, because detention during a pandemic can be deadly.

As word spread on social media, so did Camp Free Them All. Restaurants donated hot meals every day, construction companies donated portable toilets, and a nearby Mexican grocery store allowed us to use their bathroom in exchange for cleaning it. Other community organizations – including Sanctuary for All, Black Hammer, Extinction Rebellion, Denver Communists, Homeless Outreach on Every Street (HOES), and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) – participated in fundraisers, teach-ins, and protests at the camp.

As weeks passed, community support and media attention grew, and so did GEO's animosity towards us. Our resources were multiplying, our tactics were working... and they, in turn, began constructing dozens of extra fences around the facility and calling the police on a daily basis. The Aurora Police Department told *Time* that they responded to "26 different incidents" during the first two months of our protest, but no arrests were ever made, and no citations were ever issued.

On June 24, one month into our occupation, we accomplished our first objective: secure COVID-19 testing for every detainee. After GEO refused our donation of 500 masks for detainees, ICE announced voluntary testing at the facility, and four detainees tested positive the

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<sup>53</sup> Solis, J., Franco-Paredes, C., Henao-Martínez, A. F., Krsak, M., & Zimmer, S. M. (2020). Structural vulnerability in the U.S. revealed in three waves of COVID-19. *The American journal of tropical medicine and hygiene*, 103(1), 25–27. <https://doi.org/10.4269/ajtmh.20-0391>

<sup>54</sup> Wade, P. (2019, July 13). US flag replaced with Mexican flag during protest at ICE detention facility. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/us-flag-replaced-with-mexican-flag-ice-pro-test-858709/>

<sup>55</sup> ICE Accountability Report. Rep. Jason Crow's official website. <https://crow.house.gov/about/ice-accountability-report>

<sup>56</sup> Hindi, S. (2020, May 22). Two immigrants confirmed to have COVID-19 in Aurora detention facility. <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/05/21/ice-covid19-confirmed-cases-aurora/>

first week. A month later, we learned more about our effect on GEO employees and subcontractors.

On July 20, a LabCorp employee approached our nightly vigil. Carrying a bag of medical samples to her car, the woman asked to speak to us and proceeded to spend 12 minutes at the gate explaining her role as a GEO contractor. She spoke to Kesha, whose husband Pablo had been inside for months; Raul, who had been released two weeks earlier; and Rosie, Raul's mom who attended every vigil until his release. According to video footage filmed by a fellow protester that night, the woman's first words were: "I follow what you guys are doing on Instagram. I support your cause, and I know that one of the things you're calling for is better health care because we're in a pandemic."<sup>57</sup>

She went on to explain that her role at the GEO facility was to care for her detained patients, whom she agreed shouldn't be detained in the first place. When Raul asked if she truly knew what happened in detention centers like this one, she nodded and said, "I think it's disgusting. Yes, I'm telling you: I'm with you on your cause."<sup>58</sup>

While this woman refused to identify herself for fear of losing her job, she assured us that the staff members inside were paying attention. She echoed a sentiment we heard from police officers, GEO officials, and detainees themselves: that our daily presence was making it more difficult for GEO employees to operate as usual, because they could no longer ignore the ethical implications of their job duties. This confirmed our theory that staffers were actually quitting as a result (we had scoured GEO's job listings and noticed an uptick in open positions throughout the summer).

GEO is doing some of that work for us, because its own employees aren't immune to its mistreatment. According to the Sentencing Project, companies like GEO "often trim prison budgets by employing mostly non-union and low-skilled workers at lower salaries and offer limited benefits compared to staff at publicly run institutions"<sup>59</sup>. This was apparent every time employees exited and entered without personal protective equipment (PPE) during active outbreaks. Sure enough, just last month, 64 GEO employees tested positive for COVID-19<sup>60</sup> in Aurora alone.

## What Now?

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<sup>57</sup> Video of LabCorp employee. (2020, July 20). 00:30-41.

<https://app.frame.io/presentations/9de5252c-72a1-4c31-9f16-d39be39dfaab>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 6:55-7:00.

<sup>59</sup> Gotsch, K. & Basti, V. (2018, August 02). Capitalizing on Mass Incarceration: U.S. Growth in Private Prisons. *The Sentencing Project*.

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/capitalizing-on-mass-incarceration-u-s-growth-in-private-prisons/>

<sup>60</sup> McCormick-Cavanaugh, C. (2020, November 17). COVID cases: 64 GEO Group employees in Aurora test positive. *Westword*.

<https://www.westword.com/news/geo-group-staffers-in-aurora-experiencing-covid-outbreak-1845164>

The pandemic and the collective push for racial equality have redefined Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for a new era – most likely for good. But GEO is well-versed in circumventing federal law, violating human rights, and keeping their tactics secret from a public they know would object. Lawsuits, divestments, and protests have made it harder for GEO to operate in the dark, but the light of public scrutiny must be sustained by detailed research and direct actions.

After the unexpected duration, media coverage, and community support for our Aurora occupation, it seems clear that similar occupations would be successful in other states. Our next steps should include coordinated occupations and protests at GEO-owned detention centers throughout the country, using Abolish ICE Denver’s blueprint in order to mitigate risks and maintain a cohesive objective.

Ultimately, I believe any effort to eradicate GEO must be part of a larger effort to abolish for-profit private prisons as a whole. As abolitionist Angela Davis surmised in 1998, “The dividends that accrue from investment in the punishment industry, like those that accrue from investment in weapons production, only amount to social destruction”<sup>61</sup>. Taking down GEO is a necessary part of that larger effort, but it’s only one part. As long as federal and state governments allow their prisons to be privatized, human rights will come second to corporate profits.

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<sup>61</sup> Davis, A. Masked racism: reflections on the prison industrial complex. *History is a Weapon*. OR Davis, Angela. Masked racism: reflections on the prison industrial complex. Reprinted from 1998 in *Colorlines Indigenous Law Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 27, Feb 2000: 4-7.

<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html>

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