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Texas Immigration Detention Infrastructure: Scale, State Comparisons, Profiling and Political Drivers

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Summary

Texas hosts the largest immigration detention footprint in the United States, with detainee counts and the number of facilities disproportionate to its estimated undocumented population share. This briefing compares Texas with California (largest estimated undocumented population) and Louisiana (outsized detention presence relative to population). The distribution of detention capacity reflects political and institutional choices—border proximity, state–local cooperation with ICE, and a mature private-prison industry—more than it mirrors the size of undocumented resident populations. It also highlights that lawfully present immigrants and U.S. citizens have been mistakenly detained. Investigative reporting reveals that racial profiling and weak verification systems have led to wrongful detentions, disproportionately affecting Latinos and other communities of color.

Comparative Indicators (Texas vs. California vs. Louisiana)

Indicator	Texas	California	Louisiana
Estimated undocumented population (2024)	≈ 1.6–1.8 million	≈ 1.9–2.1 million	≈ 70–90 thousand
FY 2025 ICE detainees (avg/recent)	≈ 13,400 (highest)	≈ 3,800	≈ 7,500 (2nd)
Detention intensity (detainees ÷ est. undocumented pop.)	High (disproportionate)	Lower relative to pop.	Very high (outsized)
Border proximity	Extensive land border w/ Mexico	Major ports of entry; shorter border	Non-border (interior)
Cooperation with ICE (287(g), detainers)	High (numerous agreements, cooperation)	Restricted by sanctuary laws	High
Private-prison presence	Large, long-standing	Declining/limited	Significant in rural areas
Recent policy posture	Aggressive enforcement (e.g., Operation Lone Star)	Limits on ICE contracts & cooperation	Cooperative w/ ICE; rural contracts

Texas Overview

Texas operates or hosts a dense network of ICE and contractor-run facilities, including large centers such as Pearsall, Dilley, Port Isabel, Montgomery (Conroe), Bluebonnet, Rio Grande (Laredo), and the El Paso Processing Center. Planned soft-sided expansion at Fort Bliss would add up to 5,000 beds. State and local political support—including partnerships with private operators and cooperation agreements like 287(g)—facilitate rapid expansion. Economic incentives in rural counties (jobs, per-diem contracts) reinforce the siting of facilities.

California Overview

California has the nation's largest estimated undocumented population but comparatively fewer detainees and facilities relative to population size. State laws such as SB 54 (California Values Act) and scrutiny of private detention contracts limit ICE's detention footprint. Facilities exist, but capacity and growth have been constrained by legal and political checks.

Louisiana Overview

Louisiana hosts an outsized share of detainees given its relatively small estimated undocumented population. This reflects a web of federal and private contracts, rural economic incentives, and permissive state and local cooperation. As a result, Louisiana consistently ranks near the top in detainee counts despite a small undocumented resident base.

Unlawful Detentions

Lawfully present immigrants and even U.S. citizens have been mistakenly detained under federal and state immigration enforcement actions. Evidence from federal oversight agencies, civil rights organizations, and investigative reporting reveals that racial profiling and weak verification systems have led to wrongful detentions, disproportionately affecting Latino and other communities of color.

Unlawful Detention Findings

- The DHS Inspector General (2021) found ICE failed to verify citizenship in 13% of reviewed detention cases.
- Between 2003 and 2019, at least 1,480 U.S. citizens were targeted for deportation, with more than 800 wrongfully detained (Cato Institute).
- Texas and Louisiana show the highest ratio of detentions relative to their undocumented populations, raising profiling concerns.

- Operation Lone Star and 287(g) local–federal partnerships have increased reports of racial profiling in traffic and community policing.
- In border zones, U.S. citizens and legal residents—especially Latinos—report stops and questioning solely based on appearance or language use.

Conclusions

The geography of immigration detention tracks political and institutional choices more than population. Texas's leadership—combined with border logistics and a robust private-prison sector—produces an infrastructure that is disproportionate to its undocumented population. By contrast, California's legal constraints reduce detention intensity, while Louisiana's contracting environment elevates it. Policymakers and advocates should read detention counts as signals of policy and contracting strategy, not as direct proxies for state undocumented populations.

Texas' aggressive enforcement posture and close collaboration with federal authorities heighten risks for wrongful detention. Under Operation Lone Star and multiple 287(g) agreements, local law enforcement shares arrest and biometric data directly with ICE. Civil rights groups have documented incidents of Texas residents—including U.S. citizens—being detained or referred to ICE due to misidentification or racial bias.

References

1. TRAC Immigration, Syracuse University — Immigration Detention Quick Facts (2024–2025)
2. Migration Policy Institute — Estimates of U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population by State (2024).
3. American Immigration Council — The Landscape of Immigration Detention in the United States (historic facility counts).
4. Texas Tribune / Axios — 2025 reporting on Texas facility counts and detainee numbers.
5. ICE ERO releases and facility fact sheets (e.g., El Paso Processing Center dorm expansion).
6. Vera Institute — ICE Detention Trends (historical facility usage).