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City of Immigrants Fills Jail Cells With Its Own

By [NINA BERNSTEIN](#)

CENTRAL FALLS, R.I. — Few in this threadbare little mill town gave much thought to the [Donald W. Wyatt Detention Facility](#), the maximum-security jail beside the public ball fields at the edge of town. Even when it expanded and added barbed wire, Wyatt was just the backdrop for Little League games, its name stitched on the caps of the team it sponsored.

Then people began to disappear: the leader of a prayer group at St. Matthew's [Roman Catholic Church](#); the father of a second grader at the public charter school; a woman who mopped floors in a Providence courthouse.

After days of searching, their families found them locked up inside Wyatt — only blocks from home, but in a separate world.

In this mostly Latino city, hardly anyone had realized that in addition to detaining the accused drug dealers and mobsters everyone heard about, the jail held hundreds of people charged with no crime — people caught in the nation's crackdown on illegal [immigration](#). Fewer still knew that Wyatt was a portal into an expanding [network](#) of other jails, bigger and more remote, all propelling detainees toward deportation with little chance to protest.

If anything, the people of Central Falls saw Wyatt as the economic engine that city fathers had promised, a steady source of jobs and federal money to pay for services like police and fire protection. Even that, it turns out, was an illusion.

Wyatt offers a rare look into the fastest-growing, least-examined type of incarceration in America, an industry that detains half a million people a year, up from a few thousand just 15 years ago. The [system](#) operates without the rules that protect criminal suspects, and has grown up with little oversight, often in the backyards of communities desperate for any source of money and work.

Last spring, The New York Times set out to examine this small city of 19,000 and its big detention center as a microcosm of the nation's new relationship with [immigration detention](#), which is now sweeping up not just recent border-jumpers and convicted felons but foreign-born residents with strong ties to places like Central Falls. Wyatt, nationally accredited, clean and modern, seemed like one of the better jails in the system, a patchwork of county lockups, private prisons and federal detention centers where government investigations and the news media have recently documented substandard, sometimes lethal, conditions.

But last summer, a detainee died in Wyatt's custody. Immigration authorities investigating the death removed all immigration detainees this month — along with the \$101.76 a day the federal government paid the jail for each one. In Central Falls, where many families have members without papers, a state campaign against illegal immigrants spread fear that also took a toll: People went into hiding and businesses lost Latino customers in droves. Slowly, the city awoke to its role in the detention system, and to the pitfalls of the bargain it had struck.

In a sinking economy, immigration detention is a rare growth industry. Congress has doubled annual spending on it in the last four years, to \$2.4 billion approved in October as part of \$5.9 billion allotted for

immigration enforcement through next September — even more than the Bush administration had requested.

Seeking a slice of that bounty, communities like Farmville, Va., and Pahrump, Nev., are signing up with developers of new detention centers. Jails from New England to New Mexico have already made the crackdown pay off — for the private companies that dominate the industry, for some investors and, at least in theory, for places like Central Falls, a city so strapped that the state pays for its schools.

Here, a specially created municipal corporation built the jail in the early 1990s to hold federal inmates, and last year more than doubled its size. As the City Council president, William Benson Jr., put it, “The more inmates they have, the more money we get.”

Yet in a community whose 1.3 square miles are said to be too small for secrets — “If you sneeze on Washington Street, someone on Pine Street says, ‘Gesundheit,’ ” Mr. Benson said — city officials, overwhelmingly non-Latino, seemed uninformed about who those inmates were. “Nobody knows exactly who’s down there,” he said. “I hear some are Arab terrorists.”

The mystery is in some ways understandable. Though immigration detainees made up one-third of the daily population and a majority of the 4,200 men and women who moved through Wyatt’s 722 beds in a year, most were from other states, and those from [Rhode Island](#) did not remain long: [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) typically transferred them within a week.

Some were legal immigrants who had served time for serious crimes. But increasingly they were the kind of people who in the past would not have been arrested — people without papers, similar to some of the people who play, cheer and live in Wyatt’s shadow. Sometimes the same people.

Anthony Ventetuolo Jr., one of Wyatt’s developers and now the jail’s chief executive, said that who the inmates were made no difference to the jail, which was run like a business, under strict [standards](#). “I’m not interested in getting involved in the politics of immigration,” he said. “All we do is detain people that our clients tell us to detain.”

Swallowed by the System

Over 10 years, Maynor Canté, 26, hardly glanced at the jail he passed as he hurried between home, two jobs and [St. Matthew’s Church](#), where he led a prayer group.

He was 15 when he left Guatemala in 1997, sneaking across the Mexican border to join seven older siblings, legal residents who had spent years scraping new lives out of the industrial ruins of Rhode Island’s Blackstone Valley. Caught in Texas, the teenager was quickly let go pending a hearing, like so many arrested under the “catch and release” policy that prevailed while the nation’s boom times demanded cheap immigrant labor. When he failed to show up in court, a deportation order was issued.

A decade later, Mr. Canté spoke near-fluent English, and had spent thousands of dollars trying to legalize his status. Mornings, he cleaned a factory for \$8 an hour. Evenings, he worked at his nephew’s new clothing shop on Dexter Street, one of several Latino businesses that had revived a bleak stretch of vacant storefronts.

Then, early one morning in October 2007 when he headed out the door for his cleaning job, five immigration agents hustled him into a van. That night, as frightened relatives tried to find him, he was delivered to Wyatt in chains.

Inside, a plaque declares that the detention center’s mission is “to protect the public from people who pose a threat to society.” One corridor, waxed to an immaculate shine, leads to a darkened control room where

correction officers watch a dozen video monitors fed by 200 cameras. A guard can scan an entire unit housing 72 detainees in two- to four-man cells; zooming in on a card game, he can see that one player is holding hearts.

The jail was built for inmates awaiting trial on federal charges — drug possession, [child pornography](#), political corruption. But to help pay off \$106 million [borrowed](#) for its recent expansion and refinancing, Wyatt was now counting on prisoners like Mr. Canté: administrative detainees not charged with a crime, but held while the government tries to deport them.

Now he found himself slated for deportation without a hearing — or even any way to make a phone call.

“I was scared,” he said, recalling how he prayed the rosary and stared out the tiny window of his cell to watch a freight train pass at 6 a.m.

Outside, his sister Emma, 33, was distraught. Since their mother’s death in 2006, she had felt more responsible for protecting Mr. Canté, a big-shouldered man who was still her little brother. “Three days passed and we didn’t know where he was,” she said.

On the fourth day, after calls to many jails, a high school friend located Mr. Canté, and members of his prayer circle flocked to Wyatt. His priest, the Rev. Otoniel J. Gomez, had never visited the jail in the eight years since he was sent to Central Falls from Colombia. He spoke to his weeping parishioner through a thick plexiglass barrier.

“I thought, ‘This is like a horror movie, talking with a criminal,’ ” he said.

Yet the priest soon realized that Mr. Canté was lucky. “Most of these people didn’t have any relatives or friends near them,” Father Gomez said, “not even a lawyer.”

The official list of free legal help was largely a dead end. Wyatt’s expensive inmate telephone service was often useless, because it took days to set up an account, and it could not be used to call cellphones. Desperate, other detainees passed Mr. Canté phone numbers on scraps of paper, begging him to ask his visitors to call and tell where they were.

Out of Sight, Out of Reach

Plucked from communities from Maine to New York, some had already been transferred through several jails; many would soon be moved again, as the federal immigration agency improvised to make space for detainees from new roundups.

“It’s like having a room with five bathtubs and water coming in and out of each one to maintain an equilibrium,” explained Todd Thurlow, acting deputy director of the Boston field office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which contracts for about 1,000 beds in dozens of jails across New England.

Wyatt had a reputation as one of the most professionally run. But for newcomers without help, it could be rough.

One complaint, echoed by former jail employees, was that detainees in pain from illness or injury often went without adequate treatment. Other detainees spoke of going hungry, like Edgar Bocce, 25, a Guatemalan cleaner who said two muscular inmates took away his first dinner tray — rice, beans and spaghetti — while guards did nothing. Spartan meals could be supplemented with food from the jail’s commissary, but only if relatives sent money, or detainees stayed long enough to earn some; on the cleaning crew that kept the jail so spotless, starting pay was 40 cents a day.

Though officials said detainees were housed according to their history of violence, only one unit was dedicated to immigration detainees, and the rest were mixed in with criminal suspects and convicts.

Perhaps the greatest frustration, inmates said, was their inability to make sense of what was happening to them.

“Why am I here in jail?” asked one, a Central Falls mechanic who had been seized at immigration headquarters in Providence when he went to check why his green card application was taking so long. Wyatt guards had no answers. “They tell me, ‘Sorry, guys, but we’re not Immigration.’ ”

Mr. Canté’s sisters borrowed money and hired him a lawyer. But a day after the lawyer’s first visit, their brother was gone — transferred to a Boston jail. That week, he was shackled and bused with 60 other men to detention in York, Pa., then put on a government plane with 300 chained immigrants.

He ended up one of 2,000 detainees packed into a windowless tent city that had sprung up only a year earlier in Raymondville, Tex. — the [nation’s largest immigration prison camp](#), run for profit and still growing.

For weeks after his lawyer reopened his case for a hearing in Boston, she could not locate him. He was on the verge of deportation by the time she managed to persuade the government to fly him back from Texas, two days before last Christmas.

Mr. Canté finally appeared before an immigration judge on Jan. 2, after three months in the detention maze. Because his case fell under the more lenient laws in force before 1997, he not only was released on bond, but allowed to work until his immigration hearing in December 2009. He is now trying to pay back thousands of dollars in loans and legal fees.

A Market for Inmates

Mr. Canté, whose time in detention cost federal taxpayers about \$10,000, was part of what many call an “[immigrant gold rush](#)” that turned the private prison industry from bust to boom.

Across the country, starting in Texas in the 1980s, prison companies built jail cells on speculation as they rushed to cash in on the war on drugs. They overbuilt; abuse scandals and escapes soured many states on private prisons, and by the late 1990s, as competition for inmates increased, the companies’ stock was suffering.

Yet given the lure of easy financing and big fees for constructing deals, developers of prison space did not hold back on growth. Instead, big companies like the Corrections Corporation of America, the GEO Group (formerly Wackenhut) and the Cornell Companies added more beds and lobbied harder at the source of the most lucrative inmates, the federal government.

The payoff came after 9/11 in an accelerating stream of new detainees: foreigners swept up by the nation’s rising furor over illegal immigration.

Central Falls was similar, in its poverty, to more remote communities that had hitched their hopes to jails. Set in the river valley where America’s industrial revolution was born, its textile mills had hired large immigrant families — French Canadians and Poles, followed by Syrians and Portuguese — and squeezed them into triple-decker tenements. Even after the work moved away, the mills’ cheap housing continued to draw immigrants, mostly from Latin America.

The city was nearly bankrupt in 1990 when developers made a proposition: Build a profit-making jail for two or three hundred nonviolent federal detainees, and guarantee a steady stream of money and jobs for Central Falls.

But the deal that emerged, like many elsewhere, proved better at paying private investors than generating public revenue. The municipal corporation borrowed \$30 million through a state bond issue to build Wyatt, and hired the Cornell company to run it. Six years later, the municipal body borrowed \$38 million to refinance, buying back most of the bonds at a premium that gave the original bondholders a lump-sum return of 28.5 percent on their investment in addition to 9 percent annual interest.

And from its opening party in November 1993, Wyatt ran into the same problem as its competitors: finding enough inmates. For a time it imported murderers and rapists by the busload from North Carolina's crowded prisons. When city residents objected, they learned that Central Falls had no control over who was housed at Wyatt and would get no money unless it was full.

At best, Wyatt paid Central Falls \$2 to \$3 a day for each detainee — less than \$400,000 in the good years — to offset its use of city services. At times when the flow of inmates faltered, payments slowed to a trickle. Yet, following the strange logic of prison growth, Cornell and Wyatt officials were soon pushing to refinance yet again and expand.

Thomas Lazieh, the mayor who had championed the deal that built Wyatt, defended it as the best the city could get. His successor, Lee Matthews, took a darker view and sued to stop the expansion. "The city was sold a bill of goods," he said.

Wyatt doubled in size anyway, with the backing of the current mayor, Charles D. Moreau. Convinced that it could wrest more revenue from the jail as immigration enforcement boomed, the municipal corporation took full control in August 2007. The budget it approved late that year included \$6,000 a month for a Washington lobbyist to seek more detainees at higher rates.

A Recession, and Raids

By then, as in many parts of the country, people in Rhode Island were looking at Latino immigrants as prime suspects in a dismal economy. A polarizing immigration debate had converged with a huge state budget deficit and high unemployment. As this year began, resentment flared.

The catalyst was an ordinary New Year's feature in The Providence Journal about the first baby born in Rhode Island in 2008. Mother and newborn were still in the hospital when federal agents, spurred by the publicity, raided their apartment in Providence and took away the father on immigration violations. Afterward, the police said, the mother discovered that a roommate from Guatemala had hanged himself behind his locked bedroom door, apparently during the raid.

The baby's father, initially held in secret at Wyatt, was eventually deported. A Guatemalan landscaper with two misdemeanor convictions, he had been ordered to leave the country in August 2007, but stayed, his lawyer said, because his fiancée, a United States citizen, was pregnant with their second child.

To some, [the case](#) illustrated how illegal immigrants, who make up less than 4 percent of Rhode Island's population, drained public services.

"Rhode Island taxpayers are the real victims!" declared Alice Losasso of West Warwick, in a letter to The Journal. "I'm tired of paying for interpreters so that immigrants can take their driver's test in whatever language they speak. I'm tired of finding that their girlfriends and children are on welfare."

Her words echoed a major theme of the governor, Donald L. Carcieri, a Republican. In March, he issued an executive order directing the State Police to help federal authorities round up illegal immigrants, saying that they depressed wages and strained services.

Public approval for that order reached 75 percent in one poll after an illegal immigrant from Guatemala was charged with carjacking and raping a woman outside a mall. He had been arrested twice before by the Providence police, and already had an outstanding order of deportation. The governor appeared on the [Bill O'Reilly](#) program to accuse the Providence mayor of sheltering criminals.

In Central Falls, the crackdown sowed panic. At the public charter school two blocks from Wyatt, parents, already afraid to be photographed at school events, were now reluctant to drive to meetings, said Sarah Friedman, a founder of the school.

An 8-year-old girl, one of the school's high-scoring students, stopped speaking in class when her father disappeared into detention, the girl's mother said. Without his income, mother and daughter, United States citizens, were almost evicted from their apartment.

At Central Falls High School, some students stopped coming to class because their families had gone into hiding, said Margie Cruz, a school-home liaison: "The child was born here, the child is legal. But the family has to hide because the father will be deported.

"I've seen students stopped for a traffic violation and the whole family got deported," she added. "Children that were here for years. I watched them grow up."

One longtime Little League mother said she used to worry that child molesters could be watching from the jail windows. Now, she said, she worried that her sister's children would end up inside — the niece who had just graduated from high school with no path to legal status; the nephew who had been taught that local Quakers hid fugitive slaves, and asked his aunt to hide him if his parents were detained.

They were part of a generation of Central Falls teenagers born abroad who were coming of age as outlaws in their own town. Some had already lost relatives, like the 14-year-old whose older brother had made a left turn on red and ended up in a detention odyssey that led to deportation.

"My mother's afraid the same thing that happened to my brother could happen to me, because I play soccer, I'm out there," he said.

A few blocks from Wyatt, Police Chief Joseph P. Moran III praised the jail as "a great neighbor — it keeps things under control." But he went on to tell about the difficulty of investigating the killing of a Dominican cabdriver, because witnesses had not come forward for fear of deportation. He talked of the blurring line between police work and immigration enforcement.

One domestic violence call by a husband illustrated the new reality. After a routine computer check, both he and his wife were taken into police custody, and her 8-month-old baby was handed to a friend. The man had an outstanding bench warrant; his wife had a deportation warrant issued by immigration authorities — something not included in the police database a few years ago.

"We work hand in hand with ICE," Chief Moran said. At the same time, he added: "I have friends from Honduras, Ecuador. My kids went to school here. It makes it very, very difficult."

Profit and Loss

For defenders of the jail, the bottom line has always been the bottom line: Wyatt's growth meant more federal money for the city.

“They’re going to detain them somewhere,” said the manager of Mr. Williams True Styles Barbershop, on the struggling Dexter Street commercial strip. “It’s a billion-dollar business. Unless we’re going to free them, what difference does it make?”

But at least in Central Falls, the incarceration economy was not delivering on its promise.

In late June, Mayor Moreau, a big man with a florid face and a police siren in his car, offered up a budget that laid off firefighters — and told angry city employees to get used to it.

“We’re at the end of the financial rope for Central Falls,” he told the City Council, citing more than 200 boarded-up homes, foreclosures at the rate of 25 a week, and cuts in state and federal aid that required a 4 percent property tax increase and an 8 percent spending cut in the new \$17.4 million budget.

Outside, past the defunct factory where Hasbro once made G. I. Joe, beyond the rusty hulk of the downsized Sylvania plant, the summer twilight gleamed on Wyatt’s new facade.

What had happened to the windfall of money and jobs it had offered?

The jail’s annual revenue had almost doubled in a year, to \$21 million, mainly from increasing immigration detention. But the city budget projected revenue of only \$525,000 from Wyatt, which is exempt from taxes.

That was not even enough to cover its share of city services, according to an estimate by the city’s finance department. It was certainly nothing like the \$2 million a year that Mr. Benson, the City Council president, had mentioned to a reporter in April. The mayor, he said, predicted the city would get that much in profits formerly reaped by the Cornell Companies, now that the local board had taken over. Neither the mayor nor the board members, unpaid mayoral appointees, would talk about Wyatt.

As for jobs, only 10 of about 200 Wyatt employees lived in Central Falls. The jail’s board was even declining to make the \$1,500 donations to local groups it once supported, like a scholarship fund and youth football.

Mr. Ventetuolo, the Wyatt chief executive, would not say how much had been saved by dispensing with Cornell’s for-profit services, maintaining that it had all gone toward keeping prices low for the federal government. Wyatt was still in transition, he said, striving to fill new beds to meet soaring payments to bondholders, now up to \$8.4 million yearly from \$2.7 million under the terms of the latest refinancing.

Yet Mr. Ventetuolo’s consulting company had won a raise, to \$230,000 from \$156,000. And as the number of detainees increased, so did revenue from surcharges on their collect calls to relatives, under a contract with Global Tel Link that gave Wyatt a cut of about \$564,000 a year. That arrangement had survived a state ban on phone surcharges at prisons, thanks to [lobbying](#) that gave Wyatt a [loophole](#).

Other large fees went to lawyers and financiers, as Mr. Matthews, the former mayor, pointed out. “There just happens to be a lot of money made by folks other than the people of the City of Central Falls,” he said.

Out in the Open

City officials in Central Falls — mostly descendants of earlier immigrants — were mindful that they presided over a community at least 60 percent Latino, where fear of the immigration crackdown was widespread.

At the same time, the city had built its hopes for economic stability on a jail that was helping to make that crackdown possible. The combination created a local immigration politics that sometimes verged on denial.

But last summer, Wyatt itself was suddenly caught in the glare of the state's crackdown.

On the evening of July 15, a dozen State Police officers and 50 immigration agents swept into six courthouses across the state. They arrested 31 cleaners on suspicion of immigration violations, people paid \$7.40 an hour to vacuum floors and scrub toilets in Rhode Island's halls of justice. All worked for two large state contractors, one owned by the brother of a state legislator allied with Governor Carcieri.

In the uproar that followed, experiences that had been private in cases like Mr. Canté's were put on public display: the difficulty of locating those in custody; the distress of relatives, many of them legal residents or citizens; the absence of basic legal protections familiar to anyone who watches "Law & Order." Advocates eventually located most of the cleaners. Four were at Wyatt, including a 29-year-old single mother detained in its new women's unit.

Two days after the raids, as city officials raised the Colombian flag over City Hall to honor that nation's Independence Day, Mayor Moreau criticized the roundup, and chided Governor Carcieri for spending law enforcement resources on it.

"We have better things to do," he said, "than chasing the lady that cleans the attorney general's office."

A reporter asked how he squared that criticism with Wyatt's role in holding illegal immigrants, including the cleaning woman locked up there.

"One has nothing to do with the other," he retorted. "It has nothing to do with the City of Central Falls."

Soon, a case that drew national attention made that distinction harder to maintain.

On Aug. 6, [Hiu Lui Ng](#), 34, a Chinese computer engineer from New York who had overstayed a visa, died in Wyatt's custody after a year in various detention centers and months in pain.

The Times reported a week later that despite his repeated pleas for help, his fractured spine and extensive cancer had gone undiagnosed until shortly before his death. Officials at Wyatt, where he spent his last month, said he had received plenty of medical attention, and immigration authorities started an internal investigation. But local pastors and Latino advocacy groups gathered outside Wyatt on Aug. 15 to demand an independent inquiry.

A guard who watched the demonstration, who asked that his name not be published for fear of losing his job, voiced the ambivalence toward Wyatt that seems to shape the attitudes of many in Central Falls.

He spoke with sympathy of "good, hard-working people" detained there, and with distaste of the rookie guards — a result of low pay and high turnover — "who talk to people with no respect, like they're dogs."

But he added: "Immigration and all that, that has nothing to do with us. We're just the prison."

Even in the Latino population, the new awareness of Wyatt stirred little resistance.

"If the Spanish were all registered to vote they could take the city in one election," observed Councilman Benson. "A lot of them don't vote because they don't trust the government, and a lot of them are illegal, so they can't."

In contrast, Mr. Canté, who finally had proper papers, said he felt like part of Central Falls for the first time.

“In all these years I’ve been here illegally, everywhere I went, everything I used to do, I used to feel like a reject,” he said. “Now I feel like I’ve been accepted for the community. I don’t feel afraid anymore. I feel, like, free.”

Just how closely Central Falls was entwined in the business of locking up people like Mr. Canté became more obvious this month, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, citing their continuing investigation into Mr. Ng’s death, abruptly removed all immigration detainees from Wyatt, scattering them to other jails in New England, Texas and Louisiana.

With Wyatt’s solvency, if not its survival, uncertain, the mayor lobbied the state’s Congressional delegation to get back a share of the growing market in immigration detainees. Meanwhile, jail officials hunted for deals like the one they narrowly lost last spring, to house 80 Vermont inmates judged criminally insane for crimes like murder and rape.

Mr. Lazieh, the former mayor who first championed Wyatt, called the government’s immigration policies immoral, arguing that “the system has gone overboard — we’ve turned to criminalizing all immigrants.”

But he had no regrets about his city’s part. “If it’s not in Central Falls,” he said, “then this facility would be someplace else.”