

# The New York Times

January 21, 2009

## Report Faults Treatment of Women Held at Immigration Centers

By DAN FROSCH

Some 300 women held at immigration detention centers in Arizona face dangerous delays in health care and widespread mistreatment, according to a new study by the University of Arizona, the latest report to criticize conditions at such centers throughout the United States.

The study, which federal immigration officials criticized as narrow and unsubstantiated, was conducted from August 2007 to August 2008 by the Southwest Institute of Research on Women and the James E. Rogers College of Law, both at the University of Arizona. It was released Jan. 13.

Researchers examined the conditions facing women in the process of deportation proceedings at three federal immigration centers in Arizona. An estimated 3,000 women are being held nationwide.

The study concluded that immigration authorities were too aggressive in detaining the women, who rarely posed a flight risk, and that as a result, they experienced severe hardships, including a lack of prenatal care, treatment for cancer, ovarian cysts and other serious medical conditions, and, in some cases, being mixed in with federal prisoners.

Katrina S. Kane, who directs Arizona detention and removal operations for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, dismissed the study as unsubstantiated accounts from a limited number of detainees and their advocates.

“Reports such as this, while alleging to be unbiased, do great harm to the public’s understanding of the complex issues involved in immigration law enforcement,” Ms. Kane said.

The director of border research for the institute on women, Nina Rabin, an immigration lawyer who led the study, countered that interviews with detainees, former detainees and their lawyers corroborated a pattern of endemic mistreatment.

And Ms. Rabin said she had spoken with immigrant advocacy groups around the United States, many of whom stated that mistreatment of women at the centers was not unusual.

“We were pretty shocked to learn about all the ways in which life is made endlessly difficult for these women,” Ms. Rabin said, especially those who were pregnant or had recently given birth.

The immigration department has been under increasing pressure to improve conditions at its detention centers. The federal Government Accountability Office and the inspector general’s office at the Department of Homeland Security have each released reports in the last three years criticizing standards at such centers, many of which are operated by private contractors.

Last September, the immigration department announced plans to improve conditions at its detention centers, but the new rules will not fully take effect until 2010. Meanwhile, Congress has been weighing whether to impose its own requirements on the department after a New York Times article on immigrants who died in federal custody.

The three centers that the study focused on are not run by the immigration department but by the Pinal County Sheriff’s Department and the Corrections Corporation of America.

“We strictly enforce all national ICE standards,” Ms. Kane said, “and if we find those standards are not being met and we feel the deficiencies are not being corrected, we locate our detainees to other facilities.”

In one of several cases documented in the study, a woman being held at the Central Arizona Detention Center in Florence who experienced excruciating abdominal pain for months after she had been forced to undergo female genital mutilation in West Africa was told by the center’s staff to “exercise and

watch her diet,” her lawyer at the time, Raha Jorjani, said. After nearly six months, the woman, who had been convicted of a nonviolent crime, was taken to a hospital where an ultrasound revealed a cyst the size of a five-month-old fetus, Ms. Jorjani said.

Immigration officials then suddenly released the woman with no money or health insurance to treat the cyst, Ms. Jorjani said.

“That she had to remain in detention at all during this period is egregious,” Ms. Jorjani said. “She shouldn’t have had to get that sick for immigration to consider her request for release.”

Ms. Kane, the department spokeswoman, said that this was the first the agency had heard of the case and that it took accusations of mistreatment seriously.

In one case the study described, an illegal immigrant identified as Ana, who had come to the United States from Mexico as a baby and served a brief stint in jail for using a fake credit card, was being held at the Central Arizona Detention Center.

Although Ana was six months pregnant and had an ovarian cyst, she was ordered to use a top bunk and denied a sonogram and prenatal vitamins during the five weeks she was held, the study said.

Three women also told a local immigrant rights group that they had suffered miscarriages while in detention in the last three years, according to the study.

Ms. Kane said that while her department could not corroborate any of the report’s accusations, it had found that a detainee’s contention that she had not received treatment for cervical cancer had proved false.