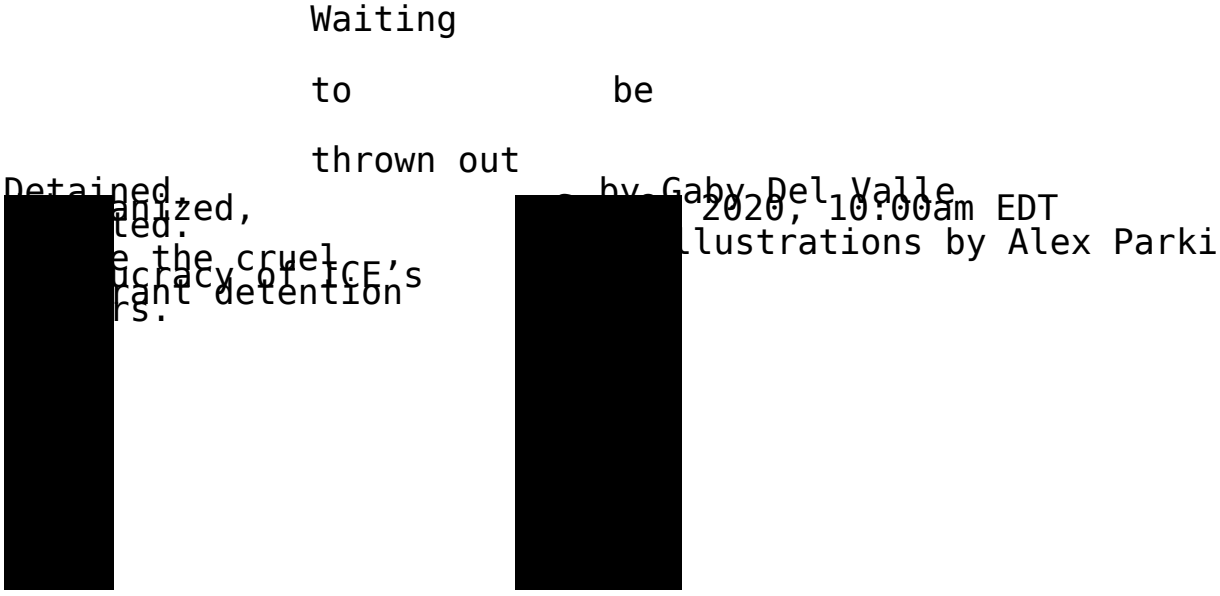
How video chat fuels the American deportation machine



Detained,
[redacted]anized,
[redacted]ted.
[redacted]e the cruel
[redacted]ucracy of ICE's
[redacted]rant detention
[redacted]rs.

by Gaby Del Valle
[redacted] 2020, 10:00am EDT
[redacted]llustrations by Alex Parki

waiting

to be

thrown

out



Samuel’s journey to America took six months, and it wasn’t even where he wanted to go.

After fleeing Cameroon for Ghana in January 2019, his plan was to stay put: go back to school, maybe get a job. More than anything else, Samuel wanted to regain the stability he had lost three years earlier, when Cameroon’s Francophone government began arresting protesters who opposed the state’s oppression of the country’s Anglophone region. (Samuel is a pseudonym; he asked to be kept anonymous to protect his family in Cameroon.) An armed separatist group had waged war on the government, calling for an independent Anglophone state,

hundreds of young Anglophone men were caught in the middle. Samuel, 19 at the time, was imprisoned alongside dozens of other young men, accused by Cameroonian security forces of taking up arms against the government when their only crime was speaking English.

After a family member helped bail him out, Samuel knew he had to leave the country before things got worse. In Ghana, he could start over. But two months in Accra, unable to get a work permit or any kind of legal status, Samuel realized there was no future for him there either. He befriended a group of Cameroonian exiles who convinced him to follow them to an ostensibly more welcoming place of refuge: the United States.

For Samuel, it made sense. He couldn't stay in Ghana, and he couldn't return to Cameroon, but he had relatives in Boston willing to take him in. There was nowhere else for him to go.

Then came a whirlwind of travel. Unable to get a visa to the United States, the band of refugees opted for a less direct route, one taken by hundreds of African asylum-seekers before them: Ghana to Ethiopia; Ethiopia to Brazil; Brazil to Peru; Peru to Ecuador, where they boarded a bus that took them to Turbo, a port city on Colombia's northwestern coast. There, they took a boat across the crystalline Gulf of Urabá, which, in recent years, has become a favored crossing for migrants. After making landfall on a small village bordering Panama, they began to hike.

The costs of detention are less important than the ability to deport people as quickly as possible

"In Colombia, we walked for a week, trekking through the forest," Samuel recalled to me matter-of-factly. To get to the US, the group first had to cross the Darién Gap, a treacherous stretch of rainforest considered one of the most dangerous places in the world. In 2016 alone, at least 22 migrants died while crossing the Colombia-Panama border. Some drowned while crossing the Gulf of Urabá; others succumbed to the elements –

or to human threats like robbers, drug traffickers, and smugglers — in the rainforest. Migrants regularly report walking past decaying corpses while crossing the gap, and many bodies decompose entirely before they can be identified or found.

“We slept on the riverside by the forest,” Samuel said. “Some nights, you could not even find your own friends — the river had swept them away.” The forest was filled with deadly snakes. Every now and then, Samuel’s group passed someone who had died of exposure or exhaustion; Samuel prayed his group would make it out alive. They did, and continued snaking their way up Central America: Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala. Crossing into Mexico, the group was caught by authorities and taken to a detention center in the southern part of the country. After a month, they were released and continued northward to Tijuana, where they learned that there would be more waiting, months before even being allowed to request asylum at the official crossing into California.

By this point, Samuel had traversed 12 countries across three continents to get to his family in Boston. In Tijuana, within spitting distance of the US, he was forced to stop. While he waited, other migrants explained what would happen to him on the other side. He would be detained. He would have to go before a judge and explain everything: his long, roundabout journey to the United States, why he left Cameroon, and why he couldn’t go back.

Samuel understood that there would be a process. What he didn’t know was how long it would all take: two months in Tijuana, half a year in detention. He had no idea that during his six months behind bars, he would never see a judge in person. He didn’t realize that rather than traveling to court from his family’s home in Boston, he would call into his asylum hearing from a former prison in rural Louisiana. With only his lawyer at his side, Samuel would make his plea for safety in an empty room.

The judge overseeing his case — as well as the government attorney arguing for his deportation — would be more than 1,600 miles away, beaming in from a courtroom in downtown San Diego. To them, Samuel was an image on a screen, just one in a series of hearing after hearing telling their sad stories of violence and persecution, as remote and distant as anything they'd see on TV. To the judge, despite having risked his life traveling thousands of miles, Samuel could've been anywhere.



Photo illustration by Alex Parkin / The Verge

The morning of Samuel’s hearing, his attorney, Sarah Owings, woke up in her parents’ house in Monroe, Louisiana. It was a place she hadn’t expected to return to, at least not for work.

Owings had left Monroe decades earlier to attend a small liberal arts college in Tennessee, where she studied English and Russian. After graduation, she moved to Georgia, where she

worked as a preschool teacher for a year before going to law school. During her first seven years as an immigration attorney, she fought for her clients in Atlanta's notoriously punitive immigration courts.

"For a long time, that was the only place I saw how things worked," she said, "so I thought it was normal for a judge to be like, 'Fuck you.' Because that's how things are here."

Owings began taking cases in more isolated parts of the state. Almost every month, she drove 150 miles south of Atlanta, deep into rural Georgia, to visit clients detained at the Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin. Stewart had opened in 2006, a year before Owings got her license. When it opened, the facility was so remote that it didn't have a court of its own. The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), the federal agency that oversees the nation's immigration courts, had yet to find judges who wanted to live in Lumpkin, a rural town of fewer than 2,000 pockmarked by vacant storefronts, where there are more immigrant detainees than actual residents. While it scrambled to bring the legal system to rural Georgia, the agency came up with a high-tech solution. Since it couldn't get judges to come to Lumpkin, it would bring the detainees to Atlanta — not physically, but through videoconference.

Owings could have fought her clients' cases remotely, too, from Atlanta, but it was important to be with them in person. For most of a decade, she worked this way: Atlanta, Lumpkin, court, new cases, asylum granted — or, more likely, denied.



Attorney Sarah Owings poses for a portrait in Atlanta, Georgia.
Photo by Avery White for The Verge

Ten years and two presidential administrations later, the virtual courtrooms Owings had fought against had expanded to her hometown. Under President Trump, a crop of new detention centers began opening up in Louisiana in 2018 and early 2019, just a few hours from Monroe. “I was mad at my state, my home state, for having allowed this to happen,” she said. Owings expanded her practice to Louisiana in spring 2019 and started flying down to Monroe and crashing at her parents’ house the night before hearings.

In Lumpkin, Owings had seen firsthand how the government used rural, isolated detention centers to warehouse immigrants out of sight, far from their families, their lawyers (if they had any), and from anyone who might care about what happened to them. She had seen how private prison companies wooed local officials, convincing them that turning vacant local jails into immigrant detention centers would reverse decades of economic stagnation. The big business of detainees would save

Louisiana’s dying towns.

But Owings understood the cost of opening detention centers. “We have these small jurisdictions that bit down on a dirty nickel hard because they’re starving for money. And so they’re going to lock up a bunch of humans in these conditions,” she said. “There’s going to be civil rights violations, there’s going to be medical neglect, there’s going to be terrible things that happen, and people are going to be put into these little boxes and forgotten about so that they can be disposed of as quickly as possible and made as miserable as possible through the process.”



Sarah Owings at home in Atlanta. She often fights for her clients remotely.
Photo by Avery White for The Verge

As Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) network of detention centers spread across the state, Owings’ fears quickly materialized. Like the immigrants she represented in Georgia at the beginning of her career, the people imprisoned in Louisiana are kept hundreds of miles away from lawyers and

advocacy organizations that could help them — and now, even from the judges who determine whether they can stay in the country.

One of those jurisdictions is Winn Parish, a rural community in northern Louisiana, an hour-and-a-half drive from Owings' childhood home. In 2019, the local government agreed to convert a local prison into an ICE detention center. That facility, the Winn Correctional Center, is where Samuel spent four of his six months in federal custody.

Owings left her house around 8AM to get to Winn in time for Samuel's hearing. It was a later start than most of her mornings, but Samuel's hearing was scheduled Pacific time since the controlling court was in California, allowing for a more leisurely drive. She'd made the trip dozens of times before. "The drive down from my parents' house, on that side of the Ouachita River, is really, really flat — open, big sky country," she said. The further you get from Monroe, the more remote things get. "There's dead critters on the road, there's cattails, there's swampy stuff. Just big, open fields."

If you were just passing through Winn Parish, you may not realize that just outside of town, more than 1,000 immigrants from all over the world are imprisoned in a building the government claims isn't a prison at all.



Outside of Winnfield, Louisiana.
Photo by Johanna Warwick for The Verge

The room where Samuel's hearing took place wasn't technically a courtroom. Instead, it still bore some of the hallmarks of what passes for a classroom in a prison: shiny floors, cinder block walls, fluorescent lighting. Aside from a table, a few plastic chairs, and a flat-screen television mounted on the wall, the room was completely empty.

A judge in New Mexico was supposed to hear Samuel's case. Right before the filing deadline, the government "randomly changed the court of administrative control to Otay Mesa," an immigration court located in yet another immigrant detention facility in San Diego. Owings wasn't notified of the switch. Thankfully for Samuel, all of the paperwork was forwarded to the right place — his first lucky break. The hearing was able to continue, though not with the seamlessness of an in-person one. There were occasional lags in the video and audio. Sometimes the camera had to be adjusted so Samuel could tell whether the person talking to him was the ICE lawyer trying to

deport him or the judge who had the power to decide whether he would be. But the glitches were manageable, and the hearing went well enough, all things considered. Owings had seen much worse.

Samuel had an answer for every question: *Why did you leave your country? Who arrested you? How do you know it was the police that arrested you? Describe the cell you were detained in. Did you try to relocate to another part of your country before coming here? Why not?* And most importantly: *What will happen to you if you return to Cameroon?*

"It was, as far as those experiences go, one of the better ones I've had," Owings said. That morning, the judge granted Samuel the maximum form of protection allowed to him: withholding of removal. It wasn't asylum, but he wouldn't be deported to Cameroon.

Samuel told me he wouldn't have known what to do without a lawyer. He could have answered the judge's questions, but it wasn't enough to explain what had happened to him. He didn't know about the onerous documentation requirements: a 2005 law, the REAL ID Act, requires asylum applicants to provide every piece of documentary evidence that they can to back up their case. The law applies even when migrants are detained, even when they don't have lawyers in the United States or relatives back home who can find the paperwork they need. Since the hospitals in Samuel's city were closed after he was released from prison, for example, Owings submitted pictures of his wounds instead of hospital records. Even if Samuel had understood the law, there was no way he could have gotten all of the paperwork he needed by himself; he was stuck in a detention center.

But Owings was more than a source of legal help, Samuel told me: she was his cheerleader. "I'm shy," he said. Without her help, he worries he would've fumbled over his words. "I'm not courageous [enough] to stand before somebody and talk."

Trekking through the forest was no problem. “It’s just energy,” he explained. “It’s quite different from talking to someone.”

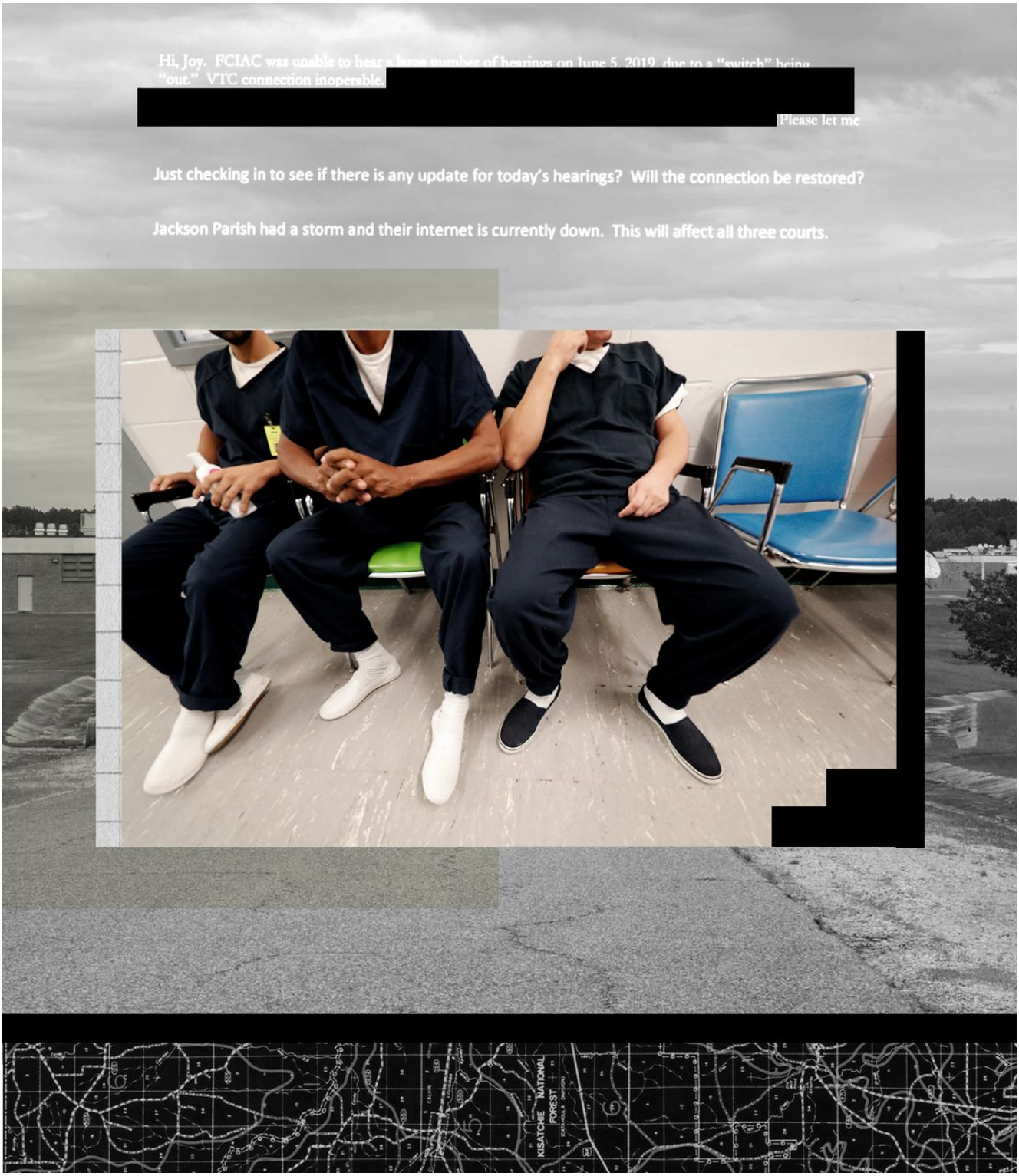


Photo illustration by Alex Parkin / The Verge | Photography by Gerald Herbert / AP Photo

The government started subjecting immigrants to video hearings long before the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to adapt to remote work. In 2019, more than 95,000 immigration hearings

were held via videoconference. At least 17 percent held during the first quarter of fiscal year 2020 were conducted by video. These remote hearings let judges preside over the cases of immigrants locked up in a constellation of isolated facilities, many of which have opened in the Deep South during Trump's three and a half years in office. Judges in New York City sometimes hear the cases of immigrants detained in Natchez, Mississippi; immigrants detained in Louisiana's Richwood Correctional Center dial in to hearings in upstate New York.

These remote hearings are the result of nearly three decades of experimentation. Immigration courts first began hearing cases over televideo in the 1990s as part of a pilot program where judges in Chicago presided over the deportation cases of immigrants held in federal prisons in Kentucky. "It was initially used to connect criminal law enforcement with immigration enforcement," said Ingrid Eagly, a professor at the UCLA School of Law. She conducted the first comprehensive study of immigration courts' use of videoconferencing and, along with many immigrant advocates, has long opposed video hearings because research shows they prevent people from having a fair day in court.

Unlike people in criminal proceedings, immigrants fighting against deportation don't have the right to a free government-appointed lawyer. If they want legal representation — and most do since immigration policy is as complicated as tax law — they have to pay for it themselves or find someone willing to fight their case pro bono. Immigrants in remote detention centers have abysmal rates of representation. Nationwide, just 14 percent of detained immigrants manage to obtain lawyers, according to a 2016 study. Immigrants detained in small cities have even worse odds: one in 10 had lawyers between 2007 and 2012, the same study found. Video hearings, which allow ICE to detain immigrants far from lawyers and nonprofit organizations, compound the problem further. (Samuel's family

initially looked for a lawyer in Boston, where they live; they were referred to Owings, one of only a handful of attorneys who takes the cases of people detained at Winn.)



Winn Correctional Facility.
Photo by Johanna Warwick for The Verge

Eagly told me that a high rate of immigration cases conducted over video never make it to the final hearing stage. Since most immigrants in detention don't have lawyers, she explained, they don't know what their rights are or how to argue their cases before a judge. "There's a lot of steps in the process," Eagly said, "and it's within that process that respondents who have their hearings scheduled over video conferencing exhibit less engagement and less ability to assert their rights."

Despite concerns over due process, the use of video hearings has steadily increased over the years; under Trump, it's exploded. Remote hearings help the government keep immigrants incarcerated for the duration of their case, often in remote parts of the country where detention is relatively cheap.

Since detained cases are processed faster than those of non-detained immigrants, video hearings enable the government to rapidly process — and in its eyes, ideally deport — asylum-seekers and other immigrants. Keeping them detained anywhere in the country, even in remote facilities like Winn, is more expensive than letting them live freely while their cases play out in court. But for the Trump administration, the costs of detention are less important than the ability to deport people as quickly as possible.

For migrants detained in certain facilities, every step of the process — from their first scheduling call to the lengthy, sensitive hearings — are conducted remotely. Newly opened detention centers are equipped with video teleconferencing software. According to an EOIR spokesperson, the agency uses "Cisco video conferencing equipment that provides industry-standard audio and video communications." Immigration courts and ICE detention facilities use Cisco WebEx, the same video chat software used by many corporations.

Technically speaking, it wasn't a courtroom at all. So what was it? No one could tell me

By 2019, as part of its "Strategic Caseload Reduction Plan," EOIR opened two "Immigration Adjudication Centers" (IAC) in Fort Worth, Texas, and Falls Church, Virginia. The 15 judges stationed between the two IACs can adjudicate cases based anywhere in the country — all without public transparency into the process. In-person immigration court hearings are open to the public unless a respondent requests otherwise; IACs aren't because the spaces where the judges sit aren't technically classified as courts. These Schrödinger's courtrooms have been called "judicial black sites" by the American Immigration Council.

For open hearings like Samuel's, ICE is supposed to "process [the] request for a visit and arrange for an escort," provided the agency is given at least two working days' notice, according to the EOIR's immigration court practice manual.

I tried to attend Samuel's hearing. I asked both LaSalle Corrections, the private prison company that runs Winn, and ICE to let me into the facility so I could observe the proceedings from his perspective. Winn's warden denied my request, claiming the court hadn't given me permission to be there. After sending more emails and phone calls, I finally got through to the deputy warden, who, speaking for the warden, told me I couldn't attend.

"These hearings are open to the public," I protested.

"No, ma'am," he replied.

When I asked for an explanation, he once again said, "No, ma'am," and then hung up.

If Samuel's hearing had been held in person, I would've been able to show up unannounced. I could have quietly sat on a bench in the back right corner of the cramped courtroom and watched the whole thing, from the testimony to the questioning to the judge's decision. But because Samuel was detained, trying to witness his hearing in person was a logistical nightmare. It was a glimpse into the inner workings of the vast bureaucracy hell-bent on arresting, incarcerating, and deporting migrants.

An EOIR spokesperson told me to contact ICE. Bryan Cox, the public affairs director for ICE's southeastern region, said I was welcome to sit in on Samuel's hearing – from the courtroom in San Diego where the judge would be. Court hearings in ICE detention were open to the public, but I wasn't allowed in Winn because, technically speaking, it wasn't a courtroom at all. So what *was* it? No one could tell me.

"There are some ICE facilities that have detention facilities with immigration courts on the premises," Cox said. "Winn is not one of them."



Outside of Winn Correctional Facility.
Photo by Johanna Warwick for The Verge

Samuel's four months at Winn were monotonous. Every day, he would wake up in the same bed, a bunk in the Dogwood unit, named after a tree beloved in the South for its pink-and-white flowers. He usually slept through breakfast, which was served around four or five in the morning most days and was practically inedible anyway. He would shower in the shared bathroom and change into the navy blue uniform issued to all detainees except those in Cypress, the solitary confinement unit. Like most of the men detained at Winn, Samuel spent part of his day working; LaSalle paid him $1 a day to help keep his unit clean. There were breaks for lunch and dinner — often mushy, under-seasoned attempts at Southern cuisine served by detainees who worked in the kitchen — and unsupervised solo time when Samuel could call his uncle in Boston or spend a day's wages on a can of Coke.

Every day, Samuel saw the same faces — the same guards, the same detainees — plus a smattering of new arrivals. Sometimes

people disappeared from one day to the next. The few lucky ones were released after winning their cases; the unlucky ones were deported or transferred to yet another detention facility. Getting out on parole was rare, if not impossible. Under Trump, ICE's New Orleans field office, which oversees operations in five states across the South, has become notorious for its parole denials. In 2016, the field office released 75 percent of detainees on parole; by 2019, that figure had dropped to zero. Samuel didn't even bother filing an application. He was focused on getting out of detention — and staying in the United States — permanently.

Not long before Samuel arrived at Winn, a Baton Rouge news station got an "exclusive look" at life in the detention center. The segment provided little insight into the daily lives of the thousand or so men detained there — not a single detainee was interviewed, but a LaSalle development executive was.

"This is not punitive detention," Scott Sutterfield told the camera crew in between shots of men playing air hockey and attending a church service in Winn's ironically named Freedom Chapel. "This is an administrative process," Sutterfield continued, "and we provide the highest level of service to our population consistent with ICE's detention standards — which, in the industry, are the gold standard."

"I haven't done anything wrong. Why are they keeping me for this long?"

Although Winn is not, as Sutterfield said, a "punitive" detention center, it's practically indistinguishable from a prison or jail, probably because it was a private prison first. Very little changed after the government started sending immigrant detainees to Winn. Keith Deville, who had served as the prison's warden, kept his title. The facility's dorms, each named after a different tree, kept the names they had been given by the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) when the prison first opened: Ash, Birch, Cypress, Dogwood,

Elm.

According to *The Associated Press*, which toured Winn in October 2019, detainees have to walk with their hands clasped behind their back, “as if they are handcuffed.” Samuel said he and the other detainees weren’t allowed to go to certain parts of the detention center without permission — which could be difficult to get, particularly for the law library, a lifeline for detainees without legal representation who had to fight their cases alone.

There was a sense of camaraderie among the detainees. Samuel gravitated toward other Cameroonians who, like him, had ended up in the remote Louisiana facility after leaving their home. They bonded over their shared circumstances and prayed for favorable outcomes for each other’s cases. In some ways, he found it comforting to be around people who shared his experiences and spoke his language. “But sometimes that’s not so good,” he said. “When everybody is trying to explain what happened to them, it feels so bad, because you will remember what happened to you back in your country.”

Samuel told me his story as he’s told it to other Winn detainees dozens of times.

On every step of his journey to the United States, from the Panamanian rainforest to the immigrant detention center in the middle of nowhere, Samuel met other Cameroonians. While walking through a mall in Accra, he overheard a couple chatting in the pidgin English spoken by Cameroon’s Anglophone population and immediately introduced himself. The three decided to leave Ghana together for the United States. Their ranks grew in South America, and they encountered even more Cameroonians in Mexico. They had all left their home for the same reason: together, they would get to the United States and start over.

“We’re an hour away from anything, but we’re an hour away from

everything.”

Samuel grew up in a small town in Cameroon’s Anglophone region. The third oldest of seven children, he was just 16 when tensions between Cameroon’s French-speaking government and English-speaking minority reached a breaking point. That year, the Cameroonian government imposed French-speaking teachers and judges on the Anglophone sectors, prompting mass resistance from the country’s English-speaking minority. Hundreds of lawyers and teachers went on strike in protest of the change; other Cameroonians, including Samuel, took to the streets in solidarity. The Cameroonian government responded with force, arresting protesters en masse. Samuel, a high school student at the time, was one of them.

It took a week and $500,000 francs — the equivalent of about $820 — to secure Samuel’s release from prison. He was also asked to sign a document saying he’d never participate in anti-government protests again. The year that followed should have been a good one: Samuel should have been wrapping up high school and applying to universities. Instead, the country — and his life — became more dangerous, its future uncertain.

While the Cameroonian government had been jailing peaceful protesters, a more radical contingent had been preparing to rise up against the state. In 2017, an armed separatist group called the Ambazonia Defense Forces rose up against the Cameroonian government, declaring Cameroon’s Anglophone region an independent nation.

Samuel was suddenly living in a war zone, trapped between the rebels and the government. He didn’t support violence on either side; he just wanted things to go back to normal. But in 2018, he was arrested again, this time as part of a mass roundup of young men in the Anglophone regions. Government security forces broke into people’s houses and seized young, able-bodied men, claiming they were the ones who had risen up against the government. He was a criminal, they said, and claimed he had information on the rebels. For the next month,

Samuel’s life was confined to a squalid prison. The cell he lived in had no beds, no bathrooms, no windows — just a small skylight and the constant stench of sweat and feces. “Sometimes they told us we couldn’t even walk outside,” he said. “[There were] mosquitoes all over us.”

After his release, Samuel thought he might be safe. But then he got word that he would be killed if he didn’t leave the country. He left for Ghana the next night before ultimately leaving for the United States. He understood that he’d be detained there, too, but he expected it to be brief. He never thought he’d end up in a place like Winn. “I was arrested in Cameroon for one month and one week, the second time,” he said. “In the U.S., I was in detention for six months. I was like, ‘I haven’t done anything wrong. Why are they keeping me for this long?’”

Samuel’s prolonged detention was emotionally draining for him, but it was a huge financial gain for LaSalle Corrections, which profited off each night Samuel spent in a cell, and for Winn Parish, which took a cut of those grosses. Surrounded on all sides by a national forest, located just outside a community that resented the people detained there but had come to rely on its continued existence, Winn was an island unto itself.



Photo illustration by Alex Parkin / The Verge | Photography by Alex Brandon, Gerald Herbert / AP Photo

There were a few key differences between Winn the prison and Winn the immigrant detention facility. Since Winn would soon be holding federal detainees, the facility got air conditioning. The inmates serving time at Winn were sent there after being convicted of a crime; a judge had already decided their fate, and incarceration was their punishment. The

immigrants detained at Winn were awaiting their hearings. According to the government, they were being locked up not because they had committed a crime, but to ensure they actually showed up for their hearings. But there was no immigration court in Winnfield, the county seat of Winn Parish. Thanks to the rise of video hearings, there never has to be.

For the federal government, there are several upsides to isolated rural facilities like Winn. The infrastructure is often already in place; there's no need to break ground on new detention centers when the South is littered with vacant prisons. Local opposition is unlikely since jobs are in dire need, and a lower cost of living means ICE can get more bang for its buck in the rural South than in large cities.

"We have an old phrase from my Chamber of Commerce days," said George Moss, a lifelong Winnfield resident who was elected mayor in 2018. "'We're an hour away from anything, but we're an hour away from *everything*.'"

The Winn Correctional Center first opened its doors in 1990, helping usher in a new era of private prisons both in Louisiana and across the country. Winn was the first privately owned medium-security prison in the United States. The Corrections Corporation of America, the private prison company that owned Winn, had been founded just seven years earlier "with a progressive vision": to profit off incarceration. CCA's founders wanted it to be the McDonald's of prisons. The company was providing a service, co-founder Thomas Beasley told *Inc.* in 1988, and "you sell it just like you were selling cars or real estate or hamburgers."



A storefront in downtown Winnfield.
Photo by Johanna Warwick for The Verge

Winn quickly became integral to everyday life in Winnfield. It was a steady source of employment for the struggling community, and besides, it was far enough outside of town that people mostly forgot about it. For more than two decades, Winn Parish and CCA benefitted from Louisiana's punitive criminal justice system. People, mostly young Black men, got arrested in southern Louisiana, and they'd be bussed upstate to Winn.

Things started to change in 2015. Two weeks after discovering that one of the employees at Winn, a guard making $9-something an hour named Shane Bauer, was actually an investigative reporter for *Mother Jones*, CCA backed out of its contract with Winn Parish. LaSalle Corrections, a "family-owned" prison company based in nearby Ruston, stepped in to fill the gap, a transfer of power "welcomed" by the Rotary Club of Winnfield. Bauer's exposé on Winn, published the following year, revealed a pervasive culture of neglect and mismanagement at the prison. By the time LaSalle took over Winn, calls for prison

reform across the state had become impossible to ignore. Louisiana was the prison capital of the US: it locked up a larger share of its residents than any other state. And northern Louisiana parishes like Winn were the epicenter of the state's private prison boom, with companies like LaSalle reaping the profits.

In 2017, Louisiana's governor signed a criminal justice reform bill that strengthened alternatives to incarceration for people convicted of minor crimes. Suddenly, the state's prisons and jails were emptying out, putting Winn at risk of shutting down for good.

"With the new state laws to decrease inmates, our numbers were going down," Winn Parish sheriff Cranford Jordan told the *Natchitoches Times* in 2019. (The Winn Parish Sheriff's Office did not respond to multiple requests for comment and did not acknowledge repeated public records requests regarding its contracts with ICE and LaSalle Corrections.)

"I feel we are doing our part to support the president."
Jordan, a balding, bespectacled man, was elected sheriff in 2011 after an unsuccessful bid 30 years prior. Born and raised in Winnfield, Jordan is a local success story with deep ties to the community. His uncle, Sanford Jordan, was sheriff when Cranford was growing up. By 2014, after just two years on the job, he managed to dig the sheriff's office out of $22,000 in debt, raising its total budget surplus to more than $300,000. He got body cams for all of his deputies and a new SUV for the department. One thing he wasn't able to accomplish, though, was opening a second jail in Winn Parish to generate even more revenue. But in 2019, Jordan managed to do something even more ambitious: turn Winn Correctional into an immigrant detention center. The town had made money from prisoners. It could now make it from immigrants.

"When ICE made their offer to house detainees," Jordan said in 2019, "we saw an opportunity."

Where Jordan saw opportunity, some Winn Parish residents saw danger. On the campaign trail three years earlier, Trump equated immigrants with violent crime. In Winn Parish, where 72 percent of voters supported Trump in 2016, locals took that message to heart. When the news broke that Winn was becoming an ICE facility, “there was some fear,” one resident said. “You know, ‘that’s all MS-13 in there,’ and ‘What if they break out?’” And besides, some residents debated on a local publication’s Facebook page, why should Winn Parish have to house people who should just go back to where they came from?

The plan went through anyway. It had to. The prison was Winnfield’s “number one water customer,” Jordan said in 2019. It was one of the biggest employers in town. For better or for worse, local life had become inextricably linked to the fate of the facility.

There used to be a movie theater in Winnfield. A drive-in, too. One resident remembered a community pool and a bowling alley and a skating rink. Winnfield was never a big city, but downtown was still a destination. All of those things are gone now. At some point, local businesses started closing up shop one by one. Maybe it was because of the Walmart that opened up; maybe it was because people’s kids kept leaving for college, having found something better to do than run the family business. Whatever the reason, downtown Winnfield was largely deserted by the time ICE came around.




COURTE$Y
LOANS
628-9623
World Finance Corporation
LOANS & TAX SERVICE
COURTE$
LOAN
FAST
FRIENDLY
SERVICE
318-628-
LOANS
LET US HELP YOU
FILE YOUR TAXES
ERVICE





Photo by Johanna Warwick for The Verge

The town's older residents — and at this point, many of them are older — largely occupy themselves with community business.

There’s the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Kiwanis Club. They’re all concerned with one thing: rebuilding what was once a great small town. And the young people? “I have no idea,” one resident told me, chuckling. “They go somewhere else, is what they all do.” Maybe they drive to the movie theater in Natchitoches, 40 minutes away, or to Pecanland Mall in Monroe. Whatever they do, they don’t do it in Winn Parish.

The population isn’t just aging – it’s shrinking. Kids go to college and stay gone. They come back for high school reunions, for Christmas and Easter, and maybe, eventually, when they retire. When you drive down through town, every now and then, you’ll spot a boarded-up business, what used to be a hardware store or a restaurant.

“It’s a sleepy town, but it’s a good place to grow up,” George Moss, the Winnfield mayor, told me. But the Winnfield he had grown up in is long gone. So are the jobs that sustained the local economy for generations. Winn Parish, like most of northern Louisiana, is heavily dependent on the timber industry, jobs that are disappearing because of automation. “A typical logging crew 40 years ago was a lot of men with chainsaws, in the woods working – they were huge crews,” said Moss. “Now that’s been replaced by a machine called a shear. One man can drive it: it grabs the tree, cuts it down, flips it over, de-limbs it, and stacks it. That’s created a lot of unemployment in our area.”



Traces of the timber industry remain in Winn County but without the number of jobs that it once offered.
Photo by Johanna Warwick for The Verge

Nothing has done more to reverse the parish's fortune than the ICE detention center. Initial fears aside, locals have come to see immigrant detention as an economic lifeline. Wages at the facility nearly doubled from $10 to $18.50 an hour. The day rate paid for detainees increased, too, from $24.39 for state prisoners to around $70 for immigrants in federal custody. That money flows to LaSalle Corrections as well as local government. (LaSalle also donated $2,000 to Jordan's reelection campaign in 2019, the same year the ICE deal materialized.)

"I feel we are doing our part to support the president," Jordan said in a 2019 interview with the *Natchitoches Times,* "but mostly, we're helping our people right here in Winn and the surrounding parishes."

There have been other efforts to revitalize the once-thriving community. Earlier this year, the parish's Chamber of Commerce

and Tourism called for an artist to paint murals around town. There's also Uncle Earl's Hog Dog Trials, an annual event that one organizer called the "Super Bowl of hog baying." For years, more than 10,000 visitors flock to Winn Parish for the trials, providing a necessary — if temporary — boost to the economy. But the trials only last five days. After the out-of-towners head back to Florida, Texas, and Mississippi, the money dries up and everything goes back to the way it was before.

Hog baying is outlawed in Louisiana, but the trials are an exception; the statute criminalizing hog fighting explicitly says the law "shall not apply to 'Uncle Earl's Hog Dog Trials.'" The concept is straightforward: hunting dogs, which have been trained to bark at and chase wild hogs to keep them at bay, compete against each other to see which dog is best at doing just that.

The defense that hog baying does not constitute animal cruelty is that there is no biting on either end; the dogs are penalized if they do. Their job is merely to corner, to trap, and they can even lose points for being too aggressive. The dogs are also at no risk of harm. Ahead of the event, the hogs' tusks are clipped, often with bolt cutters. In short, the hogs are defenseless, for sport.

Samuel assumed that America would be a different place than the country he left behind. Until relatively recently, it was unusual for asylum-seekers like Samuel to be detained for the duration of their cases. He had passed his credible fear interview, the first step in the asylum process. At that point, ICE could have released him to his family in Boston, where he could have stayed until his court date. If ICE needed to find him, they'd know exactly where to go. But thanks to changes to the immigration system implemented by the Trump administration, Samuel fled imprisonment in one country only to end up imprisoned in the United States alongside hundreds of other asylum-seekers. Because of yet another recent policy

change, many could no longer apply for asylum at all, Samuel among them.

Had he been admitted to the US a month earlier, Samuel's story would have turned out differently. In mid-July, the Trump administration implemented a new rule denying asylum to *any* migrant who had passed through another country on their way to the United States. Samuel had passed through a dozen. By that point, he and the other Cameroonian exiles he had traveled with had been waiting in Tijuana for a month. The group asked for asylum immediately after arriving in the Mexican border city. When they crossed the bridge separating Tijuana and San Diego, a US border officer stationed there told them they'd have to come back later. The border processing stations, the officer said, were all full. The Cameroonians quickly learned they had to add their names to a list and wait for their number to be called. Similar lists, maintained by migrants — and, in some cases, Mexican officials — have become commonplace in cities alongside the US-Mexico border.

They spent their days in a cheap hotel, leaving only to get food and other provisions. They often ate at a nearby Chinese restaurant; they went almost every day, and Samuel mostly ordered fried rice. Then they started to run out of money. After two months of waiting, he and a small group finally got a chance to cross — not because their number had been called, but because someone with a little power had taken pity on them. "Even now, the numbers are still ongoing," he told me in April. "They haven't even reached my number yet. If I was to wait, I would still be in Mexico now."

"It really has changed everything about me."

While Samuel waited, the government was setting up the infrastructure that would let a judge hear the case of immigrants detained in Louisiana from courtrooms across the country. Internal emails obtained by immigration lawyer Andrew Free reveal just how fraught that process was. One afternoon in early June, all of the hearings for immigrants at the

Jackson Parish Correctional Center were canceled after a bad rainstorm knocked out the internet connection. “AT&T found a bad switch,” one court staffer wrote. For the immigrants detained there, postponing hearings meant putting their chances of being released on hold. “Just checking to see who resets them?” another court staffer wrote of the hearings. “Not sure what dates should be used?”

Samuel managed to eke out a partial victory despite everything. In February, a judge granted him withholding of removal — a lesser form of protection that, paradoxically, is harder to get than asylum. “You have to show a higher likelihood of probability of harm” than you would when applying for asylum, said Owings, Samuel’s attorney. “And the protections are lower. You don’t get asylum. You get, basically, a removal order, but we don’t carry it out because of the fact that you would be harmed upon your return to [your] country.” Like other parts of the immigration system, it’s a bureaucratic solution to a humanitarian problem.

Asking for asylum is always an uphill battle. Even before Trump took office, asylum-seekers had to survive the trip to the United States, find a lawyer to take on their case and money to pay them, and convince often hostile judges not to send them back to the harm they left behind. The last three and a half years have made the process much harder for migrants like Samuel. “Thinking about the third country transit ban, thinking about the wait times in Tijuana, thinking about the impossibility of getting through this process some other way than by what is happening — to reunite with family members and be somewhere that you can be safe and protected,” Owings said, “those are complications that you kind of have to face and prepare for, and those are things I did not have to do in prior administrations.”

“There’s no way you can be in a detention center and you’re fine — there’s no way.”
In March, a few weeks before Samuel and I first spoke, a

federal appeals court in California ruled that the asylum ban doesn't apply to migrants who were waiting at the border before the policy was introduced. In late June, more than a year after Samuel first arrived in Tijuana, the immigration judge who heard Samuel's case granted him full asylum, allowing him to apply for a green card. He no longer has to worry that the US will decide that Cameroon is safe to return to, threatening his ability to stay in the country. He can eventually become a US citizen. Samuel is settled. He's in Boston with his family, trying to figure out how to start a new life in the middle of a pandemic that seems like it will never end.

For now, he's stuck at home waiting on a work permit and a Social Security card. His days are long and lazy: he told me he spends most of his time sleeping, eating, or with his cousins. "It reminds me so much of being home," he said of the Cameroonian cuisine he eats every day. "When I was growing up, I loved my country. I had no intention of leaving Cameroon, but I had no choice."

Of the last few years of his life, he said, "It really has changed everything about me." He used to be less serious, less responsible. "But now in America, you need to do so many things. My people are back home, and they're expecting a lot from me."

Samuel is in his early 20s, and he spent the last three years of his life in and out of prisons in Cameroon, Mexico, and, ultimately, in the United States, the country he thought would be a refuge. When it was time to plead for asylum, he didn't even have the dignity of doing it from a real courtroom. He wore a prison uniform instead of a suit or collared shirt; his family didn't get to be there supporting him. Still, he perversely experienced the best-case scenario possible as an asylum-seeker in the Trump era: he won.

In this sense, he's luckier than most. "The vast majority go

through this and get deported," said Owings. "The very best thing for the government is if there aren't defense attorneys in the courts," she said, "because then things can happen very quickly, and they can skip a lot of steps and they can get the outcome that the machine is designed to create, which is the deportation order."

Owings has had three clients at Winn since the facility opened last year, and Samuel's case is the only one she's managed to win. In Georgia, where the majority of her clients are detained, the odds are even slimmer: judges in Atlanta denied more than 97 percent of asylum cases between fiscal years 2014 and 2019. "There's definitely a thumb on the scale, and winning doesn't always look like winning," Owings told me. "Winning looks like doing your very best, getting everything out there, making sure that you didn't have any forced errors. You didn't screw up. And then hoping for a miracle on top of that — that you get someone who is sympathetic and can see a case in a favorable light."



Files in the trunk of Owings' car.



Sarah Owings looks through the window of her car.
Photo by Avery White for The Verge

Even before this administration, asylum victories were hard to come by. For every person like Samuel who manages to stake out a place in this country, there are dozens of others who go through the process only to be sent back to the very terror they hoped to leave behind. Sometimes the judge hearing their case decides that they don't have enough documentation to back up their claim. Sometimes an asylum-seeker might forget the exact date of their persecution or the number or exact names and affiliations of the people who harmed them, and a judge could decide that means their claim isn't credible. Sometimes an asylum-seeker remembers every detail a little too well, and a judge decides that their story is too rehearsed to be true. There are some judges who have never given anyone asylum, period.

While consumers see video chat as a way to connect families, the government deploys it to maintain secrecy. Video hearings speed up the deportation machine, continuing to let it operate

out of sight and with less accountability. Its use and power are expanding. Recently, the administration began using videoconferencing to facilitate the quick removal of two particularly vulnerable groups: migrant children and families. In March, the Justice Department began holding some unaccompanied migrant children's hearings over videoconference. The children's remote hearings have continued amid the pandemic, even as other proceedings have been postponed. Judges who work in the recently opened "adjudication centers" also hear the cases of migrants in the Trump administration's "Migrant Protection Protocols," (MPP) a program that forces asylum-seekers from Central and South America to wait in Mexico while their cases are processed in the US. More than 62,000 migrants subjected to the "Remain in Mexico" policy have attended their immigration hearings from makeshift tent courts set up along the US-Mexico border since the policy was implemented last year. Most don't have lawyers, and fewer than 1 percent have won their cases so far. Coronavirus has put all MPP hearings on indefinite hold, and the border has been effectively shut down entirely. Sooner or later, though, those hearings will resume — and so will the resulting deportations.

Around the time Samuel was granted full asylum, Owings drove to Basile, another small Louisiana town kept afloat by a detention center, to meet with a different client whose case has been a little rockier than Samuel's. A few weeks after that, Owings had a hearing in the Atlanta court for yet another client that got canceled the morning of. Protesters had spray-painted the court building, which the government decided was a "violent attack" severe enough to justify pushing back everyone's hearings by several weeks, keeping them detained that much longer.

Some of the friends Samuel made at Winn are still detained, including one who has been at Winn for twice as long as Samuel was. "He said he's fine, but he's been in there for a year

now,” Samuel told me. “I know he’s not fine. There’s no way you can be in a detention center and you’re fine — there’s no way.”

As for Winnfield, the dying town that survives by profiting off the incarceration of people like Samuel and his friends, things are more or less the same as ever. This summer, the man who helped bring immigrant detention to Winn Parish was sworn in for his third term as sheriff. And Uncle Earl’s Hog Dog Trials, the town’s crowning event, was initially supposed to be held in March but was postponed to October because of the pandemic. On a recent episode of a podcast dedicated to hog baying, the hosts were thrilled that the four-day event was finally nearing. Though they argued about the finer points of hog dogging, hog hunting, and coronavirus conspiracy theories, the hog bayers could all agree on one thing: Uncle Earl’s was like a “family reunion,” and they were eager to see their friends and loved ones again. The wait had been far too long.

https://www.theverge.com/21408606/ice-immigrant-detention-centers-video-chats-deportation-refugees-asylum