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Light in the Darkest Places: Analyzing News Coverage of a U.S. Immigrant Detention Center

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Abstract

Immigrants remain one of the most disempowered groups within the United States. Drawing on critical media literacy research that focuses on power dynamics and positioning, this article addresses ways the news media reports on immigrants and immigrant detention centers. We conducted a critical content analysis of 180 articles on one specific location, Stewart Detention Center (SDC), to demonstrate variability in newspaper reporting on several levels, including frequency, geographic location, and context. Our first research question explored changes in reporting over time, and our second research question considered differences in reporting by geographic level. Our third research question examined differences in reporting on SDC and the national discourse during the first Trump administration. This type of research is particularly important when reporting primarily comes from the outside, overshadowing the voices of people experiencing detention. We consider implications for critical media literacy as an impetus for societal change.

Keywords

content analysis, media studies, detention centers, local news, national news, immigration, policy, human rights

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Light in the Darkest Places

Analyzing News Coverage of a U.S. Detention Center

The role of the media in shaping public opinion about immigration has profound impacts on deportation policy, border enforcement, and social tensions. In the national conversation, research demonstrates the terminology and framing of immigrants can foster empathy and compassion, or it can stoke rage and fear (Hoops & Braitman, 2019). Lawmakers and politicians capitalize on this rage and fear by associating immigrants with criminality and portraying immigration as a crisis requiring swift action and harsh punishment (Haynes et al., 2016; O'Brien, 2018). Consequently, the United States currently runs the largest immigrant detention system in the world (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2020). These detention centers serve as concrete symbols of the most problematic side of immigration control and are frequently criticized by legal activists and humanitarian organizations (Longazel et al., 2016). However, detention centers rarely receive more than a cursory mention in popular discourses about immigration and have become normalized as a part of the U.S. immigration system (Ebert et al., 2020).

The relationship between politicians, private prison corporations, and news media in the U.S. is characterized by interdependence and mutual reinforcement. The media coverage of immigration increasingly frames the issue as a law-and-order problem, reflecting initiatives from politicians and aligning with the interests of private prison corporations (Ackerman & Furman, 2013; Golash-Boza, 2009). In addition, the partnership of government contracts and private corporations creates a powerful immigration industrial complex with a financial incentive for detaining undocumented immigrants, the majority of whom do not pose a danger to society and do not have a criminal history (Juárez et al., 2018). The immense wealth, power, and influence of the beneficiaries of a punitive immigration system stand in stark contrast to the vulnerability of the immigrants themselves. Because undocumented people do not have the right to legally stay in the country as they navigate the immigration system, they face challenges in advocating for their rights publicly. Their marginalized status has enabled the amplification of unwarranted fears and invented crises, further legitimizing the criminalization of immigrants (Haynes et al., 2016).

The U.S. is uniquely positioned in global immigration conversations, with billions of taxpayer dollars supporting over 200 immigrant detention centers across the nation (ICE, 2023). Yet the normalization of these facilities as an accepted part of the immigration process has effectively eliminated the voices of the people being detained. News media reporting can omit the stories of the detainees altogether by focusing on the detention center as an antidote to the poverty of rural areas in which these centers operate (Mountz, 2012). This type of omission has been referred to as the “apathy strategy.” According to Ebert et al. (2020), “The apathy strategy—the active avoidance of discussing immigrants and inequality as though the oppressed and oppressive practices do not matter or exist—is useful in understanding the institutional legitimacy of privatized immigration control” (p. 544). In other words, when the news media reports on detention centers, the suffering of the people being detained is largely shielded from public view.

While national news outlets have seen a significant uptick in reporting on immigration, security, and criminality in recent years, this type of reporting is far less common in local news outlets (Protest & McCombs, 2016). With at least one immigrant detention facility in every state, the lack of local news coverage is notable (Ryo & Peacock, 2018). Consequently, we know relatively little about how specific detention centers are presented in the news media and how these facilities serve as a symbol of the immigration system more broadly.

In the current study, we explore news media reports on one immigrant detention center in particular to better understand variability in newspaper reporting at the local, regional, and national levels and how frequency of reporting has changed over time. We also examine recent events in the sociopolitical sphere to compare the reporting on this detention facility to the national discourse about immigration. An inclusive and critical approach to understanding these media practices is particularly important in spaces that are difficult to access and the vast majority of knowledge comes from reporting from outside the space, not first-hand accounts of those inside.

Historical Background

The Rise of U.S. Immigration Detention

Because lawmakers and the news media have successfully linked immigration with criminality in the national conversation, they have constructed a problem that, as politicians have argued, can only be solved with harsh policies and punitive measures (Ryo, 2019). However, it is important to note that the U.S. has not always had a system of incarcerating immigrants. Historically, immigration has been largely unrestricted, with few exceptions such as the

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The increased salience of immigration in the public domain has followed the criminality narrative advanced by the news media and federal policies.

In 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) allowed local police to investigate the immigration status of anyone detained in their jurisdiction on behalf of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). IIRIRA also dramatically expanded the list of crimes requiring mandatory detention under anti-terrorism guidelines (Juárez et al., 2018). Following the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, the Bush administration announced in 2005 that undocumented immigrants who had been caught by police would no longer be allowed to carry on with their lives in the U.S. as they awaited their hearing. Rather, these individuals would be imprisoned in a detention facility. This convergence of immigration law and criminal law has been referred to as “cimmigration” with immigration violations, once a civil matter, now treated as a crime (Menjívar et al., 2018). As a consequence, “[p]eople who pose neither flight risks nor danger to the community are nonetheless confined for indeterminate lengths of time” (Anello, 2014, p. 365). Detention in these facilities is not legally considered punitive, yet in practice, these spaces are identical to criminal prisons.

The increase in arrests of undocumented immigrants by ICE led to an increased need for places to detain them. Unable to meet the demand, the government transferred the majority of control and oversight of immigrant detention centers to private prison corporations (Golash-Boza, 2009). Billions of taxpayer dollars are allocated each year by the U.S. government to pay these corporations, primarily GEO Group and CoreCivic, to manage the daily operations of the facilities (Gilman & Romero, 2018). These government contracts are shaped in part by lobbyists advocating for longer stays and guaranteed bed minimums (Ackerman & Furman, 2013). In other words, “[t]he problem of immigrant detention, therefore, isn’t about what is done corruptly, but what is done openly and lawfully” (Hernández, 2019, p. 140).

Operating in the Shadows

Even with immigrant detention centers operating across the country, these facilities still generally remain hidden from the public. In a literal sense, sites for detention centers are purposely selected for geographic isolation in rural areas (Mountz, 2012). Communities, impacted by deeply entrenched poverty and a declining population, are often supportive of detention facilities with the promise of new jobs and economic salvation (Bonds, 2012). However, research has demonstrated that not only have detention centers failed at advancing economic development for the local population, they have actually been associated with decreased employment in industries such as manufacturing (Zhang, 2023).

While detention centers are located in places shielded from public view, the people being detained are essentially rendered invisible. Arbitrary transfers from one facility to another make it difficult for detained individuals to contact family or legal representation, as they may not be aware of the facility’s location or even its name (Hiemstra, 2013). By withholding information and maintaining a sense of chaos, detained individuals are left in a heightened state of anxiety and hopelessness (Longazel et al., 2016; Madison & Cole, 2022). Thus, these vulnerable individuals are socially isolated in a system where they face a litany of human rights violations yet lack a platform to shine a light on the issues or resources to hold the system accountable.

As privately-run facilities, corporations are responsible for both the management and the oversight of living conditions and treatment of detained individuals. Although ICE conducts regular audits, the results have no bearing on contracts or continued operation (Hernández et al., 2018). Without meaningful external oversight, abuse has proliferated. Reports of abuse include, for example, rotten food, solitary confinement, forced labor, and sexual assault (Marquez et al., 2021). Medical neglect is particularly egregious in these spaces (Rubio, 2021). Between 2003 and 2020, over 200 immigrants died while in detention due to grossly substandard medical care and suicide (Parmar et al., 2021). While there is variation of complaints among different facilities across the nation, the systemic nature of abuse and neglect has been well-documented.

Human rights abuses have been on record for years, yet public outrage and ongoing campaigns to end privatized detention have done little to weaken the immigration industrial complex (Douglas & Sáenz, 2013). In order to deflect negative attention, detention center administrators issue press releases to discredit or minimize allegations of wrongdoing and emphasize the value of the facility to the local community and society at large (Antony, 2019). The news media, in turn, portrays private prison corporations as imperfect but integral to the immigration control infrastructure (Golash-Boza, 2009). This strategy effectively separates the corporation from the business model that profits from human suffering. For example, a content analysis of articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street*

Journal, and *USA Today* from 1995–2015 focused on the privatization of immigrant detention centers (Ebert et al., 2020). Researchers explored the ways detention centers maintained legitimacy in the public sphere as a normalized part of the U.S. immigration system. Out of 191 articles about for-profit detention facilities, 64% did not mention immigrants or immigration. Instead, supporters of privatized detention focused on the supposed benefits, such as providing jobs to economically depressed communities. Even though negative frames of immigrants dominate the news media, in articles about detention centers, immigrants were not vilified or portrayed as a dangerous threat; they were simply not mentioned at all.

Stewart Detention Center

We focused on one notable immigration detention facility called Stewart Detention Center (SDC) located in Lumpkin, Georgia. While we considered using a pseudonym for the detention center, we opted to use its true name for transparency and replicability in our methods. In addition, the humanitarian issues that persist at this facility are well-documented at other privately-run immigrant detention centers, making this site a representative reflection of the system as a whole.

SDC is a facility we know well, because we have been conducting humanitarian visits there for several years. As with other visitation programs, these visits involve a one-on-one conversation with a detained individual to check on their well-being, raise their spirits, or otherwise bear witness to their suffering (Romero, 2021). The most frequent request to SDC volunteers is educational services, particularly in the areas of language and literacy (Madison & Cole, 2022). We continue working towards the creation of an educational space for the SDC detainees as these services have not been offered in the center's 19 years of operation.

One of the largest detention centers in the U.S. housing nearly 2,000 detainees, SDC is owned by the for-profit prison corporation CoreCivic in partnership with ICE. This particular immigrant detention center has received national attention for its high rate of deportations, forced labor, and medical neglect, among other human rights violations (Marquez et al., 2021). Reports by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) and Project South (2017) revealed deplorable conditions and declared the facility among the worst in the nation. In 2023, an inspection by the Office of Inspector General concluded SDC did not meet all federal detention standards, compromising the health, safety, and rights of detainees (OIG, 2023). The report noted that despite these failures, and despite the detainee population failing to meet the guaranteed bed minimums, CoreCivic was still paid the full amount as specified in the contract with ICE.

Review of the Literature

Media Portrayals of Immigration

Immigration policies have increasingly criminalized immigration, influencing news reports framed around legality, crime, and punishment. This trend was reinforced as lawmakers introduced restrictive policies targeting undocumented immigrants which the media amplified, creating a feedback loop that bolstered the prominence of and partisan support for more restrictive measures (Golash-Boza, 2009). For instance, an analysis of *New York Times* immigration coverage from 1980–2011 found a connection between negative framing of immigration and shifts towards the Republican Party, indicating that framing can not only influence public opinion but also reshape partisan dynamics (Abrajano et al., 2017). Notably, the majority of immigration coverage has centered on Latinos, particularly Mexicans, linking undocumented status with criminality in the national news media (Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2019).

The feedback loop of negative frames of immigration in the news media and in the sociopolitical sphere have had serious consequences for the nation. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, a content analysis spanning 2017–2019 revealed that media outlets amplified narratives aligning with political rhetoric portraying immigrants and refugees, especially those from Mexico, as criminals (López, 2020; Mills et al., 2023). President Donald Trump used these negative frames extensively to manipulate the national immigration discourse, fueling emotions like anger, fear, and contempt among voters to sustain the issue's prominence in the news (Alamillo et al., 2019). Immigrants were also depicted as threats in physical, economic, and moral dimensions (Wright & Esses, 2019). Despite the lack of evidence of increased criminal activity within immigrant communities, the perception of danger and security concerns prevailed in the public's consciousness (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2020).

Variation of Coverage

In the national conversation about immigration, the more frequently news media outlets promote the idea that immigrants are dangerous, the more likely the general public is to believe the same (Haynes et al., 2016). This level of influence is important because even people who live far from borders or immigrant communities believe the issue is important, dangerous, and relevant when it is repeated in the news (O'Brien, 2018). While local news has historically reflected location-specific interests and issues, decreased readership and consolidation of news outlets have contributed to a shift towards national news as the dominant source of coverage (Protest & McCombs, 2016).

The shift away from local issues is particularly troubling when the national narrative about immigration is overwhelmingly negative. Studies spanning different time periods and locations revealed a consistent pattern of emphasis on federal policies and crime-related narratives in local news coverage of immigration (Harris et al., 2021; Young et al., 2022). Nuanced examinations of immigration within local contexts could provide counter-narratives to the dominant national discourse, but research has demonstrated a persistent and pervasive negative framing of immigration for decades.

The Current Study

Collectively, politicians, private prison corporations, and the news media have been extremely effective in constructing negative portrayals of immigrants. Furthermore, local news coverage has been overshadowed by national immigration narratives. The more often these frames are repeated, the more ingrained they become in public discourse. However, immigrant detention centers and for-profit prison corporations have been the subject of countless reports of human rights violations. How can both immigrants and detention centers be portrayed negatively at the same time? One possible explanation is to note who is left out of the conversation. Indeed, "actors involved in debates engage with one another so loudly that they silence the voices and perspectives of immigrants" (Estrada et al., 2020, p. 683).

These studies highlight the importance of considering visibility and invisibility as key factors in understanding the experiences and challenges faced by undocumented immigrants. By analyzing the visibility or invisibility of this vulnerable population, researchers can shed light on the ways in which power dynamics, social structures, and institutional practices contribute to marginalization, thereby informing the development of more inclusive policies. Thus, our focus on SDC reflects an intentional choice intended to address an active injustice. Detention centers operate largely out of public view and shining a light on one facility in particular is one way to further bring the conversation to the forefront.

Method

In the current study, we conducted a content analysis of frequency of news coverage on Stewart Detention Center, in addition to variation of coverage in different locations and in comparison to national news (Neuendorf, 2017). To illustrate the role of media reporting on detention centers within larger conversations about justice, immigration, and public awareness, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the frequency of reporting on SDC change over time?
2. How did reporting on SDC vary by geographic level?
3. How did reporting on SDC compare to the national discourse on immigration in recent years?

Data Collection

We began by conducting a search for "Stewart Detention Center" in Nexis Uni and included articles from newswires, newspapers, web-based publications, magazines, and journals between January 1st, 2006, the year SDC opened, and April 30th, 2020, when the COVID pandemic shut down visitation in detention centers. The initial search resulted in approximately 500 articles; we say approximately because the Nexis Uni database constantly changed, and specific articles would appear or be removed during the time we were coding them. Our largest total was 529, and the lowest was 472. Once we coded a study, we included it even if it disappeared from the Nexis Uni database. Then, we read each article individually and excluded press releases, editorials, Letters to the Editor, and duplicates. For duplicates, we selected the first-published article. We also excluded articles that only mentioned SDC but did not report on it substantively, resulting in 180 articles included for analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis consisted of multiple rounds of coding. To answer Research Question One (RQ1), we analyzed trends in reporting by the year in which the article was published using frequency counts. To answer Research Question Two (RQ2), the 180 articles were coded based on geographic location with those published within Georgia coded as “State,” in a state bordering Georgia as “Regional,” in a state outside of these border states as “National,” and outside the U.S. as “International.” For Research Question Three (RQ3), we noted trends in the topics being reported about Stewart each year and created an infographic to compare these topics with key sociopolitical events between 2017 and 2020. Each round of coding was performed independently by all three authors, and disagreements among the researchers were coded to consensus.

Findings

Research Question One

For RQ1, we asked how the frequency of news reporting about SDC changed over time. The mean number of news articles about SDC was 12 per year, the mode was 10, and the median was 10. If we remove year one, in which there was only one story, and year 15, which was partial, the mean becomes 13, the median stays the same, but the mode is then tied between 5, 7, 10, and 11 (Figure 1). While this is not a huge shift in the measures of centrality, it is worth noting the small effect of these anomalous years.

This descriptive analysis accomplished two things: first, it allowed us to look at whether overall attention to reporting about SDC had shifted over time, and second, it allowed us to identify key years in which that reporting shifted in terms of raw numbers, shifts that might indicate an anomaly. In 2006, reporting about SDC included only one story, published in *Marketwire* and focused on profits and earnings. This first story appeared to be the beginning of the narrative about SDC—how this could be a solution to undocumented immigration with the added bonus of potential profits (Mountz, 2012). By 2007, SDC had begun accepting detainees, and reporting for that year included seven stories. Four of the seven stories, however, were linked to an immigration raid at a Smithfield hog-processing plant that resulted in employees being detained at SDC. This first substantive story cycle was interesting because the initial story reported on the raid, the second story discussed protests by religious leaders and labor leaders, the third story reported the denials by officials, and the fourth story focused on the harm to the families. As a news cycle, this followed a unique trajectory. The report on the raid gave way to outrage about the treatment of the detainees and implications for the community.

News reporting on SDC fluctuated between five and seven stories per year until 2010, when the numbers reached double digits. In 2008, coverage varied from *Businesswire* reports about the profitability of SDC as a key employer of military veterans to reports about increasing deportation and mistreatment of detainees. The following year, coverage shifted to a detainee death and debates about the conditions inside the facility. Coverage in 2010 shifted yet again, and news stories focused on protests, though one *Atlanta Journal Constitution* article described how much the backlogs in deportation proceedings were costing taxpayers.

Stories about SDC reached numerical highs of 28 stories in 2017 and 42 stories in 2018. These two years included reports of detainees’ suicides and deaths, as well as a report on conditions in detention centers and a subsequent lawsuit. Reporting about SDC decreased to 14 stories in 2019, a number higher than the mode of ten for our total dataset. For 2020, our data only includes reporting through April and is not representative of a full year of reporting. Although the mean and median remained relatively low, there is a clear trajectory in the last three years of data collection for the total number of stories per year to be significantly higher than those in the early years. This trajectory seems to be driven by some of the answers to RQ2, specifically the types of stories that moved from the state level to the national and international levels of reporting.

Research Question Two

Our second research question addressed differences at the state, regional, national, or international level. State and national reporting constituted the bulk of reporting about SDC, accounting for 83% of the reporting (Figure 2). Within that 83%, state reporting was still the majority, accounting for 100 discrete stories. National reporting included 48 discrete stories. Regional reporting included 13 stories, even less frequent than international reporting, which had 19. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, the largest newspaper in the state of Georgia and geographically closest to SDC, provided the bulk of the state reporting about SDC with 74 stories over the included time period.

A couple of things are of interest in the reporting from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. First, reporting about SDC at the state level has increased significantly since 2010, when reporting on immigration and detention seemed to coalesce around an individual reporter, Jeremy Redmon. Second, there was some indication that Redmon's approach to reporting on immigration and detention shifted over time. His later articles were more likely to focus on individual experiences of detainees or about inhumane treatment at SDC. While we do not have space for a deep investigation into these 62 stories in this paper, there appears to be an interaction between the depth of knowledge of the reporter about immigration and detention and the approach to reporting individual stories.

Research Question Three

Newspaper coverage is driven heavily by the unfolding of current events, and during the time of SDC's emergence as one of the largest immigrant detention centers in the country, immigration issues were frequently in the headlines. Opening under President George W. Bush, SDC has remained open through the presidencies of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and a second term Donald Trump. For these analyses, we did not try to capture all of the events that occurred during these presidential terms. We did, however, review lists of well-known political decisions and directives that could potentially influence the news media's coverage of immigrants and detention centers and created an infographic timeline of a few notable events in recent years (Boghani, 2019; Flores & King, 2019). As indicated in Figure 3, we were selective in the events we included for analyses due to the overwhelming number of directives by the first Trump administration that made immigration a central policy focus.

In 2017, the Trump administration made good on campaign promises to prioritize immigration enforcement by beginning construction of the border wall and implementing the infamous "Muslim travel ban." As apprehensions at the southern border rose to over 300,000 individuals, news stories involving SDC clustered around three topics: calls for the closure of the facility (n=3), deaths of detainees (n=8), and reports of human rights violations (n=8). These news stories documented the lack of access to medical care, unsanitary and spoiled food, lengthy solitary confinement followed by suicide, court-ordered forced feeding of detainees on hunger strikes, and lack of due process. As Figure 3 indicates, these stories about human rights violations and detainee deaths were written at a time when political debates focused on the construction of the border wall. These stories occurred across all of our geographic levels, but relatively few of the stories on immigrant deaths and human rights violations appeared at the national level. Six of the eight stories on detainee deaths and four of the eight stories on human rights violations were written at the state level. This contrast suggests most people encountered stories about ideological debates but remained largely uninformed about the realities of abuse in detention centers.

As the Trump administration began its "zero tolerance border policy" in 2018, the news cycle centered heavily on family separations. However, news stories about SDC focused on detainee deaths (n=13), cruelty to detainees (n=8), a lawsuit against the facility (n=4), and separation of families (n=3). Of the three news stories that discussed family separations, one was international, one was national, and one was state. The international story reported on a Trump-era shift in policy that resulted in the deportation of Vietnamese refugees who had previously been protected from deportation, cruelly separating family members. The national-level news story reported that more than a week after President Trump claimed to have reversed the family separation policy, over 2,000 children remained in ICE custody. The state-level piece focused on one Honduran farmer whose three-year-old son had been returned to Honduras alone after their two-week journey to the U.S. Thus, news coverage of the same topic varied drastically in the way issues of family separation were portrayed, meaning that different readers (i.e., international, national, and state) were provided very different pictures of the issue of family separation.

In 2019, the national discussion of immigration issues focused on the reversal of the family separation policy, which persisted in practice well after the initial claim of a policy reversal in 2018. Notably, apprehension numbers more than doubled to 851,508 individuals at the southern border from just under 400,000 the previous year. On the other hand, news stories about SDC focused on detainee deaths (n=5), human rights violations (n=4), and a detainee escape (n=2). One news story was published at the international level on claims of abuse at CoreCivic facilities, mentioning that SDC had previously been sued for the use of forced labor. Two news stories appeared at the national level. One reported on the withholding of basic medical care, including a detainee who was given aspirin despite having blood so thin that he was bleeding through his skin and ultimately wasn't expected to survive. The other was a close look at a lawyer working at SDC, documenting his perception of the woefully inadequate access to attorneys and the serious barriers they faced receiving a fair legal hearing. Similarly, the state level news story on human rights documented the challenges detainees faced in gaining access to legal representation and the proliferation of scams along their journey through the U.S. legal system.

In 2020, the national discussion focused on the COVID pandemic and an uptick in racial violence against Asian people fueled by “China virus” discourses. Similarly, news stories about SDC focused primarily on COVID (n=5) and immigration courts (n=2), suggesting that the pressing issues tied to the pandemic had the strongest impact on the convergence of news reporting on SDC with the broader national dialogues during the period under examination. While the pandemic was associated with a large drop in apprehensions at the southern border and detentions in U.S. facilities, the consequences were dire for those trapped inside detention facilities, including those working in them. The one international news story that reported on SDC was a description of a Reuters analysis that found roughly a third of all detainees were housed in facilities isolated from available hospital beds.

The close alignment between national discourses and news reporting on SDC was evident, as three of five news stories about COVID were written at the national level. In mid-March, CNN reported on the impact of COVID on the more than 40,000 detainees in immigrant detention centers and noted that ICE had reported no positive cases among detainees. SDC was mentioned as evidence of the impact on families and advocates who could no longer visit detainees. Less than a month later, the *Natchez Democrat* reported the first positive case of a detainee, with ICE announcing 72 detainees had tested positive, including six at SDC. On the same day in mid-April, *MailOnline* reported that more than 350 detainees at SDC had declared a hunger strike in protest to their concerns about safety during COVID. The news story referred to other coverage indicating guards had pepper sprayed some of the detainees during the protest.

With the exception of 2020 when the pandemic dominated news coverage, the most commonly reported topic was detainee deaths. Although SDC opened in 2006, more than half of the news stories in our included sample were published during the period from 2017-2020 (93 of 181), and of those 93 news stories, 26 were about detainee deaths. As [Figure 2](#) indicates, this is the largest disparity between the national discourse and the observed news coverage of SDC; in none of our focal years has the national discussion really focused on detainee deaths in anything like the way those deaths dominated the reporting on SDC. The majority of the news stories about detainee deaths were at the state level (n=24) and only one was at the international level. Reporting on deaths at SDC was even more heavily slanted to state level in 2017 with four of six news stories.

Discussion

Our search of news reports on a single immigrant detention yielded 180 separate stories reported between its opening in 2006 and the COVID shutdown in April 2020. The volume of reporting is a first finding in itself. Even active readers of the news would surely miss the vast majority of the reporting done on this particular facility, and when multiplied by the over 200 immigrant detention facilities in the U.S., it is easy to understand how the average news consumer would struggle to grasp the diversity of perspectives present in news reporting on this, or really any, issue. Our research questions explored multiple aspects of the diversity of reporting: across time (RQ1), across geographic level (RQ2), and by topic (RQ3).

For RQ1, we asked how the frequency of reporting on SDC changed over time, but found that over the course of SDC's operation, the number of stories remained relatively consistent. However, there were a couple of large spikes in reporting in later years due to detainee deaths ([Figure 1](#)). Most years, there were about 10 news stories about SDC, while 28 stories were published in 2017 and 42 were published in 2018. Thus, even though the overall trend for reporting on SDC was fairly consistent, there was a noticeable increase in reporting over time with three of the most active years of reporting occurring in the last four years of our sample.

For RQ2, we asked how reporting on SDC varied by geography. Overwhelmingly, state reporting constituted the bulk of reporting. This finding was surprising, given that there has been a shift towards national news and federal policy narratives overshadowing local immigration issues ([Protest & McCombs, 2016](#)). However, in its first year of operation, a single article about SDC was published in a national, not local, news outlet. Regional reporting eclipsed state reporting for two years, but this was driven largely by singular events that impacted neighboring states economically. Interestingly, in the largest in-state newspaper, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, reporting tone and content seemed to vary more by the individual reporter than by geographic level. Over time, articles began to focus more on the experiences of detained individuals, drawing attention to systemic abuse and contributing to a more humanizing frame of immigrants and immigration.

For RQ3, we asked how reporting on SDC compared to national-level discourses on immigration. Contrary to prior research, we found considerable divergence from larger discussions of immigration ([Harris et al., 2021](#); [Young et al., 2022](#)). Using national reporting and data sources, we summarized the key topics of discussion about immigration in

the U.S. in recent years and found that reporting on SDC rarely reflected the national conversation. In fact, the single largest thread of reporting on SDC has been reports of detainee deaths, but the national conversation never reflected this reality, at least until the plight of detainees during COVID made deaths during detention more visible. Of the more than 200 immigrants have died while in detention since 2003, 11 were at SDC (Parmar et al., 2021; Project South, 2023).

Even though immigrants have often been portrayed as dangerous criminals in the greater sociopolitical sphere (Ackerman & Furman, 2013; Golash-Boza, 2009), research consistently finds that immigrants commit far fewer crimes than US-born citizens per capita (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2020). However, our analysis found that mentions of SDC detainees' alleged crimes were minimal. Some stories included interviews with family members or friends who insisted their loved one's only crime was missing a piece of paper during the immigration process. Other stories mentioned the circumstances of an individual's apprehension at something as mundane as a traffic stop. As in the Smithfield hog farm series of stories, there were examples of detainees being picked up at a workplace raid while they were in the middle of their work day, further complicating the portrayal of immigrants as a problematic drain on society (Wright & Esses, 2019). Meanwhile, the promise of detention centers as a local economic boon with injections of tax dollars and high-paying jobs has not panned out with SDC and Lumpkin, GA (Bonds, 2012). As an economic solution and solution to immigration, both fall short as the former has fizzled out in the news while the latter has taken on a more humanizing perspective with the deaths of detainees making headlines.

Because of circulation patterns and awareness through proximity, most news consumers in the U.S. would have little opportunity to read the state-level reporting that dominated the corpus of news stories about SDC. Moreover, reporting on SDC consistently differed from the broad discussion of immigration with implications for critical consumers of news media. One, readers across the country are bound to be unaware of the bulk of reporting on any given topic. Two, local readers are left on their own to make sense of the disparity between local and national reporting. A critical understanding of the news media is a crucial tool for helping readers make sense of the kinds of disparities our analyses uncovered.

The disparity between the national discourses and the reporting on SDC revealed by RQ3 speaks directly to the power of the media to influence public perception on critical topics like immigration (Haynes et al., 2016; O'Brien, 2018). Because coverage of Stewart was relegated to local news outlets, especially the human rights concerns and deaths of detainees, national news sources are complicit in the minimization of human suffering that remained largely out of the broader political discourse. While people were well aware of the children apprehended at the border and separated from their parents, few people were similarly aware of the widespread allegations of human rights violations like rotten food, lack of medical care, and overuse of solitary confinement leading to an epidemic of suicide in these facilities.

Conclusion and Limitations

This analysis examines only one immigration detention center, and reporting on other detention centers would likely vary in a number of ways. Nonetheless, SDC shares many features with the overall set of immigrant detention centers in the U.S. as a for-profit prison company contracted with ICE and located in an isolated location. Also, SDC was for many years the largest immigrant detention facility in the country, making it a site of significance in the discussion of immigration policy and therefore a likely site of media interest. As indicated, the dataset in Nexis Uni shifted throughout the time we were collecting and analyzing news stories, so it seems probable our search was not exhaustive, and there may be stories we missed.

Our analysis of news reporting on the Stewart Detention Center (SDC) reveals significant disparities in coverage across different geographic levels and over time. State-level reporting, particularly from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, dominated the discourse, highlighting the human experiences and systemic abuses within the facility. This localized focus contrasts sharply with the broader national narratives on immigration, which often overlook the specific issues faced by detainees at SDC.

The increase in state-level reporting since 2010, driven by individual journalists like Jeremy Redmon, underscores the importance of in-depth, human-centered journalism in bringing attention to the realities of detention centers. However, the national media's failure to adequately cover detainee deaths and human rights violations at SDC suggests a gap in the public's understanding of the true conditions within these facilities.

Our findings emphasize the need for a critical approach to consuming news media, recognizing the influence of geographic and editorial biases on public perception. By highlighting the human impact of immigration policies and detention practices, we can foster a more informed and empathetic discourse on immigration. Ultimately, this research underscores the power of the media to shape public awareness and the urgent need for comprehensive, humane immigration reform.

These analyses offer suggestions for future research. We considered how topics shifted over time and geography, but our readings of the news stories suggest that terminology and tone of reporting may have shifted as well, driven in part by national reporting standards about the use of terms like “illegal alien” and “undocumented immigrant.” Future analyses might use a similar content analytic or even discourse analytic framework to examine these differences. Additionally, it might be informative to compare reporting about immigrant detention centers in different areas of the country to examine how reporting varied across locations and facilities.

As researchers, we know that words matter a great deal, and words repeated in the news media have tangible impacts in policy and public opinion. These media reports are worth a critical review as the people in detention do not have control over the ways they are portrayed. As we found in the analysis of articles on SDC, downplaying the severity of human rights violations while highlighting potential economic impacts are ways in which the detainees’ stories are erased. A more inclusive approach to research demands a push for a critical approach to media discourse if we truly want to work for social change. Shining a light on the darkest spaces in the U.S. is a good place to start.

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Figures

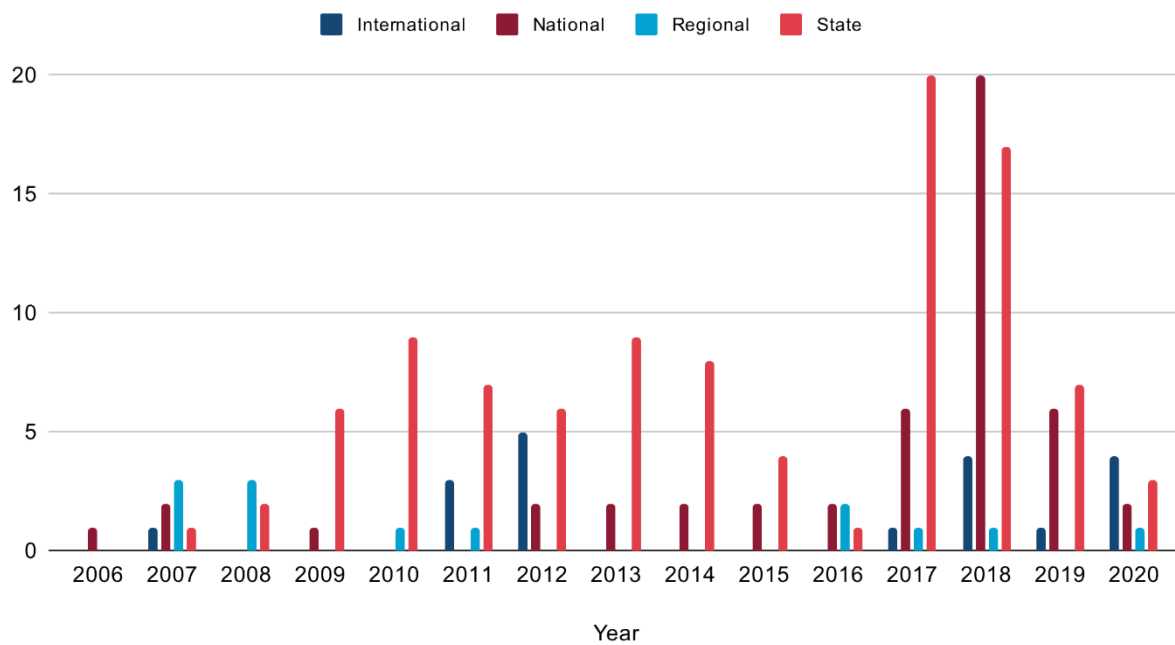


Figure 1: News Reports Over Time

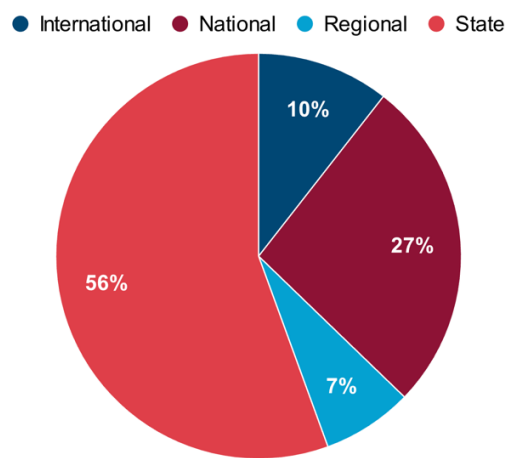


Figure 2: News Reports by Geography

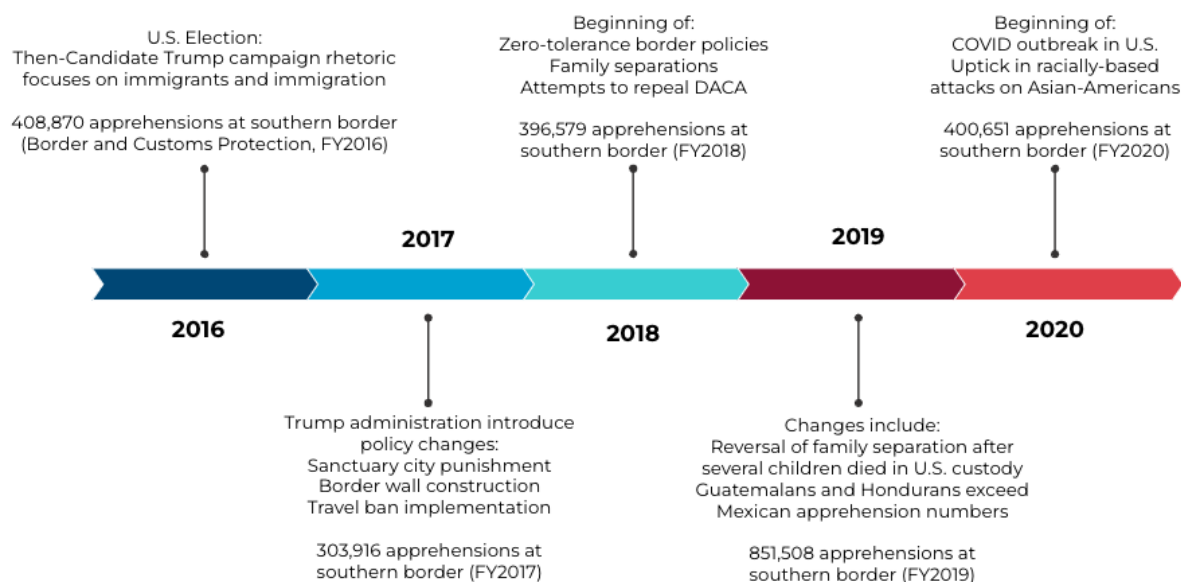


Figure 3: Timeline of Immigration Discourses

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