Carceral ethnography in a time of pandemic: Examining migrant detention and deportation during COVID-19

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Abstract
Each year the United States government detains and deports hundreds of thousands of people who prior to their removal are held in confinement for an average of 55 days. The short and long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic on migrant detention and deportation continue to be evaluated in real time, including how we can best study it. This paper provides a timely analysis on the relationship between immigration enforcement and confinement, public health emergencies, and ethnographic methods. It makes two contributions. The first is methodological and focuses on the challenges and opportunities of ethnographic methods in carceral settings when pandemic-related protocols have raised additional challenges to conventional in-person prison ethnography. The second contribution is empirical and documents how we adapted ethnographic methods to an interdisciplinary research design and to the exigencies of the pandemic to study the spread of the coronavirus in four immigrant detention facilities in New Jersey, USA.

Keywords
ethnography, COVID-19, carceral studies, migrant detention, deportation

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Introduction

It is 11 a.m. on a Friday in June 2020, and First Friends of NJ and NY is about to go live on Facebook. Since March 2020, this New Jersey-based immigrant rights organization providing volunteer visitation, post-release assistance, and advocacy for detained migrants and asylum seekers, has organized weekly and later biweekly updates via Facebook Live to update their volunteer community on alleged coronavirus infection data in four of New Jersey’s detention centers—Hudson County Correctional Center (HCCC), Essex County Correctional Facility (ECCF), Bergen County Jail (BCJ), and Elizabeth Detention Center (EDC)—where the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) hold captive migrants who face deportation in New York and New Jersey immigration courts. Most Friday mornings, members of our research team—constituted in Spring (2020) in the midst of a public health crisis to study the relationship between the coronavirus and migrant detention and deportation in New Jersey—logged into the live sessions from our improvised pandemic home offices to join this community of activist and advocates and listen to the latest COVID news in New Jersey’s detention centers, take fieldnotes, and confirm that the briefing would be recorded for later download, review, and analysis.

The United States has the largest system of migrant detention in the world (Young 2020), currently including more than 200 public and privately operated detention centers and jails. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US detention system operated at an expanded capacity instated by the Trump administration, with a record-high daily population of over 50,000 migrants (ICE 2020). At the end of February 2021, a year into the Biden administration, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency reported a record low of 13,529 people being held in ICE detention. This, however, was not a reflection of more immigrant-friendly and humane policies but was due to a combination of fewer new entries at the US-Mexico border, along with transfers, some releases—including compassionate releases related to COVID-19—and deportations (ICE 2020; TRAC 2021). Still, we know little about the movement of bodies around the detention system during the pandemic, and only now are scholars beginning to reconstruct this particularly dark and recent chapter in US detention and deportation history.

Unlike pre-pandemic research designs on carceral phenomena where researchers would have attempted access to detention facilities to speak in-person with both officials and detainees (see, for example, Drake et al., 2015; Gill et al., 2018; Hammersley 2015; Rhodes 2015), the pandemic removed those options as possibilities. Without being able to physically enter the detention facilities because of COVID-related restrictions on access, the ability to conduct remote interviews with wardens and administrators, lawyers, advocates, and formerly detained migrants, while also regularly tuning in to learn virtually from activist and legal communities advocating for detainee rights, was critical for gaining an understanding as to whether inmates and detainees were being intentionally subjected to conditions that might result in a premature COVID-related illness or even death (see Hawkins and Stodder 2020; ICE 2021; Irvine et al., 2020 or the social media footprint of #FreeThemAll). By hearing directly from affiliates of First Friends who
engaged daily and directly with institutions of confinement, we began the process of gaining firsthand remote access to the people and places of immediate import in the nexus between COVID-19, criminal justice institutions, and migrant detention and deportation. The way that COVID-19 testing data for both inmates and staff members across the four facilities in the state of New Jersey were obtained, communicated, and responded to through these briefings became a source of ethnographic inquiry that we share in this current paper.

Our goal here is two-fold: On the one hand, we aim to offer remotely obtained ethnographic insights about how COVID-19 transmission is experienced and understood by differently positioned actors intersecting in carceral spaces and how its containment was attempted and contested. On the other hand, the paper is also about the ways that we have experienced the exigencies of conducting time- and politically sensitive research with ethnographic methods that have been fundamentally challenged by social distancing mandates, stay-at-home orders, layered over the preexisting difficulties of understanding the full scope and scale of what happens in jails, prisons, and detention centers in the United States. This dual focus mirrors the two-fold purpose of prison ethnography previously proposed by prison ethnographers (Drake et al., 2015:2), which when tailored to the pandemic context, allows for examining both what (remote) ethnography can contribute to the understanding of the prison/detention center and what detention research—conducted remotely during a public health emergency—can contribute to a rethinking of the ethnographic enterprise.

In the sections below, we first offer a general discussion on ethnographic fieldwork during the pandemic followed by a more targeted discussion on studying spaces of detention during peak lockdown when pandemic-related protocols have raised additional challenges to conventional prison ethnography. The coronavirus pandemic raises new pedagogical and empirical insights and its impact on the ethnographic enterprise constitute a major focus of this paper. We here chronicle how we conducted time-sensitive and politically sensitive research with methodologies that have been fundamentally challenged. This is followed by a discussion of the ways that we applied and adapted ethnographic methods to an interdisciplinary research design and to the exigencies of the pandemic while studying remotely the spread of the coronavirus in four local immigrant detention facilities in New Jersey, USA. Overall, our focus in this article concerns how we can research and write ethnographically about migrant detention “in the time of corona”—not in spite of the pandemic but reshaped and even reinvigorated by it—by relying more fully on collaboration and interdisciplinary teamwork. Hence, we here make the case for a holistic approach to ethnographic research in carceral settings which can address the challenging entanglements of logistics and epistemology in the production of ethnographic knowledge during a public health emergency.

COVID-19 and ethnographic fieldwork in carceral settings

Implementing temporary alternatives to in-person immersive fieldwork and ethnographic methods during times of crisis is not new in the social sciences. During WWII, anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead found themselves unable to
travel and conduct fieldwork outside of the United States because of war, destruction, and travel restrictions imposed by the U.S. government. Instead, they turned to study societies and cultures from a distance through cultural productions including film, novels, poetry, and other expressions (Mead and Metraux 2000 [1953], Patterson 2001; Postill 2017)—research in some cases comparable to the efforts of 19th century “armchair anthropologists” before Malinowski’s invention of modern fieldwork (Podjed 2021). Today, immersive fieldwork that is not face-to-face and in-person has become increasingly normalized not only in the face of pandemics and other global emergencies, but also because online and virtual communities are now widely established as legitimate sites of human sociality, cultural practice, and ethnographic inquiry across a variety of subfields (e.g. Boellstorff et al., 2012; Shumar and Madison 2013; Smets et al., 2014; Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Ethnographically informed scholarship conducted remotely during the pandemic will likely proliferate in the coming months and years, especially as researchers have had to confront what safe alternatives might exist to in-person interactions and encounters. Some have deliberately “retreated to the past,” opting to research and write in isolation with pre-pandemic ethnographic materials along with more traditional forms of archival research (Kääkö 2020a). Others have pointed to the renewed importance of digital and online media for the research enterprise even while acknowledging that digital media as ethnographic archives presents its own set of challenges (DeHart 2020). Indeed, digital ethnography (Pink 2016), remote ethnography (Postill 2017), and netnography (Kozinets 2010) have experienced a revival and joined new concepts such as chatnography (Kääkö 2020b) as alternatives which allow researchers to continue practicing ethnography during the pandemic. Indeed, our team is not alone in pondering how COVID-19 has affected not only the practices and processes that we study ethnographically, but also how we study them.

COVID-19 also gave rise to revisionist critiques among some ethnographers who suggest that maybe modern-day fieldwork was never as exclusively in-person and immersive as it is often made to be and that contemporary ethnography had already before the pandemic significantly adjusted to the challenges of modern life and its institutions. Günel, Varma and Watanabe (2020), for example, acknowledge in their compelling “Manifesto for patchwork ethnography” that the reliance on many different and fragmented data sources, partly as a result of changing living and working conditions, does not have to compromise the integrity of the ethnographic paradigm and the anthropological project even as they have also transformed ethnographic knowledge production. We extend Günel, Varma, and Watanabe’s point to make the case for the explicit benefit of a research strategy that “patches together” different data sources, and address the challenging entanglements of logistics and epistemology in the production of ethnographic knowledge. In the context of COVID-19, collaborative ethnography should be acknowledged more fully not only as a sensible and temporary adaptation to the pandemic and its aftermath, but also as central to the new kinds of ethnographic and theoretical partnerships made possible by the pandemic which will contribute to expanding the boundaries of disciplinary practice and impact in years to come (cf. Boyer and Marcus 2021; Davis and Craven 2016; Fischer 2021). Indeed, the combination of strengths within
our co-author team enabled us to advance a hybrid ethnographic approach and work at a pace that was only possible through a multi-person team.

The intensification of remote online environments in research and teaching which became more predominant and visible during COVID-19 also created new inequalities in terms of our ability to contribute to ethnographic knowledge production—for researchers and study participants alike. For example, we found ourselves reflecting on implicit and explicit forms of classism and ableism that are both produced and reproduced by pandemic working conditions. In some ways, the ability to observe and engage digitally is less a function of how far we can “immerse” ourselves in the field and for how long, but on the quality of our living arrangements, the stability of our internet connection, and whether our personal, governmental, and institutional resources and privileges allow for critical services that make (remote) ethnographic work possible, foremost of these being adequate work spaces and childcare for those with parental and caregiving roles. The same is true for research participants. Participating in a remotely conducted interview can be smooth for the participant with available time, a quiet office, and untroubled access to Zoom or other platforms, but less so for the participant who works from home alongside other family members in small or noisy living quarters, or for the recently released migrant without a stable living situation who needs privacy and downtime to reflect critically and speak about potentially triggering experiences of being detained during the pandemic. These circumstances, we suggest, must be fully considered when setting up remotely conducted ethnographic interviews and when evaluating the data obtained from such interviews and from participant observation in online or digital communities.

Furthermore, prison ethnographers have long identified specific methodological, epistemological, and ethical issues around working ethnographically in spaces of confinement which might apply productively to reimagining ethnographic praxis during the pandemic. These include the question of research access to sites of detention and incarceration to document everyday life and routines in these institutions (Bosworth and Kellezi 2016; Hasselberg 2016; Maillet et al., 2017; Wacquant 2002); questions of research ethics and reflexivity in studying carceral settings (Bell and Wynn 2020; Bosworth and Kellezi 2017; Esposito 2017; Hammersley 2015; Turnbull 2018); the prison–society relation and the articulation between intramural and extramural worlds (Boe 2020; Brown and Schept 2017; Cunha 2014; Fassin 2017; Gill et al., 2018; Weegels et al., 2020), and the importance of contextualization of ethnographic observations from within the prison walls with other related institutions including courts, police, and the multiple state and non-state actors in the infrastructure of deportation (Barak et al., 2020; Berg 2021; Conlon and Hiemstra 2017; Coutin 2003; K ön n en 2019; Mountz et al., 2013; Provine et al., 2016). Many of these concerns highlighted by prison ethnographers can be applied to the pandemic context more broadly and were helpful to us in conceiving our research strategy for this project. This ‘pre-pandemic’ prison research also helped us contextualize our findings and be mindful of “pandemic research exceptionalism” (London and Kimmelman 2020).

When in-situ ethnographic observation in places of confinement, like immigration detention centers, became impossible due to safety concerns of both participants and researchers, detention and incarceration researchers had to adopt composite strategies to
get closer to an understanding of how COVID-19 is affecting the carceral spaces and processes that we study. One adjustment required was methodological and included the transition from in-person to remote methods of data collection. The other was epistemological and had to do with redefining the object of study away from the detention center as a physical place and towards detention systems and processes broadly conceived (see Brooks and Best 2021; Könönen 2021; Turner and Peters 2016). In particular, studies which modeled such conceptual moves beyond the walls of the prison to consider the carceral system and condition as “traversed by various circulations that reach within and beyond their boundaries” (Gill et al., 2018:183) were helpful for framing our analysis of the varied impacts of COVID-19 across the systems and processes of immigration detention and deportation. Finally, there were ethical issues around conducting research in a space and about the management of a captive population who were in many ways ‘sitting ducks’ (Raff 2020) waiting for the virus to arrive and potentially kill them (Rosas and Raymond 2020), and the responsibility and urgency our team felt to write up, disseminate our findings, and contribute to influencing public policy and opinion about the life-or-death consequences of immigration detention in the United States.4

When New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy declared a state of emergency in the state on 9 March 2020 due to the coronavirus, our university created an institutional hub for COVID-19 related research activities, which included intramural funding opportunities for biomedical and social science research. Our project titled “Migrant Detention, Deportation, and COVID-19 Transmission: Public Health and Safety Challenge in New Jersey”—part of the first round of funded proposals—was explicitly designed around the ethical and logistical challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and secured approval from our Institutional Review Board (IRB). Our study proposed to examine four detention facilities in the state of New Jersey—Bergen County Jail, Essex County Correctional Facility, HCCC, and the privately owned EDC. We were particularly interested in examining the role of immigration detention in the attempted containment of COVID-19, and the effects of the pandemic response on detained migrants and immigration system processes. Our data collection methods included semi-structured Zoom interviews with jail administrators, immigration lawyers, non-profit representatives, and recently released migrants; content analysis of relevant media coverage; participant observation at online and in-person public events; and the creation of a quantitative database charting positive test estimates over time in the facilities under study. We drew on each team member’s prior research and activist experiences and commitments with immigration detention, deportation research, and carceral systems. We published a descriptive first set of empirical findings about COVID-transmission in four New Jersey detention centers in April 2021 (Tosh et al., 2021) but did not give robust treatment to the methodological or epistemological features of the qualitative research process. In the remainder of this article, we explore the challenges we faced in executing this research design and share examples of the findings we were able to generate remotely with these methodologies.
‘Zooming in’ on remote ethnography: Access, interviews, participant observation, and digital record-keeping

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the four New Jersey detention centers in our study were closed to the public including visits from family members, lawyers, volunteer visitors, journalists, and researchers. Due to this lack of in-person access, we had to rely on remote research access and methodologies including Zoom interviews and participant observation in digital spaces. The Facebook Live briefings organized by First Friends and introduced at the beginning of this article served as our entry point to the “field” and quickly became a central ethnographic site for our project on the spread of COVID-19 in New Jersey’s migrant detention centers. Typically, the briefings started with an overview of the ICE detainee population in each facility comparing it to the prior week and to the national picture. This overview was followed by a detailed update per facility offered by First Friends’ Program Director and included data obtained by First Friends from the wardens on COVID-19 positive cases in isolation, fully recovered detainees, COVID-19 positive cases among staff and officers, staff and officers fully recovered, ICE releases since previous reporting, and new ICE arrivals. The briefings gave us access to weekly updated COVID-19 testing and infection data across the four facilities in our study and allowed us to monitor both the number of ICE detainees reported by the jails and the developments in positive test results over the course of the study period. Beyond this, they allowed us to contemplate the politics of data management and control in public–private partnerships in the field of immigration control. The testing and infection data offered at the briefings was often prefaced or accompanied by a discussion of the willingness of the facilities, or lack thereof, to release this information to the public and on the perceived reliability of the information provided. The briefings usually ended with a short update on First Friends’ post-release activities including transportation, housing and cash assistance for released detainees, the coordination and posting of immigration bonds, and a call for action, often in the form of an invitation to join post-briefing “phone zaps” placing calls to detention centers or local officials. Participant observation at these and other online events led our team to evaluate in real time the efficacy of remote versus traditional in-situ research methods to navigate the many challenges of “detention ethnography” during a public health emergency.

Zoom interviews with key stakeholders were another key component of our research. Administrators at the local jails were generally forthcoming—more than we had expected - and made themselves available for remote interviews in response to formal invitations to participate in our study. Some also invited us to online briefings and public hearings. The same was true for lawyers, advocates, and formerly detained migrants. The exceptions, not surprisingly, were leadership and staff at EDC, run by the for-profit company CoreCivic, who declined or simply did not respond to our requests for interviews and participation. We conducted a total of 15 interviews with detention center administrators, community-based advocates, immigration lawyers, and migrants detained and released during the pandemic. This diversity of interview participants allowed for a well-rounded understanding of how the pandemic was experienced, handled, and understood, from different vantage points within the broader detention and deportation infrastructure.
Ethnographic research during a public health emergency unfolds in a volatile affective landscape, with added anxiety and differing perceptions of risk among both researchers and interlocutors (Kuiper 2021). Our team was highly conscious and at times conflicted about asking for participants’ time amid a public health crisis, yet we also believed that the urgency of the subject matter justified these requests as appropriate. We remained attentive throughout the research process as to how interlocutors’ decisions to participate were driven by an amalgam of motives and affects. For example, one of the wardens who participated in a Zoom interview from his office began by proudly telling us all about the successful efforts and initiatives at ‘his jail’ to mitigate the spread of the virus. Yet as the interview progressed, he confessed that ultimately his motivation to accept the invitation to participate in our study was grounded in the distress he felt over the loss of colleagues to COVID at the facility:

“My number one priority is to concentrate on preserving life. Get my place back together. Restore the morale. Like I said, nobody is understanding this. I lost five colleagues. My jail is… 175 years old. This year. Never in the history did we ever lose one person. I lost two correctional officers, two nurses, and one support staff. Those nurses? A correctional officers knows that there’s a chance they’re gonna lose their life. We understand that, we took an oath. The nurses took a Florence Nightingale oath. They never in a million years thought they were gonna give up their life. They’re not even military. A military nurse has that understanding. These nurses came in there to protect and nurture and provide quality patient care and their lives were taken out. And -- I -- I own that for the rest of my days on this planet. They passed away under my care. And I’m trying to not make the same mistake twice…[...]...One of the reasons that I decided to participate is that I can in good conscience, allow any other jail to go through what I did. So, if the experience is both good and bad -- it can assist in [other] facilities.”

The focus on preserving life was also central to our study, yet when referring to losses, the warden was referring exclusively to staff members, not inmates and detainees. Such distinctions between staff and inmates in the daily practice of “preservation of life” at the jails during the pandemic did not go by unnoticed by those imprisoned there. Vincent, a recently released migrant who contracted COVID-19 while detained at one of the facilities under study, told us:

“When the pandemic started, they started making rules. ‘We’re not gonna let you see your family again. No more visitations. No more contact visits.’ So I’m like, ok, hold on one second. So, they’re afraid of our family getting the CO [corrections officer] sick or us sick? Ok. But how about the CO who goes in and out the facility every single day? Twice, three, four times a day. You don’t think they’re gonna bring that [virus] in here?”

Vincent’s observation was echoed by Lara, an immigration attorney who represents migrants detained at Essex County Jail. She reported that the jail had implemented video calls between lawyers and their detained clients, but that the lawyers had to travel from NYC to take these calls in the lobby of the jail, remarking, “It kind of, you know, negates
the purpose of not having any exposure.” Other detainees reported how they felt that they were literally left there to die. These testimonies point in very stark terms not only to how governmental institutions assign differential value to human life, shaping whose life is worth preserving and protecting (see Mbembe 2003), but also to a generalized awareness of the porousness of the prison walls which allowed the virus to travel in and spread—a key topic identified by prison ethnographers and carceral scholars more generally (Ellis 2021). Vincent and his fellow detainees were both terrified about contracting COVID-19 and angered about being cut off from family and from their lawyers in the name of “mitigating the spread of the virus,” while at the same time seeing staff come and go, oftentimes without wearing masks. Multiple times during a three-hour interview in October 2020, Vincent told us about retaliations against inmates and detainees who critiqued or challenged the prison’s COVID-19 safety protocols. These retaliations ranged from guards ignoring detainee requests for masks, personal hygiene, or cleaning supplies to threats of or actual solitary confinement (Tosh et al., 2021).

Being in such a disadvantaged position of power, Vincent and other migrants were invested in talking to researchers and journalists to make the public aware of what they had lived through with COVID-19 in detention. Some also shared diary entries with us detailing everyday life in detention during the pandemic. For example, Felix kept and shared with us his brief diary which mostly detailed his encounters with particular staff members. One note specifies: “After complaining about Officer X serving my food without gloves and mask every morning he bring me a box of milk [Felix is allergic to milk]. One day I see Officer X sleep on the job. I made a complaint to Sargent Z. Now I am being targeted for speaking up. I fear for my life in this facility.” When we later asked Felix what he would mostly like to see changed in the facility he replied: “The way the workers deal with the detainees. You know, their attitude, the way they treat us as if we’re nothing. They treat you any kind of way. It’s - to them, you’re fake. It’s just harsh.” Others wrote us letters to explain the dire situation on the inside of the prison walls or to relay their emotional states. Luciano, who was transferred from Essex to Bergen without any prior notice or explanation expressed his distress about the uncertainty: “They lie to us all the time and this quarantine is affecting me a lot...[...]... Everything is a disaster and lately I have not been feeling well. I don’t know if there is lead in the water, mold on the ceiling, but this is affecting me mentally, emotionally. The situation is very scary. My family needs me and I am afraid that I will get sick in here.” These documents which were rich in details about conditions of everyday life in detention during the pandemic became a central part of our ethnographic archive for the project.

Lawyers were another important group of remote interviewees who understood the institutional rationale for implementing restrictions on outside visits to the facilities, but who also complained that their access to clients had been drastically reduced due to entry restrictions, less time in common areas and reduced mobility of detainees within facilities, lack of confidentiality in their conversations with clients, and ongoing glitches with remote technologies. Through Zoom interviews with lawyers, we learned important details about how the pandemic restrictions imposed by the local jails and by ICE had produced a set of collateral consequences related to due process protections for non-citizens facing deportation. These included reduced access to legal representation for
detainees, challenges for lawyers in building the cases because they did not get to know their clients in-person, and multiple communication difficulties. Most lawyers we interviewed remarked on the numerous difficulties of doing their work remotely. For example, Kevin, an immigration attorney, told us that the lack of in-person meetings was an obstacle to obtain the trust required to get the kind of information that would allow him to build an effective immigration case. This concern was echoed by other lawyers. Nick, another immigration attorney, shared: “They are expressing some of the most terrible experiences of their lives over the phone,” and “I am going to trial without ever having even seen my client.” Lawyers’ lack of access to clients was compounded by the fact that detainees had less time than usual in the common areas due to social distancing measures which kept them locked in a cell or in their dorm for most of the day. These restrictions delayed often urgent case-related communication.

Opportunities to interview formerly detained migrants became possible through referrals from their lawyers and through our own recruitment at in-person public hearings where some recently released detainees came to offer their testimonies about conditions in detention during COVID-19. We interviewed three recently released migrants who had experienced the pandemic while detained in Hudson, Essex, and Bergen County Jails and we logged the testimonies of several others from public meetings and online events. These interviews revealed not just the utter vulnerability, fear, and anger over what many perceived as a disregard for their lives and their humanity, but also the precarity of their post-release situations. Except for Vincent, who we interviewed in-person at an outdoor café in Newark a few weeks after his release on bond, all other formerly detained migrants chose to participate via the phone since none had a computer to get on Zoom or a quiet place to tell their story undisturbed. For example, Felix who had returned to live with his mother in the Bronx when he was released from Bergen County Jail ended up taking our call on his cellphone outside because the house offered little privacy to discuss traumatic events experienced in detention that he did not want his mother to know about.

Remotely conducted Zoom and phone interviews, when even possible, presented both benefits and challenges. Interviews beside those with formerly detained migrants were conducted on Zoom with participants in front of a computer screen in their homes or offices. In comparison to regular face-to-face interviews, Zoom interviews require more complex exercises of ethnographic contextualization. The on-screen window mostly reveals social context accidentally when actions or sounds in the surroundings enter the frame giving away information about the participant’s intimate living space or work environment, but it doesn’t give many clues as to the participant’s relationship to others in their surroundings or of the broader social contexts in which actions and statements are made. It was also harder to construct longer-term relationships and create confidential relations with research participants in the removed and sometimes-awkward Zoom context, where interviews tend to be more scripted and less conducive to ongoing communication. On the other hand, the remote context also brought advantages. We were able to schedule meetings with busy stakeholders located throughout the state and region that very likely would not have been possible if required to find an amenable time to meet in-person—particularly in a time of heightened crisis for all groups involved. There is also
the potential that some research participants felt more forthcoming or comfortable speaking openly from the familiar context of their own home environment.

Participant observation at virtual and online events on conditions in local jails and detention centers included public hearings, advocacy briefings from advocate communities, and academic talks and conferences (including those where the research team participated as speakers and panelists). Participant observation at such online events also has its advantages and disadvantages, when compared to more traditional forms of in-person ethnography. A major advantage was the elimination of commutes to and from public events and community meetings, which freed up valuable research time. Another was that the action of observed online meetings and events—both words and images—could be recorded electronically and immediately archived giving the flexibility of postponing the initial analysis until a later time (Musante and DeWalt 2011:173). However, Kozinets (2010) has warned ethnographers about the pitfalls of over-relying on technology to record and archive online events and argued that ‘netnographers’ should write fieldnotes pretty much like in the old days of face-to-face participant observation to retain not just the computer recording of the event, but the researcher’s own response to the fieldsite, its participants, and the relationships between them. The demands of a typical pandemic workday stacked with Zoom meetings, one after the other, often created a time lag for our team members between conducting an ethnographic interview or attending an event and writing up the fieldnotes about it, and sometimes even a missed opportunity. This was in part due to the different dynamics of producing fieldnotes when the “field” is experienced mostly in front of the computer screen.

The last of our data collection tools was the coronavirus infection data which we systematized in a simple database based on the test result data provided at the First Friends briefings. Whereas ICE only reports positive test results for ICE detainees even though many are held on contract in local facilities that also holds both county and US Marshall inmates, the official ICE data does not give the full picture on total infection data of all categories of confined persons within a ‘brick and mortar’ jail. The ratio between ICE and non-ICE inmates is conceptually and politically irrelevant in the context of a pandemic because the only way that a prison can be COVID-compliant is if inmates/detainees are either released, frequently tested, or situated in de facto solitary or solitary-like conditions, which have been shown in pre-pandemic contexts to produce immeasurably harmful and antisocial outcomes (Metzner and Fellner 2010). It is impossible, however, to know for certain the extent to which the reduction in the number of detainees is due mainly to releases or also significantly to transfers between facilities and deportations. While it was beyond the scope of our study to document the details of particular individual “transfer paths” (Hiemstra 2019; Gill 2009) during the pandemic, our Zoom interviews with advocates and migrants themselves confirmed that both transfers and deportations had occurred throughout the pandemic effectively spreading the virus to different parts of the country and to migrants’ countries of origin through deportation (see also Katz 2020a, Martin 2020; Montoya-Galvez (2020); 2020b; Sieff and Miroff 2020; Wong 2020).
Zooming out: What can we learn about COVID-19 and migrant detention through remote and collaborative ethnography and vice-versa?

As the consequences of COVID-19 on the detention and deportation infrastructure continue to be evaluated in real time, some methodological and epistemological lessons can be drawn from our remote and collaborative ethnography in New Jersey’s immigration detention facilities. In this concluding section, we discuss what we can learn about COVID-19 and migrant detention through remote and collaborative ethnography and also what we can learn about the limitations of (remote) ethnography as applied to detention research during the pandemic.

Our remote methodologies taught us a great deal not only about the role of immigration detention in the attempted containment of COVID-19, and the effects of the pandemic response on detained migrants, but also about the very sites of detention that we could not visit in-person. The shortcomings of the pandemic responses in the New Jersey facilities we studied remotely were closely related to pre-COVID practices, conditions, and ineffective procedures related to hygiene, health services, commissary use, and access to lawyers.10 Some facilities did not have basic necessities mandated by detention standards prior to the pandemic, which could have allowed for a smoother adjustment to pandemic-era social distancing protocols. For example, EDC operates in a repurposed warehouse in the port area of Elizabeth, NJ, with no windows or access to sunlight or outdoor recreation; indeed, the “outdoor” recreation area in EDC is actually an indoor room with “a barred-over skylight that allows some fresh air into the otherwise dark and enclosed space” (Human Rights First 2018). Furthermore, the layout in the facility makes isolation of sick detainees and social distancing difficult if not impossible: detainees in EDC are housed in dormitory style housing units with up to 44 beds in each unit. Of the four facilities we studied, EDC had the highest cumulative total of detainees who had tested positive for COVID-19 while in ICE custody since testing began in February 2020. Whereas ICE reports total confirmed COVID-19 cases since February 2020 in Bergen to be 26, Hudson 14, and Essex 24, EDC counts a total of 117 cases. The much higher number in EDC can be explained by a multiplicity of factors which include but is not limited to the spatial layout of the facility. Admittedly, the depth of our analysis for this particular site was hampered by the lack of response from CoreCivic administrators to participate in our study. Instead, we relied on Zoom interviews with advocates, detainee testimonies logged through the First Friends briefings, and secondary data which we contextualized with our own prior knowledge of and visits to the site before the pandemic. In this sense, especially when there is limited cooperation from authorities, remote ethnography is most useful and yields the best results when building on prior in-depth knowledge and relationships with a site and its people.

Our study on COVID-19 and migrant detention also taught us how existing political and legal categories interfere with research design on confined populations. Even before the pandemic, US immigration authorities used a variety of facilities to confine non-citizens under different agreements. This made it difficult to obtain reliable and decipherable coronavirus test numbers not only on the interactions of different categories of
confined persons but also on overall positive test results in each location. This was especially true in cases of facilities that held detained noncitizens under more than one agreement or contract. But, regardless of the ratio between categories of confined populations, the coronavirus pathogen does not distinguish between socio-political or legal categories of personhood. Perhaps, the simplest but also most important lesson from this project has been that the only effective way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in detention is to get all people out of detention regardless of the legal or administrative categories assigned to them.

Cross-cultural and comparative analysis of immigration detention before the pandemic have already revealed vastly different practices of confinement of migrants and asylum seekers throughout the United States and globally (Gill 2009; Domenech 2020; Hasselberg 2016; Hiemstra 2019; Esposito 2017; Könönen 2019, Mountz et al., 2013). While we knew from prior work with detained and deported migrants that conditions in detention facilities and migrants’ experiences of them varied greatly, we were intrigued to find the extent to which local best practices and idiosyncrasies prior to the pandemic significantly shaped how the outbreaks were managed at the county level and how these protocols in turn were experienced by lawyers, detention activists, and detained migrants themselves. We believe that our interdisciplinary analysis of COVID-19 transmission in New Jersey’s detention centers can help shed light on the impacts of viral outbreaks on bureaucratic spaces of confinement and punishment elsewhere, and simultaneously highlight the lessons drawn from the institutions and processes under study. In doing so, the broader objective has been to provide both empirical and methodological insights that can be of value to revise pandemic preparedness protocols in carceral settings and to ongoing ethnographic inquiry.

Far from being ethnographic purists, we viewed ethnography as a tool that can be molded and modified to fit the exigencies of the pandemic context. This project and the complex circumstances that gave birth to it required not only the adaptation of ethnographic methods fundamentally challenged by social distancing mandates, stay-at-home orders, and widespread contagion, but also facing the preexisting difficulties of understanding the full scope and scale of what happens in jails, prisons, and detention centers in the United States due to the often-blatant lack of transparency in these institutions. Ultimately, our goal with the larger project has been to understand the role of immigration detention in the attempted containment of COVID-19, and the effects of the pandemic response on detained migrants during a critical moment when New Jersey was still in the epicenter of the pandemic as its first phase swept over the United States. The data needed to answer these questions required us to integrate conventional ethnographic methods into a remotely executed interdisciplinary framework—allowing us to overcome both practical and methodological challenges around access to the people and places of immediate import in the nexus between COVID-19 and migrant detention and deportation.

One positive impact of the scholarly frenzy to produce new knowledge on all things COVID was the forms of collaboration that this moment inspired. The remote nature of the project allowed for inter-campus collaboration and the “bringing together” of interdisciplinary scholars with uniquely relevant research backgrounds, despite being positioned at different Rutgers campuses across the state of New Jersey. With our already
robust personal and work commitments enhanced by new responsibilities and the collective trauma of the pandemic, we cultivated a reflexive and accommodating team dynamic. The ability to be flexible about meeting times, communication modalities, and collaboration styles was further enhanced by the remote context. We were able to tag team and work around the pressures imposed by the pandemic on the bandwidth and availability of each team member at particular moments.

Among the plethora of painful challenges prompted by COVID-19, a silver lining exists in the form of difficult but forward-looking opportunities for disciplinary growth and for a reassessment of how knowledge on immigration detention is produced (cf. Bosworth and Kellezi 2017; Könönen 2021). In-person participant observation focusing only on the lived experiences of detained migrants inside the detention centers would not have been possible during the pandemic, but it would also not have enabled us to come to the conclusions we have reached about detention system processes beyond the detention center itself. Ethnography as a method and style of inquiry will continue to evolve. Digital ethnography - along with more candid reflections on the varied privileges and costs of (remote) ethnographic work of any kind - will presumably gain more intra and interdisciplinary prominence and visibility. Here, we have shared our experiences in executing a collaborative and multi-instrument research design providing pointers on what worked for us and what might be useful for others conducting remote ethnographic or qualitative-intensive inquiry in carceral settings and in a pandemic context.

As for the fate of those who are policed, detained, deported, and incarcerated in the United States and abroad, their biographies and experiences have been and will continue to be at the center of our scholarship and activism, with or without a global pandemic. It is our ethnographic tools and approaches that will require constant sharpening and (re) adaptation.

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**Notes**

1. For more information on the mission and history of First Friends of NJ and NY, see [https://firstfriendsnjny.org/](https://firstfriendsnjny.org/)
2. Three of the four facilities in our study are county jails with Intergovernmental Service Agreements (IGSAs) to hold detained migrants on behalf of ICE. Only EDC is privately operated by the for-profit company CoreCivic, and exclusively holds ICE detainees.

3. Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* has served as a platform for generating catchy titles for “[discipline or subfield] in the time of corona.” Love in the time of *corona* has been both done (see Dehghan 2020) and outdone, supplanted by titles like “Medicine in the Time of Corona” (Shilatifard 2020); “Clinical Academic Research in the Time of Corona” (Banerjee et al., 2020); “Science in the Time of Corona” (Nature Methods Editorial Board 2020), “Urology in the Time of Corona” (Naspro and Da Pozzo 2020); “Fashion in the Time of Corona” (Almila 2020), and many other timely and necessary scholarly interventions. By August 2020, sociologists had already published “Ethnography in the Time of COVID-19” (see Fine and Abramson 2020).

4. Several excellent investigative journalism reports did the work of garnering immediate public attention to the issue (see De La Hoz 2020; Devereaux 2020; Lanard 2020; Lewis 2021; Raff 2020).

5. While ICE eventually made their testing data public in a live coronavirus database (ICE 2020), advocates have criticized ICE’s official biweekly coronavirus infection numbers as systematic undercounts (Cho 2020; Glaun 2020; Siulc 2020).

6. An immigration bond is a financial payment to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) set by an immigration judge which allows for the release of a detained migrant from custody. If released on bond the migrant must promise to show up to all mandated court hearings until the case is solved – even if it involves a deportation order.

7. CoreCivic is currently facing a lawsuit from their landlord to terminate the contract with EDC (Nieto del Rio 2021a). Despite ongoing litigation, the company was able to renew its contract until 2023. In 2020, Hudson County extended its contract with ICE for a new 10-year period despite extensive public opposition, but later announced that no detained migrants would be held at the jail after 1 Nov. 2021 (Nieto del Rio 2021b). Essex County Jail announced in April 2021 that it would not renew its contract with ICE set to expire in August 2021, but transferred its ICE detainees to other facilities (Katz 2021). On 20 August 2021, Gov. Phil Murphy signed a bill which bars county and privately-run jails from “entering into, renewing, or extending immigration detention agreement” (Racioppi and Koruth 2021). The bill however doesn’t annul the contracts already in place. Bergen County Jail was the last of New Jersey’s detention centers to announce that they would no longer hold detained migrants at their jails (Nieto del Rio 2021b).

8. We have used pseudonyms for all participants quoted below.

9. While there had been no detainee fatalities due to COVID-19 when we interviewed the warden at this jail, it is worth mentioning that deaths in custody due to medical negligence and suicides are not uncommon and attributable to—among other factors—organizational failure (Marquez et al., 2021; see also ICE 2021; Hawkins and Stodder 2020).

10. We have described these shortcomings at length in a separate paper (Tosh et al., 2021).
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