



Full report

# Detained

An X-Ray Examination of the  
Immigration Detention System  
in Italy

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# THE PROJECT

*Pre-Removal Detention Centres (CPRs)* represent one of the most controversial and least transparent tools of the Italian migration policy. Overseen by law enforcement, far from the oversight of civil society, these facilities offer a **bleak picture of ineffectiveness and administrative and managerial confusion.**

The *Trattenuti* project was launched with the aim of shedding a light on the

immigration detention system by providing public access to the data collected through document requests made to responsible authorities. The goal is to encourage a more informed and conscious discussion.

ActionAid Italy and the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Bari are partners on this project, for which the mere collection of information required 18 months of work and dozens of public access to documents requests.



# Further investments in CPRs?

Starting in 2017, every coalition ruling the country has announced its commitment to invest on immigration detention, consistently framing it as the key to an effective return policy. With the objective of establishing at least one CPR in each Italian region, the detention system's capacity was incrementally expanded, ultimately reaching 1,395 beds by 2022.

Our data tells the story of this project's failure. **The goal of reaching 20 active facilities was not achieved, and the system never truly became**

**fully operational.** The significant challenges in managing these facilities, where incidents of self-harm, riots, and disorder have become increasingly prevalent, have led to a surge in the costs of so called extraordinary maintenance. This, in turn, has resulted in a considerable number of spaces becoming unavailable (see Chart no. 1). Consequently, on average, from 2017 onward, **the system has functioned at just 50% of its official capacity.**

• ***The goal of building a facility in every region was never achieved.***

To address the chronic shortage of available spaces, a new approach was introduced in 2018, allowing the detention of individuals in places defined by law as "different structures" or "suitable premises." The proliferation of unregistered detention facilities managed by public security authorities further complicated the detention landscape, making it even more opaque.

# The costs of an ungovernable system:

The immigration detention system is effectively privatized. Cooperatives and for-profit entities, including some multinational corporations, managed the 10 active centers during the period when we were conducting our research. The management of the detention system is characterized by **an alarming administrative confusion.**

Over the four years taken into consideration (2018 - 2021), the management of six out of the 10 active CPRs was extended for a total of over 3,000 days (see Chart no. 3). Additionally, during the period covered by our research, the bidding contracts changed three times. These endless extensions and the succession of distinct contracts contribute to creating a system marred by **disparities in costs and services provided.**

• ***"The management of CPRs takes place in a state of alarming administrative confusion."***

According to our estimates, the average cost of each facility is around **one and a half million euros per year, while the average annual cost per occupancy is 21,000 euros** (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

**Reconstructing costs is often difficult, if not impossible.** In some cases, when CPRs and asylum

reception facilities are in the same area, even the responsible authorities struggle to separate the costs of the two types of structures, revealing the extent of the administrative chaos in which the system operates.

Another noteworthy piece of data pertains to the expenses for extraordinary maintenance interventions. **During the 2018-2021 period, over 60% of the nearly 15 million allocated for CPR maintenance was utilized for extraordinary interventions.**

There also appears to be a direct **correlation between the extension of maximum detention terms and the increase in extraordinary maintenance expenses** (see Chart no. 5): in 2018, with an average stay of 27 days in a CPR, there were 1.2 million euros in extraordinary maintenance costs; in 2020, with an average stay of 41 days, costs had risen to 4.1 million.

The consecutive succession of bidding contracts has also led to a **progressive reduction in the most basic services.** Under the current contract, each detainee has access to only 9 minutes of social assistance and legal support per week, and 28 minutes of linguistic mediation (see Table no. 3).

# Between border facilities and prison extensions

In the period covered by our analysis (2014-2021), **over 74% of the 37,000 individuals who entered a CPR were detained in the centers of Caltanissetta (22%), Rome (21%), Torino (19%), and Bari (12%)**. Of these facilities, only two centers housed a female section: Torino (until 2015) and Rome (until 2021). The percentage of detained women has steadily declined, from 20.5% of total entries in 2016 to 0.1% in 2021 (see Chart no. 20). Upon the completion of our research, no dedicated detention centers for women were in place.

By examining facility-specific data, we can unveil significant differences within the immigration detention system, where two primary types of CPRs seem to emerge. On the one hand, there are the **border**

**facilities**, characterized by shorter-than-average detention times and a high incidence of actual deportations (Caltanissetta, Trapani). On the other hand, there are CPRs that **function as extensions of prisons**, marked by relatively long detention times and a low incidence of deportations (Torino and Brindisi).

The data analysis suggests that the specialization of these facilities aligns with a strategy aimed at gradually diversifying the detention system. This diversification occurs through the creation of a detention circuit that is gradually hybridizing with the first reception system for asylum seekers, intended for managing accelerated asylum and return procedures in border areas.

## What are CPRs for?

Apart from uncovering an unmanageable system, our data strongly suggests that the immigration detention system is significantly ineffective in achieving its intended goals.

The investment in CPRs has not led to the anticipated outcomes; on the contrary, **the percentage of people actually returned compared to the number of migrants placed in detention is clearly decreasing**: from 55.1% in the period between 2014 and 2017, it dropped to 48.3% in 2018-2021 (see Chart no. 9). Furthermore, this decrease in the percentage of returns enforced occurs at a time when the average length of detention is increasing, demonstrating that longer detention terms do not correspond to a higher likelihood of repatriation.

Another crucial insight from our analysis is that **CPRs have limited impact on the execution of returns**. The data we've gathered clearly demonstrates a declining effectiveness in the Italian repatriation policy (Chart no. 37), but, more significantly, reveals that the period with the highest number of enforced returns coincides with a period in which the detention system's capacity and maximum detention terms were at their lowest (Chart no. 39).

In simpler terms, the investment in CPRs since 2017 has resulted in increased human and material costs for return policies without improving their effectiveness. Return rates have decreased, and they are becoming more coercive.

- ***“The investment in CPRs has only resulted in an increase in the human and material costs of the return policy, not of its effectiveness.”***

Who gets repatriated from CPRs? Our data indicates that **nationality and gender play pivotal roles in determining the outcomes for those entering these facilities**.

The proportion of women who are actually returned compared to those entering the CPRs is relatively low. On average, women who are returned make up just 2.6% of the total of returns carried out from a CPR during the 2018-2021 period, despite constituting 7.9% of the total entries.

The only individuals with a significant likelihood of being repatriated are **Tunisian men**, who in the 2018-2021 period **constituted 50% of the male placed in detention** and almost **70% of the returns actually executed**. Individuals of other nationalities have a higher likelihood of remaining in detention until the expiration of the detention terms due to the low probability of being repatriated, or due to their release by order of the judicial authority.

Our analysis demonstrates how CPRs have progressively evolved into a **tool for the accelerated return of Tunisian citizens**, especially those located near border areas. In addition to raising several concerns on the effective access to asylum and on the quality of judicial protection, the functional specialization of CPRs appears to have dubious efficacy, considering that Tunisians constitute only 8% of the people who disembarked in Italy in 2023.

# A paradigm shift?

The introduction of specific regulations for the detention of asylum seekers is perhaps the most disturbing development in recent years. Our analysis is based on data up to 2021, but already demonstrates a **significant increase in the number of detained asylum seekers**.

• **“The number of detained asylum seekers is growing.”**

In the four-year period from 2018 to 2021, about **16% of the migrants placed in detention in Italian CPRs were asylum seekers**. The incidence of asylum

seekers in the total detainee population increased from 15.4% in 2018 to 19.2% in 2021. In particular, this growth seems to be attributed to the increase in the number of asylum seekers who were detained without having received an expulsion order, who by 2021 represented 22% of all detained asylum seekers.

This data, combined with recent legal developments, suggests a **scenario in which the number of asylum seekers in detention is likely to grow significantly**, especially in relation to the handling of asylum applications made by individuals from so-called “safe third countries.”

## Conclusion

Despite the millions of euros spent and the thousands of people detained, the impact of CPRs on the effectiveness of return policies has remained limited. The increasing investment in the immigration detention system has not led to an increase in the number of returns executed relative to the number of removal orders issued. On the contrary, **returns from Italy are decreasing, while being executed with more coercive means**.

In addition to the alarming rise in the human and economic costs of return policies, the increasing diversification of the detention system is a cause for concern. This is attributed not only to the administrative and managerial confusion

that characterizes its functioning, but also to the **emergence of a specific detention circuit dedicated to managing accelerated asylum and return procedures directly from the so-called border areas**.

In addition to the risk of increasing hybridization between the reception and detention systems, this could lead to a proliferation of unregistered detention facilities located in ‘suitable’ places or in militarized areas beyond the scrutiny of civil society. The risk is a further reduction in transparency and accessibility to places where, it is worth remembering, individuals are deprived of personal freedom without having violated criminal law.



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