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THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS

Site visits, selective disclosure, and freedom of information in qualitative security research

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- **Research objective:** This chapter will aid researchers working with participants who are reluctant to speak "on the record." This chapter will help researchers working with freedom of information act requests, as well as contexts where private contractors hold important information related to their projects.
- **Research puzzle:** This chapter explores how qualitative research can evoke the secrecy, security, and politics it seeks security research seeks to explore. We rethink what access and denial can mean for researchers. We argue that deferrals, indecision, and off-the-record comments provide insight into participants' understanding of security discourse itself.

Introduction

Access, confidentiality, and classified information can be tremendous challenges for research on security. Confidentiality and classified information have long had an aura attached to them, as they are often represented in newspapers, popular media, and film as the means *par excellence* by which state and military actors deny the public access to information. Access by researchers into state, military, and non-governmental institutions usually requires sensitivity, a performance suggesting that some activities or scenes must remain behind closed doors to all but the most qualified individuals, even in nominally democratic societies. However, as we explore in this chapter, holding up appearances of secrecy and confidentiality does not always indicate sensitivity, but can instead indicate moments of inaction by state actors, a lack of clear policies, busyness on the part of officials, or even a desire by officials not to reveal internal institutional tensions or disagreements.

   In critical scholarship, it has become almost cliché to describe state power and institutions as messy, incoherent, and grounded in everyday practices (Mitchell

1991; Mountz 2004; Painter 2006; Jeffrey 2013). However, issues of access and confidentiality are rarely considered as *instruments* that have a specific function in relation to a messy state. Our own work has also shown us that access and the selective disclosure of information are more than annoyances. Rather, they offer insights to understanding the production of security, state power, and knowledge. Requesting information, interviews, and documents reproduce the mechanisms of disclosure. In this sense, we regard security research to be a critical "inscription" device (Aradau and Huysmans 2014), particularly for the selective constructions of "the record." Therefore, one has to pay close attention to pending applications, deferred access to research sites, "off the record" conversations, and classified secret documents. Across our different projects, our experience shows much more of an "ad-hoc-racy" than a bureaucratic logic, and that the "state effect" (Mitchell 1991) arises as much from indecisions as it does from coherent policy.

Drawing on our respective research on U.S. military facilities and U.S. immigration enforcement practices (Belcher and Martin 2013), we argue that confidentiality, classified documents, and "off the record" conversations are crucial for understanding the everyday and embodied workings of security and state power. The chapter includes anecdotes and lessons drawn from our experiences with selective disclosure and access, as well as Freedom of Information and open records requests. Like other chapters in this volume, we offer some practical tips for doing research on securitization and militarization. We emphasize to researchers, especially young scholars, the importance of repeated attempts and persistence.

Insights into the messy state: site visits, access, and confused authority

In our research, we rely primarily on three sources: site visits, interviews, and archival research. The next three sections will consider questions of access in relation to these three sources. Our research on U.S. immigration detention and military trainings and operations has brought us into contact with American state, border and military officials for access, and increasingly with for-profit contractors as numerous functions of the U.S. state have been privatized. As we discuss below, our dealings with private contractors have been tricky, as the authority to grant or deny access to information, institutions, and field sites is often unclear – and undecided – between state and non-state actors. Moreover, contractors' operations and procedures can be considered proprietary information and therefore beyond the reach of freedom of information laws, which can pose serious obstacles for the researcher.

Our methodological approaches with immigration enforcement and military officials have primarily involved semi-structured interviews (Belcher and Martin 2013), non-participant observation (cf. Belcher 2014), and archival research. Along with careful planning and the tried-and-true method of cold-calling/emailing, we have found these methods to be the best in terms of rich informational content for our research. Aradau and Huysmans (2014: 604) have shown how methods in qualitative security research work as "inscription devices": "As devices, methods

enact social and political worlds in multiple ways." This is important not only for qualifying and situating the knowledge we produce, but to understand research as a process through which securitization, depoliticization, and marketization are expressed. Paradoxically, this can mean that the process of *not* getting access, the paperwork of denial, deferral, pending applications, and so on, can also constitute moments in which "security" can be produced and understood. Thus, our research practices ask how people, institutions, and objects (such as bureaucratic paper files) draw together in particular ways; or, to put it differently, the way we *seek access* often organizes those *modes of access*.

For example, in her research at the T. Don Hutto Family Detention Facility in Taylor, Texas, Lauren interviewed detention visitation coordinators and worked to establish rapport with personnel (Martin 2014). Lauren's fieldwork provided interesting insights into the everyday functioning of a major immigration detention facility. The ambiguous authority of private prison and detention contractors like CoreCivic and GEO Group created regular difficulties for researchers and visitors. Telephones worked intermittently, making it difficult for visitors to plan visits, and for detainees to communicate with family and legal representatives. The privatized staff were often ill-trained in the rights and limitations of detainees' visitors and legal representatives. Attorneys negotiated continually changing visitation requirements. Sometimes the facility management required identification and clearance ahead of time, sometimes not. Dress codes were open to interpretation, so that women, for example, could be denied access for wearing a sleeveless blouse (commonly worn during hot Texas summers). In the absence of federal detention visitation policies, contractors and sub-federal agencies were unclear whether they were authorized to make visitation policies.

This led in many cases to private contractors running detention facilities to defer to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) who handled detainee rights, who in turn would defer to a different private contracting entity tasked with handling operational matters at and between facilities. The rapid expansion of detention as a cornerstone of immigration enforcement in the mid-2000s meant that there was, for a considerable period of time, no clear policy on who makes visitation policy. At another family detention facility in Berks County, Pennsylvania, Lauren was similarly bounced around between county and federal officials, while both parties argued that they did not have the authority to grant research access. Speaking with families, researchers and attorneys, it became clear that this confusion was endemic to the broader "chaotic geographies" non-citizens and citizens alike struggled to navigate (Hiemstra 2013).

This speaks to the often-confused authority at work in contemporary visits to nominally state institutions. In the case of immigration detention centers, what interests us is not so much the frustration experienced towards private and government officials that made access unpredictable (although that frustration was certainly real!). Rather, the unpredictability and confused authority provide the researcher a partial window into the mechanics of the late-modern state. Instead of a seamless bureaucracy that is effectively oppressive because it is fine-tuned administrative machine, we are instead exposed to partially privatized state apparatus that functions

in fits and starts, with deferred accountability and phantom authority in legal grey zones. Sometimes the problem is simply funding and staff capacity (see also Carte 2017). Based on our field experiences, the summer 2018 catastrophe of the Trump Administration's taking migrant children from their families and "losing" them in the immigration system was hardly surprising. In fact, the tragedy, ongoing as we write this, tells us a lot about how *un*systematic the U.S. immigration system really is.

In stark contrast, Oliver has had a largely smooth experience gaining access in his fieldwork conducted at U.S. military facilities. This is not to say that all military facilities are easily accessible. Rather, the protocol for entry tends to be more streamlined and uniform. While a range of components of the U.S. military have been systematically privatized – from security services and repairing vehicles to dining facilities and logistical supply chains – it remains the norm that the U.S. military command runs the facilities where they operate, with private contractors following the chain of command. For example, during his non-participant observations[1] of trainings for counterinsurgency warfare at Muscatatuck Urban Training Center (MUTC) and Camp Atterbury in central Indiana, U.S. military officers determined access to the bases, while the McKellar Corporation managed the training scenarios in which U.S. military personnel participated (see Belcher 2014).

The timing of Oliver's fieldwork (2010–2011) was interesting, because it took place at a moment when the U.S. military was actively engaging with the academic community to bolster its "cultural awareness" initiative in Iraq and Afghanistan (Gregory 2008). Like Lauren's experiences in immigration detention facilities, the grey-zone of authority was also apparent within these two military bases. For example, while Oliver was technically a guest of the U.S. military, McKellar Corporation personnel were unclear about the extent to which he could take part in the trainings, which were kind-of-but-not-quite proprietary information. After Oliver received approval to observe all the trainings, the extent to which he could interact with personnel remained unclear. On the one hand, Oliver had full access to the U.S. military personnel participating in the trainings, even while the trainings were in action. On the other hand, interactions with Afghan and Iraqi refugees also participating in the trainings were technically employees of the McKellar Corporation, and were therefore reticent to speak. Yet, on the days, all the participants were fully engaged with one another, thus making technical boundaries of access and restriction fluid. What our different experiences show is two different federal departments (Homeland Security and Defense, respectively) devolve research access very differently. The difference here shows not only a messy state in a broad sense, but ways in which localized relationships between federal, local and non-state actors become more discernible through the access process itself.

Interviews: selective disclosure and off-the-record conversations

In his 2015 *Political Geography* Plenary Lecture at the American Association of Geographers Conference in Chicago, Dr Mat Coleman argued that despite the

seemingly spectacular violence of police violence in the U.S., it has been diffi-
cult for him (and others) to research police violence in practice, not to mention
document and record in ethnographic field notes, interviews, and secondary data.
In the published version, Coleman (2016) identified a range of issues that reso-
nate with our interview experiences. In his experience of researching immigration
policing in North Carolina and Georgia, Coleman describes studying the police
as uneventful, cruddy, diffuse. Coleman tells the story from his research on local
immigration policing, and the controversial policy of local police collaborating
with federal immigration officials. The immigrant advocacy literature is rife with
stories of parents going to work and never coming home. Coleman began to focus
on traffic stops as a site (or so he thought) of strategically locating undocumented
migrants (Coleman and Stuesse 2016). As migrant communities are often described
as "under siege," Coleman assumed that this atmosphere of fear and siege would
be evident in the urban landscape. However, he never found anything observable
in the traditional sense. Driving around a relatively small area for weeks, the traffic
stops never became visible; that is, they did not have a durable presence. Yet, the
traffic stops were very much active and alive in the fear and distrust experienced
by undocumented migrants in the area which they interviewed. Borrowing from
Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), Coleman (2016: 77) calls this "invisible police work" –
affective, yet effective – "uneventful police rule."

   To understand police practice, as an object of inquiry, Coleman details his own
problems of access and struggles to get useful information. He describes over 50
interviews with police chiefs, high-ranking officials, and county prosecutors as
"controlled public relations exercises on the where and how of policing which are
highly selective on details" (Coleman 2016: 78). Only on *one* on-the-record con-
versation did a police chief provide

> a rousing critique of racial profiling and defense of community policing;
> problematize using drivers license violations to check drivers for legal
> status; made clear a distinction between civil immigration violations and
> criminal law enforcement . . . In the larger context of my other interviews
> that summer . . . the interview with [Doraville Police Chief, John] King
> was a breath of fresh air due to the fact that I was able to talk frankly about
> policing and race.
>
> *(Coleman 2016: 78)*

   In our experience, interview participants are often highly trained and edu-
cated professionals – like police chiefs and county prosecutors – who possess the
uncanny ability to consistently craft responses to interview questions that say lit-
tle more than "talking points" that is, until you turn off the voice recorder (Kuus
2013). Many of our research participants were highly aware of research as "the
record," which has the power to shape policies, experiences, and understand-
ing when brought to the public. This was especially true in Lauren's research,
where immigrant detention is a highly charged and highly politicized topic,

making interviews a potential site of exposure to public scrutiny, particularly in nominally liberal societies like the United States that remains answerable to a voting public.

Frequently, we have encountered the refrain, "this is off the record, but you might be interested in . . . " These conversations are usually the most revealing, detailed, relevant . . . and unpublishable. Coleman (2016) reports a 90-minute conversation with a police chief who discussed extensively the problematic ways in which local police have been militarized – off the record. Lauren's research included many community organizing meetings with attorneys representing detained women and families. These attorneys frequently stated, "This is off the record," at which point those in attendance visibly placed their pencil on the table or folded it onto their notebook. The attorney would relate stories of women's abuse by private detention guards, the deterioration of detainees' mental health over time, or growing evidence being collected for a lawsuit. Because access – even legal access – can be denied without explanation, attorneys were particularly concerned that their comments not make it into the newspapers or online. But for a qualitative researcher, these moments pose important ethical questions. What is the status of information that we *know*, but cannot record? How do we include these moments in our research without violating the trust involved in our presence there? What is our own relationship to, and role in producing, the "record"?

While not precisely secrets, un-recordable facts and stories are an essential part of our research. On the one hand, this information is hidden in some way, unable to be made fully public. Yet, on the other hand, someone has shared it with us, which can give the un-recordable information an aura of authenticity and truth. What's more, we have been trusted with this information ("you might be interested in . . . "); we have been given a gift and are now bound by some kind of obligation, an obligation to exercise judgment on how the gifted information does and does not circulate. In this regard, every case is unique. For our part, we always weigh the ethical demands of our research projects and the different communities of responsibility in which we work. For example, in his limited conversations with the Iraqi and Afghani refugees participating in counterinsurgency trainings, who were pressured to remain quiet on their experiences in the trainings, Oliver did not hesitate to disclose how a training scenario gone wrong revealed underlying tensions and anger between the refugees and military personnel (e.g., Belcher 2014: 1019–1021), or the context in which they were now living:

> Their stories, especially among the men, were common: They had served as translators or helpers for U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq and had been some of the lucky few to have been granted visas, in exchange for their battlefield assistance, to live and work in the United States. All of them have suffered, leaving their immediate families behind in hopes of getting a foothold halfway across the world in the United States. They now live in cities, usually alone, across the country: Detroit, Milwaukee, Nashville, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. Most looked forward to coming here to Indiana, if anything, for

the conversation. Whenever I would ask if they would like to return to their homes, a melancholy would hang heavily between us. The answer was almost always the same: It is too dangerous for former translators and helpers of the U.S. military to return. Instead, here in Muscatatuck, they spend their days drinking tea and sleeping in the concrete shacks, waiting for the next group of soldiers to arrive and, when prompted, to resume their roles and places as introductory warning signs for U.S. soldiers to learn and interpret before they enter the abyss. Such is the tragedy, the vortex of late-modern war.

(Belcher 2014: 1026)

Off-the-record information or interview material that cannot be recorded still has immense value for the researcher. Unrecordable data function like an absent-presence in our work. The researcher understands its presence in the acts of collating and organizing data, as well as its spectral presence in the act of writing. The researcher, of course, is restrained in what can be conveyed through writing, and allowed to make the reader only dimly aware of unrecordable data as a sort of chiaroscuro pictorial effect in the text itself. Nevertheless, unrecordable data not only have the power to clarify our understanding of messy state power but can actively (re)frame our research focus and interests. Practically speaking, this kind of information goes into our general background knowledge, coming back up (carefully) in conversation with other insiders, or pointing us towards peoples and places – such as the archive – that we might otherwise have missed or might seem tangential. Unrecordable data offer us vocabulary for later interview questions or steers us towards particular people, events, or relationships. Secrecy can organize our research practice, as well.

Archival research and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests

A substantial portion of our research time has been spent in various archives. For Lauren, this has involved tracking down zoning plans and facility blueprints for detention centers in Pennsylvania and Texas (Martin 2012a). Oliver spent a significant portion of his graduate and postdoctoral career in the U.S. National Archives (College Park, Maryland) and Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (Austin, Texas) uncovering the early use of computers in U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency operations in the Vietnam War, from the Hamlet Evaluation System to the "Phoenix" assassination program (Belcher 2016). Both projects have involved making extensive Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for information that has either been deemed confidential by the state, or, as can often be the case, information that has not yet been generated by a governmental entity.

An example of the latter is a current project conducted by Oliver and a group of researchers from Lancaster University (Belcher et al., 2019) to determine the hidden carbon costs of the so-called "War on Terror" from Fiscal Year 1999–2016. The focus of Oliver and the Lancaster group has been on fuel purchases made by

four branches of the U.S. military (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines) through the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). The DLA is the one-stop shop for all fuel-purchases within the U.S. military, both domestically and internationally, and they are required by law to maintain records of every purchase made by military personnel. Over 2017–2018, our research group made several FOIA requests to gain access to these records (successfully), which has given us a very clear picture of emissions based on fuel types purchased and consumed by the U.S. military over a roughly 17-year period. Importantly, the reason for the multiple FOIA requests is that the DLA had no single database where all the purchase receipts were located. Thus, they had to generate the information for us based on our FOIA requests – another instance when seeking access organizes modes of access.

In qualitative security research, the archive often becomes an important site when interviews either need to be contextualized or have achieved a dead-end. Oliver's research in particular has often had to resort to archival research in order to understand the historical context in which American counterinsurgency doctrine took shape, particularly in the Vietnam War (Belcher 2012; Belcher 2016). In his research, there have been many instances where Oliver has needed to submit FOIA requests. In the United States, FOIA requests are an official process circumscribed by a legal framework at the federal, state, and county levels. Public institutions are required by law to address every FOIA request (see Box 1.1 below). However, that neither means institutions are required to grant access to documents or information requested by researchers, nor that they always respond in a timely manner (in our experience). In one particular instance, Oliver submitted multiple FOIA requests to the U.S. Department of Army and the Army Corps of Engineers for blueprints and/or information related to the reconstruction of Taroke Kalacha, a village in Arghandab Province, Afghanistan, that had been razed by the U.S. military in October 2010 (see Belcher 2018). However, he never received a response. As a practical matter, we both tend to request documents early and often. Methodologically, requesting information can be one way of interrogating the politics of information around a particular issue.

For example, Lauren has had to make several FOIA requests for information that rests in the grey zone between public and proprietary, which reveals some of the ways in which the participation of commercial actors can affect data collection. Commercial actors operate under specific legal frameworks that protect their intellectual property and operations processes. Private companies, such as those running detention facilities, can be obstacles to accessing places, people, documents, and practices in security-related contexts. Legal frameworks vary greatly by country and jurisdiction. In the United States where the bulk of our research has taken place, outsourced services and trainings are considered proprietary information and therefore exempt from federal FOIA requests. Yet, contracts and procurement agreements (often with payments redacted) *are* releasable, while in the United Kingdom, by contrast, contracts and procurement agreements need not be releasable (see also Stavrianakis, this volume).

BOX 1.1   TIPS ON FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT AND OPEN RECORDS REQUESTS IN RESEARCH

The Freedom of Information Act is federal legislation governing the public release of government documents, and U.S. states also have various forms of "sunshine laws" outlining procedures, timelines, and costs for information requests to state, county, and municipal agencies. Depending on your research topic, the federal government may not hold the documents you need. States and federal agencies have different rules for the kinds of documents you can request – and different capacities for responding to requests. Before you submit your requests, think about the following:

> **Tip 1. Find out who has the document or information.** Many security-related issues will involve more than one agency, and each agency will have a different records request process. Some are more open, organized, or funded than others. Similarly, civil rights and legal advocacy organizations may have your documents – or be willing to support your request if you face challenges.
>
> **Tip 2. Do you need to file a request?** Sometimes, an email and phone call can get you what you need and faster than the official process.
>
> **Tip 3. Start local.** Local (state, county, municipal) agencies field far fewer requests, respond more quickly, and are easier to contact by email and phone. Local governments work with the public continually, while federal agencies may leave this to public relations offices.
>
> **Tip 4. Check current procedures.** The internet has made requests far easier and many requests can be made online – but not all. Each agency will have slightly different procedures and some will ignore or reject your request on procedural grounds.
>
> **Tip 5: Request early, request often.** State and federal requests will return different information and on different timelines. If you can't get what you need by email or phone, file requests with any agencies involved.
>
> **Tip 6: Be specific**. Requests for "all documents related to matter x" are difficult to process because the boundaries are unclear. Requests for "facility inspection reports, emails between county commissioners and contractors, complaints reports filed with local law enforcement between 2007 and 2011" give clearer guidelines and are more likely to receive timely responses.
>
> **Tip 7: Be prepared to contest security exemptions.** Most open records and FOIA procedures allow exemptions for security-related and proprietary information. As we discussed above, these increasingly overlap as governments outsource security functions. Some agencies will

respond to a request with a security exemption rather than sort through which documents can and cannot be released. Be prepared to make a case for the public interest in this information or its (perhaps small) role in your final dissertation. Be prepared to qualify your request, to rephrase it, or to exclude certain kinds of information. Legal advocacy organizations (see 'Further reading') can be helpful and are sometimes interested in pursuing cases that align with their campaigns.

Deidre Conlon and Nancy Hiemstra's work (2017) on detention center work programs revealed much about the politics of access and privatization, including a complex chain of subcontracting and multiple points of price gouging and labour exploitation. Governments at county and state-level release information on work programs, but private firms do not. Therefore, it is possible that documents end up "on file" with county governments through their oversight procedures, even if a private firm denies access to this information. Similarly, as the work program contract-holder in many cases, county governments often manage contracting arrangements for federal immigration agencies, which means they can hold documents at a county level that may not be available through a federal FOIA request. In some cases, it is possible to trace how local and county governments participate in immigration detention practices by following the trail of legal geographies of information, oversight, and documentation. What is far more difficult to understand, however, is what power these documents hold, what actions they provoke, who reads them, or how they circulate.

Take, for example, a family detention center compliance report (Figure 1.1). What is it? The report compiles findings from a visit by six members of the Nakamoto Group, a company hired by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, ICE, and other agencies to provide "compliance support"; i.e., to help managers comply with federal and state regulations. The report includes a series of calculations and judgments measuring detention conditions against ideal benchmarks, derived from Family Residential Standards (US ICE 2009). It communicates progress on certain indicators to facility staff and to federal agencies who contract them. Technically, noncompliance can become grounds for ending a contract between, in this case, the facility in Berks County and the federal government. The document itself is for guidance purposes only, so there are no direct legal consequences for failing to meet Family Residential Standards. The document represents a contracting relationship between the Nakamoto Group and federal agencies. It is one device linking these institutions together, and it is also part of a longer process of harmonizing detention standards and practices through the circulation of expertise, trainings, and protocols. It is a device that includes practices of abstraction, measurement, and judgment with the aim of building consensus around a set of acceptable detention practices.
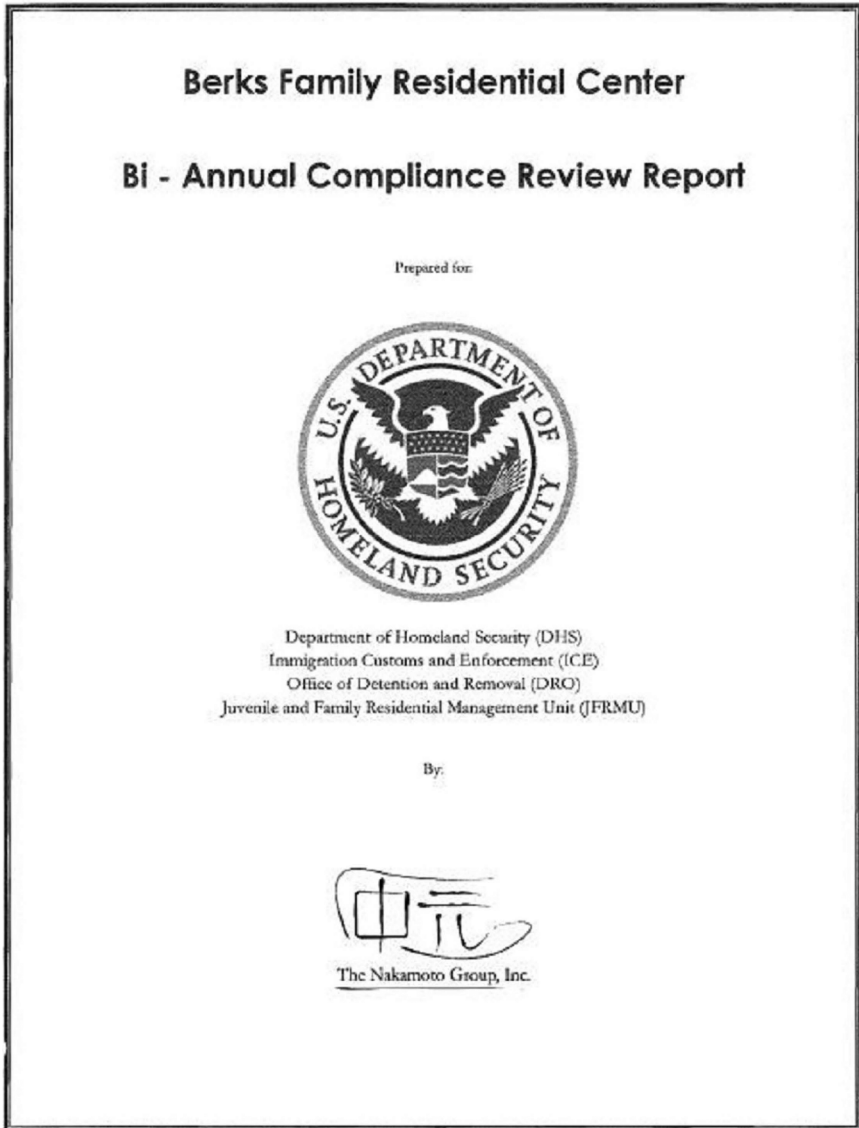
Berks Family Residential Center

Bi - Annual Compliance Review Report

Prepared for:

Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE)
Office of Detention and Removal (DRO)
Juvenile and Family Residential Management Unit (JFRMU)

By:

The Nakamoto Group, Inc.

FIGURE 1.1 FOIA request by Lauren Martin to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, on file with author.

These kind of documents can be more difficult to get from privately-owned facilities. For this reason, private corrections companies have been facing litigation for nondisclosure for some time. U.S. courts have rendered different decisions on matters of disclosure, which depend significantly on how judges prioritize intellectual property and proprietary information against the public's right to know. Here,

privatization works to make state-authorized activities obscure. For this reason, some have argued that such legal aporias have been crucial in the development of the "immigration-industrial complex" (Doty and Wheatley 2013; Golash-Boza 2009). While the political implications of privatization of state functions have been much discussed in terms of shrinking access to due process, rights violations, transparency, and accountability of government, far less attention has been given to the ways in which privatization links these practices up with different forms of valuation, measurement, and circuits of exchange. These socio-technical practices not only do political work, but they also produce public-private boundaries that directly affect research.

It is important to note that one need not always make a formal FOIA request for information. FOIA requests can often generate bureaucratic labor for agencies that can slow down one's research if a student or researcher relies upon the request too heavily. Many government offices in the U.S. can be understaffed or under-enthusiastic to take requests from the public (even if they are bound by law to do so). There have been many times that we have simply cold-called an agency, by phone or email, and asked for a specific document, and successfully received it within days (see Martin 2012a). We often ask our interviewees for leads on documents that we may not know about, or for documents that we know to exist but have not been able to obtain. Lauren's research included lawsuits and litigation (Martin 2012b), and conversations with public interest lawyers yielded key documents in her research. In the spirit of reciprocity, she shared FOIA documents she had obtained with the lawyers in return. In the U.S., transparency activism is well-organized, so legal clinics and think tanks can be important contacts for finding information (see Box 1.1 and 'Further reading').

Conclusion: the power in muddling through

In this chapter, we have shared experiences of gaining access to fieldsites, mitigating problems that occur in confidential interview settings and in the archive, and submitting FOIA requests to fill holes in our research. We want to underscore that we gained access to our research sites in different ways, and largely on a try-and-try-again basis. Getting access to the securitized migration and military facilities can feel like winning the lottery. And one learns very quickly that gaining access, as in all qualitative research, can come with all sorts of expectations, hiccups, and trial-and-error situations, which we've tried to share above.

We would like to offer two concluding points. First, the various ways in which researchers can be granted or denied access to research sites, documents, and information can be an opening to understanding how contemporary state practices work. Quite often, state functions are described in popular media and everyday discourse as "the system"; e.g., "the entire system is corrupt." However, what we have tried to emphasize is that the state in the abstract and in practice are two very different phenomena, with the latter tending to be very messy. In our experience, access and confidentiality are important instruments within the messy state that

reveal as much as they conceal. Therefore, the researcher must very often commit to muddling through the process of accessing interviews and information. Repeated requests often land on different desks, and responses can be helpful and timely, or unpredictable and fruitless. Both of us have been granted access to facilities where we know other colleagues' requests were denied, and vice versa. Responses, exchanges, deferrals, and silences are moments when we occupy positions that construct a unique terrain of information and dis/closure. Muddling through is a common condition among both researchers, officials, and state/non-state employees. It is both a pragmatic and strategic opportunity, as well as a field of analysis in itself. More than a methodological qualification about the limitations of research design or partiality of evidence presented, negotiating dis/closure is the production of knowledge in action. While one always has to be mindful of their research project's time constraints, especially in postgraduate research, months of unanswered requests can yield a rich few weeks of access.

Second, it is important to always remain *persistent* in one's requests for access, either to visit a fieldsite, gain access to an institution, or to request information through official channels (e.g., FOIAs). Repeated requests reveal not just banal bureaucratic practices but serve as important political encounters with institutions holding sensitive, classified, and proprietary information. Moreover, it is good practice to get in contact with people who are also trying to gain access to the same or similar information through different official channels. Making repeated requests for information is a common strategy for government transparency activists. By comparing different disclosures of the same document, one can sometimes piece together different words or sections that may have been redacted; or learn novel ways of gaining information. Working with journalists and lawyers can be particularly helpful in spreading the financial burden in situations where information requests come at a financial cost.

Further reading

- Oliver Belcher and Lauren Martin (2013) "Ethnographies of Closed Doors: Conceptualizing Openness and Closure in US Immigration and Military Institutions", *Area*, 45(4): 403–410.
- Mat Coleman (2016) "State Power in Blue", *Political Geography* 51: 76–86.
- Deirdre Conlon and Nancy Hiemstra (2017) "Beyond Privatization: Bureaucratization and the Spatialities of Immigration Detention Expansion", *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 5(3): 252–268.
- Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press "Open Government Guide" details open access regulations in all 50 US states. They also publish a useful "Federal Open Government Guide." https://www.rcfp.org/browse-legal-resources/guides
- The American Civil Liberties Union works on FOIA and open records cases specifically related to secrecy: https://www.aclu.org/issues/national-security/secrecy

• The Center for Constitutional Rights has won a number of FOIA lawsuits related to security and secrecy: https://ccrjustice.org/

Note

1 By "non-participant observation," we mean that Oliver did not actively participate in any military trainings. However, his relationship to the trainings *as an observer* was fraught and complicated by the fact that his presence, as an academic, lent some legitimacy to the trainings from the perspective of U.S. military personnel at MUTC. Oliver has discussed the methodological complications of "non-participant observation" in Belcher (2014).

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