

Trauma continues for immigrant children in US detention

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Following public protests and rallies around the country, the Trump administration has formally ended its practice of separating immigrant families. However, the end of family separation has not meant a change for the better, particularly when it comes to the fate of immigrant children. For one, there's still the question of how as many as 3,000 children still in federal custody will be reunited with their parents. Beyond that, what should be of great concern is what will happen to immigrant children even if the families are kept together.

In the past couple of decades, US immigration policy with regard to children has been guided by a 1997 court settlement known as the Flores agreement. The agreement has been widely interpreted as requiring the Department of Homeland Security to release undocumented immigrant children from custody after 20 days. Under the Flores framework, prior administrations generally tended to release families with children to pursue their immigration claims while living in the US. The “catch and release” policy was one of the early targets of Trump’s ire.

Having now been forced to back-pedal on family separations, the Trump administration has declared that it “will not separate families but detain families together during the pendency of immigration proceedings.” However, such cases can take months or even years before being resolved. What this means is that the federal government plans to systematically violate the Flores agreement, and hold young children in detention facilities for unspecified periods of time.

The horrific conditions in the shelters where children torn from their families were placed have been widely exposed. The family detention centers that the government now presents as its more humane alternative are hardly any better. As Angelina Marquez,

a 27-year Salvadoran refugee, told the *Guardian*, “This is substituting one kind of trauma for another kind.” And lest we forget, far from being an innovation of the Trump administration, this is in fact a revival of an Obama-era practice.

In the early part of this decade, facing a surge in undocumented immigrants particularly from violence-wracked Central American countries, the Obama administration invested heavily in the creation of an infrastructure of immigrant detention centers. These centers housed nearly half a million detainees in 2012, with the numbers showing a dramatic 1,200 percent increase between June and August 2014 alone. Despite criticism from numerous non-governmental and international human rights groups, the administration claimed that such detentions deterred further migration from Central America and that the release of the detained families would “pose an indirect national security concern.”

Four years ago, when Angelina Marquez made her way into the United States having fled the violence of El Salvador along with her 6-year-old son, she was sent to the Artesia detention center in New Mexico. In the center, she found families crowded together, often sleeping eight in a room. The food was often “raw and inedible” and “not fit for humans.” Many of the women she spoke to had been in the center for months and had no idea how to apply for asylum or how they could access legal counsel. Even more horrifying was the gratuitous cruelty deployed by the guards against the children. When Marquez was detained in Artesia, none of the guards spoke Spanish. Simple requests made by the children—including for water—were denied if the guards decided that the English pronunciation was incorrect.

In 2014, Detention Watch Network (DWN) focused

its “Expose and Close” report exclusively on the Artesia detention facility, highlighting its “egregious human rights abuses.” The isolation of the facility (being 200 miles away from the nearest town), the report stated, made it easier for ICE officers running these facilities to control all aspects of detainees’ lives, including access to legal counsel, the asylum process and even cell phones. However, the report was most scathing in Artesia’s treatment of the detained children.

The most basic child welfare guidelines set by the Flores agreement, and even ICE’s own manuals, were not met by the detention facility. Children had no access to educational services or basic healthcare. Many suffered from severe malnutrition, in part due to the stress of incarceration but also due to the regimented nature of the mealtimes and food services. Among the horror stories recounted in the DWN report is the 16-month-old baby boy who came into Artesia being able to walk, fell sick and then due to the lack of treatment lost his ability to walk. Another child, five years old, was not given any antibiotics or medication for diarrhea for over two months and told to just keep drinking water.

Even more disturbing were the stories of the psychological distress suffered by the children in the center. The children who had been detained were already victims of violence and in many cases had either witnessed or been subjected to sexual abuse. The trauma of their journey to the United States only added to their suffering and the conditions of incarceration—not to mention the absence of systematic psychological counseling—invariably led to severe mental health problems for the children.

The Artesia detention center is not unique in its abuses. Others, such as Karnes in Texas, have been hit with allegations of sexual abuse as well. The conditions in many of the detention centers are so heinous that even lawmakers have had to take notice, with Texas legislators openly calling them “jails for children.”

Hilda Ramírez, a Guatemalan refugee, was held in the Karnes detention facility in Texas along with her eight-year-old son Iván. She recounts the prison-like conditions, including rancid food that contained “bugs and small plastic pieces,” which forced her and other detainees to go on a hunger strike in 2015. The guards, Ramírez told the *Guardian*, would often put on a show when important visitors came to the center, leaving

stuffed animals for the children and better food. But that was immediately taken away after the visitors left. Her son added, “Detention is ugly. When someone important came by they would not let us ask them for help, and if we did, they would lock us up in a cold room.” The children, including Iván, who witnessed such scenes became more anxious and irritable as days went by, with many succumbing to diseases as well as mental disorientation.

Angelina Marquez was released from Artesia after two months detention over four years ago. Her son remains traumatized by the experience, waking up at night to make sure that his parents are next to him and not back in detention. News stories about families being separated create acute nervousness and anxiety, as does the ringing of the phone since the child associates this with the immigration lawyer and the possibility of detention. Such reactions are not uncommon among children of detained immigrants.

As the DWN report noted, “There is clear evidence that warehousing families and raising children in prison-like conditions for even a limited period damages children’s psychological and educational development and overall health.” The United Nations has condemned the practice of holding children in detention, stating that the “detention of children on the sole basis of their migration status or that of their parents is a violation of children’s rights, is never in their best interests and is not justifiable.” Notwithstanding these concerns, the US government has now committed itself to expanding the family detention system, continuing its ongoing violations of not just the right to due process, but of well-established international human rights norms.



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