

Protests hit mass detention of immigrant children in Texas tent camp

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Scores of protesters gathered outside the Tornillo border crossing about 35 miles southeast of El Paso, Texas over the weekend to protest the mass incarceration of immigrant children there in a barren tent camp in the desert on the Mexican border. The demonstrators demanded the immediate release of the children as well as that of their parents.

The protest came amid reports that over 1,600 children have been relocated to the camp as part of a brutal immigration policy involving what amounts to midnight raids on shelters and foster care homes throughout the country.

Children are literally being dragged from their beds in the middle of the night without warning in order to prevent them from escaping, according to a report Sunday by the *New York Times*. They are then loaded onto buses and transported hundreds if not thousands of miles from as far away as New York and Kansas to be imprisoned in the Tornillo detention camp.

The *Times* reported that caregivers at the shelters and homes from which the children are removed have protested the action and have been left in tears by the government's action. Children already traumatized by their detention and separation from their parents are once again subjected to the cruelty of the US government's police-state regime against immigrants and refugees.

"Several shelter workers, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of being fired, described what they said has become standard practice for moving the children: In order to avoid escape attempts, the moves are carried out late at night because children will be less likely to try to run away," the *Times* reported. "For the same reason, children are generally given little advance warning that they will be moved."

The Tornillo detention camp, or "Tent City" was

originally opened in June to house 400 boys after the Trump administration's implementation of its "zero tolerance" policy, which effectively meant that all undocumented immigrants, including those claiming refugee status, were to be imprisoned, and all those deemed to have violated immigration law criminally prosecuted. While held in custody, parents were separated from their children.

While the administration has formally ended the policy of separation, it acknowledges that nearly 500 children are still separated from their parents and in custody, including 22 who are under the age of five. The parents of at least 322 of these children have already been deported. Moreover, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) notified Congress earlier this month that it cannot locate about 1,500 children released into custody by immigration authorities and for whom it is responsible to ensure care.

The number of detained immigrant minors has increased fivefold since 2017, with more than 13,000 now in custody. The average period of time that these children spend in detention centers has nearly doubled from 34 days to 59 days, according to DHHS.

While the government initially said it would close down the Tornillo camp in July, it subsequently pushed the closing date to September and has now revealed that the facility is being vastly expanded and will remain open at least until the end of this year.

The children imprisoned at the camp are classified as "unaccompanied minors", though it is unclear whether some of those housed there were separated from their parents either in crossing the border or by the Border Patrol itself.

Children sent to the Tornillo federal detention camp are taken from homes and shelters elsewhere to live in

tents where they “sleep lined up in bunks” and are denied the right to education that is mandated in facilities under the jurisdiction of individual states’ child welfare laws. Their access to attorneys handling their immigration cases is also sharply curtailed.

Hundreds of children are being dragged to the desert detention camp in Texas because of the overflow in other shelters caused by the record number of children that have been detained at the border and the difficulty in releasing them to family members created by the US government’s own draconian immigration policies.

Under the pretense of imposing more rigorous background checks on family members coming forward to take care of the children in custody—which has included the demand that they be fingerprinted—Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has targeted these caregivers, many of whom are themselves undocumented immigrants, for detention and deportation.

Last month, ICE senior official Matthew Albence testified to Congress that under background check procedures, his agency had since July arrested 41 people who had come forward volunteering to “sponsor” the imprisoned children. An ICE spokesperson told *CNN* that 70 percent of these arrests were made based on the sole “crime” of being undocumented.

“Close to 80 percent of the individuals that are either sponsors or household members of sponsors are here in the country illegally, and a large chunk of those are criminal aliens,” Albence told the Congressional panel. “So we are continuing to pursue those individuals.”

Albence is the same ICE official who testified to Congress this summer that detention facilities like the one in Tornillo were the equivalent of “summer camps” for kids. Asked if he would send his own children to one of them, he replied that the question was not “applicable.”

The government’s crimes against children detained on the US southern border have only escalated since the Trump administration formally rescinded its policy of separating children from their parents. Yet, they are largely ignored by the media and by the Democratic Party, which put in place the “emergency shelter” regulations now being brutally implemented in Tornillo.



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