

Child detainees speak out: “I just wanted a hug from someone”

The view from inside America’s child immigrant detention shelters

Our reporters
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Across the United States, hiding in plain sight in strip malls and downtown blocks and amid the suburban sprawl, a record number of immigrant children—more than 13,000—are being held in shelters overseen by the Department of Health and Human Service’s Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Representatives of the Republican and Democratic parties portray the shelters as safe and even pleasant. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen and Democratic Congressman Eliot Engel both said the shelters were “like summer camp.”

But several immigrant children to whom the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke told a different story. These youth, all Central Americans separated from their families after crossing the US-Mexico border, were recently released from child shelters and volunteered to share their experiences on the condition of anonymity. They want the world to know the conditions they endured—out of sight and out of mind—in facilities located within a 15-minute drive of millions of Americans’ homes.

“I wanted to cry all the time,” said Jorge, a 15-year-old Honduran boy whose name, like all those cited in this report, was changed for privacy purposes. He was detained at a shelter for over two months. “The staff observed everything we do, reported everything we say. It drove me crazy. It was a jail.”

For many immigrant children like Jorge, the journey begins in the impoverished and violent “northern triangle” countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Until his recent release, Jorge could not remember meeting his mother, who has lived in the United States since he was an infant.

Jorge’s mother fled Honduras years ago in search of work, as there was not enough money to feed him and his siblings. She has been sending the family large amounts of her paycheck, and Jorge was desperate to reunite with her.

“Sometimes I would call my mom and cry to her, asking her to please get me out of this place. I could not connect with her, even though I was closer than I’d ever been to her physically,” he said.

Jorge fled Honduras after several relatives were murdered by the gang that controls his neighborhood. Young men are particularly vulnerable to being given the choice of joining the gang or being killed. Jorge chose the only other option: leave. After a weeks-long journey north, he was caught in the desert by immigration police, who threatened to sic attack dogs on him.

A 16-year-old Guatemalan, Heidy, came to the US with a cousin from whom she was separated when detained after wading across the Rio Grande River. Her mother died when she was young and her father is not in the picture. She is used to fending for herself, but had no immediate family in the US.

“When I was arrested by immigration, I spent a day in *La Hielera* and

two days in *La Perrera*,” Heidy said.

La Hielera means “the ice box” in Spanish. The term has become slang for the temporary holding cages in which immigrants are kept after being arrested. *La Perrera* stands for “doghouse” and is another holding cell comprised of chain link fence. Both are deliberately kept at frigid temperatures to make immigrants as uncomfortable as possible. Blaring lights are kept on 24/7 and inmates have no idea whether it is day or night.

“There were a ton of people in *La Hielera*,” Heidy said. “There were babies crying all the time. There were so many babies and they were not given food. Every so often, when people were trying to sleep, guards would come and count us, making us stand up and line up. We were all very hungry too. They gave us only a very tiny water bottle and an apple.”

A third child, 13-year-old Litzzy, traveled to the US with an aunt. The young girl was separated from her relative upon arrival and put in *La Hielera* and then *La Perrera*. “I was so physically weak at the end of the three days, I was getting a lot skinnier,” Litzzy said. “There was excrement all over the bathrooms and it was so cold you could not sleep, plus there is all the light. You get a small aluminum blanket which does nothing.”

Danny, a soft-spoken 17-year-old boy, said he was lucky to have been in *La Hielera* for only one night. Some people, he said, had been there for two weeks by the time he arrived, and they looked very desperate. Danny fled Honduras after gang members tried to abduct his sister and force her to become a sex slave.

After stays in the “ice box” and the “doghouse,” the children were all processed and sent to shelters. Though they were happy to be out of *La Hielera* and *La Perrera*, they all recall being desperate to leave the shelters soon after arriving.

While children report that some shelters are worse than others, each child described experiencing similar conditions: extreme security monitoring, a total lack of privacy, isolation from family and threats from administrators to delay their release for the slightest infraction.

Children explained that they were not allowed to be outdoors in fenced-in yard areas for more than a short period each day, they were not given sufficient food, they were always rushed, they were not allowed to look out windows, they were not allowed to touch each other or call each other by friendly nicknames. Nor were they permitted to sit cross-legged on chairs, put their feet up on couches or stretch their legs under desks.

The girls were not allowed to brush their friends’ hair or wear their own hair down, ostensibly for fear of fleas. One child said they were forbidden to talk about politics and the plight of immigrants in the US.

They were constantly terrified of breaking these rules. Each child reported that administrators said punishment could include delaying their release for a month or two for each infraction.

According to these former detainees, the average day in a shelter is similar to a day in jail. First, they are forced to wake up at a very early

hour, often before sunrise. They are marched into showers but are interrupted after several minutes by administrators who tell them their time is almost up. Some children reported being given cheap shampoo but no soap. Others said they were forced to use hand soap to wash their hair.

The children are fed breakfast, which, like all meals, they must eat extremely quickly or face punishment. “The food was tasteless and you can’t ask for more,” said Heidy about conditions at her shelter. Danny added, “I always wanted more food but the food was bad. You get sick eating it. I would get stomach pain.”

If you fail to eat your meal, you can be punished. If you try to share your food, you can be punished. Male inmates reported feeling weak at the end of the day due to insufficient food.

After roughly an hour outdoors, children attend lessons. Some said they did not have textbooks or notebooks at their facility and that they wanted to attend “real school.”

Litzy, the 13-year-old, said “the classes were so boring.” She added, “I used to love school, but here we have no activities. They didn’t give us homework and they didn’t give us pens and pencils after class.”

Litzy was held at her facility for several months. At this critical stage in the children’s brain development, several months of inadequate schooling can significantly hamper their educational aspirations, which is often a primary reason why these children came north in the first place.

Jorge described being given English-Spanish dictionaries that were “ruined” by overuse. When he asked administrators for new dictionaries, he reported being told that new dictionaries would be too expensive.

Heidy said her teacher would get so angry that it would scare the children. Another former detainee said the floors of their classrooms were unsanitary and not regularly cleaned.

After “school,” children are given free time, during which they must sit in a room for several hours, sometimes with music. Once every several weeks, children may be taken under heavy guard to view a movie or go to the park. They occasionally get to call family, but children reported that the duration of such calls is very limited and a guard waits by the phone and can hear the discussion.

After dinner, they go to their rooms, which often do not have doors. There are no lamps in their rooms, so reading is impossible after dark, and they are not allowed pens, pencils or crayons.

Children also report being treated cruelly by some guards. Sexual and physical assault has been widely reported at detention facilities as well as child detention shelters.

Heidy said that while some staff were more sympathetic to her situation, she was getting used to dehumanizing treatment. Once, when Heidy was crying, a facility employee told her that if she didn’t stop crying she would be punished and her release would be delayed.

Jorge said he did not like the fact that children at his facility are forced to recite the American pledge of allegiance and can be punished for refusing. Danny, the 17-year-old, said he was punished for saying a bad word and was not allowed to play soccer or listen to music for several days. Female child inmates report that all children are forced to wait to use the restrooms in groups, even when they are on their periods.

Many of the rules the children report border on cruel and unusual punishment. Litzy, the 13-year-old, said she wanted to put up a photo of her family in her room, but this was not allowed. This makes it hard to handle her feelings of loneliness. “I had very bad anxiety there, it was so hard. I just wanted a hug from someone, but we were not allowed to touch anyone.”

The children all complained about constant boredom and said some children are detained for months or even years. They are often tired because guards shine flashlights on their faces at night to make sure they have not escaped. One child reported that a bunkmate tried to hang herself in their room one night. Another child said she was checked into a hospital due to depression and was given many pills, the names of which

she did not know.

Escapes are rare, but they do take place. In July, the *Washington Post* reported that a 15-year-old Honduran girl tried to escape from a shelter after three weeks of incarceration. She ran away and hid in a nearby auto body shop. The *Miami Herald* wrote that she was “all alone, the frightened teen curled up behind a large, dusty tool box.” When police found her, she had been weeping for an hour.

The *Post*’s initial report of the escape explained that though none of the workers at the shop reported the runaway, police showed up and took her away. The newspaper wrote:

“It was a busy morning at the large auto shop that operates 14 bays. But she stayed there, crying, for more than an hour on Friday morning, refusing to move. ‘We were giving her water and some food, but she stayed in that corner the whole time,’ said Elvis Lopez, a mechanic at the shop. ‘She seemed pretty scared. She kept saying she didn’t want to go back.’”

Many children without family in the US fear they will not be released until they turn 18.

The children are released from such facilities only after a relative goes through a lengthy background check process in order to “sponsor” them. While background checks generally serve to make sure the child is released to a legitimate relative, the Trump administration has also used the background checks to provide Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with a copy of the sponsoring relative’s fingerprints and immigration status.

In a deliberate tactic of intimidation, the Trump administration has begun deporting relatives after they sign up to sponsor a child. In mid-September, ICE said it had arrested 41 sponsors since the beginning of July.

The vast majority of those arrests—70 percent—were of relatives without criminal records. As the *Hill* reported in October, “Because about 80 percent of sponsors are undocumented, if undocumented sponsors are not allowed to care for immigrant children, based on fiscal 2017 figures, an additional 33,998 children will stay in detention annually.”

This policy is in part the reason why the size of the child shelter population has expanded and the average length of stay in custody has doubled since 2016 to 59 days.

Heidy explained that her release was dramatically delayed when three of her relatives said they could not sponsor her. Though all three first indicated that they could, they pulled out when they realized they could be deported. “I have family here, but for a while they stopped answering my calls because they were afraid of giving their fingerprints,” she said.

Other children reported feelings of guilt because they fear they are putting their parents in danger by asking them to sponsor their release.

Though the subjects of these interviews have been released, their lives will never be the same. In many cases, the conditions they confronted will leave them with irreparable psychological baggage they will carry with them forever.

Chris Fradkin, a Fulbright Award recipient and child psychologist, told the *World Socialist Web Site* :

“It is spirit breaking to maintain order through fear. Having this regimen that is excessively precise [serves] to break these children and contain any sort of expression or piecing together resistance from within.

“As far as the children go, the damaging impact of detention is well researched. It produces higher levels of anxiety, depression and can lead to developmental regression. This can have a lifetime effect on educational achievement, on economic productivity, health status, and even longevity. Can it lead to shortened life expectancy? Yes.

“Excessive punishment is like military boot camp. Individuality is eliminated to create a coherent collective. It is ‘depersonalization.’ Now, they could shave their heads too. There is a corollary to Auschwitz. The Nazis shaved their heads and their spirits were reduced. That’s what

they're attempting to do here. They want to make it so if the children express anything the authorities deem inappropriate, they will suffer for it. This is egregious. This is a war crime. It is intentional.”

The victims of these policies are the children of working class families. Their parents and relatives work, in both the US and Central America, as truck and bus drivers, agricultural workers, service workers and in factories and warehouses.

Some of the children reported that they and their fellow inmates used to work as domestic servants or textile workers in their home countries, not making enough money to eat. After making the dangerous journey north, their only “crime” was to be born in a part of the world subjected to over a century of domination and destruction wrought by American imperialism. For many children, this legacy of war is part of family lore, as stories of relatives and loved ones killed by US-trained death squads and US-backed dictatorships are passed on from generation to generation.

What the US government is doing to these children is a great social crime, paralleled by Japanese internment, the splitting of families at slave auctions and the forced separation of Native American families in the long genocide against America’s indigenous people.

An urgent warning must be made to the entire working class, no matter one’s nationality or immigration status: A ruling class capable of treating innocent children in this way is capable of committing crimes of even greater magnitude.

This official government policy—normalized under the Obama administration and intensified under Trump—to punish and traumatize children has a dangerous logic that leads, unless stopped, to a repetition of the worst crimes of the 20th century, including the extermination of the European Jews, Roma, socialists and other “undesirables.”

Only socialist revolution, achieved through a united movement of workers of all countries, can halt this dangerous development and liberate the many thousands of detained immigrants around the world.



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