

Trump administration cuts education and recreation funding for immigrant children in detention centers

Shelley Connor
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On Wednesday, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced that funding for English classes, recreational opportunities, and legal aid for migrants in its detention centers would be cut. According to the administration, the cuts are necessary to meet the “humanitarian needs” of children at the borders.

Authorities have stated that over 144,000 migrants—most of them from Guatemala and Honduras—were interned in May alone. Minors account for almost 40 percent of those internments. The Office of Refugee Settlement has already halted the flow of funding for any activities that they consider “not directly necessary for the protection of life and safety, including education services, legal services, and recreation,” according to HHS spokesman Mark Weber.

The HHS has refused to retroactively pay costs, including personnel payment, for such activities prior to May 22. Claiming that they could run out of funding by late June, the administration has requested \$2.9 billion from Congress in order to fund what it terms “essential needs.”

“Additional resources are urgently required to meet the humanitarian needs created by this influx—to both sustain critical child welfare and release operations and increase capacity,” Evelyn Stauffer, a spokeswoman with the department’s Administration for Children and Families, said in a statement.

The cuts enacted by the Trump administration cut the deepest into programs for children, who are rapidly becoming the face of immigration in America. Educators and advocates for migrant children have expressed frustration and dismay.

Alberto Carvalho, the superintendent of the Miami-Dade school system in Florida, told *Ed Week Online*; “It is disappointing to learn that the few rights that have been extended to these children are now at risk of being completely eliminated. This is the lowering of a bar that was already unacceptably low.”

Due to new laws that make it easier for the federal government to detain anyone who steps forward to sponsor migrant children, children are being detained for increasingly longer periods of time. Activities such as crafts, English classes, and soccer practice interrupted the listlessness and isolation that these children—most of whom have already experienced harrowing and chaotic situations at home and in transit—endure in the nation’s detention centers.

Evening soccer games provide “the only glimmer of hope for these children,” Linda Rivas, executive director of Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center in El Paso, Texas told *Ed Week*, “And now that’s gone.”

Rivas stated that the cessation of legal aid funding did not surprise her.

“Attorneys provide a layer of protection for vulnerable children,” she explained. “It’s incredibly complicated for adults to understand the immigration process, it would be terrifying for children.”

This is not the first time that the federal government has come under fire for its inhumane treatment of migrant children. In 1984, a 15-year-old girl from El Salvador was detained by Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS, precursor to ICE). Her mother was distraught; although relatives with residency had asked to take Jenny Flores in, INS refused to release her to anyone other than a parent. Her

mother was terrified to present herself to INS for fear of being sent back to face the terrors caused by El Salvador's right-wing junta.

Upon arriving at the detention center where Jenny was held, Carlos Holguín, an attorney with the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law in Los Angeles, discovered that the INS had repurposed an abandoned, 1950s-era hotel, surrounding it with chain link fencing and concertina wire. Inside, children were left to intermingle with adults without supervision. Children had no opportunities for education or recreation.

"That treatment and those conditions were completely inconsistent with any real concern for their welfare," Holguín said, "It certainly persuaded me, and I think it ultimately persuaded the court, that the ostensible concern that the agency had for the well-being of the minors was not sincere."

Holguín and his co-counsel discovered further abuses. Children were subject to daily cavity searches, for example. He took on Jenny Flores's case, and waged multiple court battles with the US government over the next 12 years.

Despite a Supreme Court ruling against the plaintiffs, Holguín and other migrant advocates persisted. They reached a settlement with the Clinton administration in 1997 known as the Flores Agreement. The agreement stipulates that the federal government is obligated to provide the migrant children it detains with adequate education and recreational opportunities, including English classes and physical education—both of which the Trump administration has eliminated.

Holguín recounted to the *ABA Journal* how the Obama administration found ways around the agreement's mandates: family detention centers were set up in Texas and New Mexico, and mothers with children in tow were specifically targeted by ICE. In these facilities, Holguín discovered elementary school children and infants held in lockdown alongside their mothers; because the children were accompanied, the government could skirt the guidelines laid out by the Flores Agreement.

The scores of unaccompanied minors detained by ICE are the logical outcome of those Obama-era policies, just as today's wave of immigrations is the logical outcome of imperialist interventions in Latin America from Reagan through the Obama administration. Trump

now tightens the screws those administrations set in place, and mere children pay the price; six children have died in ICE custody since the beginning of the year. Dehydration, traumatic brain injury, and infection have been the primary causative factors in those deaths.

The Trump administration dares assert that its budget cuts and funding requests are borne out of humanitarian concerns, an assertion as offensive as it is disingenuous. There is nothing humane about locking away children fleeing violence and depriving them of the most minimal opportunities for recreation or learning. The "crisis" of immigration is caused by the US government itself, and its hostility towards workers is made clear in its unrelenting demand for more funding even as it cuts services to the bone.



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