

Inspector general report details Trump's abuse of immigrant children

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17 September 2019

A report issued earlier this month by the inspector general of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides a harrowing picture of the deliberate abuse of terrified children that is being carried out in detention facilities run by the Trump administration.

The report by Joanne Chiedi, the acting inspector general of HHS, examined the conditions of thousands of children detained in facilities operated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a division of HHS that is assigned the caretaker responsibility for child refugees.

Under the Obama administration, the ORR was tasked with the responsibility of housing unaccompanied minors from Central America who came across the US-Mexico border in large numbers from 2014 on. This population multiplied in the summer of 2018 when the Trump administration began its “zero tolerance” policy, under which all adult refugees were treated as criminals and separated from their children, who were then sent to facilities operated by the ORR.

In August-September 2018, the Office of Inspector General visited 45 of the 102 facilities in the ORR's network at the time, including many of the large ones. At the time, 12,400 children were held by the ORR.

The damning report was collected without interviewing any of the detained children: Mental health clinicians, medical coordinators and facility supervisors were the sole witnesses, and they provided ample evidence of the terrible conditions facing the children.

The report found that many of the children at ORR had experienced three separate kinds of trauma: in their home countries, during their treks through Mexico to the US border, and then within the United States, after their parents or guardians tried to file for refugee status.

According to the report, many of the children and their parents were fleeing violence in their native countries:

Staff in multiple facilities reported cases of children who had been kidnapped or raped, some by

members of gangs or drug cartels. In one case, a medical coordinator reported that a girl had been held in captivity for months, during which time she was tortured, raped, and became pregnant. Other children had witnessed the rape or murder of family members or were fleeing threats against their own lives. In one case, a mental health clinician reported that, after fleeing with his mother from an abusive father, the child witnessed the murder of his mother, grandmother, and uncle.

There were similar dangers during the trip through Mexico:

According to mental health clinicians and program directors, some children experienced or witnessed violence during the trip to the U.S. border. For example, a mental health clinician in one facility shared the story of a child who, while attempting to cross from Guatemala to Mexico, was abducted by a gang and held for ransom. The gang held the child in a compound, where another individual was shot in the head. Later, a woman who helped the child escape from the compound was shot by the gang.

Once in the United States, the children experienced trauma from different gangs: the Trump administration thugs who infest the Border Patrol and ICE.

Some children also experienced the trauma of being unexpectedly separated from their parents as a result of U.S. immigration policies. ... Policy changes in 2018 exacerbated these concerns, as they resulted in longer stays in ORR custody and a rapid increase in the number of younger children—many of whom

had been separated from their parents after entering the United States.

According to the 1997 *Flores* agreement, a settlement imposed by the federal courts after lawsuits filed by immigrant rights' activists, each child in ORR custody must receive at least one individual counseling session a week with a mental health clinician. It is evident from the inspector general's report that these clinicians take their jobs seriously and were not afraid to speak out about the terrible conditions facing the children.

That is undoubtedly one reason why the Trump administration has decided to repudiate the *Flores* agreement and now seeks to hold refugee children together with their parents in federal immigration prison camps to be run by ICE or its contractors, rather than HHS. In such camps, any mental health treatment will be under the watchful eyes of ICE officers.

According to the report, ORR mental health clinicians criticized what they called a "Band-Aid" approach, under which they sought to intervene only to prevent immediate crises or stabilize children during short-term stays: "the goal is not to treat children's underlying issues because children will not be in the facility long enough to make meaningful progress."

But children who stayed longer at ORR facilities were worse off rather than better, and they noted that after about 70 days longer stays resulted in "higher levels of defiance, hopelessness, and frustration among children, along with more instances of self-harm and suicidal ideation."

One program director told the inspector general that separated children did not understand the difference between clinical staff and the immigration agents who had taken their parents away: "Every single separated kid has been terrified. We're the enemy."

The policy directives of the Trump administration made conditions even worse. At one point in 2018, the White House demanded that the ORR fingerprint all adults in a family that offered to sponsor an unaccompanied child. This quickly drove up the average time in custody for children from 61 days to 93 days. It fell back to 58 days after the requirement was dropped.

Caseloads doubled, from a legal mandate of 1 mental health worker for every 12 children to as much as 1 to 25. There were few adequately trained mental health specialists, even fewer who were bilingual, and waiting times to see a specialist grew to many months.

Another program director at an ORR facility described a 7- or 8-year-old boy who was separated from his father: "The child was under the delusion that his father had been killed

and believed that he would also be killed. This child ultimately required emergency psychiatric care to address his mental health distress."

The report was largely ignored when it was first issued, with only one reference in a major newspaper, a column in the *Washington Post* by Catherine Rampell headlined, "Welcome to Trump's War on Children," and written in a tone unusual for the corporate-controlled media.

Rampell denounced the Trump policy of family separation as "evil," and described the inspector general report as providing "accounts of children who cried inconsolably; who were drugged; who were promised family reunifications that never came; whose severe emotional distress manifested in phantom chest pains, with complaints that 'every heartbeat hurts'; who thought their parents had abandoned them or had been murdered."

Not one Democratic presidential candidate has cited the report as documenting the deliberate cruelty of the Trump administration's policy towards asylum seekers and their children. And the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives voted in July to provide billions in funding to operate detention centers and other ICE, CBP and ORR facilities that are little better than torture chambers.

One of President Barack Obama's chief aides in the bipartisan war against immigrants, former Attorney General Eric Holder, publicly defended Obama against critics who have pointed out that Trump has invented nothing new, he has only intensified the already existing network of repression established under his predecessor.

Holder said Saturday, in an interview with CNN, "Democrats have to understand that...borders mean something." He denounced proposals by some Democratic presidential candidates that crossing the US-Mexico border illegally should become a civil rather than a criminal offense.

"No, I don't think that's right," he said. "The law that is on the books has been there for about 100 years or so." Changing the law "might send the wrong signal. But it would certainly take a tool away from the Justice Department that it might [want] to use," he added.

During Obama's first term, ICE deportations averaged nearly 400,000 a year. Under Trump, deportations have averaged under 250,000 a year, partly because the number of border crossers has declined.



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