

US detains record number of child migrants at the southwestern border

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New figures released this week by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reveal that the United States has detained a record number of 76,052 unaccompanied minors attempting to cross the southwestern border in the fiscal year 2019.

According to Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), this is an increase of 52 percent from last year and also a greater number than those detained by the Obama administration at the peak of the “unaccompanied minors crisis” five years ago.

DHS also reports that the total number of people in family units apprehended at the border was 473,682, which is a stunning 342 percent increase from the year before. All told, CBP has arrested more than 851,000 people attempting to cross the border. This is a 12-year high, and more than double the previous year’s total.

Speaking at a news conference organized in front of the steel and concrete barrier that separates El Paso, Texas, from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, acting CBP commissioner Mark Morgan declared the total arrests at the border “are numbers no immigration system in the world can handle, not even the United States.” Railing against Congress for sitting “idly by,” Morgan, in tones described by the *Washington Post* as “at times defiant, at times almost celebratory,” boasted about the success of the Trump administration’s initiatives in closing “loopholes” in the system.

These initiatives include family separations, detentions, denial of asylum, speeded-up deportation, and increased pressure on neighboring countries to provide refuge to the migrants.

The United States already has an experimental “Migrant Protection Program,” also known as “Remain in Mexico,” which has forced thousands of migrants back to Mexico, while their cases are adjudicated in the US.

The government is planning to sign a safe third country agreement with Guatemala, which will commit to providing “humanitarian protection” to refugees from Honduras and El Salvador before they can get to the United States. Given the prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions in these states, the notion of a “safe” third country is nothing less than a horrifying mockery of the laws pertaining to refugee protection.

Morgan reiterated the usual lies about the increased migration being a calculated offensive by Mexican drug cartels, while demanding congressional action that would make it even more difficult for migrants to claim asylum, and remove existing legal protections for migrant children so that they and their families could be detained for longer.

These skyrocketing detention numbers are a stark indictment of the fundamentally inhumane and punitive immigration policies of the Trump administration. The immigrants, most of whom are from Central America, are working class children and youth desperately seeking to flee poverty, violence and in many cases, certain death.

These conditions are themselves a product of decades of US involvement in the region, whether it was in the form of supporting outright coups, providing military aid to dictators, or using it as a base for further interventions in South America. To criminalize the victims of these interventions and to institutionalize a series of policies that dehumanize them, as the Trump administration has done, serves primarily to compound human misery.

In its report on the detentions, the *New York Times* carried interviews with several minors who were part of groups detained in Mexico while attempting to make the dangerous border crossing. Taken together, the stories that emerge present a heart-rending picture of

desperation, courage, and a determination to seek a better life despite all the potential pitfalls along the way.

Marvel, a 16-year-old Honduran boy, had been forced to flee his hometown, Olancho, when a local gang threatened to kill him and his family if he did not join them. His older brother had already been killed for refusing to join the gang, and in a desperate attempt to save at least one son's life, his parents had given him \$40 and told him to flee to the north.

Hitchhiking alone, sleeping in churches or under trees, gathering crucial information from other migrants about places to avoid, where to find shelter and food, Marvel slowly made his way through Honduras and Guatemala. At one particular point, after walking for several weeks in Guatemala, he came upon a cluster of graves by the roadside—the final resting place of migrants who had attempted the same journey. Despite the “fear [that] crawled up his spine,” Marvel walked on. As he told the reporter, “Quitting was not an option. You wipe your tears and carry on.”

Marvel's story is not unique. Fear and hunger are constant companions of the youth attempting to make the border crossing without even the minimum support afforded by a family traveling together. At the mercy of the goodwill of strangers, they face the possibility of brutal violence, sexual assault and lack of food and water.

One teenager, Wilson, spoke of foraging for rotten mangoes discarded by fruit vendors, while another, Mario Lionel, described drinking water from potholes along the way. Others describe sifting through garbage and debris to find anything that was edible.

Some of the youth interviewed by the *New York Times* told reporters that they had decided to stay on and seek asylum in Mexico. Under Mexican law, detained minors are supposed to be released immediately into the custody of the National Child Protection Services, which then places them in shelters. However, the Mexican government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador has, under pressure from the Trump administration, detained over 40,500 minors in the past year. These children, migrant advocates argue, have been kept in detention centers for too long, and many of them are pushed rapidly through the deportation process.

For those who somehow make it to the US border, the

conditions, if anything, are even worse. American law dictates that minors cannot be detained beyond a certain point, and should be released to sponsors while their asylum case is being considered. However, the Trump administration's punitive immigration policies have meant that fewer sponsors have come forward because of their own shaky immigration status and the potential threat of deportations. The result is the creation of a sprawling network of detention camps, in which unaccompanied minors are held, often in horrifying conditions.

This past August, in a case that would be farcical if it were not so tragic, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that detained minors should be provided with edible food, clean water, and basic hygiene items like toothpaste and soap.

The case had come up in the appeals court because the federal government challenged a lower court ruling that found the government in violation of the 1997 *Flores* settlement. Among other things, the settlement mandates providing “safe and sanitary conditions” for detained minors.

In the 2017 ruling, Judge Dolly Gee found that the US government was holding minors in cold and overcrowded cells that deprived them of sleep, while denying them access to food, water and basic hygiene. In their response, government attorneys tried to argue that the *Flores* settlement did not specify either particular sleeping arrangements or hygiene products, and therefore there was no requirement to provide soap or toothpaste.

Setting aside the absurdity of representatives of the wealthiest country in the world haggling over whether or not they are under a legal obligation to provide “edible food” or basic hygiene items to children supposedly under their care, this case exposes the ugliness of the detention system, and more broadly, the inhumane anti-immigrant edifice that has been built up under both the Obama and Trump administrations.



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