

# Human Rights First

## Discrimination, Detention, and Deportation: Immigration & Refugees

<https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/press-release/new-report-details-examines-issues-surrounding-berks-family-detention-center>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Areas of Focus

Current Initiatives

**New York City** As mothers enter the third week of a hunger strike at the Berks County family detention center, Human Rights First today [released a new report](#) examining the impact of detention on the women and children held at the facility. The report, based on a recent visit to Berks by Human Rights First researchers, mental health providers, and legal professionals, as well as a review of health records obtained by lawyers for the families, finds that detention, even for short periods of time, can have dramatic adverse effects on women and children.

We know that detention for any amount of time exacerbates preexisting trauma and can have long-lasting consequences to children's health and development, said Human Rights First's Olga Byrne. Continuing to subject asylum-seeking families to detention is not only harmful to children, but also entirely unnecessary. The Obama Administration has tools available, including referral to community-based case management programs for families in need of additional support, to handle migration without resorting to detention.

Two weeks ago 22 mothers detained at the Berks facility many for over one year began a hunger strike to protest their continued detention and the severe impact it has had on their children's health and well-being. In an [open letter](#) to Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, the women detailed their experiences in detention.

Last month a ruling from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a lower court's ruling that children should not be detained in unlicensed and secure detention centers. The ruling supports a 2015 ruling by the district court that the government's detention policy violated the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement (Flores), which governs the standards for the detention, release, and treatment of minors in immigration custody.

In October 2015, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services announced that it would not renew a license previously granted to operate the Berks County Residential Center as a child residential facility which expired on February 21, 2016 since the facility was in fact operating for the detention of immigrant families, including adults. Berks County has appealed the decision to not license the facility and that case remains pending before the state agency's Bureau of Hearing Appeals.

Human Rights First has issued multiple reports on the U.S. policy of sending asylum seeking mothers and children to immigration detention facilities, including a report last year on detention at [Berks](#), and a brief [earlier this year](#) documenting Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) failure to respond appropriately to mothers' requests for assistance regarding their children's health problems. A growing body of medical literature has found that detention is [harmful to children's health](#).

The Obama Administration's long-term detention of mothers and children at Berks comes at a time when the administration is detaining record numbers of asylum seekers, as documented in Human Rights First's new report, [Lifeline on Lockdown: Increased U.S. Detention of Asylum Seekers](#). The report shows that some ICE officers and field offices disregard the 2009 asylum parole directive, which was issued by the Obama Administration, and have taken the position that asylum seekers are a top enforcement priority under DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson's November 2014 memorandum, extending detention for many months even when asylum seekers meet the relevant parole or release criteria. Congress has also set a quota for the number of immigration detention beds to be funded, which is inconsistent with U.S. international legal obligations that prohibit unnecessary detention.

A broad array of voices have called on the administration to end the practice of detaining families, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Bar Association, Catholic and Lutheran Bishops, and 178 Members of Congress and 35 Senators, and many groups have similarly called for the administration to immediately end deportation raids against families.

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