

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/us-detention-children-only-getting-worse>

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No longer forcibly separating families at the border, the Trump Administration has merely changed the way children are harmed.

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Images of children sitting alone in chain-link cages, recordings of their frightened cries, and officials mocking reactions [generated](#) outrage across the country this summer. The Trump Administration responded by [reversing](#) its policy of forcibly separating immigrant families at the border but what it substituted has been no better: it merely changed the way children are harmed.

These more recent measures include moving to permit [indefinite family detention](#), creating procedures that have led to a [sharp increase](#) in the detention of unaccompanied children, and reversing established rules for asylum under US law. According to the *New York Times*, the numbers of migrant children in federal shelters have increased fivefold, reaching a total of 12,800 in September compared to 2,400 in custody in May, 2017.

More than 100 children [remain separated](#) from their parents despite court orders for their reunification.

Each of these policies damages children, deploying them as pawns to punish people who enter the US irregularly, and as a deterrent to others who might try. And it is taking place [at the cost of](#) millions [diverted](#) from disaster relief funds, the US Coast Guard, law enforcement training, and other programs.

Family detention, for example, is currently capped by the courts at twenty days a limit the Administration [hopes](#) to circumvent to hold families indefinitely. Family detention has [devastating, long-lasting consequences](#), particularly when prolonged. The damage is even worse for children who have fled death threats, violence, or other dangerous situations.

Two doctors who have worked as government medical consultants [warned](#) in July that children in family detention centers faced a high risk of harm. They based their conclusion on ten investigations between 2014 and 2017, revealing significant and unaddressed weight loss in infants, adult doses of medication being administered to numerous children, severe injuries from spring-loaded heavy steel doors, and widespread possibly permanent psychological harm.

In the past, the government has favored releasing detained children to family members, taking the approach that it was better for the children and society as a whole. Now, the government is [arresting](#) undocumented people who offer to take children indeliberately prioritizing enforcement of small-time immigration violations over getting kids into safe and loving homes.

As a [result](#), a record number of unaccompanied children [12,800](#) at the end of September were detained in Department of Health and Human Services shelters. They're staying longer, too: nearly [two months](#), double what it was in 2016.

Hundreds each week more than 1,600 by the end of September are being moved from shelters to a [hastily constructed tent city](#) in the west Texas desert, the [New York Times reported](#) this week.

This is a manufactured crisis. The number of migrants apprehended in early 2018 is [comparable](#) to the previous five years. The real difference is that apprehensions of families with children and unaccompanied children have increased as a proportion of the total.

These numbers bear out what Human Rights Watch has heard in interviews with migrants in Central America, Mexico, and in U.S. immigration detention. When I was on the Mexico-Guatemala border in March, groups that provide legal assistance described increasing numbers of families fleeing threats from gangs in their hometowns to the south. Families told me they fled El Salvador and Honduras after gangs targeted boys for forced recruitment and girls for rape, and threatened parents and grandparents with death if children did not accede.

These are legitimate reasons for seeking safety in the United States or elsewhere, and these children and families should be able to make

their case for asylum.

Legal assistance is crucial, and having more immigration judges would help, but only if they can operate without political influence. Litigation by the [ACLU](#) and [other](#) groups is challenging the administrations heartless policies. Investigations by journalists, mental health professionals, Human Rights Watch, and other groups to document the devastating consequences for children and their families are all helping to raise awareness and build a basis for an eventual reckoning.

The real solution is to end family detention, so that families can pursue their cases without being locked up and suffering the adverse long-term consequences, especially for children. Over [99 percent](#) of families enrolled in one pilot program for families who were not detained appeared at their check-ins with immigration officials and court hearings, at [significant savings](#) over the expense of family detention.

When it comes to migrant children and their families, the Trump Administration pursues misplaced priorities, at a high cost and with cruel consequences. The US government must stop recklessly inflicting harm on children as a means of migration enforcement.

International Alternatives to Detaining Immigrants

Internal DHS Reports of Abuses by US Border Officials

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