

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/27/candidates-homestead-visits-will-highlight-plight-detained-migrant-children>

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While Democratic presidential candidates gather in Florida for the first set of primary debates, several of them are taking the time to [visit the immigration detention center](#) for children in Homestead, Florida.

Their visits follow the news last week that [migrant children are facing neglect and danger](#) in a US Border Patrol facility just outside El Paso. That story broke when [a group of doctors and lawyers](#) two of my [Human Rights Watch colleagues](#) and I were among them learned from interviews with detained children that hundreds of children were kept in overcrowded holding cells in Clint, Texas, for days and even weeks, many sleeping on cold cement floors.

In Clint, children were caring for younger children. Some hadn't bathed in the time they'd been locked up. All were [wearing the clothes they'd come in](#). We arrived in the middle of a flu outbreak, and while there we learned that lice had spread through some of the cells.

In response, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said Monday that they [transferred hundreds of migrant children](#) out of the facility in Clint, but on Tuesday the agency actually [returned 100 children](#). Also on Tuesday, adding to the chaos, [CBPs acting commissioner resigned](#).

Migrant children without an advocate

For most migrant children who are on their own as well as [children forcibly separated from parents](#) or other relatives, facilities like those in Homestead, Florida, are their next stop after [holding cells](#) like Clint's.

My colleagues and I were in the Homestead detention center in March. What we found is nearly as troubling as what we heard in Clint.

To start with, its enormous with [more than 1,500 children](#) when we visited and [twice that number today](#), far too large to provide the individualized attention any child needs. Its wholly [unsuitable for children who have suffered significant trauma](#) violence and persecution in home countries, dangers on the journey, abusive conditions in immigration holding cells upon arrival.

Siblings are often separated. I spoke to a 16-year-old Guatemalan boy in March who said his 14-year-old brother was held in a different dormitory and that they can only see each other when they make phone calls and two or three times a week at lunch.

Children held in Homestead also said that staff repeatedly told them that breaking any rule, including something as minor as failing to walk in single file or accidentally touching another child, even a sibling, would mean more time locked up and could get them deported.

That was a lie, but the children didn't know that. Many already been in the Homestead detention center for three months or more, well in excess of the [20-day limit](#) that usually applies to unlicensed or secure facilities, and they were understandably anxious about doing anything that might extend their detention time.

Many of the children I saw in Clint may not get to Homestead or another HHS facility for a while. CBP is already backing away from its promise to remove children from Clint [on Tuesday, it returned 100 children to the border station](#) after HHS said it had run out of beds.

But these children don't have to be locked up, certainly not for weeks in immigration holding cells like Clint and months in places like Homestead. Many have relatives in the United States who are willing and able to care for them while their immigration cases are heard.

The Border Patrol and Health and Human Services should be releasing unaccompanied children to relatives as expeditiously as possible. While children are in these agencies custody, they should, at the very minimum, be warm, clean, healthy, and safe.

Its imperative for Congress to act to make sure that happens. The [appropriations bill now before lawmakers](#) is one way to do this, by

conditioning funding on compliance with strict standards. Public hearings are another. Lawmakers can also insist that both agencies operate with greater transparency, including by publicly releasing detailed data on the children in their custody.

We shouldn't accept a return to business as usual, with both agencies consistently failing to meet basic standards of decent, humane treatment.

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Asylum Seekers Abused in the US and Deported to Harm in Cameroon

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