

To the judges of the Best of the West journalism contest:

The story America and Americans often tell themselves about themselves typically goes something like this: We are a nation of immigrants. We are a nation that protects the vulnerable. We are a nation that gives refuge, a nation of human rights, a nation of democratic ideals.

There are few more vulnerable populations on our planet than young migrants. And yet, the United States has consistently failed them — and under the Trump administration, actively sought to harm them, operating under a tortured belief that trauma acts as a deterrent.

Underneath the calculated cruelty of the family separation policy that prompted global outcry, there was another story that we didn't want to hear: That previous administrations' failures to protect migrant children and asylum seekers, and the American public's base fears about safety and the "foreign," enabled Trump hardliners with long-held political goals of ending immigration to the United States altogether to use an unprecedented pandemic as pretext to violate the law, international obligations and the very idea of American values.

In this series, O'Toole and Carcamo revealed how the Trump administration, under the guise of public health, endran U.S. laws and dismantled decades-old protections for migrant children and asylum seekers, from holding unaccompanied youth incommunicado in hotels; to detaining them indefinitely and denying them release to sponsors in the United States; to deporting them — at times, after contracting COVID-19 in custody — to no one, or to the very threats they fled.

Both the Obama and Trump administration, and now, as of today, the Biden administration, have consistently violated the so-called Flores agreement, the seminal 1997 court settlement that said the government must provide a minimum standard of care for migrant children in U.S. custody. In 2015, as the Obama administration struggled to respond to an influx of unaccompanied minors at the southern border, with then-Vice President Joe Biden serving as the president's point man for the crisis, the Flores agreement was strengthened.

Generally, the government must release children as quickly as possible and cannot detain them longer than 20 days, whether they have traveled to the U.S. alone or with family. Today, across the country, whether in ICE family detention centers created by Obama and Biden or shelters under Health and Human Services, U.S. officials are indefinitely jailing children — despite active COVID-19 outbreaks, and court rulings ordering their release.

Government attorneys across administrations have argued that the minors are safer detained.

Reported from Guatemala City to Washington, D.C., O'Toole and Carcamo's series only scratches the surface of the trauma inflicted on young migrants by U.S. officials, in our name, offering a measure of accountability for those responsible by telling these migrants' stories. This, too, is who we are. Now, what will we do with that truth?

Thank you for your consideration.