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U.S.

As Border Crisis Worsens, a Detention Center Designed for Children Has None

Migrant children are crammed into processing centers, while facilities intended for them have empty beds or house adults instead



Migrants pictured outside the U.S. Border Patrol McAllen Station in a makeshift encampment in McAllen, Texas, May 15.

PHOTO: LOREN ELLIOTT/REUTERS

By *Dan Frosch and Alicia A. Caldwell*

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KARNES CITY, Texas—Outfitted with miniature furniture, toys, and rugs with roads painted on them, the government detention center here was designed with young migrants in mind. But the only people being held here right now are adults.

While reports of children being detained in crowded Border Patrol stations widely criticized as dirty and unsafe have sparked a national outcry, several facilities run by immigration authorities that are intended for children aren't being fully used for that purpose.

“It boggles the mind that at this very moment there are no kids here, when just on the other side of the state they have kids at Border Patrol processing centers sitting there for lengthy period of times without access to any of the things we should be providing them,” said Cori

Hash, an Austin immigration lawyer who was part of a delegation that visited the Karnes County Residential Center last Friday.

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In a detention center in Dilley, Texas, that houses families with children, more than 1,200 of its 2,400 beds were empty as of late June, federal data shows. A family facility with about 100 beds in central Pennsylvania housed just 29 people as of June 27.

Officials with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which oversees Karnes and Dilley, said the crush of immigrants has left them unable to transport children to those facilities, located hundred of miles from the busiest border crossings. Because families with children can't be held more than 20 days by law, officials say it makes more sense to transport single adults who can be detained longer. In addition, monitoring minors requires more resources.

But immigration lawyers and advocates said the dramatic contrast between the child-friendly Karnes and Dilley facilities and Border Patrol stations that a Department of Homeland Security inspector general report this week labeled “dangerous” showed the administration was prioritizing enforcement over the humane treatment of children.



The Karnes County Residential Center in Karnes City, Texas, was used to house families until it was converted to a single-adult center earlier this year. PHOTO: CALLAGHAN O'HARE/REUTERS

“While it is imperfect, Dilley has playgrounds, a gym, a library, a cafeteria, a school, telephones and a kitchen,” said Warren Binford, a law professor at Willamette University who has

interviewed migrants at the Dilley facility as well as at Border Patrol stations. “No child should be placed in a Border Patrol facility for any length of time.”

An official with Customs and Border Protection, which oversees the Border Patrol, said the agency is using its limited resources to provide the best care it can for children.

“Our short-term holding facilities were not designed to hold vulnerable populations and we urgently need additional humanitarian funding to manage this crisis,” the official said.

Immigrant children who cross the border illegally by themselves or with relatives aren’t supposed to be held more than 72 hours by the Border Patrol, whose cells were intended to detain single men for a day or two and lack basic amenities such as showers. Amid overcrowding and what critics say has been poor coordination between government agencies, some have been held for weeks.

Dr. Sara ‘Sally’ Goza, incoming president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, visited a Border Patrol processing center in McAllen, Texas, last week, where she said she saw children draped in Mylar blankets in cells that reeked of feces, urine and sweat. One boy who had lost the phone number for a family member in the U.S. was weeping, while two young sisters were holding hands so tightly their knuckles had turned white, she said.

“We have to do better than this,” Dr. Goza said.

President Trump on Monday signed a \$4.6 billion aid package intended to help care for migrants in government detention.

ICE detention centers, such as the one in Karnes, are meant to hold migrant families, while unaccompanied children are supposed to be cared for by the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement. But advocates say authorities should be immediately getting kids who cross the border to any safe facility with room for them, regardless of what agency is responsible.

“It seems like there is no organization of the whole system,” said Delia Garza, an Austin city councilor who was among those to visit Karnes.

In April, ICE converted Karnes to a single-adult center after it had been housing families since 2014. An ICE spokeswoman said the agency would continue holding single adults at Karnes due to a shortage of detention space for them elsewhere.

HHS, which oversees 168 shelters that house thousands of minors, is set to open a new one for about 1,300 teenage boys and girls in rural Carrizo Springs, Texas. A spokesperson for the department didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Ms. Hash, the Austin lawyer, said she and her colleagues spoke with women housed in Karnes, none of whom complained about the conditions.



Immigration lawyer Cori Hash, left, and Delia Garza, an Austin city councilor, recently visited the Karnes detention center, which is about 50 miles southeast of San Antonio. PHOTO: DAN FROSCH/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

She said the facility seemed set up as if ready to house kids—from pictures of playscapes to chalkboards lowered to children’s height to living units named “Rainbow” and “Rainforest.”

While she has long argued migrant children shouldn’t be held by the government for any length of time, Ms. Hash said under present circumstances, she would rather see kids in the Karnes facility than processing centers at the border.

“It’s a better place than the *hieleras*,” she said, using the Spanish word for “iceboxes” that migrants use to derisively describe the Border Patrol holding cells where they are kept.

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