

ALONE & AFRAID

Thousands of immigrant children crossing into the United States at the southern border have been separated from their families. Why?

BY LAURA ANASTASIA

As You Read, Think About: How can being kept apart from their parents or families affect immigrant kids?

Imagine being held in a small cement room with dozens of other kids. The toilet is in the corner, with no door for privacy or soap to wash your hands. Your clothes are dirty, and you can't remember the last time you showered. Your meals are the same every day: instant oatmeal, soup, and microwaved burritos. There are only a few beds, so at night you share a thin mat on the floor with other children. You're exhausted, but it's hard to sleep. The lights are always on, and all around you, kids sob for relatives they haven't seen in days or even weeks. You try not to think about your *mamá* and *papá*, but sometimes you end up crying too.

This might sound like a scene from a movie, but for roughly a year and a half, it has been a reality for thousands of immigrant children in the United States. Mostly from Central America, they came to the U.S. illegally with their families, seeking safety and better lives.

Mateo,* age 12, is one of them. He fled to the U.S. from Guatemala this past summer with his uncle, who was raising him and his 4-year-old brother. →

*Not his real name



A boy from Honduras and his dad (not shown) are taken into custody in Texas last year. Thousands of children have been separated from their adult relatives since April 2018.

VIDEO

The United States has experienced many large waves of immigration in the past. Visit junior.scholastic.com to find out how these surges helped shape the nation.

“We lived in a dangerous neighborhood filled with gangs and drug dealers,” Mateo said (*see note, below*).

Kids like Mateo hope reaching the U.S. will mean a safe place to live and steady jobs for the adults who care for them. But as soon as Mateo’s family got here, U.S. [Border Patrol](#) officials took his uncle away. Then they brought Mateo and his brother to a place where young immigrants are held, a youth [detention center](#).

Mateo’s story isn’t unique. Since April 2018, the U.S. government has separated scores of young people from their parents, grandparents, aunts, or uncles after the families crossed into this country. Teens, children, and toddlers have been placed in detention centers with little or no contact with their relatives. Nearly two weeks after Mateo was taken from his uncle, they still had not been reunited. “I do not know where he is,” the boy said.

MILLIONS OF LIVES AT RISK

At the southern border of the U.S., officials are struggling to deal with huge numbers of immigrants trying to enter the country. More than half a million people were stopped trying to cross the border in the first half of this year. That’s almost double the number during the first half of 2018.

Most of these immigrants are from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Those three Central



Immigrant children and adults await processing at a U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility in McAllen, Texas, last year (*above and at right*).

American countries are very poor and plagued with violent crime. Families like Mateo’s say fleeing is their only chance to escape the danger.

The U.S. *does* allow people from other nations to move here. But as in many countries, there are laws about who can come and how long they can stay. In general, families who want to live here permanently must apply in advance. The process can take years, and not everyone is admitted.

Mateo’s family—and others like his—have not gone through this process. Why not? Every year, the U.S.



gives special protection to certain immigrants who come to the U.S. because their lives are at risk in their home countries. These people must prove in court that they are in serious danger. This process is called seeking [asylum](#). People who are granted asylum can stay here for good. U.S. law says people can apply for asylum even if they enter the country illegally. Today, that is what thousands of desperate Central American families are doing.

Applying for asylum can take months or years. Until mid-2018, immigrants were usually able to live freely in the U.S. during that time. But now the government is keeping many of them in detention centers instead.

DISCOURAGING ASYLUM SEEKERS

Some Americans, including President Donald Trump, say immigrants are taking advantage of the asylum process. They say too many people remain in the U.S. illegally after their asylum requests are denied.

That’s why the Trump administration is trying to make it harder to apply for and receive asylum. It told border officials to limit how many people can apply for asylum each day at official checkpoints along the border. It also ordered thousands of asylum seekers to wait in Mexico until their court dates.

But other Americans disagree with those changes. Many immigration experts say Central Americans often

“I have not been told how long I have to stay here. I am frightened, scared, and sad.”
—5-year-old boy from Honduras, detained in Texas

do face real danger at home. They warn that if it becomes too difficult to enter the U.S. legally to ask for protection, even more people will feel forced to cross the border *illegally* to apply.

SEPARATING FAMILIES

To discourage illegal crossings, the Trump administration enacted a strict immigration policy in April 2018. That policy calls for adults who cross the border illegally to be arrested and charged as criminals—even

if they are seeking asylum. Initially, children and teens were to be separated from their adult relatives and sent to youth detention centers.

Within three months, more than 2,600 kids had been taken from their families. Photos quickly began spreading of sobbing children and their parents being pulled apart at the border. Many Americans,

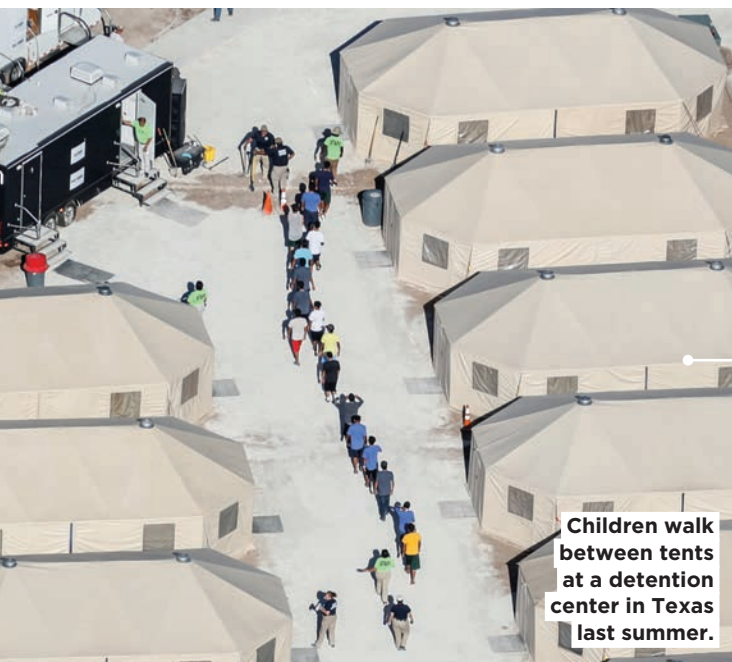
including some who want tougher immigration laws, criticized the separations. In response, the Trump administration officially ended its policy of removing kids from adult relatives in June 2018.

But over the following year, more than 900 additional children were removed from their families and put in detention. That’s according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU is a group that defends individuals’ constitutional rights.

Many of those removals happened because U.S. policy still lets border agents separate kids if they arrive with relatives other than their parents. They can also be separated if they come with a parent who previously committed a crime—even a traffic violation.

LIFE IN DETENTION CENTERS

The places where immigrant children are being held are often crowded and uncomfortable. The center in Clint, Texas, where Mateo was sent, was built to hold 100 adults. At one point, about 700 kids were there. →



Children walk between tents at a detention center in Texas last summer.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

ASYLUM This protection allows people from other countries to live and work legally in the U.S. They must first prove that they face danger in their home countries based on their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.

DETENTION CENTER This is a facility where people who enter the country illegally may be held for a certain period of time.

IMMIGRANT Someone who comes to live in a new country with the intention of staying permanently. Legal immigrants have permission to be in their new country. Undocumented immigrants do not.

Note: Quotes by kids in this story are from legal testimonies they provided while detained at U.S. Customs and Border Protection facilities. Source: National Center for Youth Law

“We are housed in a room with dozens of other children—some as young as 2,” Mateo said. After spending 13 days in detention, he and his brother had bathed only once. “Our clothes are the same clothes that we had on when we arrived. We have not been given soap,” he said.

Dolly Lucio Sevier, a doctor, examined children at a center in McAllen, Texas, this past June. The facility had “extreme cold temperatures, lights on 24 hours a day, [and] no adequate access to medical care, basic sanitation, water, or adequate food,” she said.

Older kids are asked to look after little kids they don’t know. Ana,* 15, cared for a sick 2-year-old boy in the Clint center. Ana had fled a gang in El Salvador. “I feed [the boy], change his diaper, and play with him,” she said. “[He] never speaks. He likes for me to hold him as much as possible.”

EFFECTS OF SEPARATION

Until recently, U.S. law said children could not be detained for more than 20 days. Yet one report showed that some kids spent more than a year in custody without their families.

Separating kids from their families can cause anxiety, developmental delays, and behavioral problems, doctors say. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the largest U.S. group of doctors for kids, has spoken out against detaining children.

Michelle Bachelet leads the human rights office for the United Nations. She has also criticized the practice. “Even for short periods under good conditions, [separating children from loved ones] can have a serious impact on their health and development,” she said.

IN SEARCH OF SOLUTIONS

Officials say having to hold so many people for so long—because of the increase in the number of immigrants

“I am always hungry. My sisters are hungry too. Everyone here is hungry because there is not sufficient food.”

—12-year-old girl from Ecuador, detained in Texas



People from Guatemala turn themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents in Texas in February 2019.



Central Americans waded through the Rio Grande to reach Texas in June 2019.



Above: A police officer in Honduras. Like Guatemala and El Salvador, the nation is plagued by gang violence.

and the Trump administration’s stricter policies—has overwhelmed the U.S. immigration system.

So this past summer, Congress passed a bill pledging \$4.6 billion to improve conditions at detention centers and boost border security. It wasn’t easy. Lawmakers, like all Americans, are divided on what to do about the people coming to the U.S. from Central America.

However, a majority of Americans agree that separating children from their relatives is “unacceptable,” according to a recent University of Maryland poll.

In July, U.S. Border Patrol Chief Carla Provost asked Congress to ensure that kids are housed with their relatives in centers meant for families. “We need to be able to hold families together,” she said.

Scholars and religious leaders have made similar requests. Last year, the Southern Baptist Convention, known for its conservative views, urged U.S. officials to maintain “family unity.”

In August, the Trump administration set new rules that would let the government detain immigrant kids for an unlimited period of time. That way, the administration says, children can be held with their parents until their court dates.

But critics say the new rules won’t necessarily stop separations. Plus, officials will be able to detain separated kids for far longer than what was legal before. Nineteen states are suing the administration to stop the rules from going into effect. In addition, the ACLU and other groups have filed lawsuits against the government to make sure family separations truly end.



A father and son from Guatemala reunite in the U.S. last year. They were separated for more than two months after seeking asylum.

PUSHING FOR MORE

Some Americans say the U.S. needs to go further and stop detaining young asylum seekers. The kids should live freely in the U.S. with their families, with monitors checking on them while they await court hearings, says

legal expert Shoba Sivaprasad Wadhia. She founded the Center for Immigrants’ Rights Clinic. She says that approach would be far more humane—and “far cheaper than keeping families in detention.”

U.S. officials should make kids a priority, no matter where they come from, agrees Lenni Benson. She started a group to give free legal aid to immigrants. “A child is a child first,” she says. “We should do everything we can to treat kids with dignity and respect.” ♦



How YOU Can Help

Want to learn more about the situation at the border—and what you can do to help address it? Visit junior.scholastic.com for information and advice on how kids and teens can take action.

Write About It! What challenges do children and teens who come to the United States seeking asylum face? Make sure you include facts, examples, and other evidence from this article in your response.