

Pro Bono for Immigrant Families: Report from the Texas Border

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The South Texas Family Residential Center here in Dilley, Texas is surrounded by metal fencing, video cameras, and tall light poles that you can see from miles away at night. The country's largest immigration detention facility, it sprawls 50 acres and is comprised of 2,400 beds in a series of large barracks-style trailers which look eerily similar to pictures of the Japanese-American "relocation centers" during World War II.

I met more than 25 detained women and their children here. All are from El Salvador, Honduras or Guatemala, and all but two suffered from some form of gang violence, severe domestic violence or in many cases, a combination of both. I heard stories from people who witnessed the murder of family members, and who themselves were subjected to unspeakable violent crime without protection from law enforcement.

Through the [CARA Family Detention Project](#), I spoke with these women and their children to help them prepare for [credible fear interviews](#). This is the first step – and possibly last – for these immigrants claiming asylum after being placed in expedited removal proceedings.

I will never forget the woman who in the middle of our meeting started to cry frantically, and the young daughter in her lap who began to do the same. I looked at my interpreter who also began to cry, holding her hands over her mouth momentarily, before articulating in English the detailed account of a brutal rape. I took an early lunch after that meeting and as I pulled off the highway at what looked like the end of the Earth, I wiped away my own tears.

The detention of families claiming asylum is inhumane. And yet there is [talk of expanding family detention](#) notwithstanding that existing facilities which are meant to hold families, like this one, are already at capacity.

All the women I interviewed discussed how when they were first apprehended or after turning themselves in, they were split up from any men or teenage boys they were traveling with and then placed in what they referred to as the “ice box” for a matter of hours or overnight. The ice box is a small space with a shared, non-private toilet that was, as the name implies, very cold. From there the women and children were taken to what they refer to as the “dog cage,” a large area divided into smaller areas by metal fencing. The families stayed there for up to three or four days — enduring bitterly cold conditions with inadequate food and limited hygiene until transported to the Dilley, Texas facility. They typically stay in Dilley for two or three weeks before being deported or released to family or a shelter.

For vulnerable populations, detention even for limited periods of time can do real harm. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics: “The act of detention or incarceration itself is associated with poor health outcomes, higher rates of psychological distress and suicidality making the situation for already vulnerable women and children even worse.”

The great majority of families at Dilley pass their credible fear interviews, thereby calling into question the necessity, not to mention legality, of automatic detention which is not only expensive but makes legal representation a real challenge. [The New York Times reported](#) when Dilley was opened in 2014 that the detention facility was presented by officials “as a deterrent to border crossings.” Detaining refugee families for a few weeks as a deterrent is troubling, but not as troubling as what appears to be happening on the ground now.

With [the Attorney General’s effort this month to curtail asylum claims based on gang violence and domestic abuse](#), I am concerned that detainees at Dilley are going to find it increasingly difficult to pass their credible fear interviews. Indeed, just over the course of my week at the facility, I became aware of an alarming growth of deportations.

In my next post in this series, I will:

- Address what is driving immigration to the U.S., and the potentially catastrophic change in asylum policy demanded by the Attorney General.
- Share details from my 30 minutes in the “court” trailer, where I tried to appeal the findings of a negative credible fear interview by video conference to an immigration judge.

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