



**RAICES**

# A New Era of ICE Family Prisons



Photo: Ilana Panich-Linsman/Redux

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# Executive Summary

In early 2025, the second Trump administration began detaining immigrant families and children, and by April, the Dilley Immigration Processing Center (“Dilley”) became the sole active family detention center in the United States. More than 5,600 people, including parents, children, toddlers, and newborn babies, have been imprisoned at Dilley between April 2025 and February 2026, according to our analysis of Immigration and Customs Enforcement data.

This report by Human Rights First and RAICES, based on in-depth interviews with families detained at Dilley, legal service provision, and desk research, exposes the profound harm incarceration at Dilley inflicts on families and children. It concludes that inhumane conditions, routine mistreatment, and due process violations experienced by families at Dilley are pervasive and systemic. In addition to the violation of constitutional and statutory legal protections, DHS’s policy of family incarceration also violates international treaty and legal prohibitions on non-*refoulement*, arbitrary detention, and the detention of children.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Our findings make clear that there is no rights-respecting or safe way for DHS to incarcerate families and children:**

- **Families are threatened with family separation in attempt to punish and coerce them to give up their protection claims**, forcing parents to make impossible choices to avoid being ripped away from their children and spouses. **There are many instances of family separation**, including families separated within Dilley, across different detention facilities, and instances in which children have been taken from one or both parents.
- **Families at Dilley are routinely detained well past the 20-day detention limit set by a court order as part of the *Flores* litigation.** Families interviewed for this report were detained on average two months while some families interviewed had been detained up to six months, indicating that **the Trump administration is seriously neglecting or outright defying the *Flores* settlement.**
- **Families incarcerated at Dilley face intensified due process violations** that many immigrants and people seeking asylum have endured whenever they are in DHS custody, as a result of the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign. **Various hurdles obstruct families' access to legal information and attorneys**, depriving them of the opportunity to seek protection or to challenge their detention or deportation.
- **The Trump administration's barriers to asylum combined with the harsh conditions at Dilley result in families being deported without meaningful opportunity to seek protection in the United States**, in some cases in violation of U.S. and international laws that prohibit non-*refoulement*.
- **Conditions at Dilley undermine children's health, dignity, and development.** While detained at the prison, children and their parents have limited access to clean water, nutritious food, sleep, personal hygiene, privacy, or clean or appropriate clothing. Parents and children experience verbal abuse and hostile behavior by ICE agents and Dilley staff.

- **Detention at Dilley is itself a medical risk factor.** Families experience worsening physical and mental health once detained at Dilley, interrupted medical treatment, panic symptoms, exacerbated diagnosable psychiatric harm, and trauma with long-lasting physical and psychological consequences. The Trump administration has detained children at Dilley with life-threatening illnesses, without regard to the continuity of their medical treatment.
- **Pregnant individuals detained at Dilley face inadequate prenatal monitoring and unsafe medication practices,** placing both mothers and their unborn children at serious risk and detaining them in violation of ICE’s own policies.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**The U.S. government must take immediate and decisive action to:**

- Shut down Dilley and any other DHS facilities intended to incarcerate children and their parents;
- Stop separating parents from their children or using the threat of separation as a means of pressuring parents into abandoning their legal claims. Congress should investigate the administration’s separation of any families at Dilley and elsewhere in DHS custody and ensure that children are swiftly reunited with their parents;
- Employ true community-based and non-carceral alternatives for families who opt into case management, which are more cost effective, humane and produce extraordinarily high compliance rates;
- Enact strong legislative protections to prohibit the detention of families, ensure that children and adults are treated with dignity, and ensure at a minimum basic health and safety protections for people in DHS custody.

## I. Introduction

In early 2025, the second Trump administration began detaining immigrant families and children. By April, the Dilley Immigration Processing Center (“Dilley”), operated by private prison contractor CoreCivic and located in Dilley, Texas, became the sole active family detention center in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Based on our analysis of [Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(ICE\) detention data](#),<sup>2</sup> more than 5,600 people, including parents, children, toddlers, and newborn babies, have been imprisoned at Dilley between April 7, 2025 and February 6, 2026.

The first year of this revived policy has resulted in the systemic violation of due process rights, including the denial of meaningful access to counsel, defective fear screenings, and collusion between the Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Homeland Security (DHS) during immigration court proceedings to target and detain as many families as possible pursuant to DHS’s mass deportation campaign.

Imprisoned families include people [seeking asylum](#), families with [pending visa petitions](#), [families with humanitarian parole](#), and families who have [lived in the United States for years](#). Some, like five-year-old [Liam Cornejo Ramos](#) and his father, are Minnesotan families targeted by ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) as part of Operations [Metro Surge](#) and [PARRIS](#) this year and who ended up incarcerated at Dilley, hundreds of miles away from their loved ones and counsel. The trauma of displacement and incarceration has resulted in many families being coerced by the administration to abandon their legal claims to protection – not out of choice, but as a means of shielding their children from further harm.

The imprisonment of children and families is [the subject of extensive litigation](#), with experts repeatedly warning that *any* length of detention causes irreparable harm to children. In 2016, a DHS advisory committee recommended [discontinuing](#) family detention altogether, as it “is never in the best interest of children.” The practice of family detention continued until the Biden administration [suspended the policy](#) in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Soon after the reopening of Dilley in March 2025, leading health organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Medical Association (AMA), wrote in a [joint letter](#) to the President that “detention itself poses a threat to child health... [and] even short periods of detention can cause

<sup>1</sup> ICE has not routinely detained families at the Karnes prison since April 2025, which has a lower capacity of 830 people compared with the 2,400 total capacity of Dilley.  
<sup>2</sup> ICE has failed to update its detention data since February 12, 2026, despite congressional requirements to release this data bi-weekly. Both parents with children and single women have been held at Dilley in the past year.

<sup>3</sup> Despite this change in ICE policy, DHS continued to detain children with their parents and other family members in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facilities, often far beyond the allowed [72 hours mandated by DHS custody](#) standards and in deplorable conditions. DHS closed Dilley in 2024, which at the time was the last detention facility still operating that had previously been used to detain families.

psychological trauma and long-term mental health risks.” The experts detailed how studies have shown that children and parents “may suffer negative physical and emotional symptoms from detention, including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder.” They underscored that family detention facilities have not been able to provide the medical and psychological health care needed by children and their parents.

Despite the well-documented harms of family detention, private prison contractors are yielding record profits. In fiscal year 2025, CoreCivic reported over [\\$2.2 billion in total revenue](#) and expected to earn approximately [\\$180 million](#) from operating Dilley alone. Private prison contractors have little government oversight and are rarely held accountable for health and human rights violations. Meanwhile, the Trump administration [gutted](#) the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) and the Office of the Immigration Detention Ombudsman (OIDO), which are both responsible for independently investigating detention conditions.

This report by Human Rights First and RAICES is based on 50 in-depth interviews with 15 legal service providers and 35 families following their arrest and incarceration at Dilley, and RAICES’ records from its provision of legal services to over 300 asylum-seeking families from countries around the world, including Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, Guatemala, Russia, Cuba, Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh, Haiti, Iran, Uzbekistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. This report documents the profound harm detention inflicts on families and children who sought protection at a U.S. border, as well as those living in the United States for years who were targeted as part of the Trump administration’s indiscriminate mass deportation campaign. The median length of detention across these cases was 56 days, meaning that half of the families were detained for nearly two months or longer, with some held for as long as 180 days. Across the families that our organizations interviewed, the median age of their detained children was seven years old, with the youngest less than one year old. Human Rights First’s requests to tour the prison after it reopened pursuant to the 2011 ICE Stakeholder directive, under which we have previously toured Dilley and other ICE prisons across the country, was repeatedly denied. The findings are also informed by extensive field and desk research, as well as legal representation, by Human Rights First and RAICES.

## II. Family Incarceration: Another Weapon in Trump's Mass Deportation Campaign

The renewed practice of family detention is part of the Trump administration's vast and unlawful mass detention and deportation campaign. Up to [73,000 people](#) on average are in ICE custody each day, the largest incarcerated population in this country's history. Detention conditions are increasingly [inhumane](#), [punitive](#), and even deadly. In 2025, [33 people died in ICE custody](#), making it the deadliest year since the early 2000s. At least [14 people](#) have died in ICE custody in the first two and a half months of 2026.

The Trump administration's detention campaign is backed by largely unchecked funding that the U.S. Congress approved last summer. DHS received over \$150 billion towards the mass deportation agenda, including [\\$45 billion for the expansion of immigration detention over several years](#). This funding represents a dramatic increase, more than tripling ICE's annual detention budget compared to fiscal year 2024.

DHS has employed highly questionable tactics in its effort to detain families. ICE often targets families in the interior of the United States who are [fully complying](#) with immigration requirements, including during [routine ICE check-ins or immediately following immigration court hearings](#), as well as at [the hospital](#), on their way to [schools](#), and outside [churches](#). ICE also often instructs parents to [bring their children to check-in](#) appointments, only to detain the entire family upon arrival, regardless of whether the family has complied with all requirements, and even when there is no criminal history. In one case, a Nicaraguan mother, who had complied with ICE check-ins for years, was confined for more than 12 hours in an ICE office with her three-year-old daughter and then transferred to Dilley, where they remained for over two months with little explanation.

In the context of ICE's mass detentions, the use of family detention and related family separations wreaks havoc on children and communities nationwide. A five-year-old Colombian girl watched ICE agents arrest her father outside her home in Los Angeles, California. The next day, she and her mother were detained at an ICE check-in appointment and transferred to Dilley. The mother reported to a legal service provider that the girl refused to eat at times because she missed her father, who was detained in a separate ICE detention center. When the mother and her daughter were released from Dilley weeks later, the girl asked, "Is daddy at home too?" ICE continued to detain him in a separate California detention center.

**“If [we] refused to be deported, we will be separated – my wife to one jail, me to another jail, and our children would be put in foster care or an orphanage.”**

### **A. Family Separation 2.0**

For many in the United States, the audio of [crying children](#) torn from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border under the first Trump administration marked a turning point in the Zero Tolerance Policy. Public outcry, congressional action, and [litigation](#) ultimately resulted in the formal end of that policy, exposing the cruelty of family separation as a deterrence measure. Years later, lawyers and advocates continue to track the practice of family separation under the second Trump administration.

Today, the threat of separation is pervasive and weaponized to silence, pressure, and punish families following their arrest by ICE and while at Dilley, which forces parents to make impossible choices to avoid being ripped away from their children and spouses. Forms of family separation for the families incarcerated at Dilley include: 1) the separation of family members within Dilley, 2) parents separated from their families after being sent to different detention centers, 3) children separated from one or both parents.

A mother from Colombia detained with her five-year-old son reported feeling terrified when a guard reprimanded her son and threatened to separate them. On multiple occasions, the guard said, “[y]ou have to listen to your mom, or I’m going to take you away and give you to another family, and you will never ever see your mom again.” The mother recalled, “I was completely speechless. I froze. I could not understand how someone we did not know could threaten to take my child away and give him to another family. I was afraid that if I said anything, it could negatively affect my case. I did not report the incident because I did not know what to do or whom to report it to.”

An ICE officer threatened a Russian asylum-seeking family, who had fled Russia after the father was detained and threatened by police for opposing the government and the war in Ukraine, with separation if they resisted deportation. The father recounted the ICE officer said: “if [we] refused to be deported, we will be separated – my wife to one jail, me to another jail, and our children would be put in foster care or an orphanage. They said they’d put us in jail for ten years.”

A mother from Haiti was detained by CBP and sent to Dilley without her still-breastfeeding U.S. citizen baby, who has an allergy to cow's milk protein and relied on her mother's breastmilk for all of her nutritional needs. The abrupt separation of mother and baby caused the baby to stop eating completely. Despite requests from the mother's attorneys, ICE refused to help facilitate transferring pumped breastmilk to the baby. As of March 2026, the baby has been without her mother, who remains detained, for over 100 days.

### **Separations Within Dilley**

Adult parents detained at Dilley are separated by gender and are denied physical contact and time with their families. This can [impact child-parent bonds](#), and in many cases, prevents fathers from assuming a caretaking role.

A family from Colombia lived in the United States for two years and built a stable life in New York while awaiting their Trafficking victim visa application to be processed by DHS. Both parents were working with valid work permits, and their daughter was thriving in school. The family complied with their immigration reporting requirements and in 2025 attended a routine ICE check-in appointment, at which time they were apprehended. They were held in custody from early morning until late evening without adequate food and placed under constant surveillance. In the early hours of the following day, ICE transferred them by plane to Dilley. For the following two months, the family was detained at the same family prison but separated from one another. All physical contact was prohibited. The family could only briefly see each other during meals and were repeatedly warned not to touch or comfort one another.

A father from Uzbekistan who remained detained at the time of interview reported, "We are required to sleep separately, and I am not permitted to hug my children or my wife." A 14-year-old Russian girl detained with her mother described seeing her father only three times over 12 days, saying, "It was very hard for me to be away from him." She and her mother continued to be housed separately from her father for more than a month at Dilley.

Even infants are separated from their parents within Dilley. A legal service provider shared with us that her client, an Irish mother detained with her two-month-old baby, was housed separately from her spouse and father of the newborn, forcing her to assume all caretaking responsibilities without any support. Though her sister-in-law was detained with her, guards prohibited the sister-in-law from holding the baby to allow the mother to shower, forcing the mother to hold her infant even while she showered or used the toilet.

**“I feel anguish each and every day being away from them. As of today, I have not received any information as to why I was ever separated from my husband and children.”**

### **Parents Separated From Their Families and Sent to Different Detention Centers**

DHS frequently detains one parent with children at Dilley, while separating the other parent by sending them to a different ICE prison that holds only single adults. DHS conducts such separations either at the time of initial arrest or through sudden transfers of one parent away from the rest of the family detained at Dilley; often without warning, explanation, or access to counsel.

An Afghan family fled to the United States to escape Taliban persecution. The father was initially detained with his wife and four young children after they sought protection at the southern U.S. border, albeit held in a different area within the facility. One day, officers escorted the father to the medical unit under false pretenses. When he asked to say goodbye to his family, the officers assured him he would see them the next day. Instead, officials handcuffed him, denied him access to his lawyer, and transferred him to another detention center. His family was later released from detention without him. Nearly 180 days later, he remained separated from them, stating, “I just want to be reunited with my family to provide them with a sense of security, to love them and continue to raise my children.”

Although it is typically fathers that are separated from the rest of their family unit, mothers are also separated from their children and spouse in some circumstances. A mother who was detained in May 2025 after she fled from Azerbaijan with her family, following severe physical abuse and other persecution by the government related to their religion, described being transferred to a different ICE facility, while her husband and children remained detained at Dilley: “I feel anguish each and every day being away from them. As of today, I have not received any information as to why I was ever separated from my husband and children...I received no warning and everything happened too quickly.” The father and children were detained at Dilley for a month and a half without knowing where their mother was. Eventually they learned she was detained in another ICE jail. “ICE ruined everyone psychologically,” the daughter shared, explaining that weeks after the separation she, her brother, and father were transferred out of Dilley and told that they would be taken to see

their mother. “We were so happy, thinking that we would go see our mom.” Instead, ICE attempted to deport them without their mother, but the family refused to be deported without a court hearing on their asylum case and was eventually returned to Dilley. The father and two children were later released after more than 85 days of incarceration by ICE. But they remain separated from the mother, who is still detained, as of March 2026, after more than 10 months.

A mother from China was detained with her children at Dilley for over a month before they were all released together. A month after the family’s release, ICE called the mother in for a check-in without her children, at which time she was detained independently and sent to a detention center for single adults.

### **Children Taken From Parents**

There are multiple documented instances where children have been taken from their parents while detained at Dilley. This includes young children separated from their parents, as well as the routine practice by ICE of separating [older teenagers](#) from their families at Dilley once they turn 18 years old and transferring them to an ICE detention center that detains single adults.

ICE detained a father, mother, and their 11-year-old son from Mongolia together and immediately transferred the family to Dilley after they arrived at the airport with valid tourist visas and attempted to seek asylum. The father, in a state of severe distress due to the trauma of incarceration, was found by guards after he attempted suicide. The family remained incarcerated in Dilley for more than six weeks, during which time the child was forced to act as a translator between ICE and his parents. ICE told him to inform his parents that ICE intended to separate the family by sending the parents to an adult detention center, while he would be sent to a federal shelter “somewhere in San Antonio” as an unaccompanied child. He had to watch as both his parents were then shackled by their wrists and feet. ***Describing the experience, the mother said, “[n]either my husband nor I understood why our child was being taken from us. We were not given any documents or information regarding the reason for our separation from our child.”*** For days, they could not contact their child and were given no information about his whereabouts or why he had been taken from them. Among other fears, the mother expressed her concern that her child did not have his inhaler at the time of separation and was suffering from an untreated rash. After two months of separation, the family was ultimately reunited at the airport in advance of a commercial deportation flight to their home country.

***An ICE officer attempted to coerce a 17-year-old girl from Azerbaijan to self-deport by threatening to separate her from her family in an adult detention center when she turned 18. The officer said, “[w]e will send you to a separate detention [center]. You won’t see your mother, your father, or your brother. Why don’t you just sign and go back to Azerbaijan?” The girl shared, “[y]ou can’t imagine the feeling when everyone is threatening you from all sides. I am still a child even though I am 17 years old. Threatening a child with sending her to a different detention center – it is revolting. I asked [the officer], did you change the Constitution? From what I know of the history of America, I am not aware of them being able to deport someone without a hearing.”***

In another case, a Colombian mother was detained at Dilley with her 17-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter. At 5am on the morning of her son’s 18th birthday, officers woke the family and informed them that the son would immediately be transferred out of Dilley to an ICE jail for single adults because he was no longer a minor. Following the separation, the boy’s mother was unable to contact him for 20 days and over a period of more than 40 days, was only able to speak with her son directly two times. The mother and her 14-year-old daughter were released from Dilley after 73 days, and at date of publication, her son remains detained in an ICE prison for adults.

### **III. Due Process Denied to Families and Rampant Legal Violations**

Families incarcerated at Dilley experience intensified versions of the due process violations that many immigrants and people seeking asylum have endured whenever they are in DHS custody, as a result of the Trump administration’s mass deportation campaign. This includes families who have recently sought protection at the southern U.S. border and face numerous unlawful hurdles to exercise their legal right to seek asylum. In addition, increasingly, families at Dilley include long term residents who have complied with all immigration requirements to pursue their legal claims while living in their communities, only to be abruptly detained and transferred to Dilley. In many cases, DHS and DOJ have colluded to dismiss active immigration cases without notice during prescheduled immigration court hearings, regardless of case merits, how long the impacted person or family has been in the United States, the extent of their community ties, or whether the family wished to pursue their legal claim for relief. The U.S. government then places those same law-abiding people who appeared in good faith for their scheduled immigration court hearings into expedited removal proceedings, where detention is mandatory and access to legal aid and relief is often limited, if not completely inaccessible.

**“This would result in me being deported to China while my son would be taken away from me.”**

DHS further denies families at Dilley their constitutionally guaranteed due process rights, undermining statutorily safeguarded legal protections and violating federal and international legal obligations for people seeking protection. Our research indicates substantial evidence of, at best egregious neglect, and at worst blatant violation, of requirements under the *Flores* Settlement Agreement and related litigation, with families routinely detained well past the 20-day detention limit and other minimum conditions of detention for children flouted. Access to counsel is undermined by virtue of the families being held at Dilley, but DHS erects further impediments; and as a result families are much more likely to be forced to proceed with adjudication of their claims without ever speaking to an attorney or to give up their claims rather than continue in harsh detention conditions while unrepresented. This is keenly felt for those seeking asylum who have their access to this life-saving pathway cut off from their moment of arrival due to the illegal asylum bans and other policies that undermine access to the U.S. asylum system, and which are impossible to navigate without an attorney. For the vast majority detained at Dilley who do not speak English as a first language, access to justice is often out of their reach, as DHS routinely forces individuals to engage in languages they do not speak or fully comprehend.

A Chinese mother and her 10-year-old son experienced a harrowing series of events that is illustrative of the compounding due process violations that families face in DHS custody. After repeatedly expressing fear about being returned to China, they were held in a cell for ten days and then survived an attempted deportation, all before being transferred to Dilley. During the attempted deportation, officials denied the mother access to a lawyer and threatened to separate her from her son, even saying they would put her on a military aircraft back to China if she continued to resist. She recounted, “[m]y heart dropped when they said that this would result in me being deported to China while my son would be taken away from me...” Later, once at Dilley, the son was separated from his mother and sent to Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody, while his mother was informed she would be deported to China without him. Eventually, RAICES successfully halted the mother’s deportation, but at date of publication the family remains separated.

Other examples of due process violations at Dilley abound. Some families have been deported before their scheduled immigration court hearings. Another woman and her young daughter were held in ICE custody for an entire day without explanation or access to a lawyer. Officers presented her with documents to sign, but refused to explain their highly technical legal contents, despite her repeated requests for clarification, and pressured her into signing paperwork she did not understand; she still does not know what she signed.

### **A. Requirements Under *Flores* Ignored or Blatantly Violated**

The [Flores Settlement Agreement of 1997](#) (*Flores*) and its related litigation establishes mandatory minimum conditions for [children in federal immigration custody](#). Among other key standards, *Flores* requires that minors, including those detained with their parents, be held in safe and sanitary conditions and limits the length of their detention. In accordance with a 2020 court order in *Flores*, DHS should generally not incarcerate children for [longer than 20 days](#), a limit that courts and child welfare experts already deem excessive. Nevertheless, the Trump administration has detained thousands of children with their parents [well beyond](#) this limit and in [inadequate and dangerous conditions](#). As of March 2026, some families have been detained at Dilley for as long as nine months. One nine-year-old who was incarcerated at Dilley for nine months reportedly wrote “[please get us out](#),” and one of the longest-held families described to a journalist that the experience was “[slowly killing us on the inside](#).”

Legal agencies litigating the administration’s compliance with the *Flores* settlement agreement have found [no evidence that ICE is even reviewing](#) children’s length of detention and that there are serious gaps in oversight. Counsel has argued in court that the Trump administration is violating the longstanding protections established under the *Flores* settlement agreement, as well as the [family detention standards](#) established during Trump’s first term in office.

Simultaneously, the Trump administration has taken steps to formally weaken or effectively terminate *Flores* legal protections. The administration has advanced regulatory proposals and taken litigation positions to eliminate the 20-day detention limit and authorize prolonged or indefinite family detention. Lawmakers also included provisions in the 2025 [budget reconciliation bill](#) that not only expand family detention capacity through a massive influx of billions of dollars, but also appear aimed at facilitating the indefinite incarceration of parents and children together.

“[W]e spoke to an ICE officer and told him about the *Flores* agreement. He told us *Flores* doesn’t exist now, and it doesn’t matter.”

A Russian family described repeated instances in which ICE officers told families that the *Flores* settlement agreement no longer exists. The mother explained, “[w]e spoke to an ICE officer and told him about the *Flores* agreement. He told us *Flores* doesn’t exist now, and it doesn’t matter.” She reported that two other officers made the same statement on separate occasions, and that similar claims were made multiple times throughout the detention center. Concerned, she asked one officer during a meeting with other detained individuals to show her an official order or written confirmation supporting that claim. “He wasn’t able to answer the question,” she said. Instead, the officer told families to raise their concerns with their attorneys or human rights organizations. “I don’t know whether they were lying or telling the truth,” she explained. “But that’s what they said.” At the same time, she described significant barriers to accessing legal assistance.

## **B. Barriers Erected to Counsel**

Various hurdles exist that obstruct families’ access to legal information and attorneys, depriving them of the opportunity to seek protection or to challenge their deportation. Families arriving at Dilley are not provided with a legal orientation program, such as “Know Your Rights” presentations. Additionally, internet access is restricted to one hour per day per family, and families are unable to freely request outside resources. Although families are sometimes given a list of *pro bono* legal aid providers in the area, they are often not informed that the calls to potential legal counsel are free (whereas non-legal calls are incredibly expensive for people in ICE detention). For indigent or low-income families who are navigating decisions around what to prioritize their limited amount of money on while in detention, as discussed in below sections, this fear of cost can be prohibitive. *Pro bono* legal aid providers across the country are also very stretched for capacity due to the heightened demand on services that has been exacerbated by the Trump administration’s mass deportation campaign. Consequently, by the time families are scheduled for their legal proceedings, which can conclude in as little as two weeks, it is often too late to consult with, let alone secure an attorney.

In addition to these impediments to securing counsel, families have experienced denial of access to counsel during crucial fear screenings, including instances in which officers conducted fear screenings on weekends or outside business hours without any notice to the attorney. Officers also routinely fail to call attorneys of record at all during the fear screening, thereby obstructing the right to representation. These fear screenings are generally the last opportunity for an asylum-seeking family to prevent their summary deportation and representation by counsel can often be the difference in ensuring they receive a positive determination and can proceed to a full adjudication of their protection claim.

Attorneys and relatives are often unable to track detained family members through the [ICE detainee locator system](#), which is unreliable and often fails to update, thereby impeding their ability to provide legal counsel and raising grave concerns about the legality of any decisions made by parents in such circumstances. A mother from Honduras and her 11-year-old child were forcibly transferred and deported after more than a month at Dilley, without notice or revealing their whereabouts to counsel or family. When the attorney sought judicial review, the ICE detainee locator system indicated that the family was in Washington, D.C. Relying on that information, counsel filed a habeas petition in federal court in the District of Columbia challenging their unlawful detention and imminent deportation. Days later, the mother and child vanished from the locator system entirely. After repeated inquiries went unanswered, the government eventually revealed that ICE had deported the family the previous day—and that they had never been in Washington, D.C., contrary to what the locator system reported. These actions prevented meaningful access to the courts and deprived the family of the opportunity to challenge their detention and removal.

Recent events at Dilley raise concerns that officials may have invoked a purported public health emergency to justify restricting access to legal counsel in response to recent protests by families at the prison. In early 2026, in the wake of mass immigration enforcement actions through Operation Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS in Minneapolis, which resulted in Minnesotan families, including the galvanizing image of five-year-old [Liam Cornejo Ramos](#) and his father, being detained and some transferred to Dilley, there were reports that families had organized a [large-scale protest against their confinement at Dilley](#) and the horrific conditions. Shortly thereafter, DHS and state officials announced [two cases of measles](#) had been identified and Dilley restricted physical access to the families at the prison and curtailed attorney access to clients. To date, Human Rights First and RAICS have not been able to independently confirm the scope or legitimacy of the measles outbreak.

### C. Asylum Access Thwarted

The Trump administration has layered [additional barriers](#) on previously implemented U.S. government policies that unlawfully deny access to asylum. In addition to effectively cutting off access to asylum and other legal protections at the U.S. southern border by invoking a sweeping [Proclamation](#), the administration has pretermitted—refusing to consider on the merits—thousands of asylum applications and subsequently designated these individuals for removal to [third countries](#) under the asylum cooperative agreements. The legality of [the proclamation](#) and [these agreements](#) is the subject of ongoing litigation. The administration is also dismissing immigration court cases to immediately subject individuals to expedited removal, in which families who are seeking asylum are forced to undergo new credible fear screenings, despite many pending appeals challenging the legality of such dismissals. These policies, among others, have facilitated the incarceration of asylum-seeking families at Dilley. In many cases, they have led, along with Dilley’s harsh conditions, to families’ subsequent deportation without the meaningful opportunity to seek protection in the United States. At least several families interviewed for this report were deported to their country of origin from which they fled persecution, in violation of U.S. laws that prohibit non-*refoulement*.

Political activists from Russia who fled to the United States with their two young children were refouled to Russia after a credible fear process at Dilley riddled with due process violations and errors. The father was threatened and at risk of persecution in Russia because of his longstanding public opposition to the government and support for the opposition leader Alexei Navalny. They were unrepresented in their fear screening at Dilley and received a negative determination. Subsequently, they secured a *pro bono* attorney who submitted a request for reconsideration to the government with over 300 pages of evidence detailing how the family’s accounts and fear of persecution far exceeded the threshold for passing a credible fear screening. The request also documented significant errors in the initial credible fear screening and other violations of the family’s due process rights. The government failed to read the family their rights, confirm their understanding of the proceedings they were undergoing, or read them a summary of their responses, all required as part of the credible fear screening process. The family was also forced to have their two- and seven-year-old children present for the interview, making it extremely difficult for them to disclose sensitive information about their feared persecution.

In a declaration submitted to the U.S. government, the mother stated, “[m]y husband and I have been terrified. Our son, who is seven years old, understands what is happening, and he is terrified of being separated from us. I am currently breastfeeding my two-year-old son, and I cannot be separated from him.” Despite the attorney’s request for a new screening, the family was deported to Russia shortly thereafter.

#### **D. Language Barriers Exploited**

Lack of appropriate language interpretation is pervasive at Dilley, despite [ICE detention standards](#) requiring that detained individuals be provided information “in a language or manner they can understand throughout their time in detention.” Most of the detention center staff only speak English, and if a second language is spoken by staff, it is typically Spanish. However, the nationalities of families incarcerated at the jail include far more languages than English or Spanish, including Arabic, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Dari, Farsi, French, Haitian-Creole, Mandarin, Mongolian, Pashto, Russian, Quiché, and Uzbek, among others.

Insufficient interpretation impacts the outcome of families’ immigration cases. A family from Azerbaijan with a five-year-old received a negative credible fear determination after being denied adequate interpretation in their interview. The father fled to the United States with his wife and child after he was assaulted and threatened by Azerbaijani government authorities. The family underwent a credible fear screening with a Turkish interpreter who spoke some Azerbaijani but did not appear to understand what the family was saying. U.S. immigration officials later threatened the family with separation in front of their five-year-old and referred them for criminal prosecution for not complying with the deportation process, according to an attorney who is now representing the family. If the parents are charged, they would be indefinitely separated from each other and their child. Children are often forced to act as impromptu interpreters, including regarding sensitive information about their family’s pending legal cases. As described above, a Mongolian family that was detained for more than three months was forced to have their minor child interpret critical legal conversations with their ICE deportation officer. [Research](#) suggests that interpreting for immigrant parents in high stress situations can contribute to children’s anxiety and depression.

Multiple detained parents described being pressured by officers to sign legal documents that are not in their primary language. One woman detained at Dilley reported that officials pressured her to sign documents she could not understand because Russian translation was not provided.

## **IV. Subpar Conditions Throughout Various Stages of DHS Custody**

From the time of apprehension at the border or in the interior of the country and throughout the duration of incarceration at Dilley, families are frequently held in harsh and unsanitary conditions, and denied adequate access to nutritious food or water, hygiene, or sleep. Parents are subjected to verbal abuse by ICE agents and other Dilley staff in front of their children, and children themselves are sometimes directly targeted.

### **A. Conditions Following Arrest**

Following arrests at immigration courts or ICE check-ins in cities, including New York, San Antonio, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, or following entry into the United States, multiple families interviewed for this report indicate they experienced subpar conditions in CBP or ICE custody prior to being transferred to Dilley.

Many families, including those with young children, were held without food for hours. A mother from Honduras was arrested at an immigration court in Los Angeles, California, with her six- and nine-year-old children after their case was dismissed against their wishes. They were detained at the courthouse and were not given food all day. That night, they were transported to a detention center where they had to sleep sitting upright in chairs and were given only water, juice, and an apple. The children remained hungry and did not receive a full meal until the following day, when they were taken to the airport and flown to Dilley, where they were detained for more than a month.

Multiple families said that they were not told where they were being taken before being transferred to Dilley. A Salvadoran mother and her son were detained immediately following an immigration court appearance. They were escorted to a room inside the courthouse, where other families who had just had immigration court hearings were also being held. ICE agents photographed the families and collected saliva samples. After waiting hours, the mother and her son were repeatedly transferred by van, bus, and plane without explanation as to where they were being taken or why. Her son saw other detained individuals in shackles. He asked repeatedly why they were being treated “like criminals” and begged to go home. That night, the family slept on the floor without blankets or sleeping pads, and were awakened early. They endured prolonged uncertainty before arriving late the next night at the Dilley prison, where they were detained without explanation for 41 days.

Families are subjected to unsanitary and harsh conditions following their initial detention. A father reported that before being transferred to Dilley, his family was detained at a temporary holding center for around 10 days, and he was forced to wear the same change of clothes—including underwear—for that entire period. The father developed an allergic reaction on his skin during this time. His children only received one change of clothes. Another mother summarized her time in custody before transfer to Dilley: it was “very cold,” and she and her family slept on the floor with only foil blankets, in a crowded room with 12 other people. The toilet was dirty. The food was the same every day.

## **B. Physical Conditions in Dilley**

Families detained at Dilley describe conditions that undermine children’s health, dignity, and development. Access to clean water, nutritious food, sleep, hygiene, privacy, clothing, and communication with loved ones is undermined not only by DHS and CoreCivic’s negligence, but also by prohibitively high costs to the detained individuals. Parents repeatedly describe being forced to choose between purchasing essential items for themselves or for their children when they are able to afford any essentials at all.

Across interviews and federal court filings, adults and children consistently report that the free drinking water at Dilley is unclean, foul-smelling, and causes stomachaches. The only free drinking water is dispensed from large barrels in common areas, which are sometimes dirty inside, and have water that tastes and smells bad. One Colombian family reported that these water barrels had visible mold in them; however, because the family could not afford bottled water, they were forced to rely on the communal water. According to public reporting, one mother had no choice but to use the available free water, despite its questionable safety for drinking, [to prepare formula](#) for her nine-month-old baby; the child developed diarrhea for three days. In some instances, children and adults have had to [compete](#) for access to clean water due to the limited amounts of free water made available at the detention center.

At Dilley, detained families can only access bottled water through purchasing bottles in the commissary, priced between \$1.22 and \$2.00 per 16.9-ounce bottle. Multiple families reported they could not afford to purchase sufficient bottled water for their family, particularly when detained for prolonged periods with young children.

Families also describe a nutritionally inadequate diet, with children frequently refusing to eat. Snack options for children, including fruit, are limited. Multiple families describe long cafeteria lines and waiting outside in the Texas heat for 20 to 25 minutes before meals. Parents reported fly infestations in the cafeteria, as well as reports of undercooked meat, as well as hair, worms, bugs, dead flies, or foreign objects in meals.

Families uniformly describe a total absence of privacy at Dilley with multiple families detained in the same housing units with no separation from one family unit to another. Toilets are inside the housing units, without walls or privacy, and everyone is forced to use the toilet in front of others, including adults of opposite sex and children of different sexes and ages. The flush mechanism is controlled outside the room by officers, and families must ask officers to flush after defecating. A mother from Haiti stated, ***“My son and I are in prison. There is absolutely no privacy. Our calls to our loved ones remain monitored.”***

Sleep in Dilley is routinely disrupted by overcrowding, constant light, noise, and lack of privacy. The housing units are small with no exterior windows. As has been the case throughout the history of family detention, ICE requires the lights in housing units to remain on at all times, either fully bright or only slightly dimmed at night. When challenged about these conditions, ICE has consistently maintained that it is necessary for security, despite it being a known form of sleep deprivation or torture.<sup>4</sup>

Basic hygiene supplies are limited and inconsistently distributed. Parents reported that hand soap was not kept in the housing units; instead, it was dispensed every three or four days by pouring it directly onto individuals’ hands. Families are given a single general liquid for bathing and washing—used as both soap and shampoo—which irritates the sensitive skin of younger children. Separate shampoo and body soap must be purchased from the commissary. A Venezuelan mother reported that her youngest daughter, a six-year-old, developed a skin infection after using the free soap product, which presented as white pimples across her face and arms and was intensely itchy. Because of her age, staff would not provide medication to treat the infection. When her older daughter developed the same condition, she was given cream, which was largely ineffective. Both daughters had the skin infection throughout their detention and required outside treatment after release.

<sup>4</sup> O.M.G. v. Wolf, No. 1:20-cv-00786 (D.D.C. filed Mar. 21, 2020); Flores v. Sessions, 862 F.3d 863 (9th Cir. 2017).

### **C. Verbal Abuse and Harsh Mistreatment**

Families detained at Dilley describe pervasive intimidation and hostile behavior from detention center guards and officials, which often directly targets children or takes place in their presence.

While playing, a young child accidentally hit a Dilley guard with a ball, who then cursed “*pendejo*,” (“asshole”) at the child and left the young boy in tears.

A teenager detained at Dilley during the summer heard from another detained immigrant that an employee of the detention center, a former policeman, told the immigrant that if he had his gun he would shoot them all because immigrants are evil. Even when not directed at a specific child, such statements reverberate through the prison and perpetuate an environment of fear and intimidation.

A mother from China described the terror her young son experienced during transport back to Dilley after ICE attempted to deport them. She said, “[t]he officers angrily threw our luggage in the trunk... My little boy was crying, asking me if we were going to be deported and if we were going to be separated from one another. I did not know how to answer these questions. All I could do was cry. The officers kept yelling profanities and threats at me and my child, saying things like ‘[f]uck. You’re going on a military plane back to China!’ Before slamming the car door shut, the officer saw me crying and said, ‘[s]top crying. It won’t do you any good. Nobody cares!’ The officers in the front would tell us over and over to ‘shut up!’ We were so afraid.”

A family from Russia and Uzbekistan suffered acute verbal abuse. Officers shouted, “[f]uck you! We have a new president, and we’re going to fuck people like you.” When the father asked the officer to stop cursing because his children were present, the verbal assault escalated: “[f]uck your wife and fuck your children.”

### **V. Devastating Health and Social Welfare Impacts on Children and Families**

ICE and CoreCivic staff at Dilley, which is responsible for the onsite medical care at Dilley, routinely deny families timely, appropriate, and lifesaving medical care, exposing them to preventable injury, irreversible harm, and risk of death. Human Rights First and RAICES reviewed multiple cases that revealed consistent patterns: delayed and denied treatments, misdiagnoses, ignored emergencies, and direct

interference with ongoing care. The inhumane conditions and routine mistreatment experienced by families while jailed at Dilley are pervasive and systemic, as well as widespread in past iterations of family detention.

A [study](#) conducted by the Massachusetts General Hospital Asylum Clinic at the MGH Center for Global Health, the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University, and the Harvard Global Health Institute, in collaboration with RAICES, analyzed medical records of children in family detention between June 2018 and October 2020 and documented evidence of mental and physical harm relating to inadequate and inappropriate medical care experienced by children during prolonged detention.

***No improvements to detention conditions have occurred since Human Rights First began working with pediatricians and health experts over a decade ago to [document](#) and expose the preventable harm caused by family detention. Rather, the current situation families face at Dilley reflects a deterioration in standards.***

#### **A. Delayed, Denied, and Deleterious Care**

Detention in Dilley is itself a medical risk factor for parents and children. Families experience worsening illness, interrupted treatment, and trauma with long-lasting physical and psychological consequences once detained at the prison.

The Trump administration has detained children with life-threatening illnesses at Dilley without regard to the continuity of their medical treatment. According to media reports, a six-year-old child from Honduras with a history of leukemia [missed critical cancer treatment appointments](#) while detained at Dilley, placing the child's survival at risk. ICE also detained a five-year-old child who had undergone brain surgery the previous year and continued to experience physical symptoms requiring monitoring and regular neurological follow-up, which was impossible while detained.

Other children experience alarming weight loss in detention, including an infant who lost eight pounds in a single month.

A Russian woman detained at Dilley with her six-year-old son for 83 days reported that her son developed a stomachache after drinking from the prison's water containers. When she sought medical care, she was forced to wait outdoors in line for two hours and was denied shade in the Texas heat, only to be told the doctor had already left for the day. The next day, after an hour-long wait, the doctor advised her son to "eat more vegetables and fruits." She explained this was impossible in the prison, and the doctor responded, "suck it up." Shortly after, her son developed a fever and hallucinations. At the facility's medical unit, which she described as unsanitary, she waited four days before her son was seen; he was given only ibuprofen.

A mother from Colombia informed officials immediately upon arriving at Dilley that her daughter had been diagnosed with Hirschsprung's disease—a condition in which her intestines do not function properly and cannot effectively move stool through her body. Without her medically required special diet, the girl suffers severe pain, fevers, and faces a heightened risk of infection. Despite the mother communicating the diagnosis and its medical implications, Dilley staff refused to provide any dietary accommodation. Instead, they told her that no special care or modified diet would be provided unless and until the CoreCivic medical unit evaluated her daughter. The earliest available appointment was more than a week away. During that time, her daughter's condition deteriorated and she experienced severe vomiting and developed blood in her stool. The family remained detained for at least a month.

Detained children frequently suffer acute injuries while detained that require urgent medical evaluation, only to have care delayed or denied outright. In one case documented in media reports, an eight-year-old child broke his arm while at Dilley but CoreCivic staff did not take him to the emergency room since he was "[not crying](#)." In another case, an eight-year-old boy from Venezuela fell and broke his arm while detained. The doctor at the local hospital told him he needed to see a specialist before getting fitted for a cast, but the medical staff at Dilley did not secure an appointment for him. He was left only with pain medication and no further treatment. A four-year-old Russian child hit his head and developed a black eye while detained; he soon began to feel dizzy and started vomiting. His mother worried he had suffered a concussion, but the CoreCivic staff again did not provide the boy with any diagnostic imaging or further evaluation.

A young girl from Colombia experienced severe pain, swelling, bleeding, and headaches after a CoreCivic facility custodian accidentally struck her with a mop handle. Despite clear signs of a serious injury, detention staff only provided ibuprofen and eye drops. As the child's condition worsened and she developed hearing problems, the family persistently advocated for her to receive a visit from an external specialist. The specialist eventually diagnosed ocular trauma requiring multi-week treatment. The family was deported before the prescribed course of treatment could be completed. The girl continues to suffer from unresolved eye trauma, chronic headaches, sensory sensitivity, and related complications, compounded by limited access to pediatric specialists in Colombia. She now requires psychiatric therapy, experiences panic attacks when encountering police or authority figures, exhibits developmental regression and behavioral changes, and lives in constant fear of re-detention.

A family from Russia reported that nearly every day of their 87-day detention in Dilley was marked by illness. The children suffered high fevers, nighttime breathing problems, persistent coughing, and congestion. During this time, the father tested positive for COVID-19 and was placed in isolation. Despite clear symptoms and documented family exposure, medical staff refused to test or treat the children for COVID-19. Instead, they were given only allergy medication and fever reducers. For five consecutive days, the mother sought a medical appointment for her children and was repeatedly turned away by nursing staff, who insisted that the allergy treatment "should start working." Instead of providing medication, staff printed out pages containing prayers in Russian. On another occasion, when the mother complained of neck pain, a medical provider asked about her religion and suggested that her medical problems might stem from "failing to forgive someone." Prior to their detention at Dilley, the family was held in CBP custody where their eight-year-old son slipped and struck his chin against the corner of a metal bench. The impact caused a deep cut to his chin and bruising across much of his face. Despite the visible nature of the injury, a nurse provided only a band-aid. According to the child's mother, rather than providing appropriate medical care, the nurse told her to "go home [to their country]."

A Mexican family who was detained for 105 days at Dilley reported serious disruptions in access to necessary medical care. The mother, who was being treated for a thyroid condition before detention, only received her medication consistently during the first week; thereafter, her access to medication became irregular and effectively

ceased because she was required to pay for it and lacked the means to do so. As a result, her health deteriorated significantly. The family repeatedly sought medical assistance and were told by facility staff that it would be provided, but it never arrived. Although they had brought the necessary medication with them, they were denied access to their personal belongings, including that medication, throughout their detention. Staff presented the family with forms to sign stating they had refused medication. The family refused to sign, but they believe staff nonetheless falsified consent by signing on the mother's behalf, as she later saw her name was printed on the form.

These experiences paint a consistent picture of inadequate medical care and ostensibly intentional, or at best careless neglect by CoreCivic and DHS in their treatment of the children and families in their custody.

## **B. Pregnant Parents Denied Adequate Prenatal Care**

Pregnant individuals detained at Dilley face inadequate prenatal monitoring, placing both mothers and their unborn children at serious risk in violation of a [2021 ICE Directive](#), which adopted a presumption of release for individuals known to be pregnant, postpartum, or nursing absent “extreme circumstances.” Pregnant individuals, including those with high-risk pregnancies, [continue to be imprisoned](#) by ICE without appropriate medical specialist care. After repeated failures to report congressionally mandated data and respond to congressional inquiries, DHS finally [disclosed](#) to U.S. Senators that 121 pregnant, postpartum, and nursing women were detained as of February 2026. When U.S. Congressman Joaquin Castro asked to [meet](#) with the numerous pregnant mothers detained specifically at Dilley during a Congressional oversight visit in February 2026, ICE obstructed the Congressman's access, raising additional concerns as to their well-being.

A young woman from China in her first trimester experienced near-daily spotting. Dilley medical staff informed her that she may be at risk of miscarrying and described it as a natural process that cannot be helped. Dilley [911 call logs](#) show two ambulance requests in recent months for pregnant women, including a woman in her first trimester who fainted and a pregnant woman who had a seizure. A 21-year-old young woman, who was six months pregnant when first detained at Dilley with her mother and siblings after crossing the border to seek protection, was separated from her family and sent to another detention facility for two months before being deported to Colombia when she was eight months pregnant.

A 39-year-old woman from Cameroon confirmed her 22-week pregnancy to Dilley staff immediately upon arrival at Dilley. Her pregnancy carried an elevated risk of complications due to her age. Shortly after intake, lab testing revealed that her iron levels were “very low.” However, it took several days for her to receive an appropriate prenatal supplement. Even after supplementation began, follow-up testing showed that her iron levels continued to decline. She experienced intermittent lower abdominal pain and chest pain. Medical staff initially attributed the pain to normal fetal movement. After she insisted on further evaluation, an off-site OBGYN determined that she was experiencing contractions, which may have been linked to the heightened stress and anxiety she reported feeling in detention. After two months of detention, she was transferred unexpectedly for deportation but then returned to Dilley. As a result, she experienced severe panic and shock. Her acute distress also triggered a nosebleed. A staff member offered her medication without reviewing her pregnancy status. When she asked whether the pills were safe to take while pregnant, the staff member responded, “oh, you’re pregnant? No, no. Please don’t take these.” The incident was particularly alarming given that she had been detained for many weeks and had repeatedly disclosed her pregnancy to staff.

### **C. Irreparable Harm to Mental Health and Well-Being of Children and Their Families**

Numerous [studies](#) have found that immigration detention is associated with significant adverse mental health outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. No period of detention is safe for a person’s mental health, and the unique stressors of detention—uncertainty, loss of liberty, poor conditions—compound the pre-existing trauma of people who have fled persecution.

For [children](#) and detained [families](#), the risks are much more severe and extend well past the period of incarceration. Child health experts have [long established](#) that immigration detention causes irreparable harm and has a profound and negative impact on child well-being, including long-lasting effects on their cognitive development. Based upon documented outcomes from family detention policies in the United States and [other countries](#) that employ immigration detention for children and families, experts have [overwhelmingly urged](#) governments not to detain children or families.

Children at Dilley exhibit immediate and observable psychological distress, as documented in [legal filings](#). Parents describe their children falling asleep crying nearly every night, suffering frequent nightmares, refusing food, and pleading to be released.

***A 14-year-old girl reported that her younger brother “doesn’t sleep well. He cries all night.” One evening, he sobbed for hours, refusing to reenter their room. He cried that he “wanted to be free.” He stopped eating to the point that he required PediaSure.***

A parent described her son’s anxiety escalating into self-harm behaviors. She stated, “with the lack of sleep and anxiety, my son is throwing himself against the floor and getting bruises. He wants to leave so badly that he is having these reactions.” Adolescents report acute panic symptoms. A 15-year-old described an episode in which ordinary sounds became unbearable to her. Though the room was quiet, she felt overwhelmed by every noise. She said, “it became unbearable and I had to cover my ears to cope. I was crying so much and had such a hard time controlling my breathing that my hands and legs felt tingly and numb. I had my eyes shut tight, but if I tried to open them, I only saw blurry.” She believes detention has caused her panic attacks. “If I were released,” she said, “I would be able to get back to school and have access to what normal people have, like my own room and privacy and find new friends to spend time with.”

Such symptoms are exacerbated for neurodivergent children, whose needs are fundamentally incompatible with a carceral environment. RAICES served a family with neurodivergent children who became increasingly agitated over time in detention, with one child—already traumatized prior to arrival in the United States—becoming intermittently unresponsive. Reporting by journalists similarly [documents](#) the case of a 9-year-old boy with severe autism who, after more than 80 days at Dilley, grew disoriented and distressed without access to therapy—hitting himself, crying through the night, and pleading to return to his school. These accounts underscore how detention not only fails to accommodate neurodivergence but actively exacerbates psychological distress, compounding prior trauma and depriving children of the stability and care they require.

When a 17-year-old Azerbaijani teenager sought mental health support from the Core-Civic medical unit, a psychologist dismissively told her that her family should return to their home country and that “America is closed to immigrants.” When she explained that her family would face imprisonment or death if returned to Azerbaijan, the psychologist responded that it was “not the most dangerous thing” that could happen to them. The teenager added that, as her mental health deteriorated, she was prescribed medication described to her as anti-anxiety treatment. After release, she learned that she had been taking an antipsychotic medication typically used to treat bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, without having been informed of the medication’s nature or risks.

Children detained at Dilley experience serious diagnosable psychiatric harm that is exacerbated in detention. This is supported by [studies](#) that found that asylum-seeking children experienced a tenfold increase in psychiatric disorders while detained. Human Rights First previously [documented](#) numerous instances of children’s suicidal behavior in past iterations of ICE family jails.

A seven-year-old boy from Russia experienced sharp mental health deterioration after more than a month at Dilley. He became “very upset, sad, and anxious,” with frequent crying and aggressive tantrums. Even after doctors doubled his psychiatric medication, his distress did not improve. He told his parents he felt “locked like in a prison,” with nowhere to walk, no toys, no friends, and no one who spoke his language. His fear became so severe that he began sleeping with his eyes open and experiencing persistent nightmares—behavior his parents described as entirely new since they were detained. A psychiatrist’s evaluation of the boy warned that the stress of detention itself was driving the boy’s plummeting frustration tolerance and creating a serious risk of worsening psychiatric harm. A psychiatrist later diagnosed him with “post-traumatic stress disorder [as a result of] acute stress disorder linked to the past month,” concluding that detention and repeated relocations had precipitated “serious regression...aggravated by trauma.” Before detention, the boy enjoyed playing, drawing, and building with construction toys.

Other parents described the rapid and alarming deterioration of their children’s mental health after being incarcerated at Dilley, with symptoms including anxiety, frequent bed wetting, nightmares, and sleep disruptions. Parents also shared their own despair and anxiety at being unable to provide the care and safety their children needed.

A media report detailed a recent suicide attempt at Dilley where a 13-year-old Colombian girl used a plastic cafeteria knife to cut her wrist and repeatedly hit her head. After arriving at Dilley, she had [become increasingly depressed](#), stopping eating after finding a worm in her food, and had her anxiety medications withheld by staff.

#### **D. Education and Childhood Interrupted**

Despite [educational requirements](#) for children in detention, families incarcerated at Dilley consistently report that their children receive little to no meaningful schooling. [Studies of immigrant children held in detention](#) in contexts across the world have shown that they consistently reported falling behind academically, missing important

curriculum, and experiencing distress and shame related to these educational gaps. High levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress created by the environment of incarceration, along with pervasive boredom and uncertainty, significantly impair children’s ability to engage in educational activities, even where limited programming exists.

At Dilley, children are provided with one hour per day of educational instruction in mixed-age groups from a Spanish-speaking teacher, even though not all children speak Spanish. Many families describe this as effectively “no school” at all. In December 2025, Stride, Inc., a for-profit education company, began [recruiting](#) for educational staff to work onsite at Dilley. To date, no public information has been provided about the status of this program.

A parent recently reported that her daughter refuses to attend the hour of “school”—which has largely been coloring and repetitive activities—because she was “not learning anything.” The same child wakes from nightmares and begs to go to a park, only to be told she cannot leave the facility.

Eight- and 13-year-old sisters from Russia missed two years of school due to their journey from Russia and their prolonged four-month detention. According to their mother, officers laughed and said that they “don’t need school.”

Even within the limited classes offered at Dilley, some children report that teachers spend class time discussing why the children were in detention and their immigration status. Two six- and nine-year-old Venezuelan sisters were further traumatized when they attended classes at Dilley. Their mother shared: “[i]t made the girls feel very bad and sad. [The teachers] talked a lot about how they were all grabbed and detained...It made them scared. They became even more frightened about what was going to happen.”

Beyond education, children are further deprived of the most basic elements of childhood, including toys, unstructured play, and physical activity. A parent recounted that there are “[n]o toys for the kids. They didn’t let us keep anything and didn’t give out any toys... We tried to make toys like papier-mâché out of toilet paper, but officers always confiscated them.”

## “Most of the kids don’t play because they are afraid.”

Access to outdoor recreation or play equipment is limited and inconsistently offered to the families. Children are often reluctant to play out of fear of getting in trouble with officials. A Salvadoran mother described guards yelling at her seven-year-old son when he tried to play with balls. She added: “kids need a place to feel free, to play... [my son] would keep saying, ‘mommy, I want to leave.’ He didn’t want to be there. He would just sit and be sad... after he kept getting in trouble, he would just keep repeating, ‘I’m sorry.’” Another detained child observed: “Most of the kids don’t play because they are afraid.”<sup>5</sup>

Compounding already limited access to educational materials and toys, even children have faced retaliatory treatment at Dilley for various reasons, including protests, talking to members of Congress, and expressing their grievances to the media. For example, following the publication of a ProPublica report featuring children’s letters and drawings describing conditions in detention, we received reports that facility staff [conducted raids of children’s belongings](#), confiscating paper, crayons, and other materials that could be used to document or communicate their experiences.

<sup>5</sup> Flores v. Bondi, No. 2:85-cv-04544-DMG-AGR (C.D. Cal. Sept. 18, 2025), Ex. 2.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no humane or dignified way for the U.S. government and DHS to incarcerate families and children. The overwhelming and distressing evidence presented throughout this report confirms that the revived policy of family detention is a humanitarian and systemic failure that lacks any legitimate legal or policy justification.

The profound and irreparable harm inflicted on thousands of children, the due process violations, weaponization of family separation, and the denial of critical medical care make it clear that this policy must be *immediately* reversed. Concrete measures must be taken to ensure that family incarceration is not resurrected in the future.

As such, the U.S. government must take immediate and decisive action to:

1. Shut down Dilley and any other DHS facilities intended to incarcerate children and their families;
2. End separation of parents from their children or any use of threats of separation as a means of pressuring parents into abandoning their legal claims. Congress should investigate the administration's separation of any families at Dilley or elsewhere in DHS custody and ensure that all separated children are reunited with their parents;
3. Employ true community-based and non-carceral alternatives for families who opt into case management. Alternatives to detention programs, when operated by community-based organizations with non-carceral methods, are far more cost-effective and humane, and have been shown to produce extraordinarily high compliance rates of over 99%. A family case management program piloted by DHS from January 2016 to June 2017 cost approximately \$36 a day per family compared with the estimated \$481.79 per day per bed to operate a family prison like Dilley; and
4. Enact strong legislative protections, such as reintroducing and passing the Children's Safe Welcome Act, which would establish legal safeguards to ensure that children are treated with dignity and offer basic health and safety protections. This bill would increase minimum health and safety standards for children, prohibit family detention facilities, guarantee legal representation for unaccompanied children, create a process for keeping families together, and so much more.



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