

# The number of children in immigration detention has spiked since last year. Families describe poor conditions and little education.



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By **Miriam Jordan**, **Sarah Mervosh** and **Allison McCann**

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A 7-year-old in Oregon was seeking treatment for a nosebleed last month when immigration agents detained her and her parents outside a hospital emergency room. They were taken to a federal detention center in Texas for three weeks.

In Chicago, a 5-year-old was at a laundromat with her mother last fall when they were surrounded by agents and flown to Texas.

And a teenager who had been living in the United States for a decade was getting ready for school one morning last year when the police showed up at his family's door. He, too, ended up confined in Texas with his mother, even though she had begged for him to be allowed to stay with family members who are American citizens, according to court records.

The number of children in federal custody has climbed sharply since President Trump revived the practice of detaining families last year, as part of his promise to deport immigrants who are in the country illegally. The most prominent example came last month, when 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos, still wearing his Spider-Man backpack, was detained along with his father on their way home from school in suburban Minneapolis.

Under the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign, hundreds of children have been detained, usually with a parent. Nearly all pass through one place: a sprawling detention center in Dilley, Texas, that is a jumble of trailers and soft-sided tents in a desolate expanse about 70 miles south of San Antonio.

Known as the Dilley Immigration Processing Center — or just Dilley — it has been the main site for family detentions since it was built in 2014 during the Obama administration, which at one point held more than 1,000 children there during a surge of migrants fleeing Central America.

The Biden administration stopped using the facility to detain families in 2021 and closed it in 2024. The Trump administration reopened it last year.



The Dilley Immigration Processing Center, formerly known as the South Texas Family Residential Center, in 2019. About 3,500 adults and children have been detained at the facility since it reopened last year. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

In the past, Dilley was used mainly to hold women and children who had just crossed the border. But now, many of the children sent there had been living in the United States and attending American schools, sometimes for years.

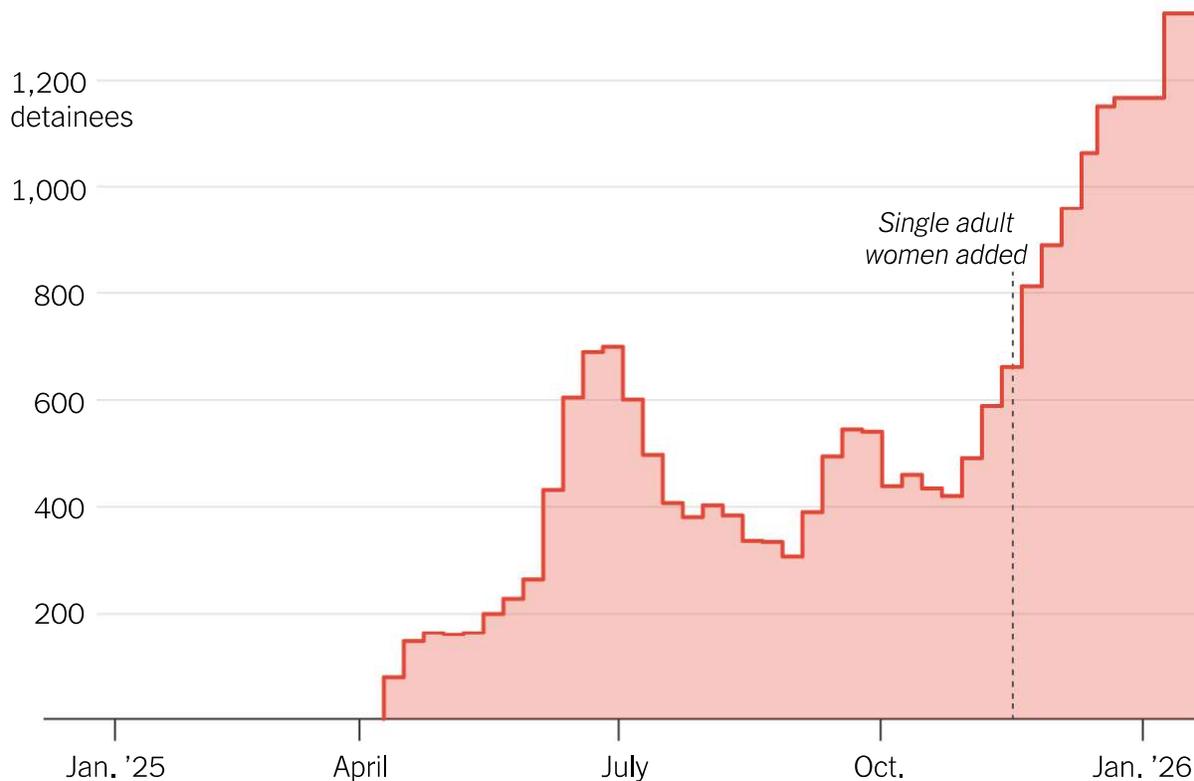
“There are many, many Liams,” said Elora Mukherjee, a professor at Columbia Law School who runs the school’s immigration clinic.

The children who end up at Dilley are generally immigrants themselves, brought to the United States by a parent. It is unclear if any American citizens, such as babies born recently to immigrant parents, have been detained there.

All told, about 3,500 adults and children have passed through Dilley since it reopened, according to lawyers and legal aid organizations that represent families. Some are held for only a few days, others for months. Some are deported, voluntarily or not. Accounts of their stays come from court affidavits written by parents and children, recent interviews with families and reports from lawyers and members of Congress who have spoken with them.

### Trump resumes family detention

Population at the Dilley Immigration Processing Center, which includes children, their parents and some single adult women.



Note: Data is calculated weekly using the average daily population through Dec. 18, 2025, and biweekly through Jan. 22, 2026. Source: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The Biden administration allowed hundreds of thousands of migrants to enter the country seeking asylum. Trump officials have said that migrants took advantage of a system where asylum cases could take years to be decided.

The Trump administration says that migrant families can avoid confinement by voluntarily leaving the country.

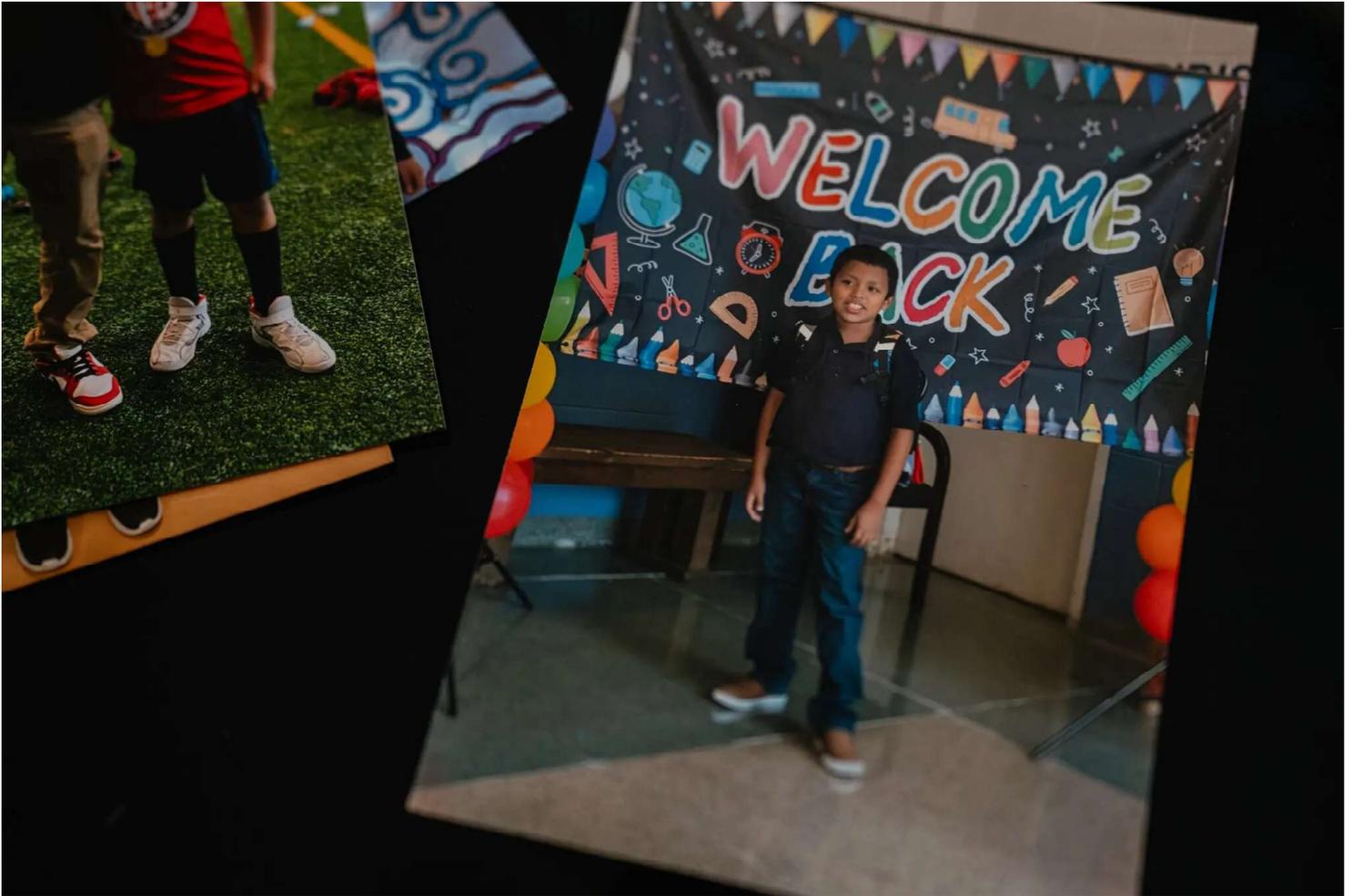
“Being in detention is a choice,” the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement, adding that the administration was offering \$2,600 and a free flight to people who leave voluntarily.

Many families have refused that offer. They may have pending cases in immigration court, giving them hope that they might be allowed to stay. Some have built lives in the United States, and some fear returning to their home countries.

Federal officials say parents can choose whether to be detained with their children. However, it’s unknown how many parents have been allowed to leave their children with another adult caregiver.

Many families say immigration agents have given them no choice but to bring their children with them.

## Taken from Learning



Ricardo said his son cries during their nearly daily calls and asks when he can return to Chicago and go back to school. Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Until two months ago, Edison, a 13-year-old Guatemalan boy, was a thriving seventh grader in Chicago. He excelled at math, his favorite subject, played on his school's soccer team and translated for his immigrant parents.

Today, Edison is being held with his mother in Dilley, where his schooling has been reduced to an hour a day.

His father, Ricardo, who spoke on the condition that he and his family be identified only by their first names, said that he came to the United States first, and that Edison and his mother arrived in 2023 and applied for asylum together.

In December, he said, Edison's mother complied with instructions to visit an ICE office for their case and was told to bring the boy back with her the next day. The two were taken into custody while Ricardo was waiting outside, a moment that has left him in agony, he said.

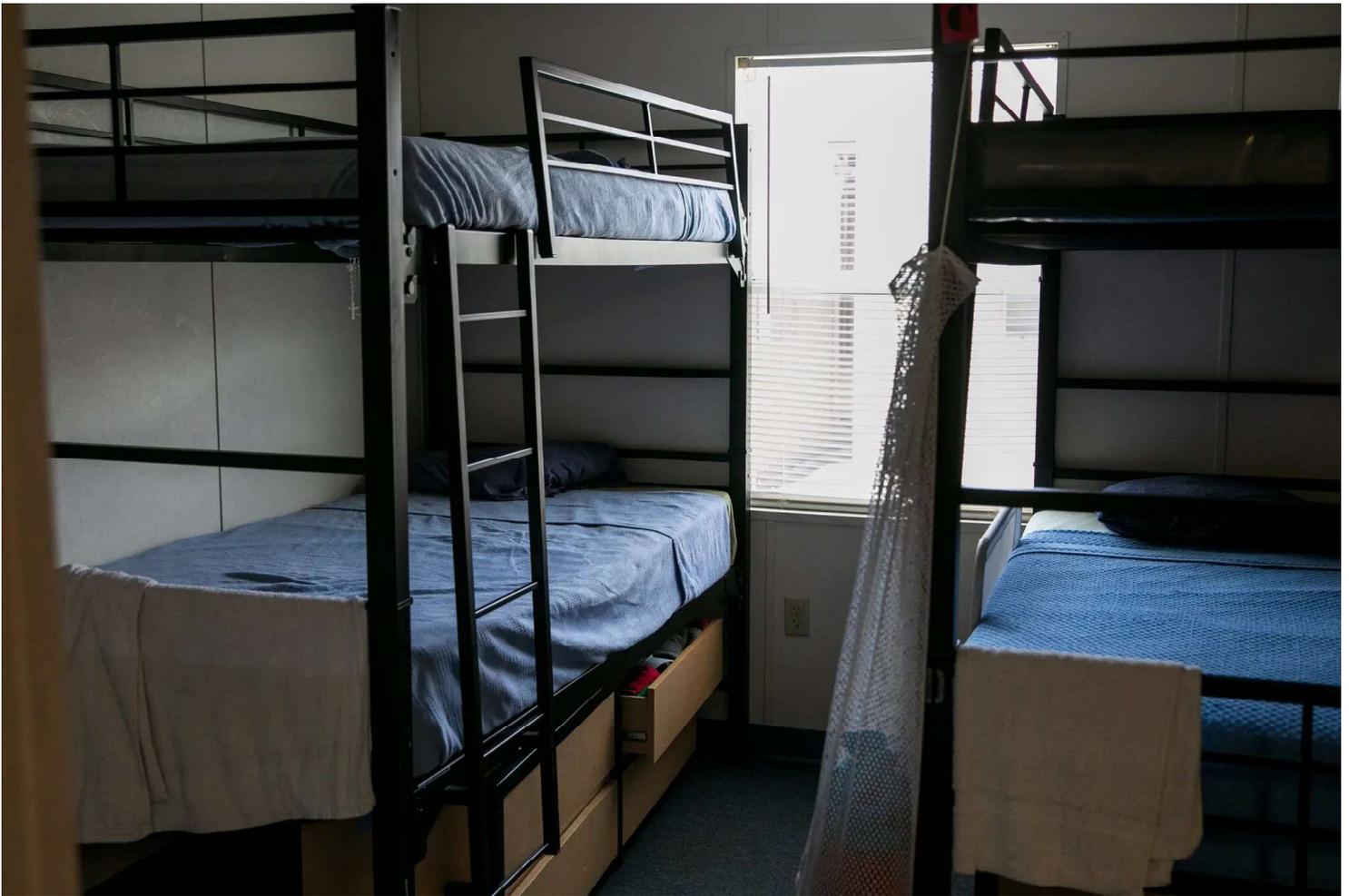
He said that his wife was not given the option to leave their child behind.

On average, about 175 children a day were held in ICE detention last year, up from about 25 children a day at the end of the Biden administration, according to data from the Deportation Data Project, which is current as of October. (Under President Biden, families taken into custody after entering the United States were sometimes kept temporarily in hold rooms or other facilities for processing.)

As of mid-January, there were about 1,400 people at Dilley, including about 500 children and 450 parents, according to RAICES, a nonprofit organization that provides legal services to families inside Dilley. (About 450 single women are being held there in a separate part of the facility.)

A promotional video by CoreCivic, a private prison company that runs Dilley, depicts a dormlike setting, with bunk beds, an outdoor playground, a volleyball court, a no-frills library and a pantry with animal crackers and other snacks.

Families describe a different reality: inadequate medical care, lights kept on all night, scant drinking water and little education.



A dorm-style bedroom where women and children were housed at the facility in 2019. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

The detention center is surrounded by barbed wire, and most families sleep in rooms shared with other families. Children often lose weight and get sick. Recently, there were two confirmed cases of measles. Some children have become suicidal and had panic attacks, families and lawyers say.

“There is a lot of desperation,” said Javier Hidalgo, a legal director with RAICES, who has visited the facility many times.

Christian Rubi, 16, said in a phone interview from Dilley that he has “a lot of anxiety attacks.”

“I start crying, shaking,” said Christian, who arrived in the United States from Mexico when he was 7 and had been living in San Antonio, where he was detained with his mother during a check-in with ICE. They have been held for more than

four months. “I just want to get out of here,” he said. “It’s hell.”

A mother seeking asylum from Colombia who spent two months at Dilley this fall wrote that her daughter, 6, had previously been an engaged first grader in New York City. Art was her favorite subject. But she regressed at Dilley.

“She has started to wet her pants again since coming here,” the mother, Kelly Vargas, wrote in an affidavit in October. “She is also asking at night to drink milk from my breasts. She hasn’t had breast milk in four years.”

The Department of Homeland Security said, “Detainees are provided with three meals a day, clean water, clothing, bedding, showers, soap and toiletries.”

“Children have access to teachers, classrooms and curriculum booklets for math, reading, and spelling,” the agency added. “All of this is generously funded by the U.S. taxpayer.”

The government has struggled for many years with the question of how to handle children who enter the country unlawfully with their parents. Many of the complaints about conditions, including extended stays and the emotional distress of children in detention, stretch back to the Obama administration.

During Mr. Trump’s first term, his administration separated children from their parents at the southern border as a way to deter unauthorized entries. His administration also kept children, including infants, in fetid, overcrowded Border Patrol facilities for weeks. Border crossings are now low, and the Trump administration has not used such tactics during his second term.

But lawyers for families say that under President Trump, federal agencies are breaking the terms of a 1997 settlement agreement, which requires the government to provide basic care and education to undocumented children in their custody. It requires age-appropriate instruction in subjects like science, math and reading in a classroom setting.

The agreement has its origins in a class-action lawsuit filed in 1985 against the government over its treatment of detained migrant children. The Clinton administration agreed to settle the lawsuit, establishing standards for the detention of minors.

Under the settlement, children are supposed to be transferred out of immigrant detention within about 20 days. The Trump administration is fighting in court to end the settlement, arguing that it incentivizes unlawful border crossings and undermines immigration enforcement.

Another issue raised by the Trump administration's enforcement efforts is what happens to children left behind when their parents are detained. Many remain with family and friends; some have ended up in state custody.

## 'Not Really Education At All'



A classroom inside the Dilley facility in 2019. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

At Dilley, children of different ages and grades are grouped together for one-hour classes, which often consist of basic work sheets or coloring. After several weeks, the lessons are repeated, according to families and lawyers.

“In high school, I was taking chemistry, geometry, history and English,” said Christian, the 16-year-old who had been living in San Antonio. At Dilley, he said, “they don’t teach you anything.”

Christian said that high school students were handed a sheet to color in the American flag and another to search for the 50 states. He has quit attending class.

Sometimes, children are turned away, because the class size is limited to 12 to 15 students.

Aury, a Venezuelan mother who was detained along with her three children, 10, 8 and 7, during a scheduled ICE check-in in San Antonio in December and held at Dilley until late January, said her children became upset when they were not allowed into the classroom. There was little stimulation otherwise.

She said they repeatedly asked her whether they had done something wrong to be confined.

The government had seemed to be making plans to set up an in-person school at Dilley by hiring Stride Inc., a for-profit company that primarily offers virtual education, according to public records and job postings.

But that did not happen.

In a statement, Stride said “we are not providing education services at this facility.” The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to questions about Stride, or who is currently providing education at Dilley.

Leecia Welch, who is chief legal counsel at Children’s Rights and represents detained children in a class-action legal case, said that the offerings at Dilley were “not really education at all.”



Protesters demonstrated outside Dilley in January. Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

As more children have been detained, their American schools often must piece together where they have gone.

In Columbia Heights, Minn., a suburb of Minneapolis, several children were taken to Dilley, including 5-year-old Liam, whose release was ordered by a judge. Two brothers were sent there with their mother and later released. While there, school officials said, the brothers recognized another child in the cafeteria: a fifth-grade girl, who had been missing from their school for weeks.

ICE has sporadically released families, sometimes without explanation. In late January, several dozen families were allowed to go free.

Hundreds remain. Edison, the 13-year-old, has now been at Dilley for 58 days. He has been having recurring episodes during which he feels despondent, his father said. He crawls under a bunk bed and weeps uncontrollably.

“You can make all sorts of improvements to Dilley, but it’s still going to be a prison,” said Ms. Welch, the class-action lawyer, who regularly visits Dilley to assess conditions.

“You can improve education, and they should,” she added, but “it will still be a place with sick, sad children.”

Edgar Sandoval, Pooja Salhotra, Jessica Silver-Greenberg and Katie Thomas contributed reporting. Susan C. Beachy contributed research.

**Miriam Jordan** reports from a grass roots perspective on immigrants and their impact on the demographics, society and economy of the United States.

**Sarah Mervosh** covers education for The Times, focusing on K-12 schools.

**Allison McCann** is a reporter and graphics editor at The Times who covers immigration.

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