

On other side of border, Mexico detaining thousands of migrant children

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UPI, SEPT. 17, 2018



Mexican immigration officials in Tamaulipas state give instructions to a group of Central American immigrants intercepted as they crossed the country on Feb. 3. Photo by José Martínez/EPA-EFE

MEXICO CITY, Sept. 17 (UPI) -- As the United States grapples with the separation of immigrant families, the same thing is happening across the border in Mexico.

When families with children are caught inside Mexico without papers, they are often detained in prison-like conditions and adolescents are often split from their parents.

Mexican law prohibits detaining migrant children, but it happens anyway because state-run children's shelters lack the capacity to handle the tens of thousands of children, mostly from Central American countries. Instead, Mexican immigration authorities detain children and their families and then deport them together after 60 days if there is no political asylum petition.

Official statistics show Mexico detained 16,191 migrant children from January to July 2018. Of those 8,662 were between the ages of 12 and 17; 7,529 were under age

12. Those under 12 are housed with their families; adolescents are detained separately.

Most of those apprehended under age 12 were traveling with at least one adult family member, but 432 were traveling without family.

Migrant advocates in Mexico have renewed their calls for the Mexican government to improve how it treats the migrant families and children it detains after the outcry this summer over the Trump administration's policy of separating families at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Not a crime in Mexico

Unlike in the United States, Mexico does not criminalize the unauthorized entry of migrants, Madeleine Penman, [Amnesty International](#)'s Mexico researcher, told UPI. When immigration agents discover migrants without papers they take them into custody, placing them in migrant detention centers until they are deported.

It's a policy known as "assisted return," Penman said, noting that Mexico only uses the term deportation for migrants who have violated their visa conditions.

"In 2016, more than 40,000 children were detained in immigration detention. In 2017, child detentions decreased to about 18,000, with the decline mostly because of reduced migration through Mexico. But this year, child detentions have picked up again and 16,000 children have already been through migrant detention centers," Penman said, citing official statistics from Mexico's National Migration Institute.

Most of the migrant children detained by Mexico this year come from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. For those under 12, almost 3,500 came from Honduras and almost 3,000 came from Guatemala, with most of these accompanied by family members.

"We've seen a number of cases of babies in detention for weeks on end, and there are mothers breastfeeding in detention centers," Penman said.

Conditions in migrant detention

"The problem is that officials -- out of negligence, out of will, or lack of capacity -- are not able to enforce the law in Mexico prohibiting child detention," said Ximena Suárez Enríquez, the Washington Office on Latin America's assistant director for Mexico, a human rights lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

Mexican immigration authorities can only detain irregular migrants. Political asylum seekers are not detained and are instead released into the community until their application is processed and approved.

Mexico's Human Rights Ombudsman has a dedicated office for migrant rights, headed by Edgar Corzo. The ombudsman has called for Mexican authorities to comply with the law prohibiting detention of migrant children.

The ombudsman issued a recommendation for implementing effective migrant child protection in May in a case of an adolescent Honduran girl arrested in Guanajuato and held in Mexico City's Iztapapala migrant detention facility, where she was raped. She filed a complaint against the facility. But Mexico's immigration authorities deported her to Honduras before an investigation could occur.

Lack of legal protection

Many of the state-run community shelters are similar to the migrant detention facilities, afflicted by negligence, abuse and lack of legal protection.

"Mexican federal and state laws are meant to protect all children," said Alberto Xicotencatl Carrasco, director of the Casa del Migrante in Saltillo, a migrant shelter run by the Catholic Church. "But what happens with migrant children and their families is that federal and state authorities pass the buck off between each other, leaving children in legal limbo and so children do not receive appropriate protection."

"There are many unaccompanied children and the federal immigration authorities send them to state-run children's shelters. But these shelters aren't equipped to provide these children with legal representation and so the child just remains in the shelter. Should they be given political asylum or repatriated? The state-run shelter cannot handle those questions. We have seen cases where unaccompanied migrant children are in state-run shelters for more than a year because they don't have legal representation and they don't have legal status in Mexico," Carrasco said.

The detention facilities and state-run community shelters in Tapachula, Chiapas, illustrate the problems. It's the first Mexican city many migrants encounter traveling north from Guatemala en route to the United States.

Tapachula's migrant detention center is Mexico's largest, and a hub for Mexico's detention of Central Americans crossing from Guatemala. Other large migrant detention facilities are in Veracruz and Mexico City.

In 2015 and 2016, a Citizen's Council with unprecedented access to Mexico's migrant detention centers calculated that 2,000 Central American children arrived in Tapachula each month.

Tapachula's state-run children's shelter has capacity for 64 children.

The children's shelters' minuscule capacity means that Tapachula's migrant detention facility is the only facility Mexican authorities can use to house children detained by immigration authorities.

Hope for change

Migrant advocates are hopeful for change with Mexico's new president taking office on Dec. 1. Corzo recently called on president-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador to end the practice of detaining migrant children.

López Obrador campaigned on a message of wanting Mexico to welcome migrants. His nominee for Interior Minister, Olga Sanchez, also said she wants "a more humane, more empathetic policy" toward migrants. The Interior Ministry runs Mexico's immigration enforcement system.

Sanchez said last week Mexico would not be a policeman for migrants for the United States.