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ANALYSIS

'Why Is This Happening to Us?' Daily Number of Kids in ICE Detention Jumps 6x Under Trump

As the Trump administration detains large numbers of kids, advocates worry 'it's only a matter of time before we see a child die.'

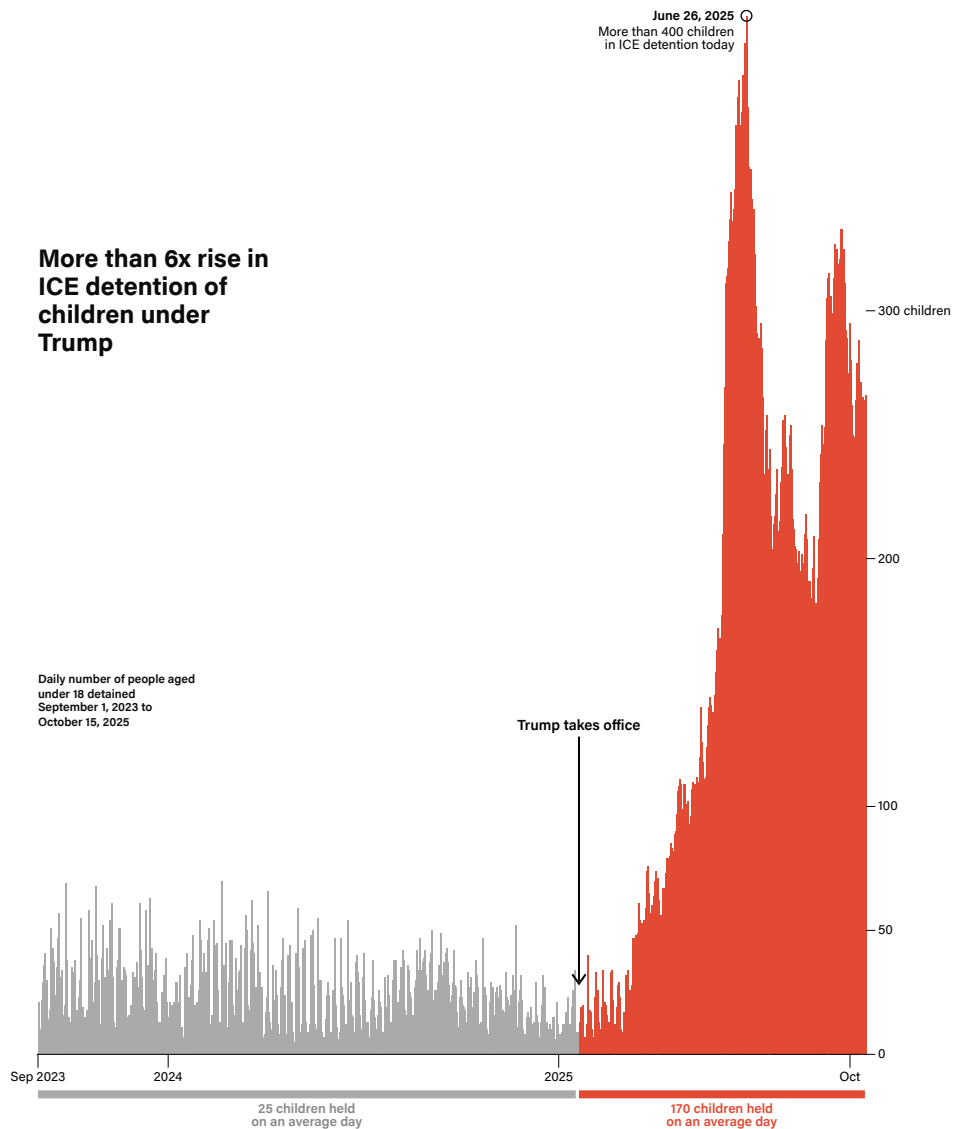


Families detained at the Dilley Immigration Processing Center in Texas wave signs during a demonstration on Saturday, Jan. 24, 2026. BRENDA BAZÁN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By ANNA FLAGG and SHANNON HEFFERNAN

The number of children in Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention on a given day has skyrocketed, jumping more than sixfold since the start of the second Trump administration. The Marshall Project analyzed data obtained by the [Deportation Data Project](#) and found that ICE held around 170 children on an average day under Trump. During the last 16 months of the Biden administration, ICE held around 25 children a day.

More than 6x rise in ICE detention of children under Trump



The Marshall Project’s analysis found that on some days, ICE held 400 children or more. The data covers September 2023 to mid-October 2025, meaning it does not include the surge of arrests from recent immigration enforcement operations in Minnesota. Nor does the data include children in the custody of the Border Patrol or the Office of Refugee Resettlement, where children are held without a guardian.

The Dilley Immigration Processing Center in Texas is the main facility for family detention. U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro spent two-and-a-half hours inside Dilley on Wednesday, visiting parents and children. He said that the 1,100 detainees housed at the facility included a 2-month-old infant. “They are literally being treated as prisoners,” said Castro, a Democrat from San Antonio, in a live-streamed video. “This is a monstrous machine.”

In 2021, Biden largely halted the practice of family detention, and the Dilley facility, which had mostly housed families, closed in 2024. But the Trump administration revived the practice last year, and the facility, which is located about 75 miles outside of San Antonio, reopened.

The detainment of children by ICE has led to protests in recent weeks, both inside and outside Dilley. On Wednesday, state police used pepper spray on people protesting outside.

Immigration attorney Eric Lee was visiting clients at the facility on Saturday when staff abruptly told him to leave. Outside, he could hear a large group of children and women detained inside chanting, "Let us out." Lee said he later learned that families inside the detention center had gotten news that people across the country were protesting [the detainment of 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos](#), whose story went viral amid the backlash against the Trump administration's recent immigration enforcement surge in Minnesota.

Javier Hidalgo, legal director at the Texas-based immigration advocacy group [RAICES](#) said he's seen many young children like Liam in Dilley. "That's very much the norm," Hidalgo said. "That's what the government is spending taxpayer money on."

A previous Marshall Project analysis found that [ICE has booked at least 3,800 children into detention since Trump took office last year](#). At least 1,000 children were held longer than 20 days, a court-ordered limit on child detention.

"Every single day that a kid is in a place like this, they deteriorate," Hidalgo said. "I've seen [them] withdraw. They lose weight; they just get physically worse."

Children being detained with their families as part of immigration raids has become a common occurrence across the country. [According to school officials in Columbia Heights, Minnesota](#), four children, including Liam, have been detained from their district during recent raids.

A 7-year-old in Portland, Oregon, was taken from a hospital parking lot in January with her family, after her parents took her to the emergency room, according to [Oregon Live](#). As ProPublica reported, a 6-year-old boy in Chicago was [detained with his mother in a large apartment raid](#) during "Operation Midway Blitz."

The Marshall Project spoke with three different lawyers representing children who were held with their families at Dilley. They said their clients were often taken into detention during in-person check-ins and had pending cases that could result in them remaining in the country legally. The lawyers believe their clients were detained not because of any danger they posed, but because the Trump administration is trying to deport as many people as possible.

"They're probably the easiest catch for a lot of immigration officials," said Veronica Franco Salazar, a Houston-based immigration lawyer.

In court documents, families have described [horrific conditions while detained with their children](#) in Dilley. They reported moldy, worm-filled food and foul-tasting, undrinkable water. With little for children to do, some resorted to playing with rocks. Parents worried about the psychological toll of detention, describing children hitting themselves in their faces or wetting themselves despite being potty-trained.

During his visit, Castro said that he heard many families talk about the psychological toll of detention. He spent half an hour with Liam, and said Liam's father, Adrian Conejo Arias, told him Liam has been depressed and sleeping a lot. Liam remained asleep in his father's arms during the visit with Castro. Arias said Liam had been asking about his classmates and the bunny hat he was wearing when detained. The congressman said he told the father that children at Liam's school were still saving a spot for him at his desk.

CoreCivic, the private company running the Dilley facility, declined to answer a detailed list of questions. "Our responsibility is to care for each person respectfully and humanely while they receive the legal due process that they are entitled to," Brian Todd, a public affairs employee at CoreCivic, told The Marshall Project in an emailed statement. Todd referred all questions to ICE, which did not respond to emails.

Kristin Kumpf, coordinator for the National Coalition to End Family and Child Detention, explained that the public may see videos or photos of the moments people are taken from their

homes or snatched off the street, but there is less attention to the conditions children endure in the black box of detention.

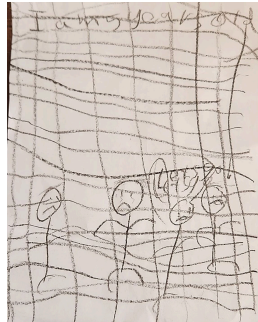
"It's only a matter of time before we see a child die within Dilley or another facility," Kumpf said.

Hayam El-Gamal and her five children, including 5-year-old twins, have been locked inside Dilley for eight grueling months. Lee, who represents the family, said they've received poor medical care and are suffering from psychological stress.

"They're calling me crying every day," Lee said. "It's an unmitigated horror show, and there's no other way to put it."

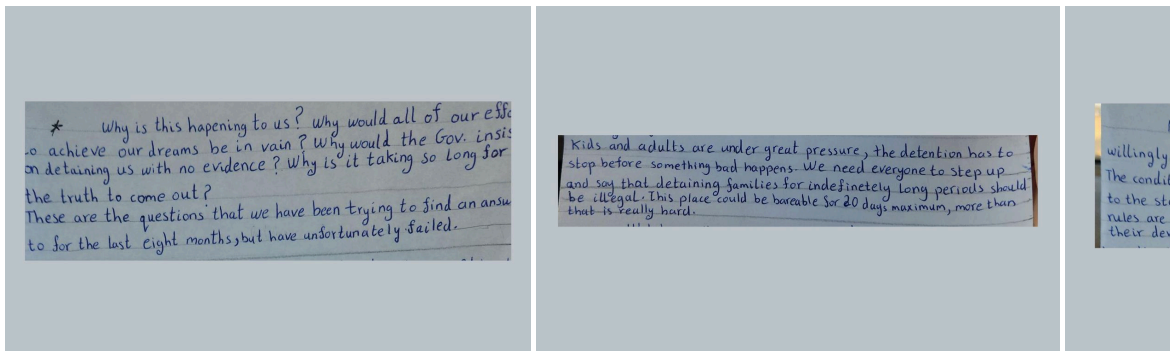
El-Gamal's husband, Mohamed Sabry Soliman, is facing charges for attacking people at an event in Colorado supporting Israeli hostages in Gaza. At least 13 people were injured in the attack, and one person died, according to prosecutors. Soliman told detectives his family knew nothing of the attack, according to court documents, and an FBI agent testified they were not involved. The family's lawyer said they are being unfairly punished for crimes they had no part in.

Lee recounted how one of El-Gamal's children had appendicitis while in detention and "was left writhing on the floor of the facility screaming and in pain." Lee said facility staff just gave him Tylenol, and it was only when he started vomiting that the child was taken to urgent care.



A drawing by a 5-year-old girl detained at the Dilley Immigration Processing Center in Texas with her mother Hayam El-Gamal. "I am 5 years old" is written at the top of the page. Lower down, next to stick figures, are the words "let us go." COURTESY OF ERIC LEE, LEE & GODSHALL-BENNETT, LLP

"Why is this happening to us?" El-Gamal's eldest daughter, 18-year-old Habiba Soliman, asked in a handwritten statement provided to The Marshall Project by Lee. "It's very easy to see the truth about this place and about us. The people need to be truthful to themselves and follow the facts."



Excerpts from a handwritten statement by Habiba Soliman, the eldest of Hayam El-Gamal's five children. El-Gamal and her children, ages 5 to 18, have been locked inside Dilley for eight months. COURTESY OF ERIC LEE, LEE & GODSHALL-BENNETT, LLP

Lee said he believes ICE is retaliating against Habiba Soliman for speaking out about her family’s long detention. She was recently moved to a different area of the facility. Lee said the timing of the move, many months after her 18th birthday, but shortly after she spoke to the press about her long detainment, suggested it was punishment. ICE did not respond to questions about the reason for the separation. Lee said she has faced threats of being moved to a different facility altogether if she didn’t behave.

“I will never forget the look of fear and helplessness on my mother’s face as she watched me being taken away and couldn’t do anything to prevent it,” Habiba Soliman wrote in her statement. “We need everyone to step up and say that detaining families for indefinitely long periods should be illegal.”

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