

Conditions in Detention Centers at the U.S. Border

Compelling Question: What is the humanitarian crisis at the border and what can we do about it?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	50–60 Minutes	Reading: R1, R7 Writing: W2 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2 Language: L4, L6
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Huddled Mass or Second Class?: Challenging Anti-Immigrant Bias in the U.S.](#)
- [‘Migrant Caravan’ and the People Seeking Asylum](#)
- [What Should be Done about DACA?](#)
- [Why are Families Being Separated and Detained at the Border?](#)
- [Who are the Children at Our Border?](#)

Children’s and Young Adult Literature

- [Books about Immigration and Immigrants](#)

Other Resources

- [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)
- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)
- [Myths and Facts About Immigrants and Immigration \(en Español\)](#)
- [Safe and Inclusive Schools for All](#)

LESSON OVERVIEW

Over the past year, the humanitarian crisis at the border has worsened for migrants and those seeking asylum. The problems now go well beyond the forced family separations and detentions that were highlighted in the summer of 2018. Migrant children are being held in overcrowded, unsanitary and dangerous detention facilities in violation of an agreement which requires that children be moved quickly. Over the past several weeks, the DHS (Department of Homeland Security) Inspector General, Congressional representatives, lawyers, physicians, journalists and others have visited facilities in Texas and Florida and report overcrowded, squalid and unsafe conditions in these detention facilities. As a result, legislation has been introduced to ensure protections for migrants and the House Judiciary and Oversight Committees announced that they will hold hearings about the conditions at detention centers.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the conditions in the detention facilities, reflect on the impact this has on migrants and those seeking asylum and explore possible actions to address the humanitarian crisis.

[Note to Teacher: It is important to reflect on and consider that you may have students in your classroom who are immigrants, documented and undocumented, or people who are seeking asylum and/or have family members who identify in this way. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, taking into consideration the extent to which they are a minority or majority of your classroom and plan accordingly. Further, it is possible that if the students have not shared this previously, they may disclose it during the course of the lesson. That information should only come from the student directly and young people do not always feel comfortable sharing this information with other people. If you have students in your class who fit into either of these categories and actually want to discuss their situations, talk with them in advance and determine the best way for them to discuss this topic while feeling comfortable and safe.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the current conditions at detention facilities on the U.S. southern border.
- Students will reflect on the experiences and conditions of those who are migrants and seeking asylum.
- Students will identify action items they and others can take to address the current humanitarian crisis on the border.

Key Words

- | | |
|-------------|--------------|
| allegations | detention |
| asylum | deter |
| clamoring | disputed |
| conditions | hearings |
| deported | hygiene |
| detainees | migrants |
| desperately | mistreatment |

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Inside the Migrant Detention Center in Clint, Texas (2019, 26 min. podcast, *The Daily*, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/01/podcasts/the-daily/migrant-children-border-detention-clint-texas.html)
- [Background Information: Migrants and Detention Centers](#) (one copy for each student, optional)
- [Quotes of Eyewitness Accounts](#) (select some or all of the nine quotes in advance and have them ready for placement around the room or project on board/smartboard)
- “Government Watchdog Finds Squalid Conditions in Border Centers” (*The New York Times*, July 2, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/us/politics/border-center-migrant-detention.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share, one copy for each student)
- Chart paper and markers

Key Words (cont.)

overcrowding
squalid
substantiated
unprocessed
urgency
vile
violations

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing

1. Either as homework (preferable) the night prior to teaching this lesson or in class, have students listen to the 26-minute podcast: [Inside the Migrant Detention Center in Clint, Texas](#). Have them write a short response essay about what they heard on the podcast.
2. After listening to the podcast, engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What did you learn about the detention centers in Clint, Texas?
 - How were the children being treated? How do you feel hearing about this?
 - What do you wish the podcast interviewer had asked?
 - What more do you want to know?
3. Ask students: *What have you heard about the conditions in detention facilities in the Southern border for people seeking asylum?*
4. Share some or all of the [Background Information: Migrants and Detention Centers](#) by either summarizing the information aloud or providing it as a handout and read aloud together.

Exploring Quotes of Eyewitness Accounts

1. Place some or all of the nine [Quotes of Eyewitness Accounts](#) around the room and post a sheet of chart paper and marker next to each one. Explain to students that over the past months, a variety of professionals have visited and inspected facilities on the border including members of Congress, attorneys, physicians, the DHS Inspector General and others. Instruct students to move around the room, reading each of the eyewitness accounts and share their responses to the following three questions on the chart paper provided next to each quote. Allow ten minutes for this process.

Note: As an alternative, project the quotes on board/smart board and have students write their responses on paper.

 - What does the account/quote mean to you?
 - What is your reaction to the quote? How do you feel? What do you think?
 - How should the situation or concern conveyed in the quote be addressed?
2. As the process winds down and students are on their last quote, have them stay where they are and discuss their responses with each other.

3. Reconvene the class and engage students in a discussion using the following questions:
 - What was it like to read all of these eyewitness accounts/quotes?
 - Would anyone like to share their thoughts, feelings and/or reflections about any of the accounts/quotes?
 - What is your overall impression of the conditions of these facilities at the border?
 - What more do you want to know?

Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of the article, "[Government Watchdog Finds Squalid Conditions in Border Centers](#)" and give students 10–15 minutes to read the article silently. As they read, have students underline any words, phrases and quotes that stand out to them.

Note: You can also assign the reading of this article the night before for homework.

2. After reading, engage students in a brief discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
 - What are some of the conditions at the detention facilities that stood out to you?
 - What do you think it's like for people who are staying in these facilities?
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - What more do you want to know?
 - Do you think the visits and report by the Inspector General of DHS will have an impact? How so?
 - What does this quote by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi mean to you: "The inhumanity at the border is a challenge to the conscience of America."
 - What do you think should be done about what's happening in these detention centers?

Actions We Can Take

1. Following up on the last question in the reading activity above, ask students again: What do you think should be done about what's happening in these detention centers? Have a quick brainstorm and then divide students into some or all the following groups:
 - Lawmakers: Members of the House and Senate
 - General public (concerned U.S. resident)
 - Department of Homeland Security
 - News reporters and media
 - Young people
 - Community organizations
 - Faith-based organizations
2. In their groups, have students play the role of the group/person assigned to them, brainstorming ideas of what they can do about what's happening at detention centers from the perspective of their assigned role. For example, if they are in the faith-based organization group, one of their ideas may be to reach out to a church, synagogue or mosque on the southern border near a detention center and partner with them to provide help or supplies. Have the groups come up with 3–5 ideas that will be shared later with the rest of the class. Give students 10 minutes to complete this task.

Closing

Have each small group share one of their ideas with the class.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“DHS Inspector General Finds ‘Dangerous Overcrowding’ In Border Patrol Facilities”](#) (NPR July 2, 2019)
- [“Everything We Know About the Inhumane Conditions at Migrant Detention Camps”](#) (New York magazine, July 2, 2019)
- [“Management Alert - DHS Needs to Address Dangerous Overcrowding and Prolonged Detention of Children and Adults in the Rio Grande Valley”](#) (Oversight.gov)
- [“Migrant Children Are Spending Months ‘Crammed’ in a Temporary Florida Shelter”](#) (The New York Times, June 26, 2019)
- [“The horrifying conditions facing kids in border detention, explained”](#) (Vox, June 26, 2019)
- [“‘There Is a Stench’: Soiled Clothes and No Baths for Migrant Children at a Texas Center”](#) (The New York Times, June 21, 2019)
- [“Trump and His Aides Dismiss Reports of Disease and Hunger in Border Facilities”](#) (The New York Times, July 7, 2019)
- [“We went to a border detention center for children. What we saw was awful”](#) (CNN, June 25, 2019)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
Writing
W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

Background Information: Migrants and Detention Centers

- **Asylum seekers.** Migrants from Central America have been increasingly seeking refuge and protection in the U.S. from three countries known as the “Northern Triangle”—Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Mostly, they are seeking asylum, a protection given by a nation to someone who has left their home country because of a “well-founded fear of persecution,” and it allows them to stay in their new country. The U.S. has historically granted asylum to people from other countries who are already in the U.S. or at the border and meet the international law definition of a “refugee”—someone who has “been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.” While people seeking asylum do have the legal right to request asylum, it is currently illegal to enter the country without appropriate documents.
- **Zero-tolerance policy.** In May 2018, then-U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a new official government-sponsored expanded “zero-tolerance policy” for migrant families seeking to cross the border. This policy announcement indicated that all migrants seeking to cross the border without documentation would be referred to the Department of Justice (DOJ) for prosecution of a crime, rendering their children unaccompanied minors. Children accompanying adults would, therefore, be deliberately separated from their parents and held at juvenile shelters while the adults would be sent to adult detention facilities. Subsequently, President Trump signed an Executive Order which claimed to end family separations at the border. However, it did not guarantee that families would not be separated and it allowed for immigrant children and families to be detained indefinitely.
- **Is there a humanitarian crisis?** Over the past year, the humanitarian crisis at the border has worsened for migrants. The problems now go well beyond the forced family separations and detentions that were highlighted in the summer of 2018. Migrant children are being held in overcrowded, unsanitary and dangerous detention facilities as reported by the DHS (Department of Homeland Security) Inspector General, Congressional representatives, attorneys, pediatricians and physicians, journalists and others who have visited facilities in Texas and Florida. This is a violation of an agreement which requires that children be moved quickly from DHS (Department of Homeland Security) custody to ORR (Office of Refugee Resettlement)—and that they be housed in safe and sanitary conditions. In response to these reports about conditions in the detention facilities, Kevin K. McAleenan, acting secretary of homeland security, and Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II, acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, maintained that the facilities were safe. McAleenan said, “What I can tell you right now is that there’s adequate food, water. For over a year, there’s been showers there.” He and Cuccinelli did acknowledge that government resources have been strained by the surge of migrants seeking asylum.
- **“Remain in Mexico” policy.** At the same time, the Administration is expanding its “Remain in Mexico” policy, sending asylum seekers back to Mexico to wait for their opportunity to seek asylum.
- **Flores Settlement Agreement.** Many say the current conditions for children violate the Flores Settlement Agreement, which arose out of *Flores v. Reno*, a 1987 California case. That lawsuit was settled with an agreement which outlined standards for the detention and release of unaccompanied minors (children under 18). The settlement requires that minors who are taken into custody must be housed in facilities that meet certain standards, including state standards for housing and care of dependent children. Under the agreement, the government is required to place minors in the least restrictive age-appropriate setting. It also requires immigration officials to provide minors with (1) access to food and drinking water; (2) medical assistance in the event of emergencies; (3) toilets and sinks; (4) adequate temperature control and ventilation; (5) adequate supervision to protect minors from others; (6) separation from unrelated adults whenever possible; and (7) contact with family members who were with the child when detailed.
- **Custody data.** In May 2019, the DHS Inspector General issued a [management alert](#) about dangerous overcrowding observed in the El Paso area during their unannounced inspections of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) holding facilities. During their visits to five Border Patrol facilities in the Rio Grande Valley, they observed serious overcrowding of UACs (“unaccompanied alien children”) and families, populations defined as “at-risk” in TEDS (Transport, Escort, Detention and Search) standards. In addition, Border Patrol’s custody data indicates that 826 (31%) of the 2,669 children at these facilities had been held longer than the 72 hours generally permitted under the TEDS standards and the Flores Agreement.

- **Sponsoring minors.** Current policies make it more difficult for children who cross the border to be released from detention quickly. The federal government is obligated to release them to approved “sponsors” (often extended family members) who the child can live with while waiting for their case to be heard. The Trump administration has added requirements for sponsors and those living with sponsors (e.g., fingerprints, background checks, sometimes DNA tests) as an enforcement strategy. Since the sponsors (and others living with them) are sometimes undocumented immigrants, they are less likely to complete all these requirements because they fear being deported. As a result, children have fewer options for sponsors and are staying at these facilities longer. And, in some cases sponsors were not even told that the children were in the United States.
- **Congressional response.** Congress passed additional funding for the Department of Homeland Security in June 2019. However, many House Democrats voted against the bill because they were concerned that there were insufficient protections for migrants.
- The House of Representatives Judiciary and Oversight Committees recently announced that they will hold hearings about the conditions at detention centers.

Quotes of Eyewitness Accounts

“This baby had been given a new onesie and given a plastic blanket, and despite her best efforts, her little newborn’s fingers and toes were still blue.”

—Dr. Lisa Ayoub-Rodriguez, pediatrician in El Paso

“Just left the first CBP (Customs and Border Protection) facility. The conditions are far worse than we ever could have imagined. 15 women in their 50s-60s sleeping in a small concrete cell, no running water. Weeks without showers. All of them separated from their families. This is a human rights crisis.”

—Congresswoman Madeleine Dean

"If you want water, just drink from a toilet.' That's what border patrol told one thirsty woman we met on today's [#DemsAtTheBorder](#) trip. These are the same CBP personnel who threatened to throw burritos at members of Congress. Changes must be made."

—Representative Judy Chu

Sevier examined 39 children under the age of 18 facing conditions including “extreme cold temperatures, lights on 24 hours a day, no adequate access to medical care, basic sanitation, water, or adequate food.” All 39 exhibited signs of trauma. Sevier told ABC News that the teenagers she observed were not able to wash their hands while in custody, which she called “tantamount to intentionally causing the spread of disease.” Teen mothers in custody told her they were not able to clean their children’s bottles: “To deny parents the ability to wash their infant’s bottles is unconscionable and could be considered intentional mental and emotional abuse. The conditions within which they are held could be compared to torture facilities.”

—Dolly Lucio Sevier, physician who visited facility
in McAllen, Texas

"Toothbrushes are not provided. Few are allowed to shower. Toilets are extremely dirty and sinks contained within lack of running water, soap or towels."

"Most children are wearing filthy clothing and have not been bathed or been provided clean clothing."

In one instance, a Border Patrol officer used a lollipop to coax a crying 6-year-old boy back into his cell. "He wept almost inconsolably for most of the time," attorneys stated.

One lawyer, who interviewed 15 children detained at the Clint station last week, depicted similarly squalid conditions, according to the legal filing. "Never before in my life have I witnessed, heard of, or smelled such degradation and inhumane treatment of children in federal immigration custody."

—Descriptions from attorneys who met with migrant children in Border Patrol sites, including sworn statements about conversations with minors at the Clint station.

“The American people must see what is being carried out in their name. The Hispanic Caucus led a delegation of members of Congress to visit 2 border patrol facilities. At the El Paso Border Patrol Station #1, women from Cuba, some grandmothers, crammed into a prison-like cell with one toilet, but no running water to drink from or wash their hands with. Concrete floors, cinder-block walls, steel toilets. Many said they had not bathed for 15 days. Some had been separated from children, some had been held for more than 50 days. Several complained they had not received their medications, including one for epilepsy. Members of Congress comforted them when the women broke down. They asked us to take down their names and let everyone know they need help. They also feared retribution. We then went to the Clint Border Patrol Station that warehouses children and some parents. The tents outside, used during the surge recently, were dark and surrounded by chain link fences. The showers—mobile units—were dank, dirty and only too small in number for the hundreds of people there just a few weeks ago. And a boy, perhaps three years old, pressed his face against the dirty glass of a locked steel door. He smiled big and tried to talk to us through the thick glass. His family—or another—ate Ramen on the floor a few feet away.”

—Congressman Joaquin Castro

“So, on Wednesday, we received reports from children of a lice outbreak in one of the cells where there were about twenty-five children, and what they told us is that six of the children were found to have lice. And so they were given a lice shampoo, and the other children were given two combs and told to share those two combs, two lice combs, and brush their hair with the same combs, which is something you never do with a lice outbreak. And then what happened was one of the combs was lost, and Border Patrol agents got so mad that they took away the children’s blankets and mats. They weren’t allowed to sleep on the beds, and they had to sleep on the floor on Wednesday night as punishment for losing the comb. So you had a whole cell full of kids who had beds and mats at one point, not for everybody but for most of them, who were forced to sleep on the cement.”

—Warren Binford, attorney and children’s rights advocate, visited a Clint, Texas Border Patrol facility where 351 migrant children were detained; over 100 were under 13, and the youngest was just over 4 months.

“So many children are sick, they have the flu, and they’re not being properly treated.” Ms. Mukherjee and her colleagues observed the guards wearing full uniforms — including weapons — as well as face masks to protect themselves from the unsanitary conditions. Together, the group of six lawyers met with 60 children in Clint this week who ranged from 5 months to 17 years old. The infants were either children of minor parents, who were also detained, or had been separated from adult family members with whom they had crossed the border. The separated children were now alone, being cared for by other young detainees. “The children are locked in their cells and cages nearly all day long. A few of the kids said they had some opportunities to go outside and play, but they said they can’t bring themselves to play because they are trying to stay alive in there.”

—Elora Mukherjee, attorney and director of the Immigrants’ Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School, visited facility in Clint, TX

“The situation we found is unacceptable. US Border Patrol is holding many children, including some who are much too young to take care of themselves, in jail-like border facilities for weeks at a time without contact with family members, regular access to showers, clean clothes, toothbrushes, or proper beds. Many are sick. Many, including children as young as 2 or 3, have been separated from adult caretakers without any provisions for their care besides the unrelated older children also being held in detention. We spoke with an 11-year-old caring for his toddler brother. Both were fending for themselves in a cell with dozens of other children. The little one was quiet with matted hair, a hacking cough, muddy pants and eyes that fluttered closed with fatigue. As we interviewed the two brothers, he fell asleep on two office chairs drawn together, probably the most comfortable bed he had used in weeks. They had been separated from an 18-year-old uncle and sent to the Clint Border Patrol Station. When we met them, they had been there three weeks and counting. ‘Sometimes when we ask, we are told we will be here for months,’ said one 14-year-old who had also been at Clint for three weeks.”

—Clara Long, Senior Researcher, [Human Rights Watch](#) and Nicole Austin-Hillery, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch