Family Separations and Detentions at the Border

Updated June 27, 2019

Topic Summary

Over the past several years, migrants from Central America have been increasingly seeking refuge and protection in the United States from three countries known as the “Northern Triangle”—Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In large part, they are seeking asylum (government protection and a safe haven after fleeing persecution in their home country). In 2014, there was a surge of unaccompanied minors attempting to come to the U.S., primarily children traveling without parents or family members who were detained on the southern border.
In 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 in 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. 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.

In May 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the new official policy of the government, an 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 to be held at juvenile shelters with the adults at adult detention facilities.

Both Attorney General Sessions and Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen defended this policy. Sessions said, "We cannot and will not encourage people to bring their children by giving them blanket immunity from our laws" and Nielsen remarked, "We have to do our job. We will not apologize for doing our job. We have sworn to do this job."

During this time, the news was filled with horrific stories of children being ripped from their parents at the border and placed in detention centers and shelters, including 2,000 children separated from their parents during the first six-week period after the policy was announced. Images of children held in cages in warehouse converted detention facilities and the audio of children screaming for their parents have generated widespread outrage and heartbreak.
On June 20, 2018, 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 (i.e. in jail) indefinitely. In addition, the Order did not specify a plan to reunite the thousands of children, some as young as three months old, who have already been separated from their parents.

**Age**

11 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**

- What have you heard about children and their parents being separated and put in detention facilities at the U.S border?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about this situation?
- What do you think it is like for these children to be separated from their parents?
- What do you think it might be like for families to have to stay in detention centers?
- Is there a connection that we, as a family, have to the current situation on the border?
- What more do you want to know about what is happening?

**Questions to Dig Deeper**

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- Have you heard about other groups of people seeking asylum and what do you know about that?
Do you think families should be held in detention centers while they are waiting to go to court?

What kind of message does the indefinite detention of families and children send to our society and the world as a whole?

If you were a U.S. Senator or Representative what would you do? How would you vote on the bills that have been introduced to keep families together and make sure they are treated with compassion?

In addition to the steps already being taken, what do you think should be done about the “zero tolerance” policy?

Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions might make a difference?

- Help to organize an educational forum in your community, school or house of worship to share information and discuss the family separation policy; come up with some actions your community can engage in to make a difference.

- Direct people to sign ADL’s petition opposing attacks on the asylum and refugee systems in the U.S., or create a petition of your own.

- As a family, write a letter to your Members in Congress that expresses your views about family separation at the border and the “Keep Families Together Act.” You can use this link to find your representative and this link to find your Senators.

Additional Resources

- Who Are the Children at Our Border? (ADL Lesson Plan)

- Education Resources on Immigration, Immigrants and Anti-Immigrant Bias (Lesson plans, children's literature, other resources)

- Myths and Facts about Immigrants and Immigration
- ADL Statement on Recent DOJ/DHS "Zero Tolerance" Immigration Policy Announcement
- Letter to Attorney General Sessions and Secretary Nielsen Regarding Family Separation Policy for Migrants
- "Hidden Children of the Holocaust" Open Up About Border Situation, Say Policy Separating Migrant Children From Parents Is Unconscionable