

A firsthand report of ‘inhumane conditions’ at a migrant children’s detention facility

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Editor's Note: After our broadcast, CPB responded to our request for comment with the following statement:

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) leverages our limited resources to provide the best care possible to those in our custody, especially children. As DHS and CBP leadership have noted numerous times, our short-term holding facilities were not designed to hold vulnerable populations and we urgently need additional humanitarian funding to manage this crisis. CBP works closely with our partners at the Department of Health and Human Services to transfer unaccompanied children to their custody as soon as placement is identified, and as quickly and expeditiously as possible to ensure proper care.

All allegations of civil rights abuses or mistreatment in CBP detention are taken seriously and investigated to the fullest extent possible.

Transcript

The Associated Press details grave conditions inside a Texas migrant detention facility where 250 infants, children and teenagers were being held without adequate food, water or sanitation during a recent visit. Warren Binford, a law professor at Willamette University, joins William Brangham to share her firsthand account, what Border Patrol agents think and what's next for these children.

- **Judy Woodruff:**

But first, a new report is again casting a spotlight on the harsh conditions for migrant families and children who are being detained by the U.S. government near the Mexican border.

William Brangham gets a firsthand account about what some children are dealing with at a detention facility southeast of El Paso.

- **William Brangham:**

That's exactly right, Judy.

The Associated Press detailed conditions inside a Customs and Border Patrol detention center in Clint, Texas, where, allegedly, 250 infants, children and teenagers are being held.

According to the AP, there's not adequate food, water or sanitation inside. The report describes teen mothers and other younger kids being asked to care for infants and toddlers on their own, with little or no help from any adults.

Warren Binford is one of the lawyers that visited that Texas facility and spoke with the children being held inside. She's a law professor at Willamette University in Oregon.

Professor Binford, thank you very much for being here.

As I mentioned, you were inside this Texas facility. Can you just give us some sense of what it is you saw inside?

- **Warren Binford:**

Yes.

Basically, what we saw are dirty children who are malnourished, who are being severely neglected. They are being kept in inhumane conditions. They are essentially being warehoused, as many as 300 children in a cell, with almost no adult supervision.

We have children caring for other young children. For example, we saw a little boy in diapers — or he had no diapers on. He should have had a diaper on. He was 2 years old. And when I was asked why he didn't have diapers on, I was told he didn't need it.

He immediately urinated. And he was in the care of another child. Children cannot take care of children, and yet that's how they are trying to run this facility. The children are hardly being fed anything nutritious, and they are being medically neglected.

We're seeing a flu outbreak, and we're also seeing a lice infestation. It is — we have children sleeping on the floor. It's the worst conditions I have ever witnessed in several years of doing these inspections.

- **William Brangham:**

What you're describing is really hard to sort of put our heads around, that this is inside a U.S. government facility.

I wonder, what do we know about, where are these children's parents? Were they coming across the border alone? Did they come with their families and separated? How did they get there?

- **Warren Binford:**

Almost none of the children that we interviewed had come across the border themselves alone.

Essentially, they came across the border with family. And they are trying to be reunited with family who are living in the United States. Almost every child that I interviewed had family, parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, siblings here in the United States who are waiting for them and are ready to care for them.

- **William Brangham:**

We know the American Academy of Pediatrics, among many others, as you are testifying, said, these are not the kinds of facilities for children.

And my understanding is that, under federal law, these children are supposed to only be kept for about 72 hours, and then transferred to Health and Human Services facilities elsewhere. Is that going to happen with these children? Would that be a better outcome for these children? What do you know about their future?

- **Warren Binford:**

You know, the goal for all of these children is eventually to place them with their family.

The facilities that you're saying they're supposed to be transferred to, those are not required by law. That's just the way that the administration is doing it. These children can be placed with their families immediately, if we wanted to do that.

And so, basically, what we're doing is, we're taking children away from their family at the border. We're putting them in inhumane conditions in Border Patrol facilities, where they shouldn't be at all, not even for a few hours. And that 72 hours, that's the maximum that someone is supposed to be kept there.

And the children are supposed to be moved through these facilities as expeditiously as possible.

- **William Brangham:**

We asked CBP for a comment, and we haven't gotten one yet.

But we have heard government officials say, we were just caught flat-footed on this. We built these facilities, as you said, for single men, and now we have this influx of children. We simply don't have the capacity or the staff or the funding to properly care for these children. And Congress needs to pass more money, so that we can do our job better.

Is that your sense of what's going on there?

- **Warren Binford:**

That's exactly what I'm hearing from the Border Patrol officers who spoke to us privately in the hallways. They are on our team. They don't want the children there.

They — many of them are parents themselves. They know that these children don't belong there and they need to be with their families. They're saying that ORR and ICE are not coming to pick up these children and process them, so that they can be reunited with their families.

- **William Brangham:**

All right, Professor Warren Binford of Willamette University, thank you for your time. And thank you for coming forward with this.

- **Warren Binford:**

Thank you.