

Detention

Impact on Children

*When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him,
and plastered it with bitumen and pitch;
she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.
His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. Exodus 2:3-4*

Information:

While being in violation of immigration laws is a civil matter and not a crime; men, women, and children are increasingly being incarcerated for these infractions. Detainees are under the care and jurisdiction of federal officers but since they lack the facilities to hold them they contract with local jails and private for-profit prisons to accommodate over half of those in custody. Since most jails and prisons cannot accommodate children, including nursing infants, they are often taken into state custody. Immigrant detainees are often transferred from state to state which can prevent visitations with children and hinder efforts to gain information on their whereabouts.

In some instances families may be held at one of the two family detention centers, T. Don Hutto Family Detention Center in Texas (opened 2001) and The Berks Family Care Shelter in Pennsylvania (opened 2006), a converted prison and nursing home respectively. While these facilities permit families to remain together they are separated by gender. There are regimented schedules and limitations on communications and activities.

Insight:

Parents swept up in immigration raids or otherwise in custody of immigration find themselves, like Moses' mother, with few choices for their young children. Unable to care for them, the state takes custody and often parents do not know where their children end up. The matter is further complicated if there are language barriers. For families who end up at one of the family detention centers, their situation is not much better.

In 2007 there were civil suits brought against Hutto because children were forced to wear uniforms, not permitted to have toys, and limited to one hour of recreation per day. Due to the lawsuits the situation has improved but these prison cells are not a suitable place to raise children. There

continues to be allegations of substandard food and nutrition, the inability to access medical and legal services, and unsanitary conditions. Recently there have been documented cases by inmates and guards about the facility serving maggot infested food and at another detention center female immigration detainees were watched by male guards while showering.

There are alternatives to detention which are available at a fraction of the cost, as little as \$12 per day.¹ Ankle bracelet monitoring, intensive supervision, and posting bond are a part of these less expensive programs that have a 91% appearance rate for court appointments.² Keeping families out of secured prison-like facilities is healthier for communities and families and is more cost effective.



¹ Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS38808+25-Mar-2009+PRN20090325>.

² See 1.

These alternatives to detention maintain family unity, allow better access to legal representation that is close to home, and permits families to maintain a sense of normalcy during this critical period of formation.

Invitation to Act:

The Detention Watch Network offers educational materials, stories from immigrants, and an interactive map of detention centers across the country. (www.detentionwatchnetwork.org)

Women's Refugee and Asylum Commission have educational information and resources on the status of women and children in detention centers. (www.womensrefugeecommission.org)

Congregations and other organizations are developing detention center visitation programs to provide pastoral care and support to immigrants and their families. Even if a detention center is not in the local area, consider visiting one as an education and mission project.

Voice your concerns about the treatment of families in the immigration detention process to your elected officials through letter writing and telephone campaigns.

Inquire:

In addition to education and advocacy efforts it is important to pray for families in detention. Just as Moses' mother sent him into the river with a prayer, join mothers and fathers in detention as they pray for the children they are forced to abandon.

God you are our parent, ever watchful for our safety and wellbeing. Some of your children are isolated from their communities and families, please hold them carefully so that they trust in your presence in their suffering and uncertainty. God give their parents strength and faith and help us be a source of their hope. Please help us not turn our backs on the children waiting in the reeds and the mothers and fathers who are in this terrible yet very real situation. It is in the name of Christ, who said let the children come to me that we pray. Amen.

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