

NINA MOINI: A family detention center in Dilley, Texas, has been under a spotlight since five-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos from Columbia Heights and his father were sent there last month after being detained by ICE. It's believed several other Minnesota children and their families have been sent there as well. Detention centers have been difficult to access during the second Trump administration. But a ProPublica reporter was able to go inside and speak to several children.

This week, reporter Mica Rosenberg published her story, "The Children of Dilley," along with videos and handwritten letters from inside. And Mica joins me now. Thank you so much for sharing your reporting with us, Mica.

MICA Thank you so much for having me.

ROSENBERG:

NINA MOINI: As I shared there in my introduction and it has been widely reported, it is difficult to gain access to some detention centers, and to Dilley, in particular. Tell us how you were able to gain access.

MICA Yeah, well, I had been reporting with my colleagues since last year on the impact of increased immigration enforcement around the country that's having on children and families. And I had been corresponding with various affected families and talking with mothers over email and phone calls who were detained inside the Dilley immigration center in Texas.

And I asked ICE if I could go and visit them, and I got some mixed responses. I was told they couldn't facilitate my visit. Another spokesman said that if the detainees were open to it, I could go as a visitor. So that's what I did. And I ended up meeting a couple of the families in person, just in the visitors' room. I didn't go beyond that. But then combined that reporting with dozens of interviews that I did with other detainees, both before and after that visit.

NINA MOINI: And for people who may not be familiar, can you talk a little bit about what you know about the population at Dilley? Who is there, families are there, and how that works?

MICA Yeah, I think that was one of the really surprising things about this reporting. This family detention center was opened up first during the Obama administration, and it was really built to deal with a big influx of families that were crossing the border. And they were detained upon their arrival. So it was primarily people who had never been in the United States, were coming for the first time, and were hoping to be released, maybe by applying for asylum or something else with their case.

But what has really changed since-- that that was open until President Biden shut it down in 2021. And President Trump, in his second term, quickly reopened it. But at the same time, border crossings have dropped to a record low. And so the population inside is really shifting.

And there are families that are coming in there who have actually been living in the United States for many years and picked up at various ICE operations around the country, many for families who were going to their regular check-ins or having other-- at a traffic stop. And some like Liam Ramos got a lot of attention. But there's other ones who I spoke to who were similar to him.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. I understand you spoke to more than two dozen detainees, half of them children, all of, obviously, whose parents gave you consent. Tell us a little bit about just the range of conditions that were described to you by these children.

MICA ROSENBERG: Well, there was a big range in ages of kids that I talked to. There were older teenagers, some who spoke perfect English and were in the middle of their years in high school and were sort of pulled out of their American lives, and then all the way to little, tiny babies.

There was a two-month-old that I met on a video call. And there was an 18-month-old named Amalia, who I met on video call, who was smiling and blowing me kisses. But then her mother told me that she had actually been hospitalized for more than a week with a very serious respiratory infection, and then after that, had been returned back to the detention center.

NINA MOINI: What are some of the conditions that were described by the kids of different ages that stuck out to you? Because when you talk to so many people, you start to see a pattern, right?

MICA ROSENBERG: Yeah, there was a lot of similar complaints generally about boredom and the repetitive nature of the food. The kids told me that the school was very minimal. It was only for an hour a day, and that classes were limited to 12 students of mixed ages. So some of the older kids said that they would just hand out worksheets, and it wasn't really challenging because it was aimed for children who were younger than them.

And then the mothers were the ones who really described some of the more serious concerns. They said that they had found worms and mold on their food. They said that they had heard about kids who were so distraught, they were cutting themselves, had spoken of suicide. So that was the range of things that I heard from both the children and the mothers.

Now, both the Department of Homeland Security and ICE say that no one is denied medical care. And the company, [INAUDIBLE], that runs the facility said that health and safety are their top priority. So we ran by all of these concerns with them. And that's what they got back to us with.

NINA MOINI: And you also talked with people who were released at some point from Dilley, correct? Your reporting shared that in January, last month, ICE released 200 people all at once. You kept in touch with people and met up with them after. What struck you about their experiences after leaving Dilley?

MICA ROSENBERG: Yeah, I spent time with one 14-year-old who I'd met in person in the detention center. I had, actually-- she and her mom had actually been separated from-- they were both from Honduras, but they had since moved to the United States and had grown their family. And they were both separated from her siblings, who were US citizens and were a toddler and a kindergartener.

And so I was there when they came back, and they told me how there was really an impact on them as well from that separation. The kindergartener didn't want to go to school when his mother was returned, fearing that she wouldn't be there when he came home. And she finally convinced him by promising every morning that she was going to be there when he came back.

And I went with the 14-year-old when she went back to her high school, and she was embraced by her teacher there who cried and said that she was really missed. And she wanted to jump right back in because she was worried about falling behind in school.

NINA MOINI: It struck me that when you talk to a lot of the kids of different ages, the things that they missed about being back home, a lot of them said their teachers. It was nice to read that they had such safe spaces where they were and routines. And what struck you about what they were sharing about what they missed while they were inside Dilley?

MICA ROSENBERG: I mean, as you said, a lot of them talked about missing their friends, their schools, their family. One family said that they had-- because of the suddenness of their detention, they were separated from their beloved dog. They all cried when they talked about him and not knowing what kind of care the dog was receiving. Some of them talked about more simple things that they missed. One girl said that she missed McDonald's Happy Meals and her favorite stuffed animal. So I think the kids being kids and trying to deal with their situation.

NINA MOINI: And we know in the case of Liam Conejo Ramos, his family was released from Dilley, but they now have some fear over the status of their asylum case and what comes next for them. As far as your reporting, Mica, what are you going to be tracking? Are you feeling like there are more and more people showing up to Dilley?

MICA ROSENBERG: There are still people being booked in there. And the people that are being released, a lot of them are being released with electronic ankle monitors. So they have to do constant check-ins with ICE. They're still in the middle of their immigration process. And so it's still a precarious situation for them and for others who are still being sent there.

NINA MOINI: Mica, thanks so much again for keeping track of all of this for us and sharing your reporting. Really appreciate your time.

MICA Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

ROSENBERG:

NINA MOINI: That's ProPublica reporter Micah Rosenberg.