Locking up kids

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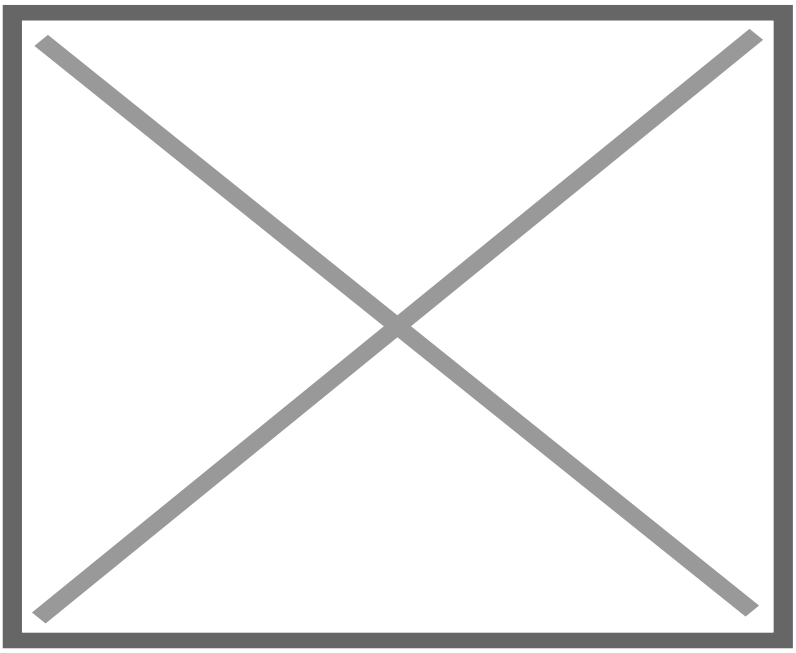

Otay Detention Center in San Diego, California, run by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, includes a facility for juveniles. Some rights reserved by bbcworldservice

President Obama's proposed $4 trillion budget wisely includes $1 billion to address the conditions in Central America that sent tens of thousands of women and children fleeing to the United States last summer. (Similar numbers are anticipated this coming summer.) Some of this money is directed at helping El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras reform their judicial systems so that fewer people have need to flee. Most of the women and children entering from Central America are victims of domestic and gang-related violence, and they would benefit from more effective local governance.

But the budget unwisely calls for increased funding to house these families in detention centers in the United States—even though human rights groups have advocated for an end to child and family detention, citing the negative effects of incarceration on children and the injustice of locking up innocent people. Despite these criticisms and the lawsuits filed to protest conditions at family detention centers, up to $850 million is slated for the "apprehension, care, and transportation of unaccompanied children and families with children apprehended along the southwest border."

Much of that money would go to Corrections Corporation of America, which operates a newly opened family detention center in Dilley, Texas. At Dilley, the largest such center in the country, 2,400 detainees will be housed at a cost of $300 per person per day. The average age of children incarcerated there is six.

There is a cheaper and more humane alternative to placing children behind razor wire. As officials at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services point out, the current immigration system already has most of the resources it needs to deal with these women and children. The vast majority don't need housing because they have relatives to stay with. What they need is not larger detention centers but more effective management of refugee cases, more immigration judges to ensure that refugee cases get a prompt hearing, and more partnerships with nongovernmental groups that resettle refugees. The solution, in other words, is to treat Central American

refugees like all other refugees and to bolster a system that already works.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration sees detention as a way to send a message to would-be asylum seekers that the United States does not welcome their presence. Meanwhile, the harmful effects on children persist. Women detained at a center in Artesia, New Mexico—since closed—reported that their children lost weight, had suicidal thoughts, and expressed despair and hopelessness.

The protocol for refugees laid out in the 1951 Refugee Convention and codified into U.S. law declares that refugees be recognized as vulnerable human beings whose “special protection” is the responsibility of the government that receives them. Putting families in detention centers is a parody of providing special protection.