

In comments directed towards the Trump administration, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in July that she was "appalled" by American border practices and that family separation and detention should "never happen anywhere."¹ Since the High Commissioner's statement, a video of that appalling treatment has surfaced and shocked people around the world, showing Carlos Gregio Hernandez Vasquez' dying from the flu on a detention center floor without care from the border patrol officers.² Carlos was one of the six children that have died in custody,³ while the administration attempts to cut back costs by arguing that children in their care don't need soap or beds.⁴ As appalling as American border policies are, however, this does not mean that America's policies are the only ones that deserve scrutiny from the United Nations. A lot of words could be used to describe Trump's family separation policy — cruel and unnecessary come to mind — but unique is not one of them. Unfortunately, in addition to the United States, Israel, India, Belize, Canada, the UK, and Norway all have a history of separating non-citizen children and their families.

Trump's policy may very well have been inspired by these other countries, most notably, Israel. He has praised Israel's border policies — including their border wall⁵ — throughout his presidency. He has also handpicked specific countries which would not qualify for visas,⁶ and Israel has likewise denied visas for family reunification for Palestinian, Syrian, Iranian, Lebanese, and Iraqi citizens.⁷ So it's of little surprise that the Trump administration started separated immigrant and asylum seeking children from their families and placed them in denigrating conditions such as cages, just as Israel did.⁸ One reporter stated that "what American have witnessed at their southern border in the last couple of months is what Palestinians have experienced as a daily reality at the hands of Israel for the last 70 years."⁹

India has a similarly lengthy history of family separation to Israel, a policy that started with the 1946 Foreigners Act.¹⁰ This Act, which disproportionately affects Bangladeshi families, allows the country to detain undocumented migrants between 2 and 8 years.¹¹ When parents are detained, their children who are older than 6 are removed from their care and sent to shelter homes. Sometimes these children do not see their parents again for years.

Even Canada, known for being "generous" towards immigrants, has separated a select few immigrant children from their parents.¹² A 2017 report by the Canada Border Services Agency

¹<https://thinkprogress.org/un-human-rights-commissioner-detention-centers-e89221887853/>

²<https://www.publicradio.org/article/inside-the-cell-where-a-sick-16-year-old-boy-died-in-border-patrol-care>

³<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/migrant-children-death-a-10-year-old-migrant-girl-died-last-year-in-government-care-officials-acknowledge-exclusive/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=729327787470026>

⁵<https://www.texasobserver.org/sorry-trump-israels-border-walls-no-model-mexican-border/>

⁶<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-ban/us-denied-tens-of-thousands-more-visas-in-2018-due-to-travel-ban-data-idUSKCN1QF2KF>

⁷<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180626-did-israel-inspire-trumps-family-separation-policy/>

⁸<https://www.splcenter.org/news/2019/09/24/family-separation-under-trump-administration-timeline> ; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180626-did-israel-inspire-trumps-family-separation-policy/>

⁹<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180626-did-israel-inspire-trumps-family-separation-policy/>

¹⁰<https://www.dhakatribune.com/magazine/2018/07/12/not-just-trump-india-has-separated-bangladeshi-children-from-their-parents-for-years>

¹¹<https://www.dhakatribune.com/magazine/2018/07/12/not-just-trump-india-has-separated-bangladeshi-children-from-their-parents-for-years>

¹² <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/canadas-immigration-policy>

found that while 151 children were imprisoned with their families, 11 were detained in separate facilities from their families.¹³ A study on “Asylum-seeking children's experiences of detention in Canada” uncovered even more examples of separation: parents and children were separated about “half of the time” during the process of applying for asylum, and fathers were routinely held in separate rooms or facilities from the remainder of their family.¹⁴

For smaller countries such as Belize, separation of families seemingly has less to do with malice and more to do with facility capacity: since Belize does not have a dedicated immigration detention center due to the small size of the country, adult immigration detainees are held in the central prison along with those convicted of criminal offenses.¹⁵ While the parents sit in prison, their children are sent to pre-deportation centers to await processing.¹⁶

Instead of going to processing centers, children of parents detained in immigration centers in the UK are sent to emergency foster care, eventually with the possibility of being given up for adoption.¹⁷ A nonprofit in the UK found that 322 children were separated from July 2017 to July 2018, an increase from previous years.¹⁸ By sometimes arresting parents without warning, they are unable to make arrangements for their children, creating a potentially traumatizing situation for both the children and the parents. Anecdotal evidence from the UK suggests that parents separated from their children by the government can develop suicidal intentions.¹⁹

While Norway does not have a noted history of separating migrant families at their border itself, they still have a history of targeting migrant families, coming under fire for what some observers view as unnecessary, excessive, and biased child protection cases against foreign parents. The most notable example comes from 2011 when the Norwegian child protection agency — called the Barnevernet — separated children from their parents who had valid visas simply because authorities “believed” that Indian cultural practices were not in the best interests of their children.²⁰

While these practices vary in degree and frequency, it should go without saying that all of them need to end. Separating children from their families, even if the child is not placed in detention, can have detrimental, long lasting effects on their growth. Child development specialists have found that the stress of family separation and the deprivation from an attachment relationship can chronically damage the development of a child’s brain, harming their future “physical, emotional, social, and cognitive maturation.”²¹

The experience of immigrating to a new country is already stressful enough without the additional anxiety of being removed indefinitely from the only people you know there. When there are alternatives that have proven successful, there is no reason to jeopardize a child’s future in this way. In a pilot program conducted by ICE, 99.6% of immigrants continued to appear in court after being released on house-arrest type programs involving electronic monitoring, random check

¹³<https://www.newsweek.com/canada-detains-migrants-separates-children-justin-trudeau-donald-trump-989698>

¹⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25985114>

¹⁵ <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5864d4fa4.pdf>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/aug/05/child-separation-migrant-parents-uk-hostile-environment-trump>

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰<https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/02/27/norways-government-abducted-children-and-ramifications-for-europe/#549d6ac84f73>

²¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6173255/>

ins, and in-person reporting to case workers.²² Not only do these types of programs protect the human rights of immigrant families, but they are also typically cheaper for the government to implement. Other countries have developed alternatives as well: Belgium created open housing facilities for those applying for asylum where families are given vouchers for food, weekly allowances, quality health services, and access to public transit;²³ and Costa Rica, gives children documentation and working rights under the condition of government monitoring.²⁴

With this in mind, the US, Israel, India, Belize, Canada, the UK, and Norway need to critically evaluate why they are willing to risk both the human rights and the well-being of immigrant children and search for more humane alternatives, especially where asylum seekers are involved.

²²<https://www.cato.org/blog/alternatives-detention-are-cheaper-indefinite-detention>

²³ <https://idcoalition.org/alternatives-to-detention-in-belgium/>

²⁴<https://idcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/There-Are-Alternatives-2015.pdf>