

US court documents reveal

Immigrant children tied down, hooded, beaten, stripped and drugged

By Patrick Martin
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Court documents made public in Virginia and Texas give a glimpse of the systematic brutality being meted out to immigrant children in both public and private jails. Children are strapped down, hooded and beaten, or drugged by force, as part of the everyday procedure in what can only be called the American Gulag.

An Associated Press report published Thursday gave details of the abuses committed against young Latino migrants at the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center near Staunton, Virginia, last year. Lawyers for the teenage victims sued the prison—a state facility run by a consortium of seven towns and cities in the Shenandoah Valley—and a court hearing is set for July.

According to a half-dozen sworn statements, given by the victims in Spanish and then translated for filing with the federal court for the Western District of Virginia, children as young as 14 were beaten while handcuffed, tied down to chairs while stripped naked and hooded, and held for long periods in solitary confinement, sometimes naked and cold.

All these are forms of torture practiced at Guantanamo Bay and at CIA torture prisons around the world. These techniques have been transferred back into the United States and unleashed on immigrant children, who have been demonized by the Trump administration.

The lawsuit filed by the nonprofit Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs declares that young Latino immigrants held at Shenandoah "are subjected to unconstitutional conditions that shock the conscience, including violence by staff, abusive and excessive use of seclusion and restraints, and the denial of necessary mental health care." As a result of "malicious and sadistic applications of force," the youth have "sustained significant injuries, both physical and psychological."

A Honduran youth sent to Shenandoah when he was 15 said in his statement, "Whenever they used to restrain me and put me in the chair, they would handcuff me... [They] strapped me down all the way, from your feet all the way to your chest, you couldn't really move... They have total control over you. They also put a bag over your head. It has little holes; you can see through it. But you feel suffocated with the bag on."

A 15-year-old from Mexico who spent nine months at Shenandoah described similar treatment.

"They handcuffed me and put a white bag of some kind over my head," he said, according to his sworn statement. "They took off all of my clothes and put me into a restraint chair, where they attached my hands and feet to the chair. They also put a strap across my chest. They left me naked and attached to that chair for two and a half days, including at night."

A 14-year-old Guatemalan youth reported frequent imprisonment in his tiny cell for up to 23 hours a day, as well as long periods of physical restraint. "When they couldn't get one of the kids to calm down, the guards would put us in a chair—a safety chair, I don't know what they call it—but they would just put us in there all day," he said in his sworn statement. "This happened to me, and I saw it happen to others, too. It was excessive."

A 17-year-old who fled Mexico to escape an abusive father and drug cartel violence was arrested at the US border, and passed through several detention centers before arriving at Shenandoah, one of three facilities in the United States with contracts from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, part of the Department of Health and Human Services, to provide "secure facilities" for young immigrants. The boy was frequently shackled, usually with cloth bindings, and reported at least one violent strip search and several beatings. He was driven to attempt suicide several times.

Other allegations include that the Latino youth received worse food and facilities than local juvenile prisoners, mostly white, and that meals were frequently cold and inadequate, leaving the children hungry.

The AP interviewed an unnamed child development specialist who had worked with teens at Shenandoah. "The majority of the kids we worked with when we went to visit them were emotionally and verbally abused. I had a kid whose foot was broken by a guard," she said. "They would get put in isolation for months for things like picking up a pencil when a guard had said not to move. Some of them started hearing voices that were telling them to hurt people or hurt themselves, and I knew when they had gotten to Shenandoah they were not having any violent thoughts."

Because the children held at Shenandoah were unaccompanied minors, rather than separated from their families, there were some suggestions in the media that they had gang connections that somehow justified the brutal treatment. But according to the AP report, a program director at the facility said the youth had been screened for gang connections and were actually suffering from

mental health issues resulting from trauma in their home countries.

The acts of torture involved multiple guards at the facility, which was run by a regional board but under the ultimate control of the state government, headed throughout this period by Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe. The new governor, Democrat Ralph Northam, who took office January 1, ordered a state investigation into the claims of abuse, but only after the AP report became public Thursday.

Even younger children were targeted for abuse at a Texas facility operated under contract for the Office of Refugee Resettlement, according to a report published by the Center for Investigative Reporting and the *Texas Tribune* Tuesday. The allegations were further detailed in a court suit filed by the Center for Human Rights & Constitutional Law.

The lawsuit charges that the Shiloh Treatment Center in Manvel, Texas, administered psychotropic drugs to immigrant children, who in some cases were separated from their parents at the border. Neither the children, some as young as nine years old, nor the parents gave consent to the treatment, and in some cases, children were forcibly drugged as they fought and screamed.

One report reads, “Some children held at Shiloh reported being given up to nine different pills in the morning and six in the evening, including antipsychotic drugs, antidepressants, Parkinson’s disease medication and seizure medications. They were told they would remain detained if they refused drugs, the lawsuit said. Children also said that after taking the drugs, they experienced side effects that rendered them fatigued and incapable of walking.”

The lawsuit charges, “ORR routinely administers children psychotropic drugs without lawful authorization... When youth object to taking such medications, ORR compels them. ORR neither requires nor asks for a parent’s consent before medicating a child, nor does it seek lawful authority to consent in parents’ stead. Instead, ORR or facility staff sign ‘consent’ forms anointing themselves with ‘authority’ to administer psychotropic drugs to confined children.”

The seven pills named in the court filings—clonazepam, duloxetine, guanfacine, Geodon, olanzapine, Latuda and divalproex—are medications used to control depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder, mood disorders, schizophrenia and seizures. This treatment amounted to applying “chemical straitjackets” to subdue the children, rather than meeting medical needs, the lawsuit charges.

According to the investigative reporting, the ORR paid \$3.4 billion to private organizations to hold immigrant children, and nearly half of this, \$1.5 billion, went to 13 companies that had been accused of hundreds of serious violations of their responsibility to provide care. These included failure to obtain medical treatment for accidents or illness, “inappropriate contact” between children and staff (apparently of a sexual nature), and neglect.

These reports of horrific treatment of innocent children do not just expose the savagery and sadism of individual guards, administrators and other officials, as well as the greed of corporate bosses seeking to join in the orgy of profiteering from federal contracts for the detention and abuse of immigrants.

What is revealed above all is the criminal character of the American political elite, both Democrats and Republicans, who have deliberately encouraged an atmosphere of brutality and terror as their preferred method of “detering” immigrants from crossing the US-Mexico border. And it not just the sociopathic bully in the White House today, but his Democratic predecessor, responsible for more deportations than any previous president.

Obama’s Department of Homeland Security chief Jeh Johnson declared that the jailing of Central American refugees seeking asylum, and the separation of parents and children, would have a positive effect in reducing the sudden influx of refugees in 2014. It was Terry McAuliffe, the longtime crony of Hillary Clinton, who oversaw the torture of immigrant teenagers at Shenandoah from 2014 to 2017.

The shift from Obama to Trump has not fundamentally changed the policy of the US ruling class towards immigrants, which has always been of an anti-democratic and brutal character. But in the hands of Trump and his fascistic aide Stephen Miller, the brutality has become more systematic, and it is accompanied by a campaign aimed at whipping up anti-immigrant racism and hysteria over the purported danger that the United States will be “overrun,” as Trump claimed in his speech Wednesday night to a rally in Minnesota.

According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal* Thursday, the Trump administration awarded multiple contracts involving tens of millions of dollars earlier this year to build detention facilities for children. This confirms that the mass separation of children from their parents, which followed the announcement of the “zero tolerance” policy by Attorney General Jeff Sessions, was not an unexpected byproduct of the new policy, but was planned and deliberate. It is a premeditated crime, the state kidnapping of more than 2,400 children, for which Trump, Sessions, Stephen Miller, Kirstjen Nielsen and other top officials should be prosecuted and jailed.

Far from abandoning this policy—as media reports on the executive order issued by Trump Wednesday suggested—the White House is preparing to accelerate the mass detention of immigrants, including children. A Pentagon spokesman said Thursday that military bases in Texas and Arkansas had been reviewed as possible locations for housing as many as 20,000 immigrant children, double the number currently in custody.

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