

# Commentary: Seeing and caring for unseen children at the border

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“Let the children come to me. Do not stop them. For the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it” (Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15-17).

Over the past few weeks, I have found myself in tears and on my knees, seeking the mercy of God to right a wrong. As a devoted mother and grandmother, I am in disbelief at the treatment of families and their children who come to us seeking asylum.

We know Jesus loves children. In the Gospels, we are reminded Jesus was displeased with his disciples and rebuked them for restricting the children access.

## Advocates for children coming to America

Earlier this month, I participated in a virtual conference, [Immigration Summit 2020: A Path Forward for New American Children](#).

The leadership team consisted of the organization’s CEO, Robert Sanborn, in addition to Yael Ross, the director of the [Center for New American Children](#). The summit was hosted by [Children at Risk](#), a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization dedicated to addressing the root causes of poor public policies affecting children.

The opening speaker was Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley. For those of us working in or following immigration issues, she simply is known as “Sister Norma.”

I have had the blessing of visiting with and supporting Sister Norma’s work. I think of her as “Texas’ version of Mother Teresa.” She has spent many years working at the border, providing love and essentials to children and families seeking asylum in the United States.

## **Conditions in border camps**

Sister Norma gave an account of the deplorable conditions in the camps south of the border following Hurricane Hanna in late July. Under the [“Remain in Mexico”](#) policy, asylum seekers have been waiting months for their opportunity for a hearing on their asylum request. Both the stories and photos were heartbreaking.

In her words, “It is horrible ...” She described the destroyed camps and the invasion of snakes, rats, spiders and mosquitos. Mothers stood guard outside their zippered tents to safeguard their children from larger, more dangerous human predators. She also noted there is a growing threat of dengue fever and other mosquito-borne diseases.

## **A different kind of undocumented**

Later in the summit, I learned of another unthinkable situation: unaccompanied children crossing into the United States, then taken to hotels by contractors of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to await return to their countries of origin.

It was shocking to learn these children never were recorded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department Health and Human

Services. Nor were they allowed their legal right to apply for asylum.

I questioned if this was possible and permissible. Could children be taken alone and housed in hotels without appropriate and qualified supervision, such as a parent or a trained social worker? Surely, there are laws in place for the protection of minor children who present themselves to a border guard. Surely, this was a “one-off” case.

I pulled up a [fact sheet](#) from the American Immigration Council to make certain I had a clear understanding of the law.

According to the sheet, Customs and Border Patrol “must transfer unaccompanied children to the custody of ORR within 72 hours ‘except in the case of exceptional circumstances.’” [CBP](#) and [ORR](#) are required to document every person in their custody. Yet, this isn’t happening for untold numbers of unaccompanied minors crossing the border.

I learned, much to my horror, about a case of two cousins aged 16 and 13 who were kept secretly in a hotel. Joel Rose, a correspondent on NPR’s National Desk, [reported their story](#). According to court documents, “unaccompanied minors have been held secretly in hotels for days, sometimes weeks,” until they can be returned home.

The reason given for this practice is “to protect public health during the pandemic.”

## **Where Christians can get involved**

I understand immigration is an emotional issue. I am hoping Christians will read Scripture, pray and let the Holy Spirit guide their thoughts and address their fears.

Children love without regard to personal interests, color, creed or financial well-being. I believe that is why Christ says, “Anyone who does not receive

the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”

Please join me in taking the Evangelical Immigration Table’s 40-day [I was a Stranger Challenge](#). Allow Scripture to guide us to learn more about God’s heart for immigrants.

Leviticus 19:33-34 was the Scripture that pierced my heart and drove me to repentance in 2009. See where Scripture lead you.

*Brenda Kirk is the south central regional mobilizer for the National Immigration Forum and Evangelical Immigration Table. The views expressed are those solely of the author.*