

## Photos provide a glimpse inside Texas border facility where migrant children are held

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Photos released by a Texas congressman on Monday offered the first glimpse inside a crowded Customs and Border Protection facility where the Biden administration is housing migrants: dozens of individuals, including small children and teens, packed into makeshift rooms with clear plastic walls, lying on padding on stone floors and covered with silver foil blankets.

The pictures — courtesy of U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, who has grown increasingly critical of the administration's approach to the border — offered Republicans more fuel as they keep the heat on a president whose approval rating has been buoyed by progress on COVID-19 vaccinations and a popular stimulus package that has checks heading to most Americans' bank accounts.

Questions about the border dominated a White House press briefing on Monday as the images went viral online. It was just what the Biden administration has sought to avoid while blocking reporters and nonprofit lawyers from seeing inside the facilities.

It was also the sort of response Cuellar was hoping the pictures would provoke. He's released similar pictures before, in 2014, in an effort to get the Obama administration to be more proactive about handling a surge then.

"People need to know what's going on. You can't just say, 'We're not going to let you know what's happening,'" Cuellar said. "When people see what's happening, I think it motivates the administration."

The photos, first published by Axios, were taken inside the overflow facility in Donna, near McAllen. They drew comparisons to those published during the Trump administration that showed cramped quarters and drew ire over "kids in cages," though Biden's administration says it is taking a vastly different approach from Trump's White House in handling surges of migrant children crossing the border. The White House is also refusing to call the situation a crisis.

Nevertheless, it is the first major political dilemma of President Joe Biden's term as Republicans accuse the president of escalating the problem by shifting away from immigration restrictions enacted by Donald Trump. The Biden administration says it is working to build a more humane system as it no longer rejects unaccompanied children at the border and works to more swiftly process asylum cases.

“You can decide for yourself whether this is humane treatment,” U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, wrote as he tweeted the pictures on Monday.

On the other hand, Democrats have been quick to point out the latest surge began when Trump was still in office and a new analysis released this week shows it is so far comparable to a surge in 2019.

“Was it a ‘crisis’ when there was a 690% surge in unaccompanied minors in Trump’s last nine months in office?” tweeted Julián Castro, the former San Antonio mayor and U.S. Housing and Urban Development secretary in the Obama administration. “Was it a ‘crisis’ when he used the pandemic to expel 13,000 children?”

### **Similar to 2019 peak**

Cuellar said the pictures illustrate how the administration is struggling to handle the current surge. He said Border Patrol is so strapped for space that agents in some cases are releasing members of migrant families who do not have criminal records — including 150 in the Rio Grande Valley sector over the weekend — without notices to appear in court.

Cuellar said he has urged the administration to work more closely with Mexico and the Central American nations the migrants are fleeing and to work harder to combat messaging in those countries that with Biden in office, now is the time to head for the U.S.

“The very humane or noble intentions the administration has are just being overrun, overwhelmed by the pure numbers of people coming across — period. That’s what it is,” Cuellar said. “At the end of the day, you have to stem the tide, you have to work with Mexico, Central America, because if not, all you’re doing is playing defense on the 1-yard line called the U.S. border.”

White House officials said Monday the administration is doing just that. Press secretary Jen Psaki said the State Department has placed tens of thousands of ads on radio stations in Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras urging people there not to come to the U.S.

The Biden administration has defended its efforts, calling in the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help set up multiple facilities to temporarily house children, including the Dallas convention center, where federal officials are working to unite them with sponsors in the U.S.

Border Patrol reported 9,457 encounters with unaccompanied children in February alone, a record for that month. That figure, however, was in line with surges in 2014 and 2019, which saw between 7,000 and 9,000 apprehensions of unaccompanied children a month, with peaks above 10,000.

A new analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute, meanwhile, shows the surge is so far comparable to that in 2019. While federal officials including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas have said Border Patrol is on pace to post the most encounters with migrants at the border in two decades, the majority of those encounters so far are with single adults who have tried repeatedly to cross and been sent back to Mexico, only to try and cross again.

That's because federal officials continue to use a public health order established by the Trump administration during the coronavirus pandemic that allows them to turn the vast majority of migrants away at the border — but many often try again later.

“Without these repeat crossers, the first few months of fiscal year 2021 would look nearly identical to fiscal year 2019 before the pandemic,” the Cato analysis said.

### **A nonpartisan plea**

Still, lawmakers from both parties are pressing the Biden administration to do more to handle the surge, including soliciting help from nongovernment organizations.

“Current facilities and services are insufficient to handle the present challenge,” Cornyn wrote in a letter to Biden along with U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz. “Our border communities and NGOs are already rising to this challenge. It is important that the federal government do so as well. We cannot afford to be consumed by partisan battles on this critical topic.”

Cornyn plans to lead a group of senators on a tour of the border with U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, on Friday as a parade of lawmakers from both parties through Texas continues. U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-San Antonio, will also tour a Carrizo Springs facility housing migrant children on Friday.

Cruz on Monday sent a [letter](#) to Biden demanding the administration let members of the press access such overflow facilities.

“Denying the press the ability to observe, film, and report on the conditions at the border is not openness or transparency — it is hiding the truth from the American people,” Cruz wrote. “The press and the American people deserve more than denials and excuses from a podium. They deserve to see and understand the crisis for themselves with the help of reporters who are free and independent from your administration.”

The White House says it is planning to open facilities up to the press eventually. Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said Monday that “the administration has a commitment to transparency to make sure that the news media gets the chance to report on every aspect of what's happening at the border.”

Psaki added that the White House is working with homeland security officials and the Health and Human Services Department to “finalize details” and that she hoped to have an update in the “coming days.”

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