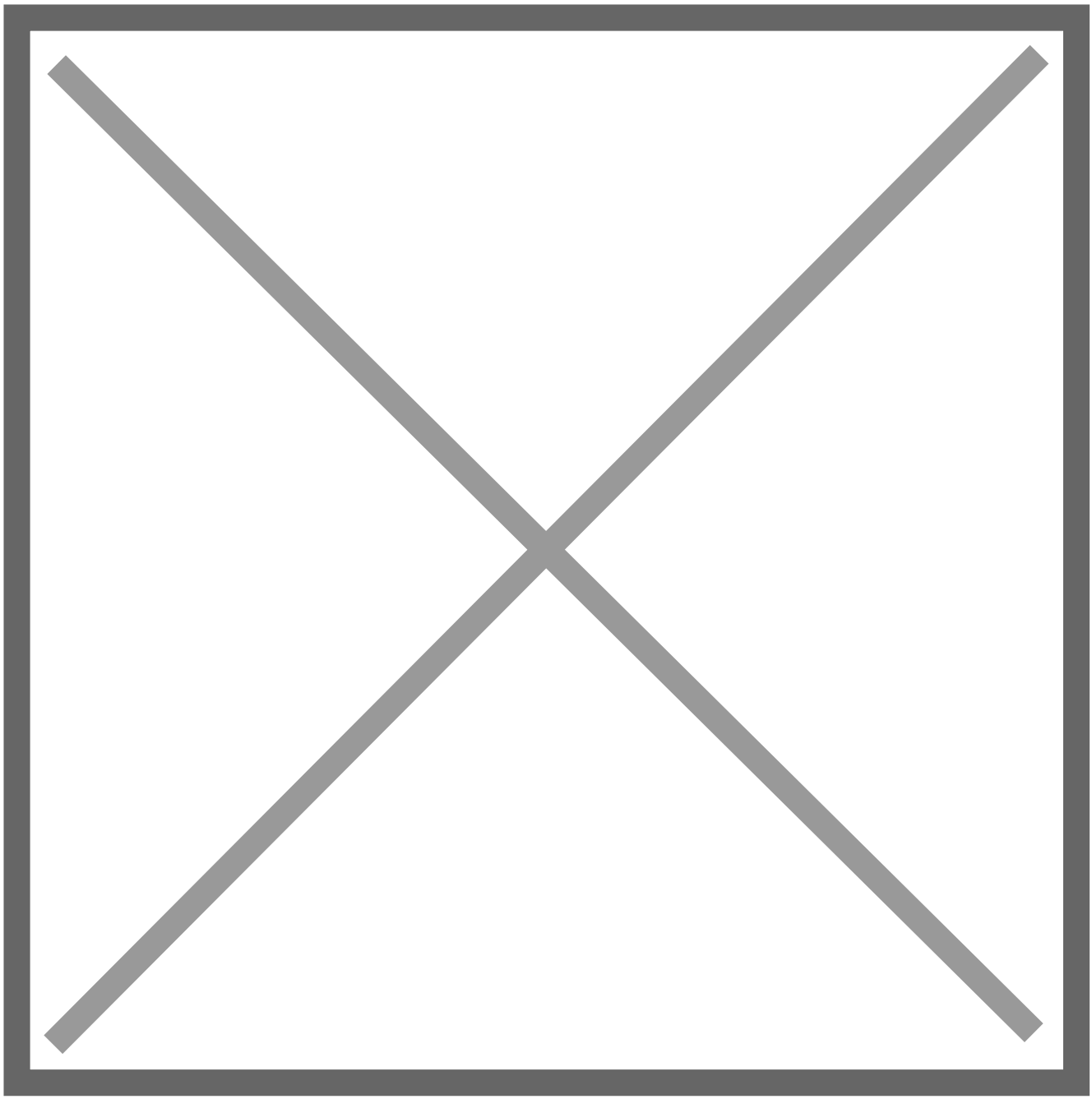
News



Liam Conejo Ramos, who was detained with his father by immigration officers during a raid in Minnesota and then taken to a detention center in Texas, is back at home after a judge ordered their release, in Columbia Heights, Minn., in this picture obtained from social media Feb. 1, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Joaquin Castro via BlueSky)



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Catholic leaders, including an official from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' migration office, reiterated a pastoral approach to the issue of child detentions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

In a Feb. 3 statement to OSV News, David Spicer, the policy and engagement director for the USCCB's Secretariat of Migration, called for federal efforts to be "guided by Christ's call in the Gospel to solidarity with 'the least of these,'" citing Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40.

Spicer reiterated the bishops' call for "humane, community-based alternatives" to family detention following the recent release of a 5-year-old from Minnesota from a Texas family detention facility and an investigative news report that found a sixfold increase in child detentions at that same facility.

The report by investigative journalists from the Marshall Project, a non-profit media outlet specializing in criminal justice news, was posted days before the Jan. 31 release of Liam Conejo Ramos and his father, Adrian Conejo Arias.

Liam and Conejo Arias were taken into custody Jan. 20 after they had just arrived home from Liam's preschool in a Minneapolis suburb. The family's attorney told media they had reportedly entered the country from Ecuador in December 2024 via the Texas border seeking asylum and had been taking the necessary legal steps.

The father and son were released after a Texas federal district judge deemed it unconstitutional to hold them, citing the writ of habeas corpus, which determines unlawful detention. They had been held at the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, 70 miles southwest of San Antonio.

Elizabeth Zuna, a fourth-grader from Liam's Twin Cities school district, was also detained for a month at the same Texas family detention center before being released with her mother Feb. 4. Three other students from the same school district are reportedly still in the Texas facility after being detained with guardians. A Feb. 3 letter from Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz to Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem pleading for the release of other Minnesota children from family detention mentioned reports of a measles outbreak at the Dilley facility.

The Marshall Project news analysis of children's detentions in Dilley shows that from the time President Donald Trump took office in January 2025 through October that year, ICE had detained an average of 170 children per day. On some days, ICE held 400 or more child detainees.

During the Biden administration, in the period between September 2023 to January 2025, ICE detained an average of 25 children per day, according to the report.

The figures came from the Deportation Data Project, an online database based on government records run by immigration law and freedom of information attorneys and academics.

The report noted the numbers did not include recent family ICE arrests from Minnesota, nor statistics of children being held without guardians by Customs and Border Patrol or the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

The report highlighted the poor mental state of the detained children, who suffered from depression and anxiety, as well as the deplorable conditions that detained parents described in court documents, which were also reported last year by several news outlets. The report also raised the alarm of the possibility of a child dying while in ICE detention.

"It's only a matter of time before we see a child die within Dilley or another facility," Kristin Kumpf, coordinator for the National Coalition to End Family and Child Detention, said in the report.

As of Jan. 25, more than 70,760 individuals are in ICE custody, with 74.2% of those detained having no criminal conviction, and many of those with convictions were responsible for minor offenses such as traffic violations, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse.

The Associated Press reports the Trump administration has also created at least three "tender age" shelters for young child migrants, including babies, forcibly separated from their guardians at the U.S.-Mexico border.

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"For many years, the USCCB has spoken strongly in opposition to family detention, citing the long-term harm it has been demonstrated to inflict on children in particular," Spicer told OSV News in his Feb. 3 statement.

He pointed to an August statement by Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, then-chairman of the conference's Committee on Migration, who said resuming and expanding family detention "inflicts a moral wound on our society." The bishop also voiced particular concern that "pregnant and postpartum mothers and their young children" faced risks in detention.

Spicer also highlighted in the bishops' special pastoral message, posted in November, regarding the country's ramped up immigration crackdown "increasing concern" over the lack of access to religious and pastoral services for all detained.

According to a joint Catholic-Evangelical report published in 2025 by World Relief, 80% of those at risk of Trump's mass deportation effort across the country are Christian, with the largest proportion — 61% — being Catholic. The report found one in six Catholics in America (18%) is either vulnerable to deportation or lives with someone who is.

"In place of family detention, the USCCB has repeatedly advocated for humane, community-based alternatives, which are not only proven to be more cost-effective but feature high rates of compliance with immigration court proceedings when

accompanied by case management services," said Spicer.

Carolina Rivera, an immigration federal advocate and liaison attorney at Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., known as CLINIC, which works closely with the USCCB, called the report "a stark reminder of how the government's enforcement priorities are not always using those standards of human dignity and respect for the vulnerable population, especially children."

Rivera told OSV News that children in detention is one of CLINIC's main advocacy issues and in its work of directly engaging with federal agencies, there's a "blackout."

"We have not received much communication from the government regarding this particular issue," she said, adding that increasingly the only recourse is going through litigation, as in the case of Liam and his father.

On the day that Liam and Conejo Arias were released from the Dilley facility, which is part of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller told the archdiocesan TV outlet San Antonio Catholic that the detainment "was a trauma for (Liam)" as described by his father. Conejo Arias told media his son was not eating and became unusually quiet and depressed.

"We pray for more humane treatment of those who are being sent to do these raids — that they be human, that they have a heart to respect human dignity," said García-Siller.

"We all agree that people who have a criminal background, they need to comply and carry consequences, but innocent people (being taken into custody), and just because (of) profiling, that is not acceptable," he added. "We know there's not much sometimes people feel they can do, but we cannot be accomplices of those situations. So we pray for Liam, for his family and so many people in the same situation."

No matter his or her age, "a person deserves to be treated as God created," he continued. "And we, being created by God, too, we can understand that beyond any other rhetoric or story or whatever. There is always a way to be human to one another, and for us who have faith in Jesus Christ, to love as Jesus has loved us."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.