

USA accused of running concentration camps

Are the detention centres along the southern US border “concentration camps”? Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has sparked a row over language and history by saying that they are.



Detained: “Things can be concentration camps without being Auschwitz,” said one historian. © Getty

Here are the facts: every day, a record **52,000** adults are being held by the USA’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE), in around 200 detention centres. They are there because they tried to cross illegally into the US.

There are also around **13,700** children, who attempted the same crossing, being looked after by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

For many of those children, the conditions are dire.

When a team of lawyers interviewed 60 children at a Border Patrol station in El Paso, Texas, they found obvious signs of neglect. “Kids are taking care of kids, and there’s inadequate food, water and sanitation for the 250 infants, children and teens,” reported *The Associated Press*.

Other reports have described a lack of beds or blankets; lights left on at all hours; **no soap or toothbrushes** to keep children clean. At least seven children have died in the last year.

Last week, New York congresswoman

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez aired her disgust on social media. “The United States is running concentration camps on our southern border,” she said. “That is exactly what they are: they are concentration camps.”

Can that be true? The next day, she cited Andrea Pitzer, author of a history of concentration camp systems. Pitzer defines them as “mass detention of civilians without trial”. By that measure, Ocasio-Cortez is right.

However, the term is extremely loaded. It is most often used to describe camps in **Nazi Germany**, which were used to kill six million Jews during the Holocaust.

“You demean their memory and disgrace yourself with comments like this,” Republican congresswoman Liz Cheney tweeted at Ocasio-Cortez.

Some historians are also cautious. “What we’re doing is just not the same as what the Nazis or the **Soviets** did,” the historian Lance Janda told *PolitiFact*. “It’s a disservice to people suffering under dictatorships around

the world to act like it is.”

Language matters

So, is the US running concentration camps or not? Of course, it is partly a matter of how you define them. If a concentration camp means holding people in poor conditions — without trial because they are seen as undesirable — then, yes. If it means repeating one of the most extreme crimes in history — the deliberate murder of millions of people — then, no.

But does arguing over terminology miss the point? Perhaps the real question is: can this situation ever be acceptable? For many, the answer is no. Charles M Blow writes in *The New York Times*: “We can use any form of fuzzy language we want, but the United States under Donald Trump is currently engaged in an **unconscionable** act [...]. Immigrants seeking asylum have surged. And he is meeting the surge with indescribable cruelty.”



Q: What do we know?

A: Immigration at the border has spiked in recent months. US Customs and Border Protection said that 144,000 migrants were taken into custody in May, up 32% from April.

The numbers are so high that border agencies are operating far beyond their capacity. “We are in a full-blown emergency. I cannot say this stronger: the system is broken,” said acting CBP Commissioner John Sanders.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Why the numbers are so high, or the best

way for USA to respond to the crisis. Most of the migrants are from three Central American countries: Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. The first two are struggling with high rates of gang violence, whilst those fleeing Guatemala are mostly attempting to escape poverty.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you describe the USA's detention centres as concentration camps?
2. What should the US do with people it catches trying to cross into the country illegally?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write your own definition for the term "concentration camp".
2. Research a concentration camp system that has been used at some point in history. Write a short report comparing it the US's current immigration system.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"A presidency that creates concentration camps is fascist."
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

52,000 – Based on figures from early June, according to a report by *NBC News*. This is "up from about 34,000 under the Obama administration".

13,700 – According to a spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services,

talking to *PolitiFact*. They were held for an average of 44 days at a time.

No soap or toothbrushes – A lawyer for the Trump administration recently argued in court that it was not necessary for the government to provide "safe and sanitary" care.

Nazi Germany – The first concentration camps were built in Germany in 1933, when Hitler

came to power. They were originally used for slave labour. They did not become death camps until 1942.

Soviets – Under the dictator Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union established "the Gulag", a system of forced labour camps. These held 18 million people in their history.

Unconscionable – Not right or reasonable.

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 Notes

