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Latino Policy &  
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# COVID-19 & MIGRANT CHILD DETAINEES

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**Releasing & Treating Children  
in Detention**

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**COVID-19**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of early May, 2020, the United States had over one million confirmed cases and more than 70,000 confirmed deaths from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).<sup>1</sup> The CDC contends that, “Limiting face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce” spreading the virus and, in effect, to reduce fatalities.<sup>2</sup> Given severely overcrowded conditions, following this recommendation is almost impossible for incarcerated populations, such as those in immigration detention centers.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, 60% of detainees who have been tested were confirmed to be infected with the deadly virus.<sup>4</sup> Detainees who tested positive for COVID-19 included dozens of vulnerable migrant children. In this context, calls for President Trump to, at the very least, release kids from immigrant detention are growing. Using polling data taken prior to the pandemic, this policy brief examines the degree of public support for releasing migrant children from detention, and public preferences for the types of necessities that should be provided to child detainees. Survey results show that 82% of the public supports releasing child detainees (to family members or sponsors) and over 90% support providing detained children with medical care and other basic necessities.

## INTRODUCTION

In the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) asserts that social distancing “is the best way to reduce the spread” of the deadly virus.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, as of this writing, close to 95% of U.S. residents have been ordered to minimize how often they “come within 6 feet of one another.”<sup>6</sup> These recommendations are nearly impossible to follow in U.S. immigration detention centers, which have a long history of dire conditions, including overcrowding and lack of access to adequate medical care.<sup>7</sup> While the Trump Administration has recently deported more than 400 migrant children under its new COVID-19 rules, the deadly pandemic has also made its way into detention facilities and is disproportionately affecting child detainees.<sup>8</sup> For example, in one shelter alone, 37 children tested positive for the virus.<sup>9</sup> Given the lack of proper medical care in U.S. immigration detention centers, a breakout of COVID-19 in these facilities could be catastrophically fatal.

Across the country, immigrant detainees have started hunger strikes, begging to be released and “protesting refusal by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to protect them from COVID-19 spreading” throughout the facilities where they are confined.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a U.S. federal judge and numerous medical, legal and community organizations throughout the nation have called for President Trump to—at the very least—release migrant kids from detention.<sup>11</sup> This policy brief examines the degree of public support for releasing migrant children from detention and public preferences for the types of necessities that should be provided to child detainees. The results show that the public strongly supports releasing detained minors to family members or sponsors, and overwhelmingly backs providing children with a host of basic necessities, including medical care. While the survey was fielded before the pandemic began, it is likely that the public is even more supportive of releasing child detainees today, since the conditions in which they are held have become much more dangerous.

## METHODOLOGY

As opposed to polling on other major immigration policies, we know relatively little about public attitudes toward the detention of migrant children. Questions in existing surveys that do ask about child detention tend to conflate child detention with family separation, which is problematic because many children in detention are unaccompanied minors.<sup>12</sup> To overcome these shortcomings in public opinion data on child detention and other

controversial immigration policies, in late August of 2019, political scientists Sophia Wallace (University of Washington, Seattle) and Chris Zepeda-Millán (UCLA) fielded (via the polling firm Prolific) the Immigration in the Trump Era Survey (ITES). The online poll included a nationally representative sample of 1,109 white respondents (ages 18+) in the U.S. who were asked about their opinions on various types of immigration policies, including migrant child detention and their access to medical care and other provisions.<sup>13</sup>

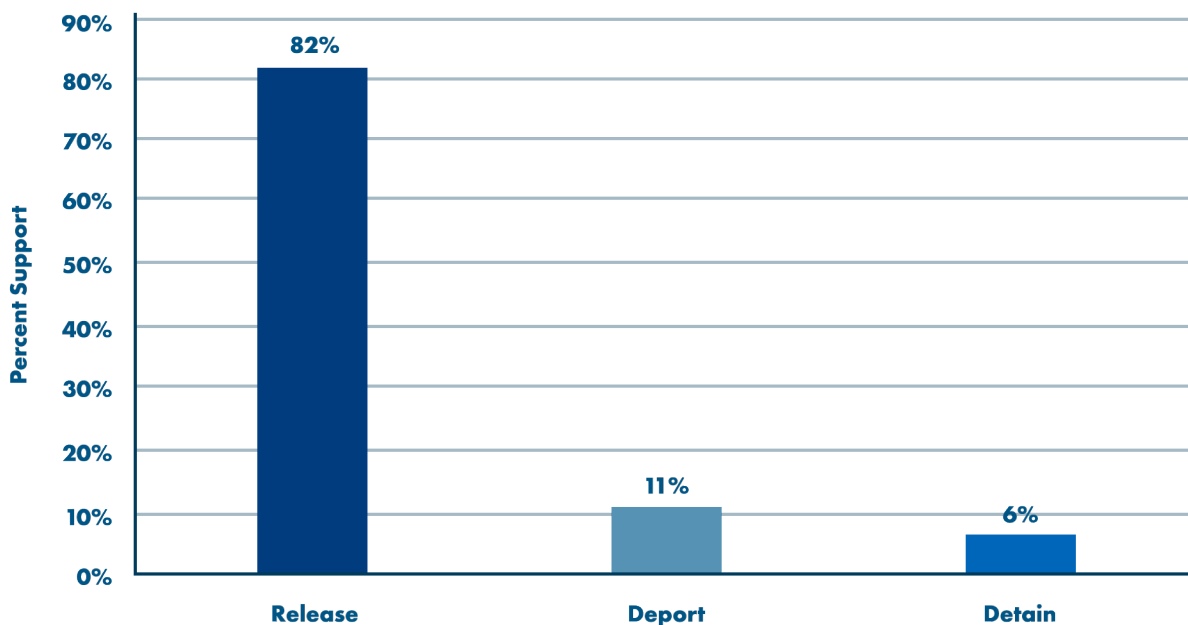
We focused on white U.S. residents because previous research has shown that they have the most variation in opinions on immigration.<sup>14</sup> This can be partially explained by significant differences in political ideology and partisanship: roughly half of whites are Democrats and half are Republicans, with similar proportions of liberals and conservatives.<sup>15</sup>

## FINDINGS

### Support for Releasing Child Detainees

Regarding the best policy options for dealing with kids held in immigration detention centers, we asked survey respondents the following question: “What should be done when migrant children are detained by immigration authorities?” Possible responses included: placing children in an immigrant detention facility, releasing them to a family member or sponsor, or deporting them.

**Figure 1: Child Detainee Policy Options**



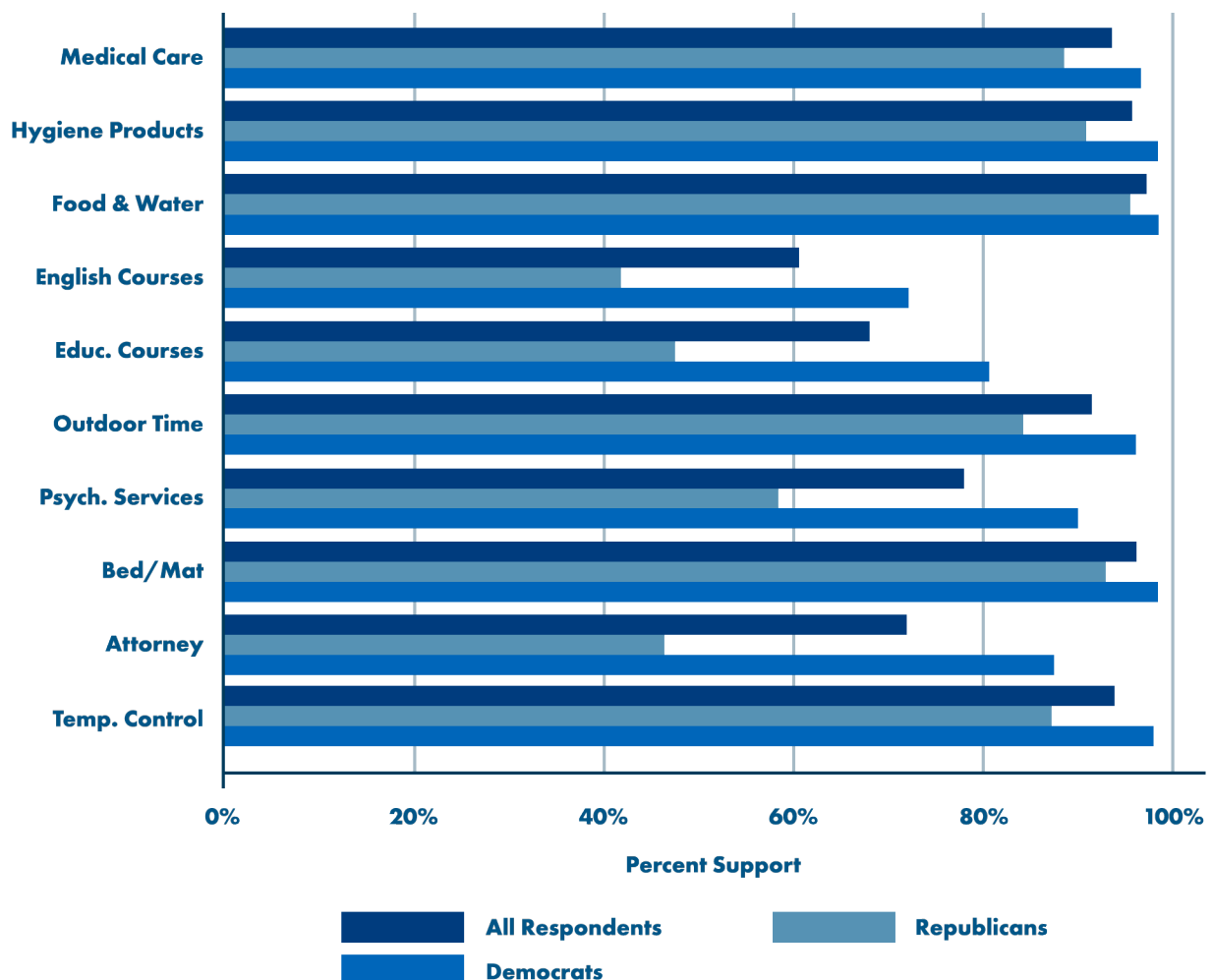
Survey results show that the public overwhelmingly rejects detaining children as the best policy option when children are in the custody of immigration officials. As **Figure 1** illustrates, when given the policy options of detaining, releasing (to sponsors or family members) or deporting migrant children, *the vast majority (82%) of those surveyed supported releasing immigrant children to sponsors or family members*. Relatively few (11%) supported deporting migrant children from the country, and an even smaller proportion (6%) backed keeping children in immigrant detention facilities. Although partisanship plays a role in these findings, almost all Democrats (97%) and a

solid majority (57%) of Republicans chose releasing child detainees as their preferred policy option. Moreover, while a larger proportion of Republicans (27%) relative to the overall sample selected deportation, detaining children remains their least popular choice, with only 16% of Republicans selecting the latter policy option. Despite these partisan differences, it is important to highlight and reiterate that a *strong majority (57%) of Republicans expressed releasing migrant child detainees as their primary policy choice.*

**Support for Medical Care & Other Basic Necessities**

As recently as last year, there were widespread reports of extremely poor conditions in immigrant detention facilities, including those that house migrant children. The deplorable conditions consisted of severe overcrowding, limited and inadequate medical care, poor sanitation, freezing temperatures, and insufficient access to essential items such as diapers, clothing, food and baby formula.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, survey respondents were asked to choose items from a list of rights and accommodations that they believed children being detained should have. The list included: medical care, personal hygiene products (e.g., soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, diapers), adequate amounts of food and water, English courses, educational courses, outdoor time for play and exercise, psychological services, sufficient sleeping accommodations (e.g., a bed or mat), legal counsel/attorney, as well as room temperature control and ventilation.

**Figure 2: Child Detainee Rights and Provisions**



The survey results demonstrate strong evidence that the public supports access to medical care and various other accommodations and rights for children detained by immigration authorities. This support largely transcends partisan differences. **Figure 2** displays the raw results for each item overall and by partisanship. *Over 90% of survey respondents support ensuring detained children's access to six out of the ten accommodations we listed, including medical care.* These findings hold even when one examines partisan differences, with Republicans and Democrats overwhelmingly in support of providing access, scoring at least 85% for each provision. Hence, on top of the public's widespread support for releasing child detainees—as evidenced by the survey findings presented above—the public also views a lack of access to basic necessities, such as medical care, as particularly unacceptable.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, while only about 1% of detainees have been tested for the coronavirus, 60% (over 700) of those who have, tested positive for the deadly disease, including dozens of migrant children.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not the public was aware of the reportedly cramped, unsanitary and generally deplorable conditions in immigrant detention centers prior to the current pandemic, it nonetheless expressed *tremendous support for releasing child detainees to family members or sponsors*. Furthermore, the public also conveyed *widespread backing for ensuring that detained migrant children have access to medical care and a host of other provisions*. Since the conditions in which child detainees are held have, and will continue to, become much more dangerous as the number of coronavirus infections and deaths increase both inside and outside of detention facilities, it is likely that survey respondents may be even more supportive of releasing them. As such, the policy recommendations proposed below are straightforward, bipartisan, and implementable.

- First, given the well documented overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in immigration detention facilities, the federal government should begin rapidly testing child detainees for COVID-19.
- Second, child detainees who test negative should be immediately released to family members or sponsors. In light of bipartisan public support for releasing children in detention, this measure is both politically feasible and necessary.
- Third, in mild or asymptomatic cases, child detainees who test positive for COVID-19 should be provided with proper medical care and supervision. Those who test positive and have more serious symptoms should be immediately treated by doctors at a local hospital. Upon recovery, all child detainees should be released to sponsors or family members without any delays.

## ENDNOTES

Note: The data in this policy brief are drawn from portions of the book *Walls, Cages, and Family Separation: Race and Immigration Policy in the Trump Era* (under contract with Cambridge University Press) by Sophia Jordán Wallace (University of Washington) and Chris Zepeda-Millán (UCLA).

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- <sup>4</sup> Martin J. (2020). 60 percent of ICE detainees tested have corona virus. Newsweek, <https://www.newsweek.com/60-percent-ice-detainees-tested-have-coronavirus-1500817> and Montoya-Galvez, C. (2020). Chicago coronavirus outbreak infects dozens of migrant children in U.S. custody. CBS News, [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/chicago-coronavirus-outbreak-infects-dozens-of-migrant-children-in-us-custody/?fbclid=IwAR1Gi45kyHcCkSQIK7yWE\\_FailKNLEoAcxtdZjoUvfZUMbL37k2YAViO-jA](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/chicago-coronavirus-outbreak-infects-dozens-of-migrant-children-in-us-custody/?fbclid=IwAR1Gi45kyHcCkSQIK7yWE_FailKNLEoAcxtdZjoUvfZUMbL37k2YAViO-jA)
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- <sup>13</sup> For more information about Prolific and their sampling methodologies see <https://www.prolific.co/>
- <sup>14</sup> Abrajano, M. & Hajnal, Z. L. (2015). *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, and Masuoka, N. & Junn, J. (2013). *The Politics of Belonging: Race, Public Opinion, and Immigration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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Professor Zepeda-Millán's first book, *Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, and Activism* (Cambridge University Press 2017) received multiple national honors and awards from the American Political Science Association and American Sociological Association. He is currently finishing a co-authored book about U.S. public opinion on migrant child detention, family separation, and President Trump's border wall.

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