

**Two young adults infiltrated an immigration detention center in Florida. This Sundance film shows what they found**

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*Lisa Rinzler, Courtesy of Sundance Institute*

*Maynor Alvarado and Manuel Uriza appear in "Infiltrators," a documentary by Cristina Ibarra and Alex Rivera, an official selection of NEXT program at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. It debuted at Sundance on Jan, 25, 2019.*

PARK CITY — Most undocumented people try to avoid immigration detention. But not Marco Saavedra and Viridiana Martinez.

In 2012, Saavedra and Martinez, two young adults in their early 20s, decided to turn themselves in to authorities to get inside the Broward Transitional Center, a for-profit immigration detention facility in Florida that houses 600 men and 100 women. Their goal was to show the world what immigration detention is really like and to advocate for the release of detained individuals without criminal records.



*Alex Rivera, Courtesy of Sundance Institute  
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Their story is the subject of the movie "Infiltrators," directed by Alex Rivera and Cristina Ibarra, which premiered Jan. 25 at the Sundance Film Festival.

Across the nation, there are 200 detention centers housing 40,000 detainees, according to the film. These facilities are not jails or prisons, but are used to house people suspected of illegal immigration while they await a judge's decision on whether they will be deported or released back into the community — something that can take months or years.

Illegal immigration is a civil not a criminal offense, and advocates say it's inhumane to lock people up and separate them from their families when they have committed no crime. But Andrew Arthur, a resident fellow in law and policy at the Center for Immigration Studies, says detention centers are necessary to hold people who may be living in the United States unlawfully and are likely to hide from authorities to avoid deportation. "The law is clear. There are limited bases on which individuals who do not have status are allowed to stay in the U.S., and the standards are high," he said.

"The scariest part for me was getting in," Martinez told the Deseret News.

The first time she tried, customs agents were suspicious because they saw her being dropped off, she spoke English well, and she was dressed nicely, Martinez said. Before approaching the facility a second time, she changed her clothes and practiced speaking broken English. She told the agents her husband had been deported and she wanted to go back to Mexico.

The film depicts Martinez, once inside, meeting a woman who left Venezuela under political pressure and is terrified of going back. Another woman from Congo has been in detention for three years after trying to report her husband for domestic abuse. Saavedra, Martinez's counterpart on the men's side of the facility, meets others including a man married to a U.S. citizen with four children who left Honduras where gangs killed two of his brothers.

During the few weeks they were both detained, Saavedra and Martinez helped multiple people get released by coordinating with their friends on the outside via phone calls and in-person visits in order to draw media and political attention to individual cases. Saavedra, Martinez and their friends are part of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, a group of "dreamers," or young people brought to the United States illegally as children, who advocate for the rights of the undocumented.

After Saavedra and Martinez were discovered and kicked out of Broward, their story attracted both praise from those who said their efforts were heroic and dismay from people who said undocumented immigrants like them do not have a right to stay in this country and should be deported.

Seven years later, Martinez estimates the National Immigrant Youth Alliance's efforts, including training they provide to other advocacy groups, have gotten thousands of people released from detention.

The film, which weaves documentary-style interviews with dramatized recreations, takes place in 2012, before President Barack Obama announced the Deferred Action Plan for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an executive branch memorandum granting young undocumented immigrants work permits and protection from deportation. In 2017, the Justice Department announced it would no longer accept DACA applications.

While "Infiltrators" is a story from the Obama administration, directors Rivera and Ibarra say it's relevant now because there have not been significant changes to immigration law in more than a decade.

"It's a deeper story than this moment in time. We hope to raise a deeper question about whether this system should exist at all. Should families be put in cages for moving here?" said Rivera.

### **What immigration detention centers are like**

Management and Training Corporation (MTC), one of the largest for-profit prison corporations in the U.S., is planning to build a 600-bed immigrant detention center in Evanston, Wyoming. The facility, 83 miles from Salt Lake City, would provide a closer location to house detainees from Utah. Currently, the closest detention facilities are in Denver and Las Vegas, said Jason Stevenson, strategic communications manager for the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah.

Uinta County Commissioner Craig Welling told [Wyoming Public Media](#) that city and county officials voted unanimously for the facility because it would bring jobs. Immigrant advocates object, saying the more beds there are, the more people will be detained, and the more lives will be disrupted. What's more, MTC has faced a [string of lawsuits](#) related to mismanagement and abuse of inmates.

Media reports from around the country have revealed cases of [neglect](#), [physical abuse](#), [sexual abuse](#) and [mistreatment](#) of inmates' [medical conditions](#) inside America's immigration detention centers. [NBC News](#) reported that 22 immigrants have died in ICE detention centers during the past two years. In addition, there is currently a [class-action lawsuit](#) against GEO group, the company that runs the detention center featured in the film, alleging wage violations and forced labor.

"Infiltrators" does not depict any of these abuses, but it shows a man named Victor being put in solitary confinement for encouraging inmates to participate in a group fast, to gain spiritual strength and demonstrate how much they want to be released. Another man named Beni is threatened by officers who tell him they know where his wife and son live.

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*Andrew Arthur, a resident fellow in law and policy at the Center for Immigration Studies*

Arthur, who worked as a judge in the York immigration court in Pennsylvania from 2006 to 2015, said human rights abuses within detention centers are rare and that "without a doubt" conditions are better than they are in prisons. During Arthur's time as a judge, he made it a point to go through the York County Prison detention facility every day, eating in the cafeteria and using the fitness room.

"The actual facilities are better. There's more freedom to move around and more oversight from special interest groups about them," Arthur said, contradicting the advocate's narrative that detention centers are unsafe.

The quality of the conditions doesn't change the fact that some people are detained for two, three or more years as they apply for asylum or appeal their cases, usually without a lawyer. A court backlog,



*Cristina Ibarra, Courtesy of Sundance Institute*

*Cristina Ibarra, director of "Infiltrators," an official selection of the NEXT program at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. It debuted at Sundance on Jan. 25, 2019*

which President Donald Trump has addressed by proposing to hire 75 new immigration judges, adds to delays.

According to Stevenson, detainees are not provided with legal representation because their cases are civil, not criminal.

"The law is very clear on this. You have right to a lawyer, just not a free one," Arthur said.

In 2016, the American Immigration Council found that only 14 percent of detained immigrants acquired legal counsel.

"There are not enough private attorneys or NGOs that can meet the need," said Mohammad Abdollahi, an Iranian-born member of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance who also appears in the film.

### **Who should be detained?**

In 2011, prior to DACA, the Department of Homeland Security began to relax the enforcement of U.S. immigration laws at the urging of the open borders lobby through a series of memos called the Morton memos. They called for a case-by-case review of all aliens in deportation proceedings and the granting of administrative amnesty to low risk persons, like those who were brought to the U.S. as a child, were pursuing an education or had no criminal record, for example.

"We found out that by 2012, less than 4 percent of 350,000 total cases were actually closed," said Abdollahi, indicating that Obama's policy was not being implemented to the degree advocates had hoped.

Victor Rojas, an Argentinian father who appears in the film, had been living in the United States for a decade and had no criminal record, but he was nonetheless detained at a time when Obama said ICE was focusing on felons, not families. "That was the dissonance the infiltrators jumped into to prove that schism was so real," said Rivera.

Despite the Trump administration's decision to stop considering new applications for the DACA program, Abdollahi told the Deseret News, "Trump has been very good for immigrants."

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*Olivier Jimenez, a barber in West Valley City*

Not only were there far fewer Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) administrative arrests so far during the Trump administration compared with the first seven years of the Obama administration, but Trump's calls to construct a wall and declare a national emergency at the border have brought increased awareness to immigration issues in general, Abdollahi said.

According to Stevenson, when someone is picked up by ICE, it disrupts not only their families, but their workplaces, schools and communities. "The collateral damage is much more catastrophic than you might think," Stevenson said.

Olivier Jimenez, 20, a barber in West Valley City, saw the film Sunday in Salt Lake City. Jimenez came to the U.S. when he was 5 years old with his mother, who was escaping economic hardship in Mexico. He is protected under DACA, but his mother is not.

"Many people have the privilege to not think about this subject, but it's very real and it affects more people than you think," Jimenez told the Deseret News. Jimenez has witnessed ICE roaming around his neighborhood and conducting what he thinks were illegal sweeps, where they had a warrant for one person yet asked for documentation of anyone they encountered.

"You don't really get the birds and bees talk growing up, you get the ICE talk," he said. "You get told what to do when someone you know gets deported, what to say to ICE, who to alert and who to call."

Inside Broward, Martinez found she could identify with every one of the women she met who had been separated from their families. "Family is sacred," she said. "What would I want someone to do for my family?"

According to Arthur, wanting to keep a family together is not a good enough reason to let an undocumented person remain in the U.S. The legal standard is that a person must have been physically present in the country for 10 years, have good moral character and be facing a situation where their removal would result in "exceptional and extremely unusual hardship" to their family members, Arthur said.

"Family separation is not unique to immigration," said Arthur, noting that many families are separated under different circumstances, including military service. "Again, it is the choice of the family members to remain when one gets deported."

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*Olivier Jimenez, a barber in West Valley City*

Stevenson said that under the Trump administration, ICE has demonstrated less discretion in terms of the types of people, criminals or not, that get detained. A 2018 ACLU report notes an increase in arrests taking place at courthouses, including in Utah, where noncitizens come to testify or check in with immigration officials.

"The presence of these officers and increased immigration arrests have created deep insecurity and fear among immigrant communities, stopping many from coming to court or even calling police in the first place," the ACLU report reads.

The debate comes down to the question of whether undocumented immigrants who are living peacefully and contributing to society should be left alone or detained.

"To put it in a simple way, no human being is illegal. Breathing air in a foreign country should not be a crime," said Jimenez.

"The reality is that immigrants are criminals in the eyes of all nonimmigrants," said Martinez. "We are criminals. Have we committed a crime? No, it's a civil offense. But that doesn't matter to them."