

IHRP Fellowship Final Report

Yolanda Song, IHRP Summer Fellow

As summer fellow at the International Human Rights Program, I worked at the law school with director Samer Muscati and senior fellow Hanna Gros. Working in such a small organization allowed me to see every step of the advocacy process, which I found to be an invaluable experience.

I spent the majority of my summer working on the issue of immigration detention in Canada and its impact on children. Together with Hanna, I co-authored a 70-page report entitled ["No Life for a Child": A Roadmap to End Immigration Detention of Children and Family Separation](#). The report examines Canadian practices of placing children in immigration detention or separating children from their detained parents, and the terrible consequences that these practices have on children's mental health and human rights. It also discusses options that can be implemented as alternatives to immigration detention. Finally, the report makes a number of recommendations to the Canadian government for bringing Canada in line with its obligations under international law.

I was given the opportunity to experience every aspect of the report's production. I spent a number of months researching the issue of immigration detention of children, which included research into domestic legislation and policy, international law, and models of alternatives to detention in foreign jurisdictions. It also included analysis of data that the IHRP obtained through access to information requests, such as statistical data and reports on detention conditions and practices. From conducting this research, I developed an extremely detailed understanding of the issue. I found that this allowed me, a law student with little previous experience in advocacy, to contribute meaningfully to the work of the IHRP and other advocates.

Hanna and I wrote the bulk of the report over the last two months of the summer. The process was very dynamic, and we were making constant changes up until the deadline. Writing the report was one of the most valuable learning experiences of my fellowship. I received frequent feedback from both Hanna and Samer, as well as feedback from the IHRP's partners, which included lawyers, medical professionals, and other advocates. Hearing the input of experienced professionals and advocates was instrumental in developing my skills as a writer and an advocate. On a more personal level, working with these passionate and skilled advocates was very inspiring and educational, and a particular highlight of my summer.

In addition to researching and writing the report, I had the chance to be involved in other aspects of the advocacy process as well. For example, I attended meetings with senior directors and managers from the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), the agency responsible for many key aspects of immigration detention. The IHRP and its advocacy partners and the CBSA discussed upcoming reforms to the immigration detention system as well as the report's findings and recommendations. Attending and participating in these meetings was a very exciting element of my fellowship and I

learned a great deal both from watching experienced advocates at work and from presenting on aspects of the report myself. Furthermore, it was very interesting to write the report as these meetings and developments were happening, as we were able to flexibly tailor the report to respond to the CBSA's statements and to address the IHRP's advocacy targets more effectively. For instance, we saw that the CBSA directors were more responsive to case studies and evidence of the mental health impacts of detention on children, and expanded on these sections in the report.

I also attended meetings with other advocates working on the issue of immigration detention. A number of medical and legal professionals drafted a statement condemning the practices of child detention and family separation, which was endorsed by several major medical, legal, and human rights organizations in Canada. I was able to get a behind-the-scenes look at the work that goes into contacting and coordinating such a large group of advocates, which was much a much more complex process than I had previously imagined.

Finally, in addition to my work on immigration detention, I also reviewed other reports published by the IHRP on a variety of human rights issues. These included a report entitled "*Unsafe and on the Margins: Canada's Response to Mexico's Mistreatment of Sexual Minorities and People Living with HIV*," which addressed the discrimination and rights violations that vulnerable people in Mexico face in terms of health care services. I also reviewed and fact-checked a report that the IHRP produced in conjunction with PEN Canada and PEN International, entitled *Fearful Silence: The Chill on India's Public Sphere*, which provided an update to a previous IHRP–PEN report examining problems relating to freedom of expression in India. Reviewing these reports was a fascinating way to learn more about and contribute to the other work that the IHRP was involved in, but which I did not have time to focus on during my fellowship.

Final remarks

My summer fellowship at the IHRP was an amazing experience for which I will be forever grateful. I was able not only to see but also to be involved in every stage of the advocacy process, which taught me a great deal about the skills and procedure involved. I loved the opportunity to do such hands-on and exciting work, which was both extremely stimulating and rewarding. At the IHRP, I received the opportunity not only to learn about advocacy but also to do meaningful work addressing a serious human rights issue within Canada.