

# Seven hundred children separated from their families at US-Mexico border since October

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The Trump administration's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has separated more than 700 children, including infants, from their families at the US-Mexico border since October, according to a *New York Times* investigation. The Trump administration had declared previously that it was considering taking children away from parents as a deterrent to immigration.

While officials have stated that the number of families separated in this fashion is low, immigrant rights groups have sought official data to determine how many families have been broken up.

New data obtained by the *Times* shows that of those separated in this fashion, more than 100 are under the age of four.

The data was released by the Office of Refugee Settlement, a division of the Department of Health and Human Services, which detains children who have been removed from their parents' custody. While DHS officials initially denied the numbers were so high, a spokesman confirmed there were "approximately 700."

While the DHS denied that it was separating families to deter immigration, John Kelly, Trump's chief of staff who served last year as Homeland Security secretary, publicly floated the idea late last year.

Kelly proposed to shut down immigrant detention camps designed for families and replace them with separate camps for adults and children. The White House supported the idea and convened several government agencies to investigate the possibility, but the DHS denied it was ever adopted it as official policy.

Typically, children who are taken away from their families are sheltered by nongovernmental organizations where workers can see if a relative or guardian living in the US can take care of them. But this process is especially difficult for those without

documents, and children can languish in these shelters for years.

In fact, Border Patrol officials told the *Times* that there is no firm process to determine whether children were separated from their legitimate parents, or even to reunite children who were mistakenly separated from their families.

The *Times* cited the case of Mirian, an immigrant who is suing the government with support from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to prevent families from being separated at the border.

Mirian was held in three detention centers in Texas, without ever being told why her son was being taken away from her. Since February the only word she received of his whereabouts came from a case manager in San Antonio, where he is being held. She was told her son asked about her and "cried all the time" while dealing with an ear infection and a cough.

The DHS has defended its cruel and inhumane policies by pointing to allegations of fraud, in which immigrants were supposedly caught crossing the border with other people's children in the hope that they would be given lenient sentences.

The DHS undersecretary Kirstjen Nielsen has sought new ways to discourage immigration, in addition to a policy of family separation. Now, even immigrants with old deportation orders that were never enforced are being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) despite being married to a legal citizen or permanent resident for years.

The *Times* featured an interview with Karah de Oliveira, a woman from Massachusetts who has been married to Fabiano de Oliveira from Brazil and has a five-year-old son with him. Fabiano had no prior criminal conviction but was ordered back to Brazil 13 years ago.

When the couple decided to officially get married in order to enjoy the usual “privileges” of naturalized citizens, like buying a house and boarding an airplane, they went to the immigration office in Lawrence, Massachusetts only to meet two ICE agents with handcuffs.

Ms. de Oliveira told the *Times*, “He got caught because he was trying to do the right thing,” adding, “it was like a setup.”

While in years past, being married to a US citizen was a near guarantee against deportation, immigrants with homes, families and even businesses are finding themselves deported despite having no criminal record.

Perhaps most disturbing is that immigrants who show up to routine ICE appointments are being arrested. Meanwhile immigrants who have past deportation orders have few, if any, real prospects to avoid arrest.

Last fall, a Mexican man from Denver who was trying to get a green card from his daughter at Yale was arrested at his residency interview. In San Francisco earlier this year, a Sudanese man was arrested at his interview for political asylum. Even though he overstayed his visa, he had no criminal record or deportation order.

The latest developments reported by the *Times* underscore the grave threat to immigrants living in the US. While the Trump administration has greatly increased immigration arrests, which have grown by 40 percent increase since 2017, both Democrats and Republicans are to blame for the attacks on immigrants. The Obama administration deported some 3 million immigrants, more than all previous US presidents combined.



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