

# Hundreds of migrant children torn from their families under Trump's "zero tolerance" policy yet to be reunited with parents

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The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has revealed that 545 children who had been torn away from their families three years ago under the Trump administration's brutal "zero tolerance" policy are yet to be reunited with their parents. In a court filing yesterday, the ACLU said that in its hurry to carry out the policy, the Trump administration had deported two-thirds of the parents to their countries of origin without maintaining any proper records. This criminal negligence has meant that the task of reuniting families has been made exceptionally difficult, especially during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

It is hard to overstate the sheer inhumanity of the entire enterprise. The Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy calling for the criminal prosecution of all undocumented immigrants, regardless of the conditions leading to their crossing the US border, in practice meant ripping apart families.

Officially in place between the months of May and June, 2018, the policy saw children regardless of age being torn away from their parents and placed under the dubious care of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The HHS then shipped the children to 100 Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) centers around the country or made other "care" arrangements.

By early June 2018, reports started trickling in about the horrific reality of family separations at the border. The *Washington Post* reported the suicide of a Honduran immigrant in a Texas jail, who had suffered a mental breakdown after being dragged away from his wife and child. CNN reported that a Honduran woman who was breastfeeding her infant daughter in a detention center in McAllen, Texas had the child snatched away by federal officials. These stories,

however, paled in comparison to the conditions faced by the children themselves in detention.

Journalists and human rights advocates who were given a tour of a warehouse in McAllen, Texas in late June, 2018 described hundreds of children being kept in cages made of chain-link fencing. The Associated Press reported that the overhead lighting in the space was kept on around the clock, the children slept under "large foil sheets," they had no books or toys and that the older ones were forced to take care of the younger ones, including having to change soiled diapers.

In an audio clip from one such "care" center that went viral after being published by ProPublica, one can hear children crying and screaming "Mami" "Papa" and "Daddy" over and over again, as a guard jokes: "Well, we have an orchestra here. What's missing is a conductor."

Public outrage and mass protests around the country following these revelations forced the Trump administration to officially renounce the policy through an executive order on June 20, 2018, except when "there was concern that the parent might endanger the child." Six days later, Judge Dana Sabraw issued a nationwide injunction against family separations. However, as recent revelations have made evident, the policy has not only continued under the radar, but had in fact been in operation for much longer than had been publicly acknowledged.

Early this month, the *New York Times* reported the existence of a pilot program at the Texas border with Mexico that had been putting family separations into practice a year before "zero tolerance" with the active involvement of Department of Justice (DOJ) officials, especially then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Sessions had denied the existence of such a program, and as late as June, 2018, then-Department of Homeland Security secretary Kirstjen Nielsen tweeted: “We do not have a policy of separating families at the border. Period.”

The absolute cravenness and outright duplicity of officials in the Trump administration, while not surprising, is still noteworthy, given that the targets of these policies were children—hundreds of them under the age of four. The fact that children remain separated from their parents years after the Trump administration was legally countermanded speaks to blatant inhumanity underlying the anti-immigrant measures enforced by the US government.

By July 2018, immigrant parents were given the choice of either being deported back to their countries of origin with their children, or pursuing their asylum claims while being separated from their children. At the border, Custom and Border Protection agents made up spurious and vague allegations of minor criminal activity in order to separate families. Children as young as five were being asked to “sign away their rights” after being taken from their guardians. As various immigration rights activists have pointed out, these practices were carried out in “the cover of the night” and there is no reason to believe that they do not continue to this day.

What the latest revelations mean is that the number of children that have been forcibly taken away from their families is in fact far higher than has even been acknowledged by the Trump administration. The initial public acknowledgment placed the number at 2,300, though a later Amnesty report stated that CBP had separated 6,022 “family units” between April 2018 and August 2018. In January, 2020, the official government count of children separated from their parents or guardians since 2017 stood at 4,368. Within a month, it was reported that an additional 1,142 children had been separated from their families after “zero tolerance” had officially ended. However, immigration advocates rightly point out that even these numbers are questionable.

Leaked reports and eyewitness accounts over the past three years make clear that the children who have been separated from their families have been subjected to all manner of abuse and have been traumatized in ways that are yet to be accounted for.

The fact that a significant number of them are still being deprived of their parents is a testament to the criminality of the Republicans and Democrats, and as Paola Luisi, director of the coalition “Families Belong Together” told the *Guardian*, “par for the course for a sadistic immigration system.”

The Democrats have opposed Trump from the right on issues of foreign policy, including his supposed weakness towards Russia and China, while doing nothing to oppose his fascistic immigration policies, including the construction of a border wall with military funding, mass workplace raids and a ban on travel from seven majority-Muslim countries. The four-year war waged on immigrants by Trump—including the child separation policy—has not been raised as an issue in any significant manner in the election campaign of former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Kamala Harris.



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