

More than 660 parents of separated immigrant children cannot be located by the US government

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The horrors of the Trump administration's family separation policy are continuing to come to light. After an ACLU lawsuit last month revealed that the parents of 545 immigrant children could not be located, a lawyer tasked with reuniting families disclosed this week that the total has now risen to 666. Almost 20 percent of the children were under the age of 5 when separated.

The Trump administration began separating children from their parents in July 2017 under a "pilot program" in the El Paso, Texas area, which lasted until November of that year. In April 2018, the policy was fully implemented at the US-Mexico border and lasted until June 2018, when a US District Judge issued an injunction limiting family separations and ordering the government to reunite all migrant families.

Under this so-called "zero tolerance" policy, all migrants crossing the border, including asylum seekers, were referred to the Department of Justice for prosecution. Undocumented immigrants were imprisoned, with their children sent to various Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters around the country. The separated children included infants and toddlers.

In October 2018, Amnesty International reported that during the period April-August 2018, 6,022 "family units" were separated. Since the government's "zero tolerance" policy officially ended in June 2018, the government has acknowledged separating another 1,100 children from their families, with the number undoubtedly far higher.

The courts have proved ineffective in putting an end to family separation. On January 13, 2020, Judge Dana Sabraw, the same judge who issued the initial injunction, refused to issue further restrictions on the

government's ability to separate families, allowing immigration officials discretion to continue to separate children where the "parent is unfit or presents a danger to the child." In fact, immigration officials have used this "discretion" to separate families based on "crimes" such as traffic violations or mere suspicion that an adult is not the actual parent of a child.

Now, more than two years after Judge Sabraw ordered the government to reunite all children, the process of finding parents is still ongoing. About two-thirds of the parents of the initially identified 545 separated children were deported, making reunification extremely difficult, if not impossible. According to Steven Herzog, the attorney leading the effort to reunite the separated children, the new group of 121 children includes those "for whom the government did not provide any phone number." These additional children were mostly separated during the 2017 pilot program.

The deputy director of the ACLU Immigrants' Rights Project, Lee Gelernt, told NBC News that the new number "includes individuals in addition to [the] 545 for whom we got no information from [the] government that would allow meaningful searches but [we] are hopeful the government will now provide [us] with that information."

The Trump administration's grotesque family separation tactics built upon the foundation laid by the Obama administration. In an inhumane effort to deter families from coming to the United States, Obama's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) instituted the practice of splitting families apart, sending mothers and their children to one detention location and fathers to a facility in another part of the country.

As another tactic to intimidate immigrants, Obama's

DHS routinely violated a 1997 court settlement agreement, known as the Flores agreement, by frequently keeping children in detention beyond 20 days. The Obama administration also deported about 3 million immigrants, more than any president in US history.

In a related development, an important witness into purported widespread medical neglect at a Georgia Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center has been threatened with deportation to the Philippines, despite strong evidence that she is a US citizen.

Alma Bowman has been held at Georgia's Irwin County Detention Center for more than two years. This is the same ICE facility where a nurse recently filed a whistleblower complaint alleging that a number of women were subjected to sterilization through hysterectomies without consent.

On November 1, ICE denied a stay of removal for Bowman, which sets her up for deportation; however, after further intervention by her immigration attorneys that afternoon, the deportation was halted for the time being. According to Priyanka Bhatt, an attorney with Project South, the organization which filed the whistleblower action, Bowman was "a big source of information" for the September 14 complaint into forced sterilizations.

Since her transfer to the Georgia facility in January 2018, Bowman has been trying to raise awareness about medical abuses, along with the general deplorable living conditions at the facility. In an October 2020 letter to Representatives Hank Johnson and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bowman wrote that "These conditions are not safe for anyone to live in whether they are citizens of the United States or not."

Bowman was born in the Philippines to a US citizen father and Filipina mother, moving to the US as an adolescent. Under US immigration law at that time, a person born out of wedlock to a US citizen father had to have their father "legitimate" the paternity prior to turning 21. According to The Intercept when she was 11, Bowman's father filled out an immigration form called a "petition to classify status of alien relative" and submitted it to the US embassy in the Philippines. Bowman's immigration lawyer argues that the document legitimates her paternity. According to The Intercept, her parents' 1968 marriage also legitimated

her under Georgia law, making her a US citizen.

Despite informing ICE and immigration judges about her citizenship, she remains subject to deportation. Bowman's situation is far from unique. According to Jacqueline Stevens, founder of the Deportation Research Clinic at Northwestern University, about 1 percent of all ICE detainees and about one-half of 1 percent of deportees are US citizens, resulting in the deportation of thousands of American citizens every year.



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