

These U.S. policies await immigrant children when they reach border

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A few boys try to make calls as they are joined by hundreds of mostly Central American immigrant children who are being processed and held at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nogales Placement Center on Wednesday, June 18, 2014, in Nogales, Arizona. Photo by: Ross D. Franklin/AP Photo

News reports revealed that the U.S. government couldn't confirm the locations of nearly 1,500 immigrant children. Some people wondered how this could happen and who was at fault. The answer is complicated.

There are three issues that have become mixed up. One issue is children arriving at the border without adults. Another is separating children from their parents at the border. The third is families seeking asylum. Asylum is different from regular immigration. It is for people moving to the U.S. to get away from problems like violence in their home country. Asylum seekers can fill out a form and try to get asylum. First, though, they must be either at the border or inside the U.S.

Did the Trump administration separate children from their parents at the border, then lose track of the children?

No. The 1,475 children arrived at the U.S. border alone, without their parents. Most of the children came from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. These are all countries in Central America. The children were fleeing violence in these countries.

The children came to the border without adults. Under U.S. law, they cannot be deported right away. If the children were deported, they would be sent back to their home countries. First, they are placed with sponsors. The sponsors are usually close relatives who live in the United States. About 1 out of 10 of the children are placed with people who aren't related to them.

Placing these children with sponsors is a rule that dates back to the administration of former President Barack Obama.

The government's Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, is in charge of placing the children with sponsors. Steven Wagner works for HHS. Although the government doesn't know where the children are, Wagner said the children are not "lost."

The agency tried to check in on thousands of children by calling their sponsors, he said. In 1,475 cases, nobody picked up the phone.

He said many sponsors did not answer the phone because they were living in the country without permission. Wagner said that does not mean the children are missing or in danger.

Why the confusion? One reason: The administration's new zero tolerance policy

The administration of President Donald Trump announced a new rule in May. There would be a "zero tolerance" rule for families trying to cross the border without permission, it said.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions is the government's top lawyer and law enforcement official. He said the government will take action against anybody who crosses the U.S. border without permission. He said that if adults bring children with them, the government will separate them from the children.

The Trump administration insists that this is not a new rule. In the past, parents have been arrested for crossing the border without permission. Their children were placed in temporary homes with other people.

The other reason: The Trump administration is cracking down on asylum seekers

People who present themselves at U.S. borders are allowed to claim asylum. The government is taking a stronger position against this, though. The reason is President Trump wants to limit people coming to the United States.

Sessions has spoken out against the asylum system. He said the system is misused by immigrants and some lawyers.

In many cases, the government denies asylum claims. It then treats those asylum seekers as law breakers instead. This leads to more children being separated from their families.

What does this have to do with the Obama administration?

The rules about placing children with sponsors and separating children from their families were in place under the Obama administration. They go back to the administration of former President George W. Bush.

The Trump administration said it's time to change the laws. The administration says it wants rules that allow families to stay together and face deportation together.

Stephen Miller works in the White House. He said Congress needs to pass laws to increase the number of centers where immigrants are held. That way families can stay together as they wait to be deported.

Miller said the root problem is at the border. It would be easier to solve other immigration problems if we solved the problems at the border, he said.