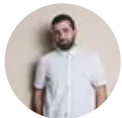


CORONAVIRUS

Border Officials Turned Away Unaccompanied Immigrant Children More Than 13,000 Times Under Trump's Pandemic Policy

"This is an enormous number of children who are being summarily sent back without any due process, potentially to serious or fatal danger."

**Hamed Aleaziz**

BuzzFeed News Reporter

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Immigrant children at the Gateway International Bridge, in Matamoros, Mexico, eat a meal provided by the United in Christ Ministry of Los Fresnos, Texas, a group that brings dinner every Thursday in rotation with other volunteers.

Rebecca Blackwell / AP

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The Department of Homeland Security has expelled unaccompanied immigrant children from the US border more than 13,000 times since March, when the Trump administration gave the agency unprecedented powers to close off access at the border during the coronavirus pandemic, according to an internal document obtained by BuzzFeed News.

The figure represents a major jump in child expulsions since the CDC issued an order allowing border officials to expel nearly all immigrants crossing from Mexico as the coronavirus was spreading rapidly across the world in March.

“This is an enormous number of children who are being summarily sent back without any due process, potentially to serious or fatal danger,” said Lee Gelernt, an attorney with the ACLU who has been working to stop the order.

Previously, unaccompanied children were sent to government-run shelters as they attempted to pursue their asylum cases. But the Trump administration has argued that the policy is necessary to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in the US and has been a key tool for border agents.

Expulsions are legally different than deportations, which would mean an immigrant had actually undergone the immigration process and found to not be legally allowed to stay in the US. Critics say the government is using the public health orders as an excuse to violate federal laws that govern the processing of unaccompanied minors at the border.

Immigrants from Honduras are escorted back across the border by Border Patrol agents in 2018 in Hidalgo, Texas.

David J. Phillip / AP

In September, a border official declared in federal court that around 8,800 children had been turned around through the use of the CDC order. The internal DHS document states that since March, there have been more than 13,000 “encounters” with unaccompanied immigrant children under the new policy.

A US Customs and Border Protection spokesperson did not confirm the statistic due to ongoing litigation but stated that “encounters” meant expulsions.

“Once encountered, they would be expelled,” the spokesperson said, noting that the statistic could also include children who return to the border multiple times.

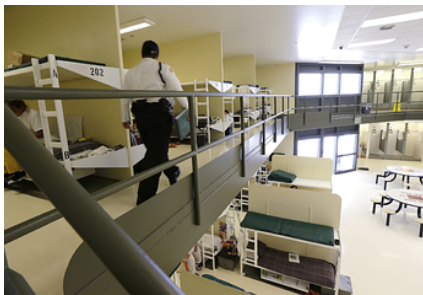
Before the pandemic, unaccompanied children picked up by Border Patrol agents would be sent to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, where they would be housed in shelters as they officially started applying for asylum and waited to be reunited with family members in the US.

The ORR referral process was created by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which was signed by then-president George W. Bush in 2008. Under the law, CBP officials are generally required to refer the children within 72 hours to the US refugee agency.

But those referrals dropped precipitously after the CDC order. Instead, unaccompanied children at the border are turned back immediately to Mexico or held in CBP facilities until a flight can remove them out of the country.

In late June, US District Judge Carl Nichols, who was appointed by President Donald Trump, blocked the deportation of a 16-year-old Honduran boy under the CDC order. While the ruling did not void the policy altogether, it was seen as a blow to the administration. Since then, the government has said it was no longer seeking to use the CDC order to remove the boy from the country.

In September, a federal judge also ordered the Trump administration to stop detaining immigrant children in hotels before quickly sending them back to their home countries under the pandemic border policy.

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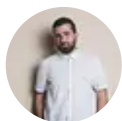
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