

ICE Is Now Fingerprinting Immigrants As Young As 14 Years Old

A new Immigrations and Customs Enforcement directive allows the agency to collect fingerprints from immigrants 14 and older who are in immigration shelters. The agency says it's for their safety.

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A border security officer in Los Ebanos, Texas, searches immigrants before transferring them by bus to a facility.

John Moore / Getty Images

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials have begun fingerprinting unaccompanied immigrant children over the age of 14 who are not in their custody but are in shelters across the country, BuzzFeed News has learned.

ICE officials called it a way to protect unaccompanied minors in custody.

“In January, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) issued field guidance to juvenile coordinators to work with Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to identify and collect fingerprints on unaccompanied alien children (UACs) at ORR facilities who

are over the age of 14, to mitigate and prevent the risk of their victimization by human traffickers and smugglers, and to reduce misidentification,” a senior ICE official said in an email to BuzzFeed News.

It is unclear if the collection is taking place across the country or in certain locations.

The new ICE directive, issued to its juvenile coordinators in January, appears to be the latest Trump administration policy aimed at collecting more personal information about immigrants — including children — who cross the border. In recent months, the administration launched a pilot project in various parts of the US to collect the DNA samples of individuals at the border.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement oversees shelters across the country that hold unaccompanied children. These shelters then look to identify potential "sponsors" or family members in the US for permanent placement. ORR officials did not respond to a request for a comment.

Democratic Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, said in a statement that ICE officials coming into shelter to fingerprint teens is "antithetical" to ORR's mission, and that she did not buy ICE's justification "for one second."

"Make no mistake: ICE's intention is to intimidate and scare children by entering these shelters, and if HHS allows ICE to do so, they will be complicit," she said.

DeLauro added that if the policy was actually about protecting children, "it would not have gone into effect without notifying Congress or been leaked out anonymously."

"I will leverage every resource I have as Chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee that funds HHS to ensure this policy is overturned and ORR upholds its mission to protect children, not enforce the racist immigration policies of President Trump and Stephen Miller," she added.

HHS officials on Thursday said that their focus is always the safety and interest of the child and the agency verify the sponsor's identity before sending them to the sponsor.

"As part of ORR's determination of whether an individual is an appropriate sponsor, case managers are required to verify a potential sponsor's identity and relationship to a child before releasing a child to a sponsor," the agency said in a statement.

Sponsors, they added, must provide documentation on their addresses, and once the children are released, they are no longer in the care of the government.

"Sponsors are responsible for making appropriate custodial decisions while unaccompanied alien children await their immigration hearings," the agency said.

The Washington Post reported in December that senior White House officials pushed to have ICE agents within ORR facilities. Instead, the administration opted to allow ICE to collect fingerprints of those who seek to pick up immigrant children at government shelters.

Immigrant advocates said that they had already heard of ICE officials showing up at the ORR facilities to begin the process of fingerprinting children.

“It causes an incredible amount of stress — the kids were seeing it as scary and frustrating,” said Jennifer Podkul, director for policy and advocacy at Kids In Need of Defense, a group that represents unaccompanied children. Podkul said that children over 14 who apply for an immigration benefit with the government through US Citizenship and Immigration Services already provide their fingerprints.

What’s more, she said, information on their sponsors in the US and where they will be living is well known to the government.

Experts who spoke with BuzzFeed News also said the move was misguided.

“It is unwise to have ICE going to ORR facilities, which are supposed to provide a safe and comfortable space for the children,” said Sarah Pierce, an analyst at the Migration Policy Institute. “The children already go through processing with CBP at the border when they arrive. It would be easier, and less traumatic for the children, if the administration just got their fingerprints then.”

ICE officials said, however, that the move would help with the ability to track down children in unsafe conditions.

“ICE has taken this necessary step to further protect UACs who may be released to unsafe situations. ORR’s current practice of predominantly relying on documents with biographic information alone rather than fingerprints to confirm sponsor identity and suitability is dangerous and irresponsible. Fraudulent documents and documents obtained by fraud are known to be prevalent at the southwest border,” said a senior ICE official. “Even though they have been made aware of the potential risks to child safety, in many cases, ORR has willfully elected to rely on these suspect documents instead of fingerprints for the sole purpose of increasing the speed of placement and ignoring the obvious risks to child welfare and safety.”

The official said that without the fingerprints, ICE investigators who find children who may have been smuggled or trafficked would not be able to identify them.

“ICE’s fingerprinting process is entirely digital and takes less than three minutes. Capturing the UACs photo and fingerprints will allow law enforcement entities to identify children who are trafficked, smuggled, forced into sweatshops or even the sex trade,” the official said.

A former senior ICE official told BuzzFeed News, “This policy looks to add to ICE's ever-growing data collection for future enforcement. I'd find it very hard to believe such a benign motive as protecting children, that might be a sidenote, but the goal is like everything else in this administration — tightening the screws on anyone seeking asylum no matter their age or situation.”

ICE officials also said that DHS is “actively” trying to locate unaccompanied children who did not appear before a judge to pursue their immigration case.

“DHS is now actively trying to locate the 7,888 UACs who disappeared while in the care of sponsors that ORR deemed suitable in FY 2019. That’s 7,888 children whose sponsors failed to take them before a federal judge who could have then granted them the right to stay in [the] United States,” the senior ICE official wrote. “Instead, 7,888 children from last year alone are now considered fugitives because their ORR approved sponsors, many of whom ORR knew were fugitives prior to placement, predictably failed to bring the child to court.”

In 2018, around 15,000 unaccompanied children were in shelters across the country as the number of those who crossed the border rose to high levels. In recent months, that number has dropped significantly. In early January, just over 3,000 children were in shelters across the country.

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