



ICE Sent 600 Immigrant Kids to Detention in Federal Shelters This Year. It's a New Record.



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by **Mica Rosenberg, Mario Ariza, McKenzie Funk, Jeff Ernsthausen and Gabriel Sandoval**

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Reporting Highlights

- **Kids in Custody:** This year ICE has sent more immigrant children into the federal shelter system than in the previous four years combined. New data suggests families are being separated.
- **Florida Cooperation:** The pipeline from traffic stops to federal shelters is evident in Florida, where thousands of state and local police are deputized to enforce federal immigration laws.
- **Stuck in the System:** Under Trump, kids' average stay in federal custody is nearly six months — up from a month under Biden. Lengthy stays are leading some children to lose hope.

These highlights were written by the reporters and editors who worked on this story.

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It was Friday, June 6, and the rent was due. As soon as she finished an errand, Imelda Carreto planned on joining her family as they gathered scrap metal to earn a little extra cash. Her fiancé, Julio Matias, and 15-year-old nephew, Carlos, had set out early, hitching a trailer to the back of their beat-up gray truck.

Shortly after 8 a.m., Carreto's phone rang. It was Carlos, telling her an officer with the Florida Highway Patrol had pulled over the truck on Interstate 4 near Tampa. The stated reason: cracks in their windshield. But Carreto was worried. She knew Florida police were collaborating with federal immigration authorities. Her fiancé was undocumented. She says she rushed to the scene and made it there just before the immigration officers.

As she feared, Matias had been detained. But to her surprise, so had Carlos. He was just a kid. (ProPublica is only identifying Carlos by his first name because he is a minor.) Carlos was in high school. He'd been living in the United States for over two years and was working toward applying for legal status to stay long term. The government had given her, a legal resident, custody of him. Now he was in handcuffs. Why would they take him too?

Carreto didn't carry any proof that she had custody of the boy. She had left it in another car in her rush. She recalls officers saying her nephew would likely be released to her in a few days once she presented the proper documents. Before they drove him away, Carlos started to tear up. Carreto told him, "Don't cry. I don't know how, but I'll get you back. Understand?"

A cracked windshield, a waiting officer, a forgotten document: The new family separations often start in the most mundane ways.

Seven years ago, during the first administration of President Donald Trump, children were taken from their families the moment they crossed the border into the United States. Under a policy of zero tolerance for illegal crossing, Customs and Border Protection officers detained adults while children were sent into the federal shelter system. The

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Today, family separations are back, only now they are happening all across the country. The lawsuit against the zero tolerance policy resulted in a 2023 settlement that limits separations at the border, but it does not address those that occur inside the country after encounters with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. Advocates fear the administration is conducting the new separations for the same reasons as before: to deter new immigrants from coming and to terrify those who are here into leaving.

Since the start of this year, some 600 immigrant children have been placed in government shelters by ICE, according to government data. That figure, which has not been previously reported, is already higher than the tally for the previous four years combined. And it is the highest number since recordkeeping began a decade ago.

ProPublica pieced together additional information for around 400 children sent to shelters by examining state and federal records and conducting dozens of interviews with current and former government officials, advocates, attorneys and immigrant families.

Around 160 of the cases that we learned about involved child welfare concerns, which current and former officials say is typical of the children ICE has sent to shelters in the past. These cases include instances of kids who were encountered alone inside the country or were considered potential victims of domestic abuse or trafficking, or instances where minors or the adults they were with had been accused of committing a crime.

But in a majority of the cases we examined, kids ended up in shelters in ways government officials say they never would have in the past: after routine immigration court hearings or appointments, or because they were at a home or a business when immigration authorities showed up to arrest someone else.

In South Carolina, a Colombian family of five went to a government office for a fingerprinting appointment, only to have the parents detained while the children — ages 5, 11 and 15 — were sent into the shelter system for four months. In South Florida, a 17-year-old from Guatemala was taken into custody because officers couldn't make contact with his dad after a traffic stop; his dad is deaf. In Maryland, a 17-year-old from Mexico ended up in a shelter after making a wrong turn onto military property.

In around 150 cases, children were taken into federal custody after traffic stops. The trend is especially noticeable in states like Florida, where thousands of state and local police, including highway patrol, have been deputized to enforce immigration laws.

“What’s happening to kids now is like many small zero tolerances,” said Marion “Mickey” Donovan-Kaloust, director of legal services at the Los Angeles-based Immigrant Defenders Law Center. This and other changes affecting immigrant children are “adding up to a huge trauma.”

Most of the cases we found involve teenagers, and many of them had been in the United States for years. In those cases, being sent to a shelter can mean separation not only from their families but from schools, friends, churches, doctors and daily routines.

Once children are in shelters, the government is making it harder and harder for relatives or other adults who act as sponsors to get them back. The average length of stay has grown to nearly six months, up from one month during the presidency of Joe Biden, public data shows.

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson said in a written statement that the Biden administration released immigrant kids to sponsors too quickly and without proper vetting, sometimes into unsafe situations. “The Trump Administration is ensuring that unaccompanied minors do not fall victim to the same dangerous conditions,” Jackson said.

Department of Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin, speaking for ICE, said the agency “does not

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Asked about Carlos' detention in Florida, McLaughlin said that traffic stops by officers trained to partner with ICE have prevented abuse of immigrant children and "resulted in arrests of human traffickers, abusers, and other criminals."

ProPublica found no evidence of Carreto or Matias, her fiancé, being accused or convicted of serious crimes. Carreto had been found guilty of driving without a license at least twice and had gotten a speeding ticket. Matias pleaded guilty to a 2011 taillight infraction. He now has an ongoing case for driving without a license from the traffic stop with Carlos, and he has been returned to Guatemala.

Shelter Network Turned on Its Head

What is happening now is not what the system was set up for.

The nation's network of roughly 170 federal shelters for "unaccompanied" immigrant children is run by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, part of the Department of Health and Human Services. The office is tasked with temporarily housing vulnerable children who cross the border alone, holding them in the least restrictive setting possible until they can be released to a sponsor in the United States. Typically that means placing kids with a parent or other family member. The office finds and vets the sponsors and is required to release children to them without delay. Once kids are out, they can apply to remain here permanently.

Under Biden, when border crossings surged to record highs, around 470,000 children were released to sponsors after going through the shelter system. Republicans said the releases incentivized smugglers to endanger kids on the long journey north and encouraged parents to send their children across the border alone.

The White House called the previous administration's sponsor-vetting process "abysmal," and said that many records pertaining to minors released under Biden "were either fraudulent or never existed to begin with."

Biden officials deny these claims. But some kids have indeed [ended up working](#) in [dangerous jobs](#).

The Trump administration [has placed former ICE officials in charge of the refugee resettlement office](#) and has made it a priority to locate children who were released from custody in previous years. To facilitate the effort, ICE plans to open a [national, 24-hour call center](#) meant to help state and local officials find them. The government says it says it has already checked on more than 24,400 children in person, and it cited [more than a dozen examples](#) of [sponsors](#) and immigrant minors arrested for crimes ranging from murder to drug trafficking, rape and assault. One of the [cases](#) the White House highlighted was of a 15-year-old Guatemalan girl the government says was released in 2023 to a man who falsely claimed to be her brother and allegedly went on to sexually abuse her.

Under Trump, the government has introduced new vetting requirements, including expanded DNA checks, fingerprinting for everyone in the sponsor's household and heightened scrutiny of family finances.

In response to questions from ProPublica, the refugee resettlement office said it was legally required to care for all unaccompanied kids who came through its doors and defended the new vetting process. "The enhanced sponsorship requirements of this administration help keep unaccompanied alien children safe from traffickers and other bad, dangerous people," a spokesperson said.

Because so many children are now being sent into shelters in ways they hadn't been before, though, lawyers and advocates worry the administration's efforts have another motive: to more broadly target and deport immigrant kids and their families. They also say the new requirements are creating so much fear that some undocumented family members are hesitant to come forward as sponsors.

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“I think that they’re using a clearly vulnerable, clearly sympathetic population in a way that sends a powerful message to literally every other population,” said Jen Smyers, who was an official at the Office of Refugee Resettlement during the Biden administration. “If they’re going to go after these kids who have protections and say we care about them, and then treat them like this, that shows everyone that no one is safe.”

This month, attorneys suing the government over its treatment of children in the shelter system recovered a [government document](#) being provided to unaccompanied minors who cross the border. It warns them that if they do not choose to leave the country within 72 hours they will “be detained in the custody of the United States Government, for a prolonged period of time.” The document also warned that if the person who sought to sponsor the minors was undocumented, they would be “subject to arrest and removal” or to criminal penalties for “aiding your illegal entry.”

Customs and Border Protection told ProPublica that the document is used to ensure immigrant children “understand their rights and options.”

There have already been cases of prospective sponsors who have shown up at government offices for in-person interviews and been detained for being in the country illegally, said Marie Silver, a managing attorney at the National Immigrant Justice Center in Chicago.

“They are using the kids as bait, and then the kids are stuck,” Silver said. “They are creating unaccompanied children this way.”

Separation in the Sunshine State

In Florida, we found two dozen kids arrested in traffic stops who went on to spend weeks or months in federal shelters. Some are still there.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and the state’s Republican majority have spent years crafting policies that allow local police officers to seamlessly operate as federal immigration enforcers. They aim to be a model for how states can help the Trump administration “[reclaim America’s sovereignty](#).”

Across Florida, almost 5,000 officers — even those from its Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission — are empowered to detain people over their immigration status and to call in federal authorities to come pick them up. ProPublica obtained state data revealing that Florida police have arrested at least 47 children on federal immigration charges since late April, with the Florida Highway Patrol leading the tally.

In cases like that of Carlos, children were sent to a federal shelter despite having a parent or legal custodian caring for them. Five current and former federal officials said this could be a violation of [ICE’s own policy](#). The policy dictates that officers should let primary caregivers like Carreto take them home or find a safe place to send them. (It does not clearly require caregivers to show any documentation.) If they can’t find a safe place, or if there are signs the child is in danger, officers are supposed to alert local law enforcement or child-welfare officials and wait for them to arrive.

Florida has its own laws governing how state and local officers should interact with children. If a kid is found alone or in danger, state police must call a hotline run by Florida’s Department of Children and Families. The call is supposed to trigger a process in which state judges review any decision to place a child in the care of someone other than their family within 24 hours.

It’s not clear if Florida officers are calling the state hotline when encountering immigrant children. But it is clear that this year they have often called ICE.

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State Rep. Lawrence McClure, the Republican who introduced legislation this January that supercharged Florida's cooperation with ICE, promised during debate on the bill that nothing would change about how the state treated immigrant children. McClure did not respond directly to questions from ProPublica about the transfers to ICE.

Boundaries between state and federal policy "are being blurred" in an "unprecedented way," said Bernard Perlmutter, co-director of the University of Miami's Children and Youth Law Clinic.

The collaboration with local police in Florida and elsewhere comes as ICE has worked increasingly with other federal agencies that may have their own policies for handling encounters with kids.

In response to detailed questions from ProPublica, DeSantis' press secretary emailed a list of more than a dozen links from the video platform Rumble in which the governor speaks about immigration enforcement, writing: "Governor DeSantis has made immigration enforcement a top priority to keep Florida communities safe."

Other state officials, including from the Florida Highway Patrol and Department of Children and Families, either did not respond or declined our requests for comment on the state's partnership with ICE and its impact on immigrant children.

It was Florida's cooperation with federal authorities that landed Carlos in the federal shelter system this June — his second time there.

In December 2022, Carlos, then 13 years old, came to the United States from Guatemala, where his single mother made him work or beg for money, according to court records. He thought he would be better off in the U.S. with her sister, according to records provided by his attorney. He made the journey without his parents, the documents say.

After he crossed near Donna, Texas, he was picked up by border agents and spent three weeks in a federal shelter before being released to his aunt. Carreto said she had no idea Carlos was making the journey until she received a 2 a.m. phone call from immigration authorities. She welcomed the boy into her sprawling Guatemalan American family and insisted that he go to school.

Two and a half years into his stay with Carreto came the traffic stop.

Carlos was first taken across the state to the Broward Transitional Center, a for-profit detention facility operated by the GEO Group, an ICE contractor. He was transferred later in the day to an Office of Refugee Resettlement shelter in Tampa run by Urban Strategies, another government contractor, records show. The GEO Group declined to comment and referred ProPublica to ICE. Lisa Cummins, president of Urban Strategies, wrote in an email: "We remain deeply committed to the care and well-being of the children we serve."

Carreto launched into weeks of confusing phone calls and paperwork to get her nephew back. She had to send in a 10-page application. She turned over information about her finances, her adult son's finances, her lack of criminal history. She submitted samples of her DNA. She sent photos of the smoke alarms in her house.

Shortly after Carlos was detained, Carreto said, immigration officers paid an unannounced visit to her home. Her son Ereson, who is 18, says federal agents came onto the property without permission and asked if any immigrants were living there. The visit scared the family.

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Carreto's daughters eventually managed to pinpoint Carlos' location by asking him over the phone to name landmarks he could see, then searching for them on Google. In video calls home, Carreto said, Carlos was visibly sad. She said he

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Carlos was released after two and a half months.

He was one of the lucky ones: His aunt was a legal resident who had custody of him, and the family had the resources and determination to fight for him.

The government this year has moved to [slash legal services for children](#) and offered cash to kids who give up their cases and go home. (The Office of Refugee Resettlement’s statement to ProPublica said it is fully complying with a court order requiring that minors be provided with legal representation.) Attorneys who represent children said they have seen a spike in cases of self-harm and behavioral problems as kids lose hope of being released.

Of the kids that ProPublica learned about, around 140 were still stuck in federal shelters as of last month. Close to 100 were ordered to be deported or had signed papers agreeing to leave the country.

We are continuing to report on this issue and want to hear from anyone with insights on how immigration enforcement is impacting children. We are especially interested in speaking with people inside state and federal governments. Contact reporter Mica Rosenberg at mica.rosenberg@propublica.org or securely on Signal at [micarosenberg.94](#). For tips about Florida, please contact reporter Mario Ariza at mario.ariza@propublica.org or securely on Signal at [MarioAriza.28](#).

[Pratheek Rebala](#) contributed research.

Mica Rosenberg



I am an investigative reporter on ProPublica’s national desk focusing on immigration.

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If you have tips or story ideas you can share from inside the government, the companies where you work or from your communities, please reach out securely via Signal or email.



Mario Ariza



I cover Florida for ProPublica.

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Contact me via email or Signal about big systemic harms happening in Florida or emanating from it. Tell me stories that powerful people or organizations don’t want told.



McKenzie Funk



I cover immigration, privacy and climate change from my native Pacific Northwest.

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I’m eager to hear from anyone connected to the business of immigration enforcement: technologists, data brokers, activists, airplane pilots, private-prison officials and insiders at ICE, CBP and DHS writ large.



Jeff Ernsthausen



I am a reporter who specializes in using data analysis and code to find stories.

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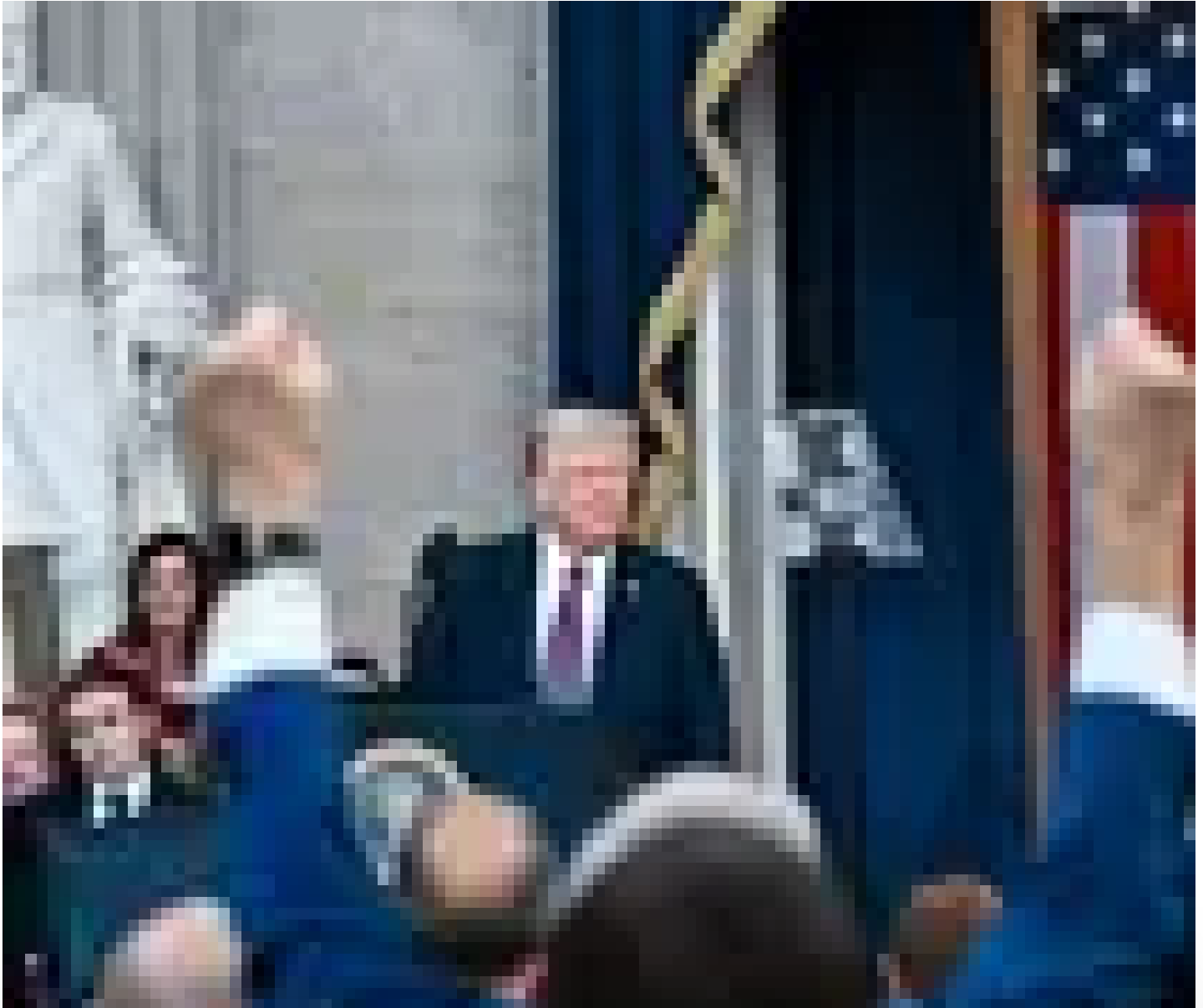
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I am interested in tips on anything related to immigration, the American Southwest and the U.S.-Mexico border.

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I cover health and the environment and the agencies that govern them, including the Environmental Protection Agency.

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