

KFF Health News

'They Tricked Me': A Father Was Chained After He Went to ICE To Reunite With His Kids

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MARCH 24, 2026



(MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES)

Carlos arrived at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in New Mexico in December, believing he was one step closer to reuniting with his children. By that point, his 14-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter had been in a federal shelter in Texas for nearly a year after crossing the border to be with him.



This story also ran on [CNN](#). It can be [republished for free](#).

“I feel like I’m suffocating inside this shelter, trapped with no way out,” Carlos’ son said, according to one of the teens’ attorneys, when asked to describe how he felt after months at the Houston-area facility. “Every day, the same routine. Every day, feeling stuck. It makes me feel hopeless and terrified.”

During daily video calls, Carlos, who had temporary protected status, urged the siblings to be patient, to trust the process. Federal officials had vetted Carlos before he could be granted custody and told him his case was complete. He believed he would soon be back with his children, who, like him, had sought refuge from political violence in Venezuela.

An immigration officer called Carlos on a Friday and asked him to attend a meeting at an ICE office the following Monday to discuss reunification with his children. Once Carlos arrived, officers tried to force him to sign documents he said he didn't understand. When he refused, they stripped off his clothes, seized his ID and belongings, and chained him by the neck, waist, and legs.

"They tricked me," Carlos said in a phone call from an immigration detention center in El Paso, Texas, where he was held for several months. "They used my children to grab me," he said.

In reporting on the family's story, KFF Health News reviewed court documents, spoke with the family's immigration attorneys, interviewed Carlos, and reviewed statements from his children, translated from Spanish. Carlos is a pseudonym, being used at the request of attorneys concerned that speaking out could jeopardize Carlos' immigration case or further delay his reunion with his family.

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Using Children to Arrest Parents

Since 2003, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement has cared for immigrant children under 18 who arrive in the country without their parents, often fleeing violence, abuse, or trafficking. The office, which in February had more than 2,300 children in shelters or with

foster families across the country, is supposed to promptly release them to vetted caregivers, typically parents or other family members already living in the country.

Congress placed this responsibility with the health agency over 20 years ago to prioritize the well-being of unaccompanied children and separate their care from immigration enforcement priorities.

Now the second Trump administration is using migrant children held by the resettlement office to lure their parents, such as Carlos, whether or not they have a criminal record. A KFF Health News investigation found the resettlement office, headed by a former ICE official, coordinates with the Department of Homeland Security to arrest people seeking custody of migrant children.

Arrest documents show Homeland Security Investigations, the arm of the agency that normally focuses on organized criminals and traffickers, will interview parents or other caregivers then arrest them if they are in the country illegally. Before Donald Trump returned to the White House, the resettlement office prohibited data sharing and collaboration with immigration enforcement, and it did not deny caregivers custody of children solely because of their immigration status. Those restrictions were rescinded last year.

It's unclear exactly how many caregivers have been baited into arrest. LAist obtained data indicating more than 100 have been arrested while trying to get their kids out of detention, but KFF Health News could not independently verify that number with federal agencies.

Since February, the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, and Justice Department have not responded to questions about caregiver arrests. Prior to leaving DHS last month, Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said the administration protects children from being released to people who shouldn't care for them. Andrew Nixon, an HHS spokesperson, referred questions related to immigration enforcement to DHS.

At the same time, the resettlement office has enacted new rules that make it harder for caregivers to gain custody of unaccompanied children. These include narrowing the range of accepted documents, requiring fingerprint-based background checks for every adult in the home and backup caregivers, and requiring in-person appointments to verify identification documents, sometimes with ICE agents present. The requirements keep “children safe from traffickers and other bad, dangerous people,” Nixon said.

As of January, the agency had detained at least 300 children already placed with vetted sponsors and asked their caregivers to reapply, according to the National Center for Youth Law and the Democracy Forward Foundation. The advocacy groups filed a Feb. 23 lawsuit calling these actions “a quieter, new form of family separation.”

Reverse Separation

Dulce, a Guatemalan mother in Virginia, said her 8-year-old son was sent to a government shelter after he was detained during a traffic stop last summer while visiting family members in a different state.

At first, Dulce expected to get her son back within days — she had passed the government’s sponsorship requirements in 2024 and was reunited with him three weeks after he first crossed the border. But resettlement agency officials asked her to repeat the entire process and resubmit documents, Dulce said. It took eight months to get him back.

Dulce is a pseudonym being used at her request because she fears speaking out could get her deported.

At one point, Dulce was told to attend an interview at an ICE office to show her identification as part of the process of reuniting with her son. She refused out of fear that she too might be detained, because she doesn’t have legal status. She believes ICE agents visited her home at one point.

“I stopped going home,” Dulce said. “I lived with some of my friends for days.”

Even though she lived just 45 minutes away, Dulce was allowed to visit her son only twice a month.

Until recently, most unaccompanied children landed in government custody after being detained at the border. But border crossings started to fall in 2024, and the number of people coming to the U.S. has dropped precipitously in President Trump's second term.

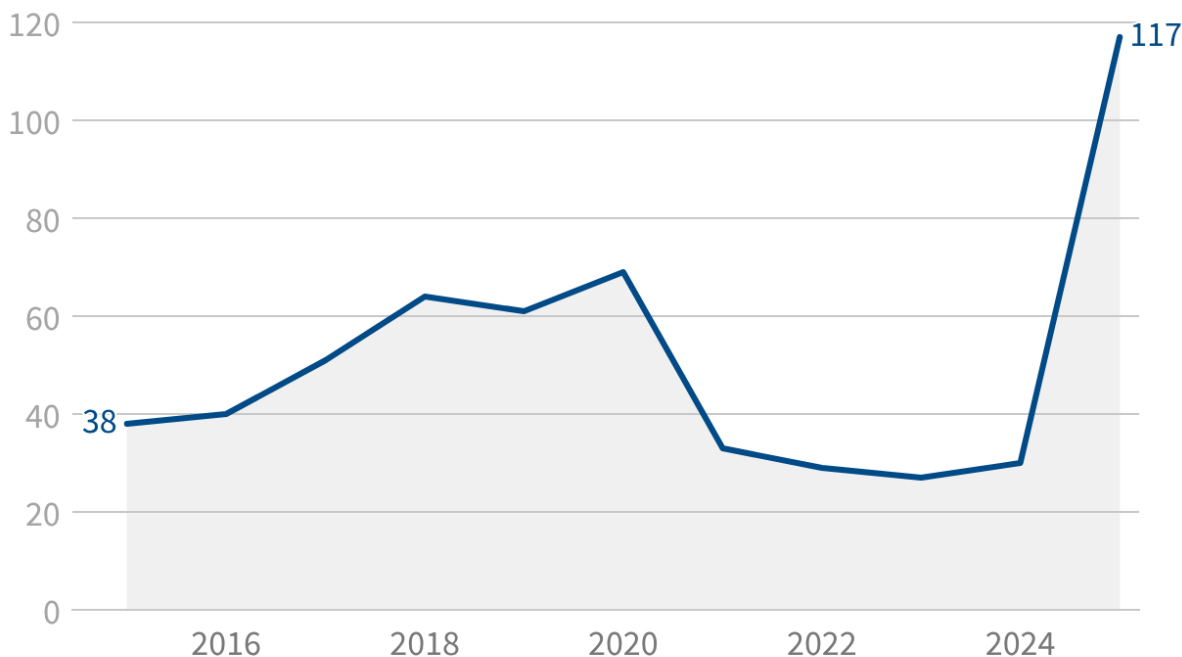
Now, hundreds of kids have been taken to government shelters after being swept up inside the country, often during immigration raids or traffic stops, according to the advocates' lawsuit. Many were already living with relatives, including guardians already vetted by the resettlement agency.

Releases have grinded nearly to a halt. According to the resettlement office, children in its custody stayed in government shelters or foster care for an average of one month in 2024. As of February, that had jumped to more than half a year.

Children Face Longer Stays in Resettlement Shelters or Foster Care

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement cares for immigrant children who arrive in the country without their parents. The average time children stayed in custody was 117 days in fiscal 2025, compared with 38 days a decade ago.

Average days in care:



Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement, current and archived fiscal year statistics

Credit: Judy Lin/KFF Health News

When children do get released, it's often only after their attorneys file a lawsuit in federal court challenging their detention as unconstitutional.

Authorities released Dulce's son to her in February after the boy's attorneys filed such a petition. Dulce said she's relieved to have him back but still anxious that ICE could show up at their house.

Immigrants at Risk

During Trump's first term, his administration was criticized for losing track of children who had been released from custody. President Joe Biden was blamed for how his administration processed a surge of unaccompanied children that peaked in 2021 with about 22,000 in the resettlement office's custody. Though most children were placed with legitimate sponsors, some were placed with people who hadn't cleared safety checks, putting them at risk of exploitation.

The Trump administration says it is checking on those children's welfare, and the Justice Department has prosecuted child trafficking cases. On March 1, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, who is set to leave her role at the end of the month, touted a multi-agency effort, including the resettlement office, that DHS said had tracked down 145,000 unaccompanied children who had been placed with caregivers during Biden's term.

Yet internal HHS reports about that initiative obtained by KFF Health News show that nearly 11,800 of those migrant children and nearly 500 of their caregivers were arrested as of Jan. 29. Only 125 of those migrant children and 55 of those caregivers were arrested for alleged criminal activity, suggesting the majority were for immigration violations.

HHS referred questions about the figures in the reports to DHS, which did not respond to requests for comment about the data. However, Michelle Brané, who was a DHS official in the Biden administration, said the figures show that most of the arrests were to detain and deport migrants. Previously, CNN reported the administration targeted parents and caregivers who had paid for children to cross the border, trying to levy smuggling charges against them.

"They have really dropped that pretense in a lot of ways, and they are going for anyone openly," Brané said. "These numbers clearly reflect that this is not about public safety or about safety of the children."

Case on Hold

Carlos left Venezuela in 2022 because of death threats and, like thousands of others fleeing that country, was granted what's called temporary protected status under the Biden administration. That protection was later rescinded for most Venezuelans by the Trump administration.

In January 2025, days before Trump was sworn in for his second term, Carlos' children crossed the border from Mexico to the U.S., turned themselves over to border authorities, and were immediately placed in the resettlement agency's custody. Carlos spent months submitting paperwork to reunite with them. He said he's their only parent, because their mother left when they were toddlers.

Officials visited his home twice and determined he was fit to care for them, according to court documents petitioning for his release from detention. He passed DNA testing, proving he's the biological father, one of his attorneys said. His arrest documents show he has "no criminal history." In July, Carlos was told his reunification case was complete and being sent for approval. But then, with little explanation, the case was put on hold.

Before his arrest by ICE, Carlos said, he drove 14 hours each way from his home to visit his children. Once there, he could see them for only one hour. When he was in detention, he said, he spoke to them about every two weeks in quick, monitored phone calls.

He's trying to stay hopeful, but it's hard.

According to documents completed by ICE officers during his arrest and submitted in his court case, Carlos was arrested under an initiative called Operation Guardian Trace, which requires immigration officers to detain potential caregivers if they are in the country without legal authorization and recommend that they be deported.

"This operation is designed to force parents to make an impossible choice between reuniting with their children and seeking safety," said one of Carlos' attorneys, Chiqui Sanchez Kennedy of the Galveston-Houston Immigrant

Representation Project, a nonprofit that helps low-income immigrants.

'I'm Going to Wait'

In March, a federal judge said officials had unlawfully detained Carlos and he was released on bond.

But his children still face an uncertain future for now. Government shelters often lack sufficient resources, research shows, and social workers say lengthy stays in these facilities can result in additional trauma.

“Not only is it bad, full stop, but the longer you’re there, the worse it gets,” said Jonathan Beier, associate director of research and evaluation for the Acacia Center for Justice's Unaccompanied Children Program, which coordinates legal services for unaccompanied minors.

Carlos' children could also be sent back to the country they fled. Because of his detention, Carlos will have to redo much of the process to reunite with them, according to an attorney for the children, Alexa Sendukas, also with the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project.

In statements shared through Sendukas, Carlos' daughter said she no longer wants to be around others and spends most of the time in her room. His son, now 15, described having panic attacks and feeling that he's missing out on life, whether it's the opportunities he longs for — to learn English, to study science — or watching basketball with his family.



An attorney holds up a drawing of Rapunzel by Carlos' daughter, who said she spends most of her time in her room, feeling isolated like the “Tangled” movie character. (ABIGAIL GONSOULIN)

“I remember when I first arrived at this shelter, I was so hopeful and had faith that I would be reunited with my dad soon,” he said.

Carlos' daughter spent the day crying in bed when the siblings learned their father had been detained. For days, they didn't know where he was. Now, they fear the only way out is through adoption or foster care.

"I am afraid," she said. "I'm going to wait for my dad forever."

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