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Advocates Fear US Agents Are Using 'Wellness Checks' on Children as a Prelude to Arrests

The Trump administration's \$45 billion for detention is raising fresh concerns over law enforcement visits to families.



Photo illustration by 731; Photo: John Moore/Getty Images

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- A group of armed federal agents visited a family in Spokane, Washington, to conduct a "wellness check" on a 16-year-old boy who migrated to the US without his parents.
- Advocates say the checks intimidate rather than protect vulnerable kids, and they fear the visits may be laying the groundwork for future arrests of these children and immigrant adults in the same households.
- According to Azadeh Erfani, director of policy for the National Immigrant Justice Center, "What's really clear is they're certainly not doing this for the welfare of the children," and Janet Gwilym, an attorney, said "My clients are just terrified" of the visits.

A group of armed federal agents greeted a family in Spokane, Washington, when they opened their front door to run an errand. They bolted back into the house. Undeterred, the agents pounded on the doors and windows, asking for a 16-year-old boy by name.

From inside, the family agreed to speak to the agents and answer a few questions: Was the boy going to school? Was he being fed? How did he injure himself in gym class? Then, the agents left. They haven't returned.

That April visit was part of a nationwide push by the Trump administration to conduct "wellness checks" on children who migrated to the US without their parents or guardians and were subsequently placed with US-based sponsors. Federal law enforcement agents have sought out families at homes, schools and on the streets in the name of child welfare.

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But advocates representing many of these children say the unprecedented checks intimidate rather than protect vulnerable kids. And with billions of dollars in new funding for immigration enforcement now approved, they fear the initial visits are laying the groundwork for future arrests of these

children as well as immigrant adults in the same households. The \$45 billion for detention facilities included in the law recently signed by President Trump allocates funding for family detention.

The Trump administration has said the checks are necessary to protect such children from trafficking and exploitation. It also has claimed that 300,000 of them are missing. While there have been documented cases of labor exploitation involving unaccompanied minors, the missing-children figure is disputed. It likely refers to an August 2024 Department of Homeland Security Inspector General report that found 291,000 children had not been served court papers by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, making it harder for the agency to track their whereabouts.

It's not clear which agency sent the officers who visited the Spokane family, said Janet Gwilym, an attorney with the International Rescue Committee, a New York-based group that works on humanitarian crises around the globe. They had a photo of the 16-year-old boy, who is from Guatemala, she added. Gwilym represents the teenager along with other unaccompanied children in Washington. At least 10 of the roughly 140 children the organization represents in Washington have been visited by agents, according to Gwilym.

“My clients are just terrified,” she said.



The Trump administration has ordered US Immigration and Customs Enforcement to expand the deportation of immigrants across the country. *Photographer: Christopher Dilts/Bloomberg*

Gwilym and other advocates have struggled to understand why some children are receiving visits and others are not. Agents have performed checks on children who are regularly attending school, children who were recently in immigration court and children who were placed in state-licensed foster facilities by the federal government. In these and many other cases, the US government already has clear evidence the children are not missing, and other means of checking their well-being.

“What’s really clear is they’re certainly not doing this for the welfare of the children,” said Azadeh Erfani, director of policy for the National Immigrant Justice Center.

When children enter the US unaccompanied, they are taken into custody by the Department of Health and Human Services until they can be placed with a family member or other vetted sponsor. From fiscal year 2019 through 2023, almost 450,000 children, mostly from Central America, were transferred to the custody of HHS’s Office of Refugee Resettlement. The vast majority of these kids are released to parents, siblings or other close relatives, according to ORR data.

Those numbers have declined as border crossings plunged, but there are still about 2,400 children in ORR care, according to the agency's website.

ORR works closely with law enforcement and other partners if there are "concerns regarding the safety and well-being of a released minor," HHS spokesperson Andrew Nixon said in a statement. Nixon referred further questions about the checks to DHS, which didn't respond to inquiries.

Past administrations have never conducted such checks using federal law enforcement agents. Instead, contractors with child welfare backgrounds were employed to do phone check-ins after kids were released to sponsors. In some jurisdictions, these contractors would connect families to social services or counseling. The deployment of enforcement agents to check on families in person has caused confusion and fear about the purpose of the visits.



A line of unaccompanied minors, right, wait to be processed by US Border Patrol agents after they crossed the Rio Grande from Mexico into Roma, Texas, in 2021. *Photographer: John Moore/Getty Images*

Erfani said that these encounters could lead to children being taken back into government custody if agents decide to carry out immigration

enforcement actions. “We’re honestly terrified that this is going to supercharge the kind of re-detention where kids are being essentially separated from their family members as a result of these so-called wellness checks.”

The wellness checks began in February and have included agents from ICE, Homeland Security Investigations, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the FBI, according to legal services providers that operate across 17 states. Agents ask if a child is in school, if they are working, if they’re getting enough food and if their sponsor is treating them well, among other questions, according to a DHS questionnaire seen by Bloomberg News. But the agents also frequently stray beyond those questions, those providers said, and the interactions between federal agents and families can vary dramatically, the result of a sprawling effort with few public guidelines.

In some regions, agents are demanding they see the interior of homes, while others are allowing lawyers to set up meetings in neutral locations such as public libraries. Sometimes agents arrive armed and in bulletproof vests. Other times, they wear plain clothes. If nobody answers, some agents leave a card and never come back, while others return until they receive an answer. Many advocates report that agents had no interpreter or language skills beyond English, making it hard for families to understand what’s happening to them.

In two cases, agents threatened to arrest the mothers of children they were performing checks on, according to Erfani. In other cases, she said, agents told children they had upcoming court dates when their cases had already been terminated months earlier.

A child represented by the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project was approached by agents at a bus stop after school. The agents followed him home to conduct a home visit, according to Alexa Sendukas, a managing attorney at the organization. During another wellness check, a child’s father answered the door and identified himself. ICE later returned and arrested him, Sendukas said.

“It’s hard to distinguish the wellness checks from targeted apprehensions or something in between,” she said. “It seems that one can turn into the other on a dime.”

These checks are the latest in a series of dramatic changes to how the federal government deals with unaccompanied children. The Office of Refugee Resettlement is now sharing sponsor information with immigration enforcement authorities. That information has historically been closely held by ORR to encourage potential sponsors to come forward regardless of status and to ease fears that it could be used for immigration arrests and deportations.



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The administration also gutted a watchdog office charged with visiting facilities where these children are held before being placed with sponsors, and slashed legal representation that’s helped children navigate the complex US immigration system. It also introduced DNA testing requirements for sponsors and proof-of-income documents that can be difficult to obtain for people without legal status. As a result, the average time children spend in federal custody ballooned to 191 days in May from 35 days in October.

The administration has argued those changes are necessary to keep children safe.

The wellness checks have slowed over the past month, but with the \$45 billion in funding allocated for immigration enforcement and removals, Sendukas and other advocates worry that this is just the start of a new enforcement push. Sponsor households often contain individuals who do not have legal status or who are working to obtain it – groups that have been the targets of the administration’s immigration crackdown.

“We’re certainly mindful that these wellness checks are part of an apparent multiphase policy or initiative,” Sendukas said. “To the extent the additional appropriation leads to more wellness checks or more targeted arrests or detentions of our clients or family members, we are very concerned it could lead to another family separation crisis.”

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