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Exclusive: Thousands of parents, guardians of migrant kids arrested in Trump administration crackdown

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By [Priscilla Alvarez](#), [Adam Cancryn](#)



Two parents embrace each other outside of the Rayito De Sol Spanish Immersion Daycare and Pre-School in Chicago, where federal agents conducted an immigration raid that ended in a teacher being detained, on November 5, 2025. *(Jim Vondruska/Reut*



When Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents **arrested a woman** at a Chicago day care this month, it sparked local uproar over ICE's tactics. But it also provided a window into the Trump administration's latest enforcement initiative — an intense effort to crack down on parents and guardians who paid for children to come across the border.

The arrest of Diana Patricia Santillana Galeano, who after a vehicle stop fled into the childcare center where she taught, came weeks after her sons, ages 16 and 17, had crossed the US-Mexico border. They were transferred to a shelter in the Chicago area under the care of the Health and Human Services Department, which is responsible for migrant kids who crossed the southern border alone until they can be placed with a so-called sponsor, like a parent or relative, in the United States.

But instead of leading to her being reunited with her kids, their arrival led to the government accusing Santillana Galeano of smuggling children.

On Thursday, she was released following a judge's order. "We will continue to pursue her immigration claims to stay in the United States," said Charlie Wysong, one of her attorneys.

Senior Trump officials have **focused for months** on minors who crossed the US southern border alone under former President Joe Biden, when an unprecedented surge of kids overwhelmed federal resources. Recent moves involving multiple agencies, which have not been previously reported, signal the administration is doubling down on the targeting of those children — and their caretakers.

So far, a pair of operations launched this year targeting parents, guardians or potential caretakers of migrant children have yielded nearly 3,000 arrests, according to federal data reviewed by CNN. A Homeland Security spokesperson said in a statement to CNN that the arrests are "primarily the result of human smuggling investigations where an (unaccompanied child) was encountered as part of the smuggling incident."

White House deputy chief of staff for policy Stephen Miller and other administration officials who favor the push see it as a relatively easy way to **ramp up deportations** of people who, unlike some migrants, can easily be located by the government, according to two people involved in the discussions. Trump officials believe it can also be portrayed effectively as a humanitarian effort, given the dangerous journey many migrant children make to the US.



White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller speaks with reporters outside the West Wing of the White House on October 24. *(Kylie Cooper/Reuters)*

“Unless we put our foot down and say that we’re not going to accept this as a nation, that we don’t want kids smuggled across the border, it’s going to continue unless there’s a punishment for it,” a Health and Human Services official told CNN.

As part of that concerted effort, ICE launched an initiative this week with state and local law enforcement leveraging standing agreements to fan out local authorities to conduct welfare checks on children, CNN exclusively learned. The UAC Safety Verification Initiative, as it’s being called, began on Monday in Florida and will expand nationwide.

Another operation, launched last month, builds on that by tasking Homeland Security agents with arresting sponsors if they are unlawfully present in the United States, used a smuggler, or have a criminal history, among other circumstances, according to two of the sources.

Agents have been directed to see if they can be applied, against those caretakers, leaving them after in limbo or potentially placed back in US

“ICE HSI utilizes its federal authority/statutes to prosecute any individual and/or organization when a criminal offence has been committed to include but not limited to any violations of federal immigration law. We have been clear, anyone not legally authorized to be in this country is subject to removal,” the spokesperson said in a statement.



Unaccompanied minor migrants wait to be transported by the US Border Patrol, after crossing the Rio Grande River into the United States from Mexico in La Joya, Texas, in April 2021. *(Go Nakamura/Reuters/File)*

‘So much pressure on the children’

The effort has dramatically reshaped the way the US addresses one of the most vulnerable immigrant populations, according to advocates who work with migrant children — and rapidly turned a tiny HHS office charged with caring for and uniting migrant kids with their guardians into yet another branch of President Donald Trump’s sprawling mass deportation force.

In a matter of months, the administration has mounted multiple additional hurdles for parents or guardians trying to retrieve the children from government custody, including the fact that they often are not allowed to be detained or arrested themselves in the process.

The administration is also setting up a call center, looking for leads on kids that the government can't locate.

"It is putting so much pressure on the children, knowing their families are at risk in this way, and we've had children beg their sponsors not to go. They'll sacrifice themselves and stay in detention because they're too scared for their parent," said Mickey Donovan-Kaloust, director of legal services at Immigrant Defenders Law Center.

Though the volume increased during the Biden administration, unaccompanied migrant children have been arriving at the US southern border for years. Children are typically fleeing dangerous or deteriorating conditions in their origin country and reuniting with a parent or family member in the United States. It's a difficult trek — and one that often requires payment to a smuggler, as with anyone else crossing the border.

"There's a lot that happens on the journey for these kids that has nothing to do with the family member here. ... The ones that end up here have gone through the most and survived it somehow with or without the family's help," said Marie Silver, managing attorney of the Immigrant Children's Protection Project at the National Immigrant Justice Center.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which has been in place for more than two decades, provides protections for unaccompanied migrant children who arrive and reside in the US, including being screened to see if they are victims of human trafficking or have a credible fear of persecution in their home country.

While an immigration judge determines if a child has protections in the US, case managers work to find a suitable sponsor, like a parent or relative, to care for them and therefore remove them from a detention setting. Many guardians of unaccompanied migrant children are undocumented.



Federal agents stand guard as they are confronted by residents after making a stop while driving in a caravan through the Brighton Park neighborhood of Chicago, on November 6. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

CNN **previously reported** Immigration and Customs Enforcement had taken hundreds of children into government custody this year following so-called welfare checks, either because their situations were deemed unsafe or because of immigration enforcement actions against sponsors, the majority of whom are the kids' parents or other family members. The administration also tried to abruptly remove **hundreds of Guatemalan children** who were in custody.

New federal data reviewed by CNN provides more insight on who is being targeted. Homeland Security Investigations arrested more than 450 sponsors of unaccompanied children, according to internal federal data shared with CNN. The Department of Homeland Security told CNN many had committed crimes, though data shows that agents also detained caretakers without a criminal record who were in the country illegally.

“Sponsors illegally in the United States are in v
such, will be placed in removal proceedings. P

to leave with their children,” the Homeland Security spokesperson said in a statement.

DHS provided a list of individuals accused of crimes who served as caretakers for unaccompanied children released to them, including a woman from Venezuela who sponsored three migrant children while in possession of fentanyl, a Honduran man who was arrested for alleged forced labor of two teenagers, and two men who DHS said “exploited” two kids by forcing them to work illegally.



Birds fly over a residential area in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago, while federal law enforcement agents conduct an immigration raid on November 8. *(Carlos Barria/Reuters)*

Slowing the release of children to sponsors

DHS has fanned out nationwide to conduct welfare checks of kids residing in the country and interviewing sponsors before children are released from custody. Under the Trump administration, DHS has had access to a trove of data housed at HHS identifying the whereabouts of migrant children in the United States.

According to the HHS official, information sharing between HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement and ICE is limited, though the various agencies work together in a war room set up at HHS to swap information relevant to ongoing operations.

The intense scrutiny has sharply slowed the release of migrant children to sponsors; HHS data shows it handed just 118 kids over to guardians in the US in September, down from the more than 5,000 being released each month at the tail end of the Biden era. The average length stay for children in HHS' care has more than doubled over that same period.

Advocates who work with children in custody told CNN that there's been an uptick in parents detained when completing new requirements despite passing all background checks and vetting.

One child's father, who did not have a criminal history and passed vetting, was detained in Texas when presenting for his ID check, the last step in the process to retrieve his son from government custody. Now, both are detained, according to Alexa Sendukas, managing attorney of the Immigrant Children and Youth Program at the Galveston-Houston Immigrant Representation Project (GHIRP). In another case, a brother of an unaccompanied minor was arrested at his ID appointment.

"They're languishing in detention for extended periods of time with no explanation. We had several cases that were approved and then remanded," Sendukas said. "The kids are asking us, 'Why can't I go home to my mom?' It's very sad. The detention fatigue is extremely palpable."

Are you an ICE, CBP or USCIS employee? CNN would like to talk to you

The Trump administration has intensified its immigration enforcement operations. CNN would like to talk to personnel from the three main federal immigration agencies — ICE, CBP and USCIS — about their perspective on the ongoing operations.

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