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Migrant children, increasingly separated from their parents, fill US detention centers

According to figures from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the number of immigrant children held in US government custody has grown by 21 percent in the past month. On Tuesday, HHS stated that it had 10,773 migrant children in its custody, up from 8,886 on April 29.

The spike in child detentions is the result of a new policy announced last month by the Trump administration. The Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are joining forces to criminally prosecute all undocumented immigrants crossing the southwest border and seize their children from them for separate detention as a means of intimidating anyone seeking refuge in the US. Speaking on the “zero tolerance” policy, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said all migrants crossing the border would face criminal prosecution and up to six months in prison, and children would be sent to HHS juvenile facilities.

The HHS figures do not distinguish between minors who arrive without a parent and those who are separated from their mothers and fathers after they cross the border. However, an official for US Customs and Border Protection testified at a Senate committee hearing last week that 638 adults were referred for prosecution between May 6 and May 19 and that they brought 658 children with them.

According to immigration officials, there was a 200 percent surge in border apprehensions in March compared to the same month last year. Agents detained thousands of undocumented immigrants, most of them comprised of families or children traveling alone

from Central America. Fleeing the violence and devastation wrought in the region by a century of US imperialist wars and interventions, they are seeking asylum in the US, only to be treated as criminals.

Margaret Huang, executive director of Amnesty International USA, told NPR, “These are children who have already suffered the trauma of violence and persecution in their native countries and the arduous journey to seek safety.”

As the Trump Administration places more migrant children into custody, often jailed hundreds of miles from their parents, the amount of time those children are in detention has increased as well. The latest figures from HHS indicate the average amount of time that children spend in juvenile facilities has increased to 57 days in recent months, up from 51 days last year.

The US government has about 100 federal jails, officially designated as “shelters,” across 14 states to hold juvenile migrants. Today those shelters are at 95 percent capacity, according to an HHS official, and the agency is preparing to add thousands of new bed spaces in coming weeks. A care provider who works with DHS told the *Washington Post* the number of beds available for long-term detention has doubled, to nearly 600, since May 2016. HHS has also considered the possibility of housing children on military bases, but views the measure as a “last option.”

The conditions migrant children face in these detention centers was laid bare by an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report that detailed the routine abuse minors face in custody, including sexual assault and deprivation of food, water, and medical attention.

According to HHS, the agency typically releases the vast majority of children into the care of a sponsor. In 2017, HHS took custody of more than 40,000 migrant children, and the agency’s Office of Refugee Resettlement said it released 93 percent to adult sponsors. In half of those cases, the adult sponsor was one of the child’s parents, and another 40 percent were close adult relatives. But in the past six months, the percentage of migrant children in custody without a sponsor increased to 10 percent, up from 7 percent in 2017.

As the number of children sent to shelters grows, immigrant advocates say a new information sharing agreement between HHS and the Department of Homeland Security could strand even more children in long-term federal custody. The agreement, signed last month, gives DHS access to more information about potential sponsors and children’s relatives, including their immigration status.

Advocates say the agreement will keep more children in long-term federal custody if relatives are forced to choose between retrieving their child or facing their own

deportation. In many cases, sponsors are aunts and uncles who may not have a close relationship to a child in custody and may be hesitant to jeopardize the immigration status of their own families.

Separating children from their parents is a policy continued from the prior administration. In 2016, more than 20 percent of migrants who crossed the border illegally faced criminal charges under the Obama administration. During Obama's second term, the government prosecuted roughly 70,000 migrants per year, with thousands of children being taken into custody.

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