

Child Separation Report Further Fuels Demands for House Hearings

By Michaela Ross and Shira Stein

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- Influx of family separations began months before first reports
- Watchdog says agencies struggled to track separations

A report that Trump administration policies may have separated thousands more migrant children than previously reported is invigorating House Democrats already poised to scrutinize the president's immigration agenda.

This report "renews our effort, it renews my determination to get to the bottom of this. The only way we're going to do it is, we've got to get the information," House Oversight and Reform Committee Chairman Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) said in an interview. Cummings said he would "probably" call former Office of Refugee Resettlement Director Scott Lloyd to testify before the Oversight committee.

The Health and Human Services Department Inspector General released the report as about half a dozen House committees and subcommittees gear up to investigate the Trump administration's family separation policy. Democrats leading the Oversight and Reform, Judiciary, Homeland Security, Appropriations, and Energy and Commerce committees have called for hearings on the issue.

Several of those chairman told Bloomberg Government they were outraged but not surprised by the report. Others said it energized their efforts to investigate the issue.

"We will not allow these reprehensible acts to go unanswered, and we will ensure that the president and his administration are held accountable for their misdeeds," Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said in a statement.

'They Lied'

Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-Calif.), chairwoman of the House Appropriations Homeland Security subcommittee, said in an interview that her panel would be holding hearings on family separation.

"It is yet another reason why I will be holding the first oversight hearing in Congress on this inhumane policy in the coming weeks," Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said in a statement.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), chairwoman of the House Health and Human Services Appropriations subcommittee, also called the report alarming. She said "throughout the entire process" the Trump administration lied.

“They lied about what the appropriate, accurate numbers were,” she said.

Separations Unknown

The Jan. 17 inspector general’s report acknowledges accounts from immigration advocates that the separation of undocumented migrant families actually started months before the Trump administration officially announced a “zero tolerance” policy in April 2018. The policy led to more criminal prosecutions and detentions of adults, then held them separately from their children, who legally cannot be held in detention for more than approximately 20 days under a U.S. court agreement.

The department has struggled to identify separated children in part because the influx of separations began in 2017, before a federal district court ordered the policy reversed in June 2018, according to the report. So far, 2,727 children identified by HHS as in its care were part of that class-action lawsuit, the report said, up from more than 2,654 who were reported by the department last July.

The policy led to public outcry and a June 2018 executive order issued by President Donald Trump to end separations while immigration courts determined if families could stay in the U.S.

A September 2017 report from the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General said the department was not prepared to handle the separations that occurred because of the zero-tolerance policy, and lacked a centralized database to track the children and parents.

Multiple Reports Expected

The new IG report said the department was unable to provide more precise information about the children’s placement or a complete estimate due to lack of formal tracking systems. Thus far, 2,131 children have been reunified with parents, 526 have been released to sponsors or remanded to DHS custody after turning 18, and 159 are still in custody.

The HHS Inspector General’s office expects to be releasing multiple reports this year reviewing the care of unaccompanied minors in Office of Refugee Resettlement custody, a spokesperson told Bloomberg Government.

A spokesperson for DHS said the inspector general did not appear to understand long-standing policy to separate children from parents for safety reasons, casting doubts about the report.

This report confirms what the HHS has previously said about its capability to “determine the location and status of any child in Office of Refugee Resettlement care” separated under the “zero tolerance” policy, the agency said in a statement. That does not apply to the separation of migrant children from their parents that occurred in 2017.

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