

SNAPSHOT

"It is a pain that cannot be erased. Whatever you try."

- Child separated from their mother for more than two years.

Introduction

The Trump administration's brutal family separation policy remains a lasting and disgraceful legacy of both that administration and of the United States as a nation. At least [5,569 children were separated from their parents](#) or guardians during the Trump administration. More than 1,000 children remain separated from their parents today.

This snapshot summarizes our [policy brief](#) on the current status of, and ongoing harms suffered by, these forcibly separated families. It details the **urgent actions necessary** for the well-being of families torn apart, which include the **funding and provision of services, critical policies and oversight, and restitution measures** that both Congress and the Biden administration should take to help these families heal. Finally, the brief reaffirms—in the strongest terms—the need, and **recommends policies, to prevent future forcible family separations and to immediately address and remedy any future separations that do occur.**

Family Tracing and Reunification—Where Are the Forcibly Separated Families Now?

In its most recent [progress report](#) of July 31, 2022, the Biden administration's Family Separation Task Force identifies 1,217 children who remain separated from their parents or guardians. Because government officials [failed to establish any tracking and reunification mechanisms or recordkeeping](#) until ordered to do so by a federal court, the full scope of children and their parents and guardians subjected to forcible separation is still unknown.

The absence of government records has required extensive family-tracing efforts. Government-provided data and contact information are commonly out of date or inaccurate. The US government has proved slow to act and resistant. WRC has participated in more than 50 reunifications as part of the [Ms. L Steering Committee](#). We have seen that the effects of US government negligence are compounded by language, indigeneity, and poverty. A significant portion of the forcibly separated families are native speakers of Indigenous languages. Contact typically requires hard-to-find interpreters just to attempt a phone call to a number dating from 2017 or 2018.

Finally, many families have a natural distrust of anything connected to the US government that forcibly took their children. An example from a joint project between WRC and Barnard College illustrates this: one interviewee, who was forcibly separated from their mother, describes thinking that "if they [the US government] already caused me pain before, now they will come to me to cause more pain." Another parent, reunited with their child, noted that "we do feel that relief being together, but we live with anxiety in this country, because I don't know when we can be deported separately again."

Children and Their Parents Continue to Suffer Severe Impacts from Forcible Separation

Expert studies consistently conclude that the [harmful impacts](#) of forcible family separation are lifelong, a harrowing reality borne out by separated family members. Forcible separations of children have significant deleterious impacts not only on their mental health but also on their behavioral functioning, resulting in educational and medical harms.

In WRC's direct experience, separated children and parents show ongoing effects of the trauma they experienced and recurring manifestations of the pain of separation, as well as fear that forcible separation will happen again. In some cases, parents have reported being unable to work because their [children remain too frightened](#) to be separated from them even for brief periods of time.

Policy Recommendations: Urgent Actions Necessary to Repair the Harms to Families and Ensure Justice

Separated families continue to suffer unmet material needs even after reunification, including [housing insecurity and homelessness, employment instability, and lack of food access](#). The Biden administration should promptly support the following to help right the wrongs—even if they can never be fully undone—of family separation. WRC emphasizes that the urgent service needs listed below are necessary for safe and stable reunification of separated families.

Urgent Service Needs

- Psychological and behavioral health services
- Educational support services
- Medical services
- Employment and childcare services and assistance
- Housing and nutrition (food) support

Restitution Measures

- Restitution and the offer of a formal apology to separated families
- Permanent status and protection in the US

Policies to Prevent Future Separations of Families

- Durable policies that secure the speedy resolution—through immediate location, contact, and swift reunification—of rare and exceptional family separations, with enforcement mechanisms
- The development, publication, and implementation of a comprehensive action plan to ensure family separations cannot happen again

Read the [full policy brief](#).

For additional information, please contact Mario Bruzzone, senior policy advisor, WRC, at mariob@wrcommission.org.

Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them. womensrefugeecommission.org.

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