

Family Separation in Their Own Words: How Ending Legal Services Is Another Step Toward Separating Families Again

"It's a pain that can't be erased."

(Fifteen-year-old boy separated from his mother, Guatemala)



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The first Trump administration forcibly separated thousands of families under a **policy formally known as "Zero-Tolerance."** Even after public pressure and litigation led to the official termination of the policy, the administration continued to separate families; by the end of the first Trump administration **at least 5,569 children had been separated from their parents.**

To bring to light the human costs of family separation, the Women's Refugee Commission and Barnard College launched a project in 2020 called **"Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity."** We **interviewed 27 children, parents, and other migrants** who were affected by "zero tolerance." The participants described coping with the lasting effects of trauma. Parents and children who were not yet reunited shared the profound grief and fear of living apart.

The government agencies that undertook these separations did not track the locations of parents

In Their Own Words

"Those nine months were torture for me. Really, I didn't want to know anything anymore. I just felt like I wanted to kill myself, that's what was going on inside me. To kill myself and not know anything anymore."

"It changed my life, changed my life. That time, I was so sad, depressed, I didn't want to know anything. All I wanted to know was where she [his mother] was. To see her. To hug her. To know that she was okay because I was so worried about her. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know if she was alright, if she was even alive, or what was going on. I was just so sad. So sad I just had a cloud that—a black cloud that made me feel so, so sad."

(Fifteen-year-old boy separated from his mother, Guatemala)



In Their Own Words

Even parents who have been reunified with their children speak about the fear that continues to live with them.

"Suddenly that, that still bothers me, now in my body too. It's like a fear. It's like something is still in my body right now."

(A father who had experienced a psychotic break after being separated from his child)

"I live with this terrible insecurity because I still experience it every day. When I go to work, I check if my children are still there. At night, I wake up, I always go to check on my children because it feels like they're not with me....It's an insecurity that has remained so long after."

(Mother separated from two of her young children, Honduras)

and children to ensure that families could later be reunified. Failing to maintain proper records or take basic precautions to protect separated parents and children magnified the catastrophic harm the policy caused to these families. To this day, more than five years later, **more than 1,000 children remain separated from their parents.**

The government has a legal obligation to help reunify the families it forcibly separated. As part of **the settlement agreement in *Ms. L et al v. ICE***, a lawsuit brought on behalf of separated parents that led to the termination of zero-tolerance family separation, the court required that the government provide separated parents and children with services to help them recover and reunite. The settlement agreement prohibited the government from separating parents who cross the border into the United States from their children except under certain limited and exceptional circumstances. It also required the government to establish protocols to reduce harm to families that are separated, including provisions for monitoring families and facilitating communication between parents and children.

Among the reunification services the court required were legal services. The **Legal Access Services for Reunified Families** (LASRF) program was created to fund legal service providers to provide these services. On April 11, 2025, the **Trump administration terminated the LASRF program** as of April 30. The termination of LASRF funding places thousands of parents and children in legal limbo, without access to the legal assistance they urgently need to reunify, submit immigration-related filings, prepare for hearings, and otherwise navigate complex legal and immigration systems.

Parents whose parole (or legal permission to remain in the United States) may soon expire or be revoked by the administration are also at risk; if they are deported, they will no longer be able to continue the process of reunifying with their children in the United States.

The administration's termination of the LASRF program is one of several actions that cut migrant families off from access to legal information and services, including basic information about their rights. Last month, the administration ended legal services for unaccompanied children (children who come to the US without a parent), leaving children as young as toddlers to represent themselves in immigration proceedings. The administration has also terminated many of the programs that provide legal services to migrants, such as the Legal Orientation Program and the Immigration Court Helpdesk. The information provided by these services is vital to helping migrant parents make informed decisions about how to care for their children if they are facing detention or deportation, including ensuring that they are not separated.

WRC is gravely concerned about the impact the administration's decision to terminate the LASRF program will have on families, including those that are still desperately seeking reunification. We fear for the families facing renewed and possibly permanent separations as a result of this decision. The Trump administration must restore funding to these services immediately to comply with their legal obligation to help undo the harm caused in its first administration, and to prevent additional needless harm to parents and children.

In Their Own Words

Families who are still separated speak of the ongoing pain and fear of being apart from their loved ones, not knowing if they are safe, or if they will ever reunify with them.

"Not a day goes by without me thinking of my son, wondering what he's doing, if he's behaving himself, now that he's bigger and growing up."

(Mother still separated from her son at time of interview, Guatemala)

"I have this pain that lives inside my heart. It's so hard to talk about this situation with anyone because years have passed and I feel the pain as if it was yesterday....It's just burned into your mind, and then in your heart is something that, something that can never fill the void inside of you."

(Mother also still separated from her child at time of interview, Guatemala)

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Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, youth, and other people who are often overlooked, undervalued, and underserved in humanitarian responses to crises and displacement. We work in partnership with displaced communities to research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for gender-transformative and sustained improvement in humanitarian, development, and displacement policy and 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](https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org).

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April 2025