

The past 72 hours in outrage over Trump's immigrant family separation policy, explained

Children are being kept in cages. Parents are being deported without their kids. Trump is wrongly blaming Democrats.

By Emily Stewart | Jun 18, 2018, 2:30pm EDT



A Honduran mother removes her 2-year-old daughter's shoelaces, as required by US Border Patrol agents, after being detained near the US-Mexico border on June 12, 2018, in McAllen, Texas. | John Moore/Getty Images

The Trump administration's **policy** of **separating children** from their parents who seek asylum in the United States by crossing the border illegally has sparked outrage across the country — and it reached a fever pitch over the weekend.

We got a glimpse of the **cages** kids are being kept in, read heart-wrenching **stories** of families being separated, and watched the **Trump camp** try to toss the political football of culpability to others.

President Trump **tweeted** Monday morning that the situation is Democrats' fault for being "weak and ineffective" with border security and crime and said it's time to "change the laws." But this claim simply makes no sense. Contrary to what Trump seems to be implying, there was no preexisting law requiring family separation, and what's happening at the

border doesn't have anything to do with Democrats — it's a decision the Trump administration has made.

The administration recently implemented a “zero-tolerance” policy that includes separating children from their parents as they try to enter the United States seeking asylum at the US border, in what some say is an attempt to deter other potential migrants from making the same decision. The policy has sent shock waves around the country, igniting outrage on the part of immigration advocates, human rights groups, and citizens across the political spectrum.

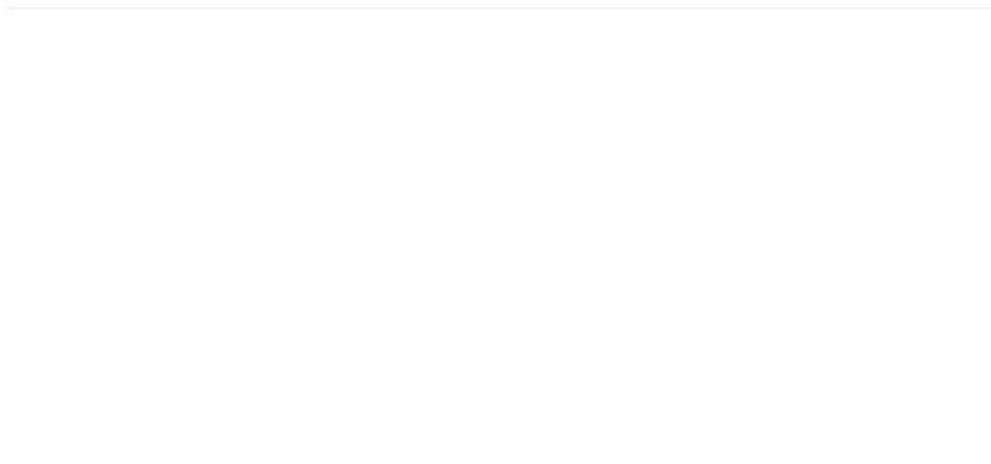
And the situation has the potential to get much worse: **The Washington Examiner** reported on Monday that the Trump administration could wind up holding some 30,000 illegal immigrant children by the end of the summer, citing a senior administration official with the Department of Health and Human Services. The HHS official told the publication 11,500 children were already being held.

Here's an overview of what's happened in the past 72 hours.

We got a look at where children are being kept. It's in cages.

The **Department of Homeland Security** on Friday confirmed that about 2,000 children were separated from their parents at the border during a six-week period this spring. And over the weekend, we got a look at the places and conditions children are being kept in, and the scene was disturbing.

The Associated Press reported on the scene at a McAllen, Texas, facility where some 1,100 people, including 200 minors unaccompanied by a parent, are being kept. US Border Patrol agents briefly opened up the old warehouse, where detainees — including children — are being kept in cages, for reporters to visit.



McALLEN, Texas (AP) — Inside an old warehouse in South Texas, hundreds of children wait away from their parents in a series of cages created by metal fencing. One cage had 20 children inside. Scattered about are bottles of water, bags of chips and lemons.



Philip Rucker
@PhilipRucker

AP describes what it's like inside one of the cages detaining migrant children at the Texas border

apnews.com/amp/9794de32d3...

6:52 PM - Jun 17, 2018

2,301 3,060 people are talking about this

Reporters weren't allowed to interview the people being held or to take pictures. Michelle Brané, the director of migrant rights at the Women's Refugee Commission, had met with a 16-year-old girl being kept on Friday and spoke with the AP. The girl had been taking care of another young girl who she thought was about 2 years old for a few days and had taught other children how to change her diaper. (The little girl, it eventually turned out, was actually 4 and had been separated from her aunt from Guatemala.) Brané also told the AP she saw officials scolding a group of 5-year-olds for playing in their cage.

Colleen Kraft, the head of the American Academy of Pediatrics, told the **AP** that on a recent visit to a different shelter, she was told by staff that they weren't allowed to touch, pick up, or hold crying children, no matter how young or distraught they may be.

Democratic politicians made visits to detention centers over the weekend in an attempt to draw more attention to what's happening at the border. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and other lawmakers **toured CBP processing centers** in the Rio Grande Valley on Sunday to learn more about the situation. "We must end this policy of family separation," Merkley told CNN.

While those touring the detention facilities weren't allowed to capture film of it, Customs and Border Protection released a video of the McAllen warehouse, which quickly found its way to Twitter. The footage portrays dozens of people in cages and children sleeping under foil blankets.



David Begnaud
@DavidBegnaud

BREAKING: Border Patrol [@CBP](#) just gave us this video of the detention facility we toured yesterday in McAllen, Texas. We weren't allowed to bring in cameras, or interview anyone. To be clear: this is government handout video.

8:35 AM - Jun 18, 2018

11.5K 14.3K people are talking about this

The McAllen facility — which agents call “Ursula” because of the street it’s on — isn’t the only one that has been in the news of late. Last week, **the Washington Post** also described a former Walmart in Brownsville, Texas, that has been transformed into a holding center for some 1,400 immigrant boys in federal custody. Known as “Casa Padre,” it houses teenage boys who entered the US alone as well as children who were forcibly separated from their parents under the Trump administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy.

Tents are being put up near El Paso to house more unaccompanied kids. Protesters have **gathered there** and **across the US** to speak out against splitting up migrant families.

Some parents are being deported without their children

Multiple reports of uniquely aggressive or inhumane treatment have emerged from the Trump administration’s practices, including a Honduran man who **died by suicide** less than a day after being separated from his wife and 3-year-old child by Border Patrol agents, and a Honduran woman who says officials took her daughter away while she was **breastfeeding her in a detention center**.

A report from **the New York Times** over the weekend highlighted another layer of the situation: the fact that some immigrant parents are being deported without being able to recover their children first. They try to cross the border, are separated, and then are sent back to their home countries without their children.

The Times highlights the story of Elsa Johana Ortiz Enriquez, a Guatemalan woman who tried to enter the country with her 8-year-old son, Anthony. The 25-year-old Ortiz was sent back to Guatemala, but her son is still in the US. Immigration officials say this isn't supposed to happen, but apparently, it does. And then parents only have two options, per the Times:

They can have a family member who is living in the United States take sponsorship and custody of the child, or the child can be flown home and delivered into the custody of the authorities in the parent's home country — and from there to the parent.

Parents are given a hotline to try to find their kids.

Family separation protests are growing

The chorus of protests against the Trump administration's family separation practices has grown louder.

Former first lady Laura Bush wrote an op-ed in **the Washington Post** on Sunday characterizing the policy as "immoral" and "cruel" and saying it "breaks my heart." Former President Bill Clinton said in a **tweet** on Sunday, Father's Day, that "children should not be a negotiating tool."



Bill Clinton
@BillClinton

On this Father's Day I'm thinking of the thousands of children separated from their parents at the border. These children should not be a negotiating tool. And reuniting them with their families would reaffirm America's belief in & support for all parents who love their children.

11:03 AM - Jun 17, 2018

170K 57.6K people are talking about this

Even Republicans and some Trump allies have expressed concern. Rev. Franklin Graham, the son of evangelist Billy Graham and a Trump defender, has called the policy “**disgraceful.**” Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) in an interview on CBS’s *Face the Nation* on Sunday said the policy is “contrary to our values in this country.” Sen. Ben Sasse (R-NE) in a **Facebook post** on Monday said separating immigrant children and parents is “wicked” and “absolutely should NOT be the default US policy.”

Even White House adviser Kellyanne Conway has seemed to want to distance herself from the matter. In an interview on NBC’s *Meet the Press* on Sunday, she said “nobody likes this policy” or seeing “babies being ripped from their mothers’ arms.”

The White House is trying to blame Democrats, but this isn’t their fault

In her *Meet the Press* interview, Conway also parroted President Trump’s line that it is somehow Democrats who are to blame for separating immigrant children from their parents. It’s a line that Trump and the White House have tried over and over again.

The president has **repeatedly blamed Democrats** for the situation and seems to believe it will serve as a bargaining tool to get them to agree to other parts of his immigration agenda, such as paying for a wall at the US-Mexico border and enacting broader restrictions on legal immigration.



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

The Democrats should get together with their Republican counterparts and work something out on Border Security & Safety. Don’t wait until after the election because you are going to lose!

7:49 PM - Jun 17, 2018

89.7K 40.8K people are talking about this



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Democrats can fix their forced family breakup at the Border by working with Republicans on new legislation, for a change! This is why we need more Republicans elected in November.

Democrats are good at only three things, High Taxes, High Crime and Obstruction. Sad!

8:03 AM - Jun 16, 2018

120K 79.6K people are talking about this



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

It is the Democrats fault for being weak and ineffective with Boarder Security and Crime. Tell them to start thinking about the people devastated by Crime coming from illegal immigration. Change the laws!

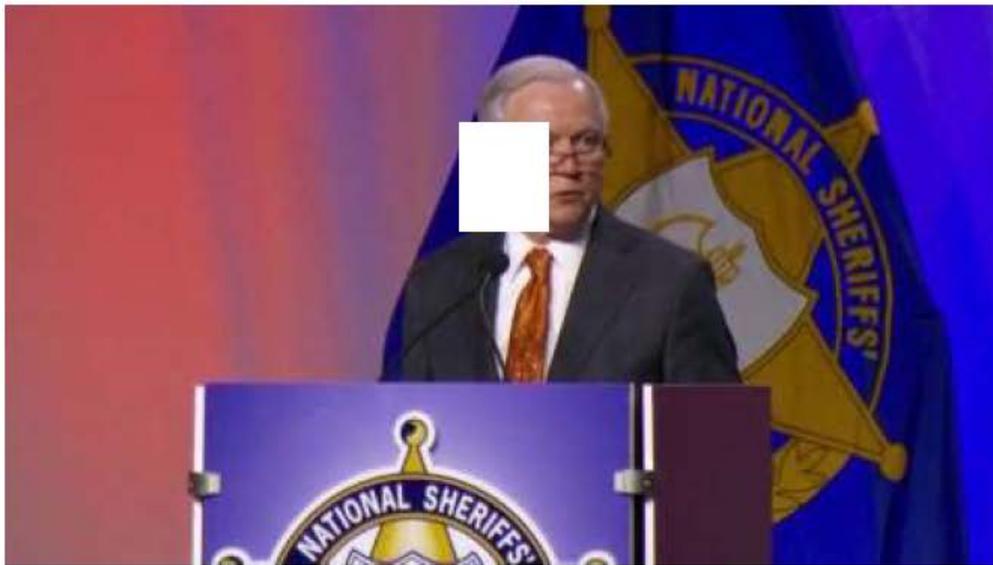
8:53 AM - Jun 18, 2018

100K 78.7K people are talking about this

Speaking at the White House on Monday, Trump said he would not let the US turn into a “migrant camp” and again blamed Democrats. “The United States will not be a migrant camp and it will not be a refugee holding facility ... not on my watch,” **Trump said**. “Immigration is the fault, and all the problems that we’re having because we cannot get them to sign legislation, we cannot get them even to the negotiating table, and I say it’s very strongly the Democrats’ fault.”

Administration officials, including Attorney General **Jeff Sessions** and White House press secretary **Sarah Sanders**, have asserted that family separation is part of the “zero-tolerance” approach to illegal immigration. They’ve cited the **Bible** in defending their stance.

Sessions, speaking at a conference hosted by the National Sheriffs’ Association on Monday, echoed Trump’s assertion that the separation might stop if there’s a wall and some “loopholes” are closed.



NBC News
@NBCNews

BREAKING: AG Sessions on Trump admin. policy of separating migrant families at US border: "If we build a wall, we pass some legislation, we close some loopholes, we won't face these terrible choices." [nbcnews.to/2t5uPc0](https://www.nbcnews.com/2t5uPc0)

10:26 AM - Jun 18, 2018

938 3,087 people are talking about this

As **Vox's Dara Lind explains**, separating immigrant children and parents is not part of the law, as the White House keeps insisting, nor does it have anything to do with the Democratic Party:

There is no law that requires immigrant families to be separated. The decision to charge everyone crossing the border with illegal entry — and the decision to charge asylum seekers in criminal court rather than waiting to see if they qualify for asylum — are both decisions the Trump administration has made.

Other administration officials back up Trump by pointing to the laws that give **extra protections to families, unaccompanied children, and asylum seekers**. The administration has been asking Congress to change these laws since it came into office, and has blamed them for stopping Trump from securing the border the way he'd like. (Those aren't "Democratic laws" either; the law addressing unaccompanied children was passed overwhelmingly in 2008 and signed by George W. Bush, while the restriction on detaining families is a result of federal litigation.)

In that context, the law isn't forcing Trump to separate families; it's keeping Trump from doing what he'd perhaps really like to do, which is simply sending families back or keeping them in detention together, and so he has had to resort to plan B.

A **New York Times** story published on Saturday furthers the case that this matter instead falls squarely on Trump. The report, from Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael Shear, chronicles the Trump administration's arrival at the decision to implement a "zero-tolerance" policy at the border that would result in splitting up kids and parents.

Then-Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly in March 2017 floated family separation "in order to deter more movement along this terribly dangerous network."

Senior policy adviser Stephen Miller pointedly told the Times that this was a "simple decision" for the administration to make. "No nation can have the policy that whole classes of people are immune from immigration law or enforcement," he said. "It was a simple decision by the administration to have a zero tolerance policy for illegal entry, period. The message is that no one is exempt from immigration law."

Of course, not everyone around Trump is so eager to take credit for what's happening.

Homeland Security Secretary **Kirstjen Nielsen** in a **tweet** on Saturday asserted, "We do not have a policy of separating families at the border. Period." It's narrowly true, because family separation isn't the official policy. But it is an obvious outgrowth of the administration's "zero-tolerance" policy.



Sec. Kirstjen Nielsen @SecNielsen

17 Jun

This misreporting by Members, press & advocacy groups must stop. It is irresponsible and unproductive. As I have said many times before, if you are seeking asylum for your family, there is no reason to break the law and illegally cross between ports of entry.



Sec. Kirstjen Nielsen
@SecNielsen

We do not have a policy of separating families at the border.
Period.

4:52 PM - Jun 17, 2018

8,884 63.7K people are talking about this

First lady **Melania Trump** through her spokesperson on Sunday said she “hates to see children separated from their families.” But she echoed her husband’s false assertion that somehow this is on Democrats to fix, calling on “both sides” to come together for immigration reform.

The president has sent some mixed messages. While he has consistently tried to blame Democrats for what’s happening, he has also continued to paint immigrants as dangerous criminals. In a **tweet** on Monday, he said children are being used by “some of the worst criminals on earth as a means to enter our country.”

Trump might also think this could be a winning issue for him among Republicans, cruel and inhumane as it may be. And there is some evidence to suggest it: An **Ipsos poll for the Daily Beast** found that 46 percent of Republicans support separating parents and children trying to enter the US illegally as a deterrent to other immigrants, while 32 percent oppose.