

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/18/trumps-family-separation-affected-thousands-more-children-previously-known>

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Documents Reveal Concentrated Targeting of Migrant Families

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Trump administration officials were discussing deliberately targeting migrant families by late 2017, a [draft policy document leaked to NBC News](#) confirms. A [government report](#) also published this week found that thousands more children were forcibly separated from their parents, and beginning much earlier, than the administration had previously acknowledged.

The separations uncovered by the Office of Inspector General of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) date to summer 2017, well before the administrations zero tolerance policy became public in April 2018 and images of children in cages hit the news in the following months.

A [court case brought by the ACLU](#) compelled the government to disclose how many children were separated from their parents under the zero tolerance policy. Authorities struggled to provide this information, eventually telling the court that 2,737 children had been forcibly separated from their parents.

But the [court order](#) only covered children who were in HHS custody on the date it was issued in June 2018. The count didnt include many of the children split from their families in 2017 and early 2018, a number that the inspector general concluded was unknown but in the thousands. Because of inadequate recordkeeping, authorities also cant say where all these children went and dont know how many children have not yet been reunited with their parents.

Rather than reunification, the real priorities were deterrence and punishment of these families. Those priorities were obvious last summer, and theyre confirmed by the leaked policy memo.

The memo discussed [targeting parents in migrant families for prosecution](#), with their children treated as unaccompanied and transferred to HHS custody. This approach would have a substantial deterrent effect, the document stated.

One official also [suggested ways to deny separated children their right to seek asylum before an immigration judge](#), a process the official said can be slow.

The trauma of tearing families apart is never acknowledged in the memo. Nowhere do its drafters pause to consider how young some of the affected children would be more than 100 were under age five, and some children were newborns.

These documents tell us the Trump administration wasnt simply careless about the well-being of children in its care. Forcible family separation, piloted for months before it was rolled out across the border, was a deliberate strategy to inflict harm on children and their families to send the message that asylum seekers were unwelcome.

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