

Trump's assertion that 10,000 of 300,000 'missing' children have been found

The president undercuts his claims of progress by repeating a ginned-up figure from the 2024 campaign.

July 16, 2025



Analysis by [Glenn Kessler](#)

“Something that you should have that you haven’t reported. As you know, 300,000 children are missing, right, 300,000 under Biden. We’ve already gotten back 10,000 of those children, and we have a lot more planned to come back. We’re getting them back by the thousands, but 300,000 and as of this morning, over 10,000, we’ve gotten back.”

— **President Trump, speaking to reporters at the White House, July 11**

“Look, we need to find those hundreds of thousands of children that were missing during the Biden administration and get them from whatever situation that they're in.”

— **Rep. Carlos A. Gimenez (R-Florida), remarks on Fox Business, July 14**

This is an example of how government initiatives can begin with falsehoods.

During Donald Trump's first term, he implemented a “zero tolerance” policy at the border that resulted in children being separated from their families. The policy was widely condemned before Trump reversed course. President Joe Biden, calling it “a moral failure,” made it a major issue in the 2020 presidential campaign. After Biden took office, he formed a task force to identify about 5,000 children who had been separated from their families.

Running for president again in 2024, Trump turned the tables on Biden. He first accused the Biden administration of losing 88,000 unaccompanied migrant children, claiming that “many of those children are dead.” Then, the Trump campaign boosted the figure to 320,000 — a number that JD Vance used (“effectively lost”) in the vice-presidential debate.

In both cases, claiming that so many children had been lost was false. The numbers involved different datasets. The first one, 88,000, referred to children who haven't responded to phone calls from a government agency. The second one, 320,000, referred to children who were never given a date to appear in immigration court or missed an appearance. Yet, as you can see from Gimenez's comment, the figure still resonates. (The lawmaker's spokesman did not respond to requests for comment.)

As for blaming Biden, the larger number included almost 2½ years of Trump's first term, so it was not a new problem, though it grew substantially bigger with the flood of illegal immigration under Biden. The smaller figure was also an issue in Trump's term, with no difference in the percentage of children or sponsors (or both) who could not be reached in either presidency.

But never mind our fact checks. The president decreed 300,000 kids were lost, and now he's claiming progress in finding them. What's going on?

The Facts

Let's start with the complicated system of laws and court cases that govern the treatment of children who arrive at the border without an accompanying adult.

A legal agreement known as the "Flores settlement," struck by President Bill Clinton's administration in 1997, requires the federal government to release, rather than detain, undocumented immigrant children — first to their parents if possible, to other adult relatives if not and to licensed programs willing to accept custody if no relatives are available. Then, a law signed by President George W. Bush, the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, said unaccompanied children are exempt from prompt return to their home country, unless they come from Mexico or Canada. The fear was that otherwise the children might be stuck across the border, where they could be trafficked.

Separately, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service was dismantled and the Department of Homeland Security was created in 2002, responsibility for the care and placement of those children was given to an arm of the Health and Human Services Department — the Office of Refugee Resettlement. That means that Homeland Security, which encountered the children, must refer them to HHS within 72 hours after border agents detain and process them at the border. As part of the refugee office's protocol, case managers are supposed to try three times to check on the status of a child between 30 and 37 days after release to a sponsor, preferably by having a conversation with the child in addition to the sponsor.

It's not a legal requirement for HHS to make the calls — and it's not required that children or the sponsor answer. But losing track of kids can have consequences. A harrowing 2023 New York Times investigation (which won a Pulitzer Prize) showed how the flood of undocumented children across the border in Biden's term led to some sponsors forcing underage children to work in brutal conditions, with many missing school.

Separately, after DHS transfers children to HHS oversight, ICE is supposed to monitor the location of unaccompanied children, including the status of their immigration cases and if they need to be deported. In August, the DHS inspector general issued a report saying ICE could not account for 32,000 children — who were transferred to HHS from fiscal year 2019 to 2023 and who did not appear in court. Moreover, ICE had not served notices on more than 291,000 children to appear in court. (About one-quarter of the children were transferred during Trump’s first term, but it’s unclear what proportion did not appear in court or did not receive notices.)

The Trump campaign combined the two figures to come up with 320,000. But, again, this is largely a paperwork issue, with different Cabinet agencies not communicating with each other. ICE even told the inspector general’s office that it was not required to tell HHS when children failed to show up for court appearances.

In March, the inspector general issued an updated report with new numbers. The report said that most of nearly 450,000 children have been placed with sponsors, such as relatives in the United States. But, as of October, 43,000 children had failed to appear for scheduled court dates. As of January, ICE had not served notices to appear in court on more than 233,000 children. In other words, by the time Trump took office, the Biden administration had made some progress, reducing the total of the two figures by more than 50,000, to 276,000.

The report, however, pointed the finger at HHS, saying that more than 31,000 of the release addresses to sponsors were blank, undeliverable or missing apartment numbers. That might be a more realistic figure for “missing” children.

In April, The Washington Post reported that DHS has enlisted the FBI and other law enforcement agencies to conduct welfare checks on children in an effort to track down the children who had missed court dates or had not been served notices. Immigration advocates, such as the Young Center for Immigrant Children’s Rights in Chicago, expressed alarm that the welfare checks were a backdoor way to seize undocumented immigrants.

“As a result of these checks, in some cases law enforcement officials detain and deport children and their family members,” the group said in a statement. “In other cases, officials rip children apart from their family as ICE detains their loved ones. And officials separate some children from their family, after which the government sends them back into federal custody.”

Administration officials say the program is a rigorous effort to track down and update information on migrant children. HHS said in April that there were nearly 65,000 reports of concern about children, and an official said about 42,000 of these reports have now been resolved.

In addition, more than 7,500 unaccompanied children were contacted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, mostly via door knocks or site visits, officials said. Some of the children have been repatriated to parents living in other countries, while those found to have committed crimes have been arrested. Officials also found instances of labor exploitation, including two teenage girls being forced to work in a plastic factory to pay off an alleged \$500,000 in debt, and disturbing cases of sex abuse and exploitation of minors.

The Trump administration has also implemented new requirements, including DNA tests for immediate family members as a condition of release, fingerprint checks for sponsors and all household members, and valid identity documents.

“The Biden administration’s dangerous open border policies didn’t only let countless unvetted, criminal illegal aliens flood into our country; they enabled horrific instances of child smuggling and exploitation,” Abigail Jackson, a White House spokeswoman, said in a statement. “Joe Biden and Kamala Harris lost track of over 300,000 kids and the Trump Administration is working to find these children, verify they are with safe sponsors, address reports of concern that went unanswered under President Joe Biden, and reunite them with parents in foreign countries. To date, the Administration has accomplished this with 10,000 of the kids that Joe Biden lost — and the efforts continue. Any claim that these kids were not actually missing ignores the horrific instance of abuse that migrant children suffered because of the Biden administration’s lax vetting procedures and inadequate security screenings.”

The Pinocchio Test

The New York Times series documented labor exploitation of migrant children, and the Biden administration in 2023 pledged to fix the problems. According to the Trump administration, many of those problems still exist. The Biden administration was overwhelmed at the southern border, while undocumented immigration has slowed to a trickle under Trump. Perhaps that will allow for a cleanup of the records.

We note that Jackson repeated Trump’s 300,000 number. But the inspector general’s report said most children ended up with sponsors; the problem was the children had not been given a notice of when they should appear in court to argue their case to stay in the country. Under any definition, that’s not the same as lost — or missing. The actual number of children who failed to appear in court is much smaller.

The Trump administration should be applauded for tackling problems that, according to government reports, also existed in his first term. We see no reason to doubt that the records of 10,000 children have been cleaned up. But why keep hanging your hat on a ginned-up campaign number? The most recent IG report said the records on sponsors were inadequate for about 31,000 children. That is still just one-tenth of the figure Trump cites.

We had already debunked the 300,000 figure during the campaign. We give this claim Two Pinocchios — half true. There are documented problems with keeping track of unaccompanied children — and serious accounts of abuse — that administration officials say they are determined to address. But the administration is still touting a phantom number as its Rosetta Stone.

Two Pinocchios

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The comments overwhelmingly criticize Donald Trump for his claims about the number of missing children, labeling them as lies or falsehoods. Many commenters express disbelief in the accuracy of the figures he cited, suggesting that his statements are part of a broader pattern of... [Show more](#)

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