

Why are so many migrant families still separated? Chaos in the data

October 26 2023, by Kristin Samuelson



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Five years since the retraction of the Trump-era zero-tolerance policy on illegal border crossings, which resulted in the separation of more than 5,000 children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border between 2017 and 2021, a task force is still attempting to reunify and account for separated families.

According to advocates of the Biden administration's Family Reunification Task Force, the group's scope isn't large enough to capture

all separated families. Additional complications have arisen because of inconsistencies in data used to track families down, resulting in separated families falling through the cracks.

If using DNA data to reunite families could help even one child, it's worth giving it a shot. Genetic justice experts at Northwestern University and the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago have combed through the [task force](#)'s semi-monthly public reports to highlight four key findings they hope will raise awareness in addressing the needs of all families separated by U.S. government policies.

Observations include varying definitions of "reunification" throughout different reports; inadequate reporting systems to track separations still ongoing in the U.S.; importance of addressing trauma after families are reunified; and the omission of reporting separations outside the child-parent category. (More detailed information below.)

"Our goal is not to undermine the careful and intentional work of the [task](#) force but to highlight the mountain of a challenge they have in accounting for these separations," said senior author Sara Huston, research assistant professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

"We want to highlight how the numbers the task force reports have importance to the general public. The lack of coverage of what happened to these families is misleading. While the task force is doing the important work, they're not tasked with covering the full effect of the separations."

The research team's commentary was [published in the journal *Family and Community Health*](#).

Leveraging DNA to reunite families

As of September 2023, approximately 1,000 [children](#) were still separated from their families. The task force has not found contact information for 81 of those children's parents (down from 545 children in 2020). Huston and Diana Madden, the study's lead and corresponding author, say those are the children who could potentially benefit from a DNA-based database approach, but advocates have been hesitant to use biometrics to reunify families.

"Every child counts," Huston said. "If using DNA data to reunite these families could help even one child, it's worth giving it a shot."

Task force covers a narrow scope

The task force's mandate covers a limited scope of children, primarily those who were part of the 2018 *Ms. L v. ICE* lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union. The commentary authors said the task force reports do not address whether over 1,000 children excluded from the *Ms. L* class were ultimately deemed eligible for task force support.

"Five years since the separations, the task force is still working hard to rectify the separations that fall within their narrow scope," said Madden, a research coordinator at Lurie Children's. "In the meantime, separations have continued to happen and might happen again if our administration shifts. How can we stand on the precipice of more separations happening when we still don't have solid systems to track when they do happen or how to reunify families?"

With the Oct. 16 release of the proposed settlement negotiation, there are provisions to track future [family](#) separations, the authors said.

The commentary is titled, "Accounting for migrant family separations: When numerical chaos exacerbates health inequity."

More details on each observation:

- Publicly reported numbers of separated children are challenging to interpret. As of August 2023, the task force has publicly released 14 progress reports. The researchers point out fluctuating definitions for how the term "reunified" is used across the reports. For instance, in some reports, children were "reunified" either in the U.S. or in their own home countries, whereas other reports described them as being "reunified" only in the U.S.
- The scope of reunification efforts does not include all families separated by the government at U.S. borders. Those eligible for reunification support include only children who were under 18 when separated from parents or legal guardians at the U.S.-Mexico border between Jan. 20, 2017, and Jan. 20, 2021. The focus on the U.S.-Mexico border likely excludes separations at other border entry points during the time frame of the zero-tolerance policy; the authors are aware of at least one separation at an internal international airport in 2019. Some separations involved U.S. citizens.
- The definition of the term "family" excludes non-parental relationships, doesn't account for varied family structures, leading to an undercount in numbers of true separations. "We don't know how many families there are that may be genetic aunts or uncles or a sibling over 18 traveling with a sibling under 18," Madden said. "What happened to those types of pairs? What happens when two children are siblings?"
- The total number of reunifications alone cannot account for the breadth and harms of separations. "Reunification is a process, not a conclusion," Madden said. "These families that do get reunified have not necessarily received any privileges as a resident in the U.S. The privileges and support families do receive will expire, and reparations are absent. Reunification is a

goal but not the end point for the trauma that happened to these families."

More information: Diana Madden et al, Commentary: Accounting for Migrant Family Separations, *Family & Community Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1097/FCH.0000000000000390](https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.0000000000000390)

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Why are so many migrant families still separated? Chaos in the data (2023, October 26) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-migrant-families-chaos.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.