

**TRAFFICKED, EXPLOITED, AND MISSING: MIGRANT  
CHILDREN VICTIMS OF THE BIDEN-HARRIS AD-  
MINISTRATION**

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**JOINT HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
BORDER SECURITY AND ENFORCEMENT**  
AND THE  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
OVERSIGHT, INVESTIGATIONS, AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY**  
OF THE  
**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION**

NOVEMBER 19, 2024

**Serial No. 118-83**

Printed for the use of the Committee on Homeland Security



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.govinfo.gov/>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

60-159 PDF

WASHINGTON : 2025

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## **TRAFFICKED, EXPLOITED, AND MISSING: MI- GRANT CHILDREN VICTIMS OF THE BIDEN- HARRIS ADMINISTRATION**

**Tuesday, November 19, 2024**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER SECURITY AND  
ENFORCEMENT, AND THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT, INVESTIGATIONS,  
AND ACCOUNTABILITY,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittees met, pursuant to notice, at 2:17 p.m., in room 310, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Clay Higgins [Chairman of the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement] presiding.

Present: Representatives Higgins, Bishop, Guest, Greene, Gonzales, Ezell, Luttrell, Strong, Brecheen, Correa, Ivey, Thanedar, Ramirez, Clarke, Suozzi, and McIver.

Mr. HIGGINS. The Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability will come to order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare the committee in recess at any point.

Without objection, the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Pfluger, is permitted to sit on the dais and ask questions of the witnesses.

The purpose of this hearing is to examine how the Biden-Harris administration's crisis at the border has led to increased numbers of trafficked, missing, and exploited children.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability. This is a joint hearing on the trafficking, exploitation, and missing unaccompanied children of the Southwest Border.

We're here today to examine how the Biden-Harris administration's border policies have allowed dangerous cartels, criminals, and human traffickers to prey upon the world's most vulnerable people, unaccompanied children that come to our country.

Our committee has been actively engaged in addressing this important issue.

In August, I, along with Chairmen Green and Bishop, sent a letter to the deputy assistant secretary for humanitarian services and director of the Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Reset-

tlement, Robin Dunn Marcos, requesting critical information on the screening and vetting of potential sponsors.

In September, Chairman Bishop and I held a Member briefing with officials from the Department of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services to better understand how DHS encounters, screens, and transfers unaccompanied children to HHS and how HHS subsequently places those children with potential sponsors.

As the administration's border crisis continues to spiral out of control, the number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the Southwest Border has increased greatly, turning the situation at the border into a devastating humanitarian catastrophe. In fact, the Biden-Harris administration has encountered nearly 530,000 alien children at the border to date. In comparison, the Trump administration had less than half that number over the same period of time.

I think America, we should ask ourselves, why are so many children arriving at the border alone and afraid, sometimes in the hands of an unconfirmed relative with no apparent indications of family connection? These children show up with arbitrary phone numbers and addresses scribbled on their arms as if they're, like, packaging arriving at someone's warehouse or doorstep. Some children that arrive at the border appear to be drugged, preventing law enforcement authorities from properly questioning them about those they're traveling with.

This is outrageous, and it's an affront to the very core principles that form the morality of any decent nation. Certainly, Americans should not accept this moving forward.

The purpose of this hearing is to put some hard facts on the table so that we can work together on both sides of the aisle and address actual solutions.

The Biden-Harris administration has stated that they have the most humanitarian border policies in history, yet we witness these horrors that are happening, and there's nothing humanitarian about enabling criminal cartels to exploit, abuse, and profit from vulnerable children.

Once the children enter the United States, Customs and Border Protection, the CBP, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, and Health and Human Services, HHS, are tasked with their well-being and safety. Initially, CBP works to process and screen those children once they're encountered at the border. Next, HHS works to identify and place them with a potential sponsor. Finally, ICE works to ensure they follow through with their immigration court proceedings.

That's how it's supposed to work. However, those agencies do not have the capacity or resources to handle the sheer number of children who have crossed the border in the last 4 years.

Compounding this crisis, the administration is not thoroughly vetting potential sponsors. This is a serious weak link in the chain.

According to information leaked to the media, Health and Human Services reportedly lost contact with more than 85,000 unaccompanied children between 2021 and 2023. Now, think about that. That's the size of major cities in America. In my district, that would be about the size of Lake Charles, Louisiana. Eighty-five

thousand children that are stated and known to be lost, and this was a year and a half ago.

We are appalled that our Government has neglected its primary duty to protect the safety and well-being of those children placed in our care. It's entirely unacceptable that the current administration has allowed human traffickers to take advantage of this ongoing border crisis. We have a responsibility to our Nation to fight against human-trafficking horrors and to find and rescue the children at that are currently missing.

I would like to express my gratitude to our witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

Before I yield to the Ranking Member of the Border Security Subcommittee, Mr. Correa, I'd first like to thank my good friend and colleague, Representative Dan Bishop from the great State of North Carolina, for joining me one last time as we work together to bring awareness to this very important topic.

After winning a special election in 2019, Representative Bishop was appointed the seat on the House Homeland Security Committee. He later became Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability in 2023.

Known for his tenacious questioning of hostile bureaucrats who've come to testify before both this committee and the House Judiciary Committee, where he also serves, Dan has devoted himself to combating the abuse of weaponized Government.

Dan is an extraordinary champion of the right to free speech, defending the homeland through strong border security, and enforcing the immigration laws passed by Congress.

Agree or disagree with him on policy, Dan Bishop's intellectual rigor and command of the law are indisputable and have earned him the respect of colleagues on both sides of the aisle. There is never any doubt about where Representative Dan Bishop stands.

It's been an honor to serve with him on this committee, and I'm sure that he will continue to use his God-given talents to serve our country.

With that, I yield the balance of my time.

[The statement of Chairman Higgins follows:]

#### STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN CLAY HIGGINS

NOVEMBER 19, 2024

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability joint hearing on the trafficking, exploitation, and missing unaccompanied children at the Southwest Border.

We are here today to examine how the Biden-Harris administration's open border policies have allowed dangerous cartels, criminals, and human traffickers to prey upon the world's most vulnerable people—unaccompanied children.

Our committee has been actively engaged in addressing this important issue. In August, I, along with Chairmen Green and Bishop, sent a letter to the deputy assistant secretary for humanitarian services and director of the Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, Robin Dunn Marcos, requesting critical information on the screening and vetting of potential sponsors. In September, Chairman Bishop and I held a Member briefing with officials from the Department of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services to better understand how DHS encounters, screens, and transfers unaccompanied children to HHS and how HHS subsequently places these children with potential sponsors.

As the administration's border crisis continues to spiral out of control, the number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the Southwest Border has skyrocketed, turning the situation at the border into a devastating humanitarian catastrophe.

In fact, the Biden-Harris administration has encountered nearly 530,000 alien children at the border to date. In comparison, the previous Trump administration had less than half that number.

America, ask yourself—Why are so many children arriving at the border alone and afraid and sometimes in the hands of unconfirmed “relatives” with no apparent familial indicators?—These children show up with arbitrary phone numbers and addresses scribbled across their arms as if they are a package arriving at somebody's doorstep. Some children arrive at the border drugged, preventing law enforcement authorities from questioning them about those they are traveling with. This is a moral outrage.

The Biden-Harris administration has touted that they have the most “humanitarian” border policies in history. Yet, there is nothing humanitarian about enabling the cartels to exploit, abuse, and profit from vulnerable children!

Once the children enter the United States, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Health and Human Services (HHS), are tasked with their well-being and safety. Initially, CBP works to process and screen these children once they are encountered at the border. Next, HHS works to identify and place them with a potential sponsor. Finally, ICE works to ensure they follow through with their immigration court proceedings. However, these agencies do not have the capacity or resources to handle the sheer number of children who have crossed the border in the last 4 years.

Compounding this crisis, the administration is not thoroughly vetting potential sponsors. According to information leaked to the media, Health and Human Services reportedly lost contact with more than 85,000 unaccompanied children between 2021 and 2023. Think about that. That is the size of the city of Lake Charles, LA.

We are appalled that our Government has neglected its primary duty to protect the safety and well-being of these children placed in our care.

It is entirely unacceptable that the Biden-Harris administration has allowed human traffickers to take advantage of this on-going border crisis.

We have a responsibility to our Nation to fight against this scourge of human trafficking and to find the children that are currently missing.

I would like to express my thanks to our witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

Before I yield to the Ranking Member of the Border Security Subcommittee, Mr. Correa, I first would like to thank my good friend and colleague, Representative Dan Bishop (from the great State of North Carolina), for joining me one last time as we work together to bring awareness to this very important topic.

After winning a special election in 2019, Mr. Bishop was appointed a seat on the House Homeland Security Committee. He later became Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability in 2023.

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It has been an honor to serve with him on this committee, and I am sure that he will continue to use his God-given talents to serve our country.

With that, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. HIGGINS. I recognize my friend and colleague, Mr. Correa.

Mr. CORREA. Good afternoon. Thank you to Chairman Higgins and Chairman Bishop for holding this most important hearing today on unaccompanied children.

I want to thank our witnesses again for being here. Thank you for your time and interest.

I'm going to listen to your testimony from you, the witnesses, very closely, not just as the Ranking Member of this committee but as a father, as an individual that, like I think all of us in this coun-

try, cares about children. We want to find some good solutions to these challenges. I hope that this hearing will also generate some good, bipartisan, across-the-aisle solutions that all of us can work on moving forward.

Let me be clear at the onset that it's everyone's responsibility to make sure all our children, as many children as we can put in safety, that we put them there. It means ensuring that these children that we're talking about today are protected at all stages of the immigration process, and that includes when they're encountered and held at the border, transferred to Department of Health and Human Services, and sent to what we hope is a vetted sponsor.

All of us—all of us—want to stop human trafficking, child trafficking, and other horrible, unspeakable crimes against children. Human traffickers are not going to be waiting for us or our permission. They're going to keep doing what they do.

But, again, I'm interested in hearing solutions today from our witnesses and also how you believe we can implement those solutions. All of us can give advice and counsel, but I want to hear, how do we implement them based on the constraints that we have?

Of course, Mr. Chairman, we all need to address the root causes of this problem of immigrants approaching the border. You know, at earlier hearings, we found out, discovered, that 80 percent of the women by the time they reach the Southern Border are either raped or sexually abused. It's a long, expensive, and dangerous journey. So the question is, what would prompt people to undertake that journey? What would prompt parents to let their children go on this very dangerous journey?

None of us want these children crossing our border or making this journey. Nobody in this committee wants to see that situation. So we have to ask ourselves, what is it that prompted these individuals to undertake this journey?

A lot of young children I've spoken to in other countries have said, "Either I leave or I join a gang. One way or the other, I'm probably going to die." Others come from families that have nothing to eat, essentially starvation. It's what prompted our ancestors to come to this country. Stay in Europe or starve; you've got a choice.

Also, we need to investigate those individuals that are making a lot of money from trafficking children, dropping kids over a wall, as well as those individuals in the United States that actually make a buck from looking the other way and hiring children to do adult work.

Of course, we also need to make it easier for the victims that are trafficked to come forward and to ask for help.

I've worked closely with my Republican colleagues to counter a lot of human trafficking, child exploitation. I've also spoken to special agents at Homeland Security Investigations to hear about their investigations, what are they doing, and what tools do they need to be more effective.

In this committee I've spoken to many CBP officers about the ways they identify human-trafficking situations. I've also heard from the Department of Health and Human Services on their efforts to improve outreach to unaccompanied minors, expand access to post-release services, and improve the vetting process.

Just last year, our Chairman Higgins and I introduced H.R. 4574, Cooperation on Combating Human Smuggling Trafficking Act. This bill would enhance Homeland Security's transnational criminal investigative units, which help stop trafficking in their home countries before these children undertake that long journey.

I'm glad this bill was passed out of this committee and then is now scheduled to be marked up in the Senate, and hopefully we'll be able to get it to the President's desk for his signature.

But so much more is left to be done, and that's where all of you come in.

Of course, we know that, basically, we need more agents dedicated to investigating these cases, preventing child trafficking and exploitation. We also need more legal services available for children so that toddlers aren't defending themselves in a courtroom.

We also need the resources for more home visits of those sponsoring unaccompanied minors. We need to make sure that those children, after they're placed, are actually in safe living conditions.

Those are just a few things that we need to do. A lot of work to do across the aisle. A lot of work.

Finally, Mr. Carrell, I want to note that I saw your prepared remarks and they don't conform to the rules of the committee. Here in Congress, we don't accuse sitting Presidents, Vice Presidents, or Members of Congress of treason.

But you are invited by the Chairman, and in this hearing I'm going to respect that. I want to make sure we move ahead and hear your testimony, sir. We want to be productive here and move forward.

With that, I want to thank our witnesses for being here.

Finally, I also want to turn to Mr. Bishop.

Chairman Bishop, sir, every once in a while, you and I have disagreed on issues. Just once in a while. But I've enjoyed the debates, the discussions, the intellect that you brought to the House of Congress.

Like the Chairman has said, I don't think you're done. I think you're just taking a reprieve and going to recharge the batteries, and God knows where we'll find you in a couple of years.

Give him a round of applause, please.

[Applause.]

Mr. CORREA. Thank you, sir, and may God be with you.

Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HIGGINS. The Ranking Member yields.

I now recognize the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability, the gentleman from North Carolina, Mr. Bishop, for his opening statement.

Mr. BISHOP. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thank you, Ranking Member Correa, both of you, for your very kind words.

My passing from this place doesn't hold a candle to the seriousness of the subject that is before us today. So I very much appreciate your comments, but I want to get to the matter at hand.

I do want to say to Mr. Correa, I have such a fond feeling for you, sir, and it is important to say that we do have very fundamental disagreements and yet you are a warm-hearted, kind individual.

I wish that it were possible for us to express just how deeply our differences are felt without it appearing sometimes that we dislike each other on a personal basis. I do not. I haven't disliked anybody in this Congress—well, I'm sure there's probably an exception or two to that. But, for the most part, it is merely the seriousness of the problems that we confront and the deep disagreements about what leads to them that I think leads me to the things I'm going to say right now.

When you say that we need more resources for rescuing children from these circumstances, when we say that we need more resources to crack down on employers who would employ vulnerable children in the country, when you say you need more resources to ferret out child sex trafficking and the most horrendous sorts of victimization that you can imagine, sheer hell on Earth, I don't know how you can talk about that need without reckoning with whether or not decisions that each of us made gave rise to the need that is articulated.

Why do the people come? Because it was declared that the border was open. Let's face it, that's what was declared. That's why you saw a sudden, dramatic change. You saw a massive, complete 180-degree reversal of policy that had attenuated the flow most successfully in history. It was 100 percent reversed.

So we see the horrific circumstances that you now want to articulate more burdens on the American taxpayer to attempt to solve. You want to impose more burdens on the men and women of law enforcement, who are already overburdened with the problems we have in society in the United States that will now be increasingly neglected because you have chosen to recreate in the United States, to a substantial degree, the horrific circumstances that are causing people to flee elsewhere.

I, too, want to thank our witnesses for joining us today to examine this tragic crisis enabled by one of the major parties in politics in the American political system and the Biden-Harris administration's gross mismanagement of caring for unaccompanied migrant children.

I think it also bears noting at the beginning, what we're examining here today are the unaccompanied children, who went into the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and were supposedly cared for to the best of the capability of the overtaxed resources of the United States of America, and it overlooks every other migrant child who came in, many of them purportedly with family units to which they may not have been genuinely attached. What has happened to them? We won't even see that in the numbers, upwards of 100,000 that we say have gone missing. We don't even know—those people aren't even represented in those stats.

So, under the Biden administration, over 526,000 unaccompanied alien children crossed the Southwest Border—unprecedented number. Each year from 2021 to 2023, CBP encountered over 130,000 unaccompanied children, more than twice the levels seen under the Obama and Trump administrations.

While CBP is usually the first point of contact for unaccompanied children who cross the border, the Health and Human Services Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement is primarily responsible for the care and placement of these children. Much of this work is

done in partnership with nongovernmental organizations that provide shelter and services, usually under contract.

Under the Biden-Harris administration, these NGO's received a windfall of taxpayer money through ORR, whose budget for its Unaccompanied Children Program was \$6.9 billion in fiscal year 2023.

We throw these terms around, these numbers, up here like they don't matter. Six-point-nine billion. My good friend and colleague from California is up here talking about we've got to get a lot more, we need a lot more.

Southwest Key Programs, the largest housing provider of unaccompanied children—one contractor—received more than \$2.5 billion in taxpayer funding over the past 3 years. This summer, the Federal Government sued Southwest Key, alleging that employees engaged in a pattern of sexual abuse and harassment against children in its shelters and failed to take sufficient action to protect the children in its care.

Do you see how the dominoes fall? This is what happens when you begin with one ill-considered, ideologically-bound decision that did not take account of the realities on the ground or the circumstances that would certainly ensue, and they have ensued.

Another company, Deployed Resources, has had a contract for a migrant facility in Greensboro, North Carolina, my State, since May 2022. Thirty-nine-point-five million has already been spent, with another \$64 million obligated, but, incredibly, according to HHS, no children have been in care at the facility from the time it became operational in March until it went into standby in June.

Do you see how the consequences proliferate of unbelievably bad decision making? What did we spend all that money on?

The Biden-Harris administration placed political aims above the welfare of unaccompanied migrant children who crossed or were trafficked across the Southern Border, releasing UACs—I'm not going to use that term—releasing unaccompanied children with inadequate vetting and follow-up to avoid the bad optics of crowded facilities.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement releases children to sponsors in the United States. Thorough vetting of these sponsors is absolutely critical and morally compelled if that's the path you're going to undertake to bring these children across.

Unfortunately, the Biden-Harris administration's push to bring in migrants, to quickly release migrants, resulted in countless cases of migrant children being released to sponsors with major red flags, placing children at obvious risk of exploitation that has played out in exactly the exploitation that would've been anticipated.

Far too often, children are released to sponsors who do not care about their welfare and intend to exploit the child through, at a minimum, child labor and, very often, far more heinous forms of trafficking.

Should we really—is it really in the interests of these children to rush to release them to individuals who are trying to sponsor multiple unrelated migrant children? This is a systemic failure that has put thousands of vulnerable children in risky situations here in the United States.



This failure goes well beyond the vetting issues on the front end, as an inspector general report earlier this year made clear that the Federal Government cannot account for tens of thousands of children that HHS released to sponsors. Thirty-two thousand children didn't show up for their immigration court hearings.

Those hearing dates are one of the only opportunities that ICE must engage with unaccompanied children and observe signs of trafficking or exploitation. What happened to those? What happened not just to 32,000, each one of them, what happened to that child? We do not know. They cannot be reached.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Over 290,000 have been released by HHS without a notice to appear for an immigration court date at all, so there will be no such opportunity to observe signs of trafficking or exploitation. There is no way for ICE to monitor their location, the status of these children, or verify their safety.

We've asked and even subpoenaed HHS for information about the screening of potential sponsors and the children that they've lost contact with.

In many cases, documented by investigative journalists with *The New York Times*, children released to sponsors who may not even be related to the child ended up working dangerous jobs to pay off debts or send money back home, often working night shifts or dropping out of school.

Mr. Chairman, I request unanimous consent to enter into the record 3 articles: "Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the United States." That's February 28, 2023. Second one, "As Migrant Children Were Put to Work, U.S. Ignored Warnings," April 17, 2023, *New York Times*. Finally, "U.S. Failed to Safeguard Many Migrant Children, Review Finds"—

Mr. HIGGINS. Without objection.

Mr. BISHOP [continuing]. February 15, 2024.

[The information follows:]

## ***Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S.***

Arriving in record numbers, they're ending up in dangerous jobs that violate child labor laws — including in factories that make products for well-known brands like Cheetos and Fruit of the Loom.

**By Hannah Dreier** Photographs by Kirsten Luce

Hannah Dreier traveled to Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota and Virginia for this story and spoke to more than 100 migrant child workers in 20 states. [hannah.dreier@nytimes](mailto:hannah.dreier@nytimes) @hannahdreier

Published Feb. 25, 2023 Updated Feb. 28, 2023



Cristian works a construction job instead of going to school. He is 14.

5/1/25, 2:03 PM

Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S. - The New York Times

Carolina packages Cheerios at night in a factory. She is 15.

5/1/25, 2:03 PM

Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S. - The New York Times

Wander starts looking for day-labor jobs before sunrise. He is 13.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html>

4/32

5/1/25, 2:03 PM

Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S. - The New York Times



processing giant Hearthside Food Solutions, which would ship these products around the country.

“Sometimes I get tired and feel sick,” Carolina said after a shift in November. Her stomach often hurt, and she was unsure if that was because of the lack of sleep, the stress from the incessant roar of the machines, or the worries she had for herself and her family in Guatemala. “But I’m getting used to it.”



Hearthside Food Solutions, one of the United States' largest food contractors, makes and packages products for well-known snack and cereal brands. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

These workers are part of a new economy of exploitation: Migrant children, who have been coming into the United States without their parents in record numbers, are ending up in some of the most punishing jobs in the country, a New York Times investigation found. This shadow work force extends across industries in every state, flouting child labor laws that have been in place for nearly a century. Twelve-year-old roofers in Florida and Tennessee. Underage slaughterhouse workers in Delaware, Mississippi and North Carolina. Children sawing planks of wood on overnight shifts in South Dakota.

Largely from Central America, the children are driven by economic desperation that was worsened by the pandemic. This labor force has been slowly growing for almost a decade, but it has exploded since 2021, while the systems meant to protect children have broken down.

The Times spoke with more than 100 migrant child workers in 20 states who described jobs that were grinding them into exhaustion, and fears that they had become trapped in circumstances they never could have imagined. The Times examination also drew on court and inspection records and interviews with hundreds of lawyers, social workers, educators and law enforcement officials.

In town after town, children scrub dishes late at night. They run milking machines in Vermont and deliver meals in New York City. They harvest coffee and build lava rock walls around vacation homes in Hawaii. Girls as young as 13 wash hotel sheets in Virginia.

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Oscar Lopez, a ninth grader, works overnight at a sawmill in South Dakota. On this day, he skipped school to sleep after a 14-hour shift. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

In many parts of the country, middle and high school teachers in English-language learner programs say it is now common for nearly all their students to rush off to long shifts after their classes end.

“They should not be working 12-hour days, but it’s happening here,” said Valeria Lindsay, a language arts teacher at Homestead Middle School near Miami. For the past three years, she said, almost every eighth grader in her English learner program of about 100 students was also carrying an adult workload.

Migrant child labor benefits both under-the-table operations and global corporations, The Times found. In Los Angeles, children stitch “Made in America” tags into J. Crew shirts. They bake dinner rolls sold at Walmart and Target, process milk used in Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and help debone chicken sold at Whole Foods. As recently as the fall, middle-schoolers made Fruit of the Loom socks in Alabama. In Michigan, children make auto parts used by Ford and General Motors.



The number of unaccompanied minors entering the United States climbed to a high of 130,000 last year — three times what it was five years earlier — and this summer is expected to bring another wave.

These are not children who have stolen into the country undetected. The federal government knows they are in the United States, and the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for ensuring sponsors will support them and protect them from trafficking or exploitation.

But as more and more children have arrived, the Biden White House has ramped up demands on staffers to move the children quickly out of shelters and release them to adults. Caseworkers say they rush through vetting sponsors.

While H.H.S. checks on all minors by calling them a month after they begin living with their sponsors, data obtained by The Times showed that over the last two years, the agency could not reach more than 85,000 children. Overall, the agency lost immediate contact with a third of migrant children.

An H.H.S. spokeswoman said the agency wanted to release children swiftly, for the sake of their well-being, but had not compromised safety. “There are numerous places along the process to continually ensure that a placement is in the best interest of the child,” said the spokeswoman, Kamara Jones.

Far from home, many of these children are under intense pressure to earn money. They send cash back to their families while often being in debt to their sponsors for smuggling fees, rent and living expenses.

“It’s getting to be a business for some of these sponsors,” said Annette Passalacqua, who left her job as a caseworker in Central Florida last year. Ms. Passalacqua said she saw so many children put to work, and found law enforcement officials so unwilling to investigate these cases, that she largely stopped reporting them. Instead, she settled for explaining to the children that they were entitled to lunch breaks and overtime.

Sponsors are required to send migrant children to school, and some students juggle classes and heavy workloads. Other children arrive to find that they have been misled by their sponsors and will not be enrolled in school.

The federal government hires child welfare agencies to track some minors who are deemed to be at high risk. But caseworkers at those agencies said that H.H.S. regularly ignored obvious signs of labor exploitation, a characterization the agency disputed.

In interviews with more than 60 caseworkers, most independently estimated that about two-thirds of all unaccompanied migrant children ended up working full time.

A representative for Hearthside said the company relied on a staffing agency to supply some workers for its plants in Grand Rapids, but conceded that it had not required the agency to verify ages through a national system that checks Social Security numbers. Unaccompanied migrant children often obtain false identification to secure work.

“We are immediately implementing additional controls to reinforce all agencies’ strict compliance with our longstanding requirement that all workers must be 18 or over,” the company said in a statement.

At Union High School in Grand Rapids, Carolina’s ninth-grade social studies teacher, Rick Angstman, has seen the toll that long shifts take on his students. One, who was working nights at a commercial laundry, began passing out in class from fatigue and was hospitalized twice, he said. Unable to stop working, she dropped out of school.

“She disappeared into oblivion,” Mr. Angstman said. “It’s the new child labor. You’re taking children from another country and putting them in almost indentured servitude.”

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## On the Night Shift



Children being processed by the U.S. Border Patrol in Roma, Texas. In the past two years alone, 250,000 unaccompanied minors have come into the country. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

When Carolina left Guatemala, she had no real understanding of what she was heading toward, just a sense that she could not stay in her village any longer. There was not much electricity or water, and after the pandemic began, not much food.

The only people who seemed to be getting by were the families living off remittances from relatives in the United States. Carolina lived alone with her grandmother, whose health began failing. When neighbors started talking about heading north, she decided to join. She was 14.

"I just kept walking," she said.

Carolina reached the U.S. border exhausted, weighing 84 pounds. Agents sent her to an H.H.S. shelter in Arizona, where a caseworker contacted her aunt, Marcelina Ramirez. Ms. Ramirez was at first reluctant: She had already sponsored two other relatives and had three children of her own. They were living on \$600 a week, and she didn't know Carolina.

When Carolina arrived in Grand Rapids last year, Ms. Ramirez told her she would go to school every morning and suggested that she pick up evening shifts at Hearthside. She knew Carolina needed to send money back to her grandmother. She also believed it was good for young people to work. Child labor is the norm in rural Guatemala, and she herself had started working around the second grade.

One of the nation's largest contract manufacturers, Hearthside makes and packages food for companies like Frito-Lay, General Mills and Quaker Oats. "It would be hard to find a cookie or cracker aisle in any leading grocer that does not contain multiple products from Hearthside production facilities," a Grand Rapids-area plant manager told a trade magazine in 2019.

General Mills, whose brands include Cheerios, Lucky Charms and Nature Valley, said it recognized "the seriousness of this situation" and was reviewing The Times's findings. PepsiCo, which owns Frito-Lay and Quaker Oats, declined to comment.

Three people who until last year worked at one of the biggest employment agencies in Grand Rapids, Forge Industrial Staffing, said Hearthside supervisors were sometimes made aware that they were getting young-looking workers whose identities had been flagged as false.

"Hearthside didn't care," said Nubia Malacara, a former Forge employee who said she had also worked at Hearthside as a minor.

In a statement, Hearthside said, "We do care deeply about this issue and are concerned about the mischaracterization of Hearthside." A spokesman for Forge said it complied with state and federal laws and "would never knowingly employ individuals under 18."



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Kevin Tomas said he sought work through Forge after he arrived in Grand Rapids at age 13 with his 7-year-old brother. At first, he was sent to a local manufacturer that made auto parts for Ford and General Motors. But his shift ended at 6:30 in the morning, so he could not stay awake in school, and he struggled to lift the heavy boxes.

“It’s not that we want to be working these jobs. It’s that we have to help our families,” Kevin said.

By the time he was 15, Kevin had found a job at Hearthside, stacking 50-pound cases of cereal on the same shift as Carolina.

### ‘So Many Red Flags’



Cristian, 14, has been working in construction in North Miami for two years instead of going to school. Federal law bars minors from a long list of such jobs. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

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The growth of migrant child labor in the United States over the past several years is a result of a chain of willful ignorance. Companies ignore the young faces in their back rooms and on their factory floors. Schools often decline to report apparent labor violations, believing it will hurt children more than help. And H.H.S. behaves as if the migrant children who melt unseen into the country are doing just fine.

“As the government, we’ve turned a blind eye to their trafficking,” said Doug Gilmer, the head of the Birmingham, Ala., office of Homeland Security Investigations, a federal agency that often becomes involved with immigration cases.

Mr. Gilmer teared up as he recalled finding 13-year-olds working in meat plants; 12-year-olds working at suppliers for Hyundai and Kia, as documented last year by a Reuters investigation; and children who should have been in middle school working at commercial bakeries.

“We’re encountering it here because we’re looking for it here,” Mr. Gilmer said. “It’s happening everywhere.”

Children have crossed the Southern border on their own for decades, and since 2008, the United States has allowed non-Mexican minors to live with sponsors while they go through immigration proceedings, which can take several years. The policy, codified in anti-trafficking legislation, is intended to prevent harm to children who would otherwise be turned away and left alone in a Mexican border town.

When Kelsey Keswani first worked as an H.H.S. contractor in Arizona to connect unaccompanied migrant children with sponsors in 2010, the adults were almost always the children’s parents, who had paid smugglers to bring them up from Central America, she said.

But around 2014, the number of arriving children began to climb, and their circumstances were different. In recent years, “the kids almost all have a debt to pay off, and they’re super stressed about it,” Ms. Keswani said.

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She began to see more failures in the vetting process. “There were so many cases where sponsors had sponsored multiple kids, and it wasn’t getting caught. So many red flags with debt. So many reports of trafficking.”

Now, just a third of migrant children are going to their parents. A majority are sent to other relatives, acquaintances or even strangers, a Times analysis of federal data showed. Nearly half are coming from Guatemala, where poverty is fueling a wave of migration. Parents know that they would be turned away at the border or quickly deported, so they send their children in hopes that remittances will come back.

In the last two years alone, more than 250,000 children have entered the United States by themselves.

The shifting dynamics in Central America helped create a political crisis early in Mr. Biden’s presidency, when children started crossing the border faster than H.H.S. could process them. With no room left in shelters, the children stayed in jail-like facilities run by Customs and Border Protection and, later, in tent cities. The images of children sleeping on gym mats under foil blankets attracted intense media attention.

The Biden administration pledged to move children through the shelter system more quickly. “We don’t want to continue to see a child languish in our care if there is a responsible sponsor,” Xavier Becerra, secretary of health and human services, told Congress in 2021.

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A detention site in the Rio Grande Valley in March 2021. The Biden administration has faced pressure to move unaccompanied children through the system quickly. Pool photo by Dario Lopez-Mills

His agency began paring back protections that had been in place for years, including some background checks and reviews of children's files, according to memos reviewed by The Times and interviews with more than a dozen current and former employees.

"Twenty percent of kids have to be released every week or you get dinged," said Ms. Keswani, who stopped working with H.H.S. last month.

Concerns piled up in summer 2021 at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the H.H.S. division responsible for unaccompanied migrant children. In a memo that July, 11 managers said they were worried that labor trafficking was increasing and complained to their bosses that the office had become "one that rewards individuals for making quick releases, and not one that rewards individuals for preventing unsafe releases."



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Staff members said in interviews that Mr. Becerra continued to push for faster results, often asking why they could not discharge children with machine-like efficiency.

“If Henry Ford had seen this in his plants, he would have never become famous and rich. This is not the way you do an assembly line,” Mr. Becerra said at a staff meeting last summer, according to a recording obtained by The Times.

The H.H.S. spokeswoman, Ms. Jones, said that Mr. Becerra had urged his staff to “step it up.” “Like any good leader, he wouldn’t hesitate to do it again — especially when it comes to the well-being and safety of children,” she said.

During a call last March, Mr. Becerra told Cindy Huang, the O.R.R. director, that if she could not increase the number of discharges, he would find someone who could, according to five people familiar with the call. She resigned a month later.

He recently made a similar threat to her successor during a meeting with senior leadership, according to several people who were present.

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**'It Was All Lies'**

Migrant children were among the day laborers who gathered on a school day in Homestead, Fla., to find roofing, landscaping or other work. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

While many migrant children are sent to the United States by their parents, others are persuaded to come by adults who plan to profit from their labor.

Nery Cutzal was 13 when he met his sponsor over Facebook Messenger. Once Nery arrived in Florida, he discovered that he owed more than \$4,000 and had to find his own place to live. His sponsor sent him threatening text messages and kept a running list of new debts: \$140 for filling out H.H.S. paperwork; \$240 for clothes from Walmart; \$45 for a taco dinner.

"Don't mess with me," the sponsor wrote. "You don't mean anything to me."

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Nery began working until 3 a.m. most nights at a trendy Mexican restaurant near Palm Beach to make the payments. “He said I would be able to go to school and he would take care of me, but it was all lies,” Nery said.

His father, Leonel Cutzal, said the family had become destitute after a series of bad harvests and had no choice but to send their oldest son north from Guatemala.

“Even when he shares \$50, it’s a huge help,” Mr. Cutzal said. “Otherwise, there are times we don’t eat.” Mr. Cutzal had not understood how much Nery would be made to work, he said. “I think he passed through some hard moments being up there so young.”

Nery eventually contacted law enforcement, and his sponsor was found guilty last year of smuggling a child into the United States for financial gain. That outcome is rare: In the past decade, federal prosecutors have brought only about 30 cases involving forced labor of unaccompanied minors, according to a Times review of court databases.

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Deuda de Nery	
1	Primer Pago Salida Gtate a USA. \$ 10,000
2	Segundo Pago Mexico Estados Unidos \$ 16,000
3	Pago de huellas al notario \$ 102.50
4	Pago de papeles FOTI da para Ali Zora \$ 37.50
5	Bono de avion de NERY \$ 551.00
6	Pago del Parque del aeropuerto de NERY \$ 6.00
7	Almuerzo una noche de Permiso de trabajo \$ 50.00
8	Tacos Por la llegada de NERY \$ 45.00
9	Tele para NERY al aeropuerto \$ 65.00
10	Tacos al comprar la ropa de NERY \$ 30.00
11	Ropa de NERY \$ 240.00
12	El favor Por toda a NERY \$ 300.00
Total 3,000	
620 pesos mensuales	
Pobres 4036	
interes mensual 620	
tarifa de monito mensual	
\$ 500 aqui	
4000 en la casa	

A handwritten ledger, in Spanish, of Nery Cutzal's debts to his sponsor, including money for tacos and clothes. The child owed more than \$4,000, plus interest. Court information has been redacted for privacy.

Unlike the foster care system, in which all children get case management, H.H.S. provides this service to about a third of children who pass through its care, and usually for just four months. Tens of thousands of other children are sent to their sponsors with little but the phone number for a national hotline. From there, they are often on their own: There is no formal follow-up from any federal or local agencies to ensure that sponsors are not putting children to work illegally.

In Pennsylvania, one case worker told The Times he went to check on a child released to a man who had applied to sponsor 20 other minors. The boy had vanished. In Texas, another case worker said she had encountered a man who had

been targeting poor families in Guatemala, promising to help them get rich if they sent their children across the border. He had sponsored 13 children.

“If you’ve been in this field for any amount of time, you know that there’s what the sponsors agree to, and what they’re actually doing,” said Bernal Cruz Munoz, a caseworker supervisor in Oregon.

Calling the hotline is not a sure way to get support, either. Juanito Ferrer called for help after he was brought to Manassas, Va., at age 15 by an acquaintance who forced him to paint houses during the day and guard an apartment complex at night. His sponsor took his paychecks and watched him on security cameras as he slept on the basement floor.

Juanito said that when he called the hotline in 2019, the person on the other end just took a report. “I thought they’d send the police or someone to check, but they never did that,” he said. “I thought they would come and inspect the house, at least.” He eventually escaped.

Asked about the hotline, H.H.S. said operators passed reports onto law enforcement and other local agencies because the agency did not have the authority to remove children from homes.

The Times analyzed government data to identify places with high concentrations of children who had been released to people outside their immediate families — a sign that they might have been expected to work. In northwest Grand Rapids, for instance, 93 percent of children have been released to adults who are not their parents.

H.H.S. does not track these clusters, but the trends are so pronounced that officials sometimes notice hot spots anyway.

Scott Lloyd, who led the resettlement office in the Trump administration, said he realized in 2018 that the number of unaccompanied Guatemalan boys being released to sponsors in South Florida seemed to be growing.

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Jose Vasquez, 13, photographed at the church he attends in Grand Rapids, Mich. He works 12-hour shifts, six days a week, at an egg farm outside the city. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

“I always wondered what was happening there,” he said.

But his attention was diverted by the chaos around the Trump administration’s child separation policy, and he never looked into it. The trend he saw has only accelerated: For example, in the past three years, more than 200 children have been released to distant relatives or unrelated adults around Immokalee, Fla., an agricultural hub with a long history of labor exploitation.

In a statement, H.H.S. said it had updated its case management system to better flag instances when multiple children were being released to the same person or address.

Many sponsors see themselves as benevolent, doing a friend or neighbor a favor by agreeing to help a child get out of a government shelter, even if they do not intend to offer any support. Children often understand that they will have to work, but do not grasp the unrelenting grind that awaits them.



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“I didn’t get how expensive everything was,” said 13-year-old Jose Vasquez, who works 12-hour shifts, six days a week, at a commercial egg farm in Michigan and lives with his teenage sister. “I’d like to go to school, but then how would I pay rent?”

## Occupational Hazards



Carolina Yoc, back right, worked on math problems after a night shift at a Grand Rapids food plant. The 13-year-old girl sitting next to her said she also worked nights at a factory. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

One fall morning at Union High School in Grand Rapids, Carolina listened to Mr. Angstman lecture on the journalist Jacob Riis and the Progressive Era movement that helped create federal child labor laws. He explained that the changes were meant to keep young people out of jobs that could harm their health or safety, and showed the class a photo of a small boy making cigars.

“Riis reported that members of this family worked 17 hours a day, seven days a week,” he told the students. “The cramped space reeked of toxic fumes.” Students seemed unmoved. Some struggled to stay awake.

Teachers at the school estimated that 200 of their immigrant students were working full time while trying to keep up with their classes. The greatest share of Mr. Angstman’s students worked at one of the four Hearthside plants in the city.

The company, which has 39 factories in the United States, has been cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for 34 violations since 2019, including for unsafe conveyor belts at the plant where Carolina found her job. At least 11 workers suffered amputations in that time. In 2015, a machine caught the hairnet of an Ohio worker and ripped off part of her scalp.

The history of accidents “shows a corporate culture that lacks urgency to keep workers safe,” an OSHA official wrote after the most recent violation for an amputation.

Underage workers in Grand Rapids said that spicy dust from immense batches of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos made their lungs sting, and that moving heavy pallets of cereal all night made their backs ache. They worried about their hands getting caught in conveyor belts, which federal law classifies as so hazardous that no child Carolina’s age is permitted to work with them.

Hearthside said in a statement that it was committed to complying with laws governing worker protections. “We strongly dispute the safety allegations made and are proud of our safety-first culture,” the statement read.



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A selfie taken by a 17-year-old at a Hearthsides facility in Grand Rapids. She said older men at the factory sometimes harassed her.

Federal law bars minors from a long list of dangerous jobs, including roofing, meat processing and commercial baking. Except on farms, children younger than 16 are not supposed to work for more than three hours or after 7 p.m. on school days.

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But these jobs — which are grueling and poorly paid, and thus chronically short-staffed — are exactly where many migrant children are ending up. Adolescents are twice as likely as adults to be seriously injured at work, yet recently arrived preteens and teenagers are running industrial dough mixers, driving massive earthmovers and burning their hands on hot tar as they lay down roofing shingles, The Times found.

Unaccompanied minors have had their legs torn off in factories and their spines shattered on construction sites, but most of these injuries go uncounted. The Labor Department tracks the deaths of foreign-born child workers but no longer makes them public. Reviewing state and federal safety records and public reports, The Times found a dozen cases of young migrant workers killed since 2017, the last year the Labor Department reported any.

The deaths include a 14-year-old food delivery worker who was hit by a car while on his bike at a Brooklyn intersection; a 16-year-old who was crushed under a 35-ton tractor-scraper outside Atlanta; and a 15-year-old who fell 50 feet from a roof in Alabama where he was laying down shingles.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/us/unaccompanied-migrant-child-workers-exploitation.html>

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From left: Oscar Nambo Dominguez, 16, was crushed last year under an earthmover near Atlanta. Edwin Ajacalon, 14, was hit by a car while delivering food on a bike in Brooklyn. Juan Mauricio Ortiz, 15, died on his first day of work for an Alabama roofing company when he fell about 50 feet.

In 2021, Karla Campbell, a Nashville labor lawyer, helped a woman figure out how to transport the body of her 14-year-old grandson, who had been killed on a landscaping job, back to his village in Guatemala. It was the second child labor death she had handled that year.

“I’ve been working on these cases for 15 years, and the addition of children is new,” Ms. Campbell said.

In dairy production, the injury rate is twice the national average across all industries. Paco Calvo arrived in Middlebury, Vt., when he was 14 and has been working 12-hour days on dairy farms in the four years since. He said he crushed his hand in an industrial milking machine in the first months of doing this work.

“Pretty much everyone gets hurt when they first start,” he said.

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## Targeting the Middlemen



Young workers exited an overnight cleaning shift last October at a JBS pork plant in Worthington, Minn. Their employer, a sanitation company, was later fined for violating child labor laws. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Charlene Irizarry, the human resources manager at Farm Fresh Foods, an Alabama meat plant that struggles to retain staff, recently realized she was interviewing a 12-year-old for a job slicing chicken breasts into nuggets in a section of the factory kept at 40 degrees.

Ms. Irizarry regularly sees job applicants who use heavy makeup or medical masks to try to hide their youth, she said. "Sometimes their legs don't touch the floor."

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Other times, an adult will apply for a job in the morning, and then a child using the same name will show up for orientation that afternoon. She and her staff have begun separating other young applicants from the adults who bring them in, so they will admit their real ages.

Ms. Irizarry said the plant had already been fined for one child labor violation, and she was trying to avoid another. But she wondered what the children might face if she turned them away.

“I worry about why they’re so desperate for these jobs,” she said.

In interviews with underage migrant workers, The Times found child labor in the American supply chains of many major brands and retailers. Several, including Ford, General Motors, J. Crew and Walmart, as well as their suppliers, said they took the allegations seriously and would investigate. Target and Whole Foods did not respond to requests for comment. Fruit of the Loom said it had ended its contract with the supplier.

One company, Ben & Jerry’s, said it worked with labor groups to ensure a minimum set of working conditions at its dairy suppliers. Cheryl Pinto, the company’s head of values-led sourcing, said that if migrant children needed to work full time, it was preferable for them to have jobs at a well-monitored workplace.

The Labor Department is supposed to find and punish child labor violations, but inspectors in a dozen states said their understaffed offices could barely respond to complaints, much less open original investigations. When the department has responded to tips on migrant children, it has focused on the outside contractors and staffing agencies that usually employ them, not the corporations where they perform the work.

In Worthington, Minn., it had long been an open secret that migrant children released by H.H.S. were cleaning a slaughterhouse run by JBS, the world’s largest meat processor. The town has received more unaccompanied migrant children per capita than almost anywhere in the country.

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Outside the JBS pork plant last fall, The Times spoke with baby-faced workers who chased and teased one another as they came off their shifts in the morning. Many had scratched their assumed names off company badges to hide evidence that they were working under false identities. Some said they had suffered chemical burns from the corrosive cleaners they used.

Not long afterward, labor inspectors responding to a tip found 22 Spanish-speaking children working for the company hired to clean the JBS plant in Worthington, and dozens more in the same job at meat-processing plants around the United States.

But the Labor Department can generally only issue fines. The cleaning company paid a \$1.5 million penalty, while JBS said it had been unaware that children were scouring the Worthington factory each night. JBS fired the cleaning contractor.

Many of the children who were working there have found new jobs at other plants, The Times found.

“I still have to pay back my debt, so I still have to work,” said Mauricio Ramirez, 17, who has found a meat processing job in the next town over.



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**‘Not What I Imagined’**

Cristian Lopez, 16, pictured with his 12-year-old sister, Jennifer, works at a Hearthside facility in Grand Rapids. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

It has been a little more than a year since Carolina left Guatemala, and she has started to make some friends. She and another girl who works at Hearthside have necklaces that fit together, each strung with half a heart. When she has time, she posts selfies online decorated with smiley faces and flowers.

Mostly, though, she keeps to herself. Her teachers do not know many details about her journey to the border. When the topic came up at school recently, Carolina began sobbing and would not say why.

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After a week of 17-hour days, she sat at home one night with her aunt and considered her life in the United States. The long nights. The stress about money. “I didn’t have expectations about what life would be like here,” she said, “but it’s not what I imagined.”

She was holding a debit card given to her by a staffing agency, which paid her Hearthside salary this way so she did not have to cash checks. Carolina turned it over and over in her palm as her aunt looked on.

“I know you get sad,” Ms. Ramirez said.

Carolina looked down. She wanted to continue going to school to learn English, but she woke up most mornings with a clenched stomach and kept staying home sick. Some of her ninth grade classmates had already dropped out. The 16-year-old boy she sat next to in math class, Cristian Lopez, had left school to work overtime at Hearthside.

Cristian lived a few minutes away, in a bare two-room apartment he shared with his uncle and 12-year-old sister, Jennifer.

His sister did not go to school either, and they had spent the day bickering in their room. Now night had fallen and they were eating Froot Loops for dinner. The heat was off, so they wore winter jackets. In an interview from Guatemala, their mother, Isabel Lopez, cried as she explained that she had tried to join her children in the United States last year but was turned back at the border.

Cristian had given his uncle some of the money he earned making Chewy bars, but his uncle believed it was not enough. He had said he would like Jennifer to start working at the factory as well, and offered to take her to apply himself.

Cristian said he had recently called the H.H.S. hotline. He hoped the government would send someone to check on him and his sister, but he had not heard back. He did not think he would call again.

Research was contributed by Andrew Fischer, Seamus Hughes, Michael H. Keller and Julie Tate.

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## ***As Migrant Children Were Put to Work, U.S. Ignored Warnings***

The White House and federal agencies were repeatedly alerted to signs of children at risk. The warnings were ignored or missed.

**By Hannah Dreier**

April 17, 2023

In the spring of 2021, Linda Brandmiller was working at an arena in San Antonio that had been converted into an emergency shelter for migrant children. Thousands of boys were sleeping on cots as the Biden administration grappled with a record number of minors crossing into the United States without their parents.

Ms. Brandmiller's job was to help vet sponsors, and she had been trained to look for possible trafficking. In her first week, two cases jumped out: One man told her he was sponsoring three boys to employ them at his construction company. Another, who lived in Florida, was trying to sponsor two children who would have to work off the cost of bringing them north.

She immediately contacted supervisors working with the Department of Health and Human Services, the federal agency responsible for these children. "This is urgent," she wrote in an email reviewed by The New York Times.

But within days, she noticed that one of the children was set to be released to the man in Florida. She wrote another email, this time asking for a supervisor's "immediate attention" and adding that the government had already sent a 14-year-old boy to the same sponsor.

Ms. Brandmiller also emailed the shelter's manager. A few days later, her building access was revoked during her lunch break. She said she was never told why she had been fired.

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As Migrant Children Were Put to Work, U.S. Ignored Warnings - The New York Times

Over the past two years, more than 250,000 migrant children have come alone to the United States. Thousands of children have ended up in punishing jobs across the country — working overnight in slaughterhouses, replacing roofs, operating machinery in factories — all in violation of child labor laws, a recent Times investigation showed. After the article's publication in February, the White House announced policy changes and a crackdown on companies that hire children.

But all along, there were signs of the explosive growth of this labor force and warnings that the Biden administration ignored or missed, The Times has found.

Again and again, veteran government staffers and outside contractors told the Health and Human Services Department, including in reports that reached Secretary Xavier Becerra, that children appeared to be at risk. The Labor Department put out news releases noting an increase in child labor. Senior White House aides were shown evidence of exploitation, such as clusters of migrant children who had been found working with industrial equipment or caustic chemicals.

As the administration scrambled to clear shelters that were strained beyond capacity, children were released with little support to sponsors who expected them to take on grueling, dangerous jobs.

In interviews with The Times, officials expressed concern for migrant children but shifted blame for failing to protect them.

H.H.S. officials said the department vetted sponsors sufficiently but could not control what happened to children after they were released. Monitoring workplaces, they said, was the job of the Department of Labor.

Officials at the Labor Department said inspectors had increased their focus on child labor and shared details about workers with H.H.S., but said it was not a welfare agency.

And White House officials said that while the two departments had passed along information about migrant child labor, the reports were not flagged as urgent and did not make clear the scope of the problem. Robyn M. Patterson, a White House

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spokeswoman, said in a statement that the administration was now increasing scrutiny of employers and reviewing its vetting of sponsors.

“It’s unacceptable that companies are using child labor, and this administration will continue working to strengthen the system to investigate these violations and hold violators accountable,” the statement read.

But the White House declined to comment on why the administration did not previously react to repeated signs that migrant children were being widely exploited.

“If I saw it, they could have put it together,” said Ms. Brandmiller, who is also an immigration lawyer. “There were so many opportunities to connect those dots that no one ever did.” An H.H.S. spokeswoman said the agency had no record of Ms. Brandmiller’s concerns. The company that ran the emergency shelter declined to comment.

Ms. Brandmiller said she still worried about the 14-year-old boy, Antonio Diaz Mendez.

Antonio is living in Florida City, Fla., far from his family in Guatemala. In an interview last summer, he sat on the mildewed porch of a house crowded with other migrant children. He said he was working long shifts in a refrigerated warehouse, packing vegetables for distribution around the country, and had not seen his sponsor in months.

He missed his grandmother and sometimes went days without talking to anyone. He wanted to go to school, but felt trapped because he needed to earn money to repay his debts, support himself and help his siblings.

No one, he said, had ever come to check on him.

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**'This Is BS'**

Over the past two years, more than 250,000 migrant children have come alone to the United States.

Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Soon after President Biden took office, the growing numbers of migrant children touched off tension between the new administration and longtime government staff members.

The president had promised to abide by a 2008 anti-trafficking law that requires the federal government to accept children traveling alone from most countries and allows them to stay in the United States during the yearslong process of applying for legal status.

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But the law did not anticipate that a pandemic would ravage the economies of Central American countries. Parents in deepening poverty began sending their children to the United States to earn money — part of a phenomenon some immigration advocates call “voluntary family separation.”

In 2021, as images of children sleeping under foil blankets in overflow centers dominated the news, Susan E. Rice, the White House’s head of domestic policy, told staff members she was frustrated with the situation, according to five people who worked with her. Ms. Rice vented in a note she scribbled on a memo detailing the position of advocates, who believed a pandemic-era border closure was compelling parents to send unaccompanied children, sometimes called U.C.s.

“This is BS,” Ms. Rice wrote, according to a copy of the memo reviewed by The Times. “What is leading to ‘voluntary’ separation is our generosity to UCs!”

In a statement, Ms. Patterson, the White House spokeswoman, said that any suggestion that Ms. Rice felt constrained by the demands of the law was false and that she was “proud to be doing the right thing and treating children with dignity and respect.”

A copy of a 2021 memo with handwritten notes by Susan E. Rice, the White House's domestic policy adviser. Identifying information has been redacted.

Under the law, the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for vetting sponsors to ensure they will provide for children's well-being and protect them from trafficking or exploitation. But as shelters filled with children, the department began loosening some vetting restrictions and urging case managers to speed the process along.

Longtime H.H.S. staff members complained that the changes endangered children. White House aides and administration officials grew exasperated, believing that these workers were clinging to protocols that kept children in shelters when it was better for them to be in a home with an adult.



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“It was maddening,” said Vivian Graubard, a White House adviser who worked with Ms. Rice on migrant child issues.

At least five Health and Human Services staff members filed complaints and said they were pushed out after raising concerns about child safety.

Jalyn Sualog was the most senior career member of the H.H.S. division responsible for unaccompanied migrant children when Mr. Biden took office. She had helped build the program after the passage of the 2008 law and, as a lifelong Democrat, had celebrated Mr. Biden’s win.

But soon, she said, she began to hear reports that children were being released to adults who had lied about their identities, or who planned to exploit them.

She warned her bosses in a 2021 email, “If nothing continues to be done, there will be a catastrophic event.” She continued to email about situations she described as “critical” and “putting children at risk.”



Jalyn Sualog was moved out of her position at the Health and Human Services Department after raising concerns about migrant child safety. Lexey Swall for The New York Times

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Concerned that no one was listening, Ms. Sualog filed a complaint in the fall of 2021 with the H.H.S. Office of Inspector General, the agency's internal watchdog, and requested whistle-blower protection. She also took the unusual step of speaking with congressional staffers about her worries.

"I feel like short of protesting in the streets, I did everything I could to warn them," Ms. Sualog said of the administration. "They just didn't want to hear it."

In late 2021, she was moved out of her position. She filed a complaint with the federal office responsible for enforcing whistle-blower protection rules, arguing that she had been illegally retaliated against.

Last fall, the Office of the Inspector General released a report that discussed Ms. Sualog's case and several demotions and dismissals at the agency that "may have risen to the level of whistle-blower chilling."

Ms. Sualog settled with the agency, which agreed to pay her legal fees, and resigned last month.

An H.H.S. spokeswoman declined to comment on Ms. Sualog's complaint but said the agency does not retaliate against whistle-blowers. While some staffers disagreed with the administration's approach, the spokeswoman said, significant changes were needed to address the increase in unaccompanied migrant children.

Even as veteran employees left, others kept sounding alarms. In January, shortly before the Times investigation was published, a group of workers sent another memo to their H.H.S. bosses saying the system had resulted in unsafe discharges. "We are pulling humanity out of 'Health and Human Services,'" they wrote.



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## Troubling Trends



Social workers noted red flags in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago, where hundreds of migrant children have been sent. Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Some of the most persistent warnings that children were being funneled into dangerous jobs came from outside the government. H.H.S. releases most children to sponsors without follow-up care, but it hires organizations to provide thousands of the most high-risk children with several months of support services.

Last spring, Matt Haygood, senior director of children's services at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, one of the largest of these organizations, sent an email with the subject line "Trafficking Concerns" to several H.H.S. officials.

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“We have identified some troubling trends in the Chicago metro area,” he wrote, including vans picking up children at odd hours, suggesting that they were being driven to factory jobs. Mr. Haygood asked if H.H.S. would consider adding the neighborhood to a watchlist, so that prospective sponsors there would be more closely vetted.

An H.H.S. staff member replied that more than 200 children, most of them Guatemalan, had recently been released to the neighborhood and confirmed that many of those cases had been marked as suspicious: Adults were sponsoring multiple children, and minors were working instead of attending school.

“There are certainly plenty of other concerning trafficking red flags,” the staff member wrote. Mr. Haygood expected the agency to add more safeguards for children released to the area, Little Village. Instead, H.H.S. decided they were not needed.

In response to The Times, an H.H.S. spokeswoman said the department had already put protections in place for children being released to a few streets in the city and at the time saw expanding those measures as overreach.

At a small fast-food restaurant in Little Village one recent afternoon, Guatemalan teenagers played video games on their phones and flirted in Indigenous languages. Several said they worked full time overnight in factories, in violation of child labor laws. Few had enrolled in school.

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A teenager looking at her phone at Dennis B&K, a small fast-food restaurant in Little Village. Some migrant children in the neighborhood said they worked overnight shifts at factories. Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

One, Marvin Che, said he came to the United States last year, when he was 16, and had been working 12-hour overnight shifts alongside other migrant children packing products at the manufacturer Pactiv Evergreen, including Hefty plastic party cups. “We came alone, so we have to work hard,” Marvin said.

A spokeswoman for Pactiv Evergreen said that its company policy prohibited minors from working at manufacturing sites, and that it would make sure its staffing agencies were complying. A representative for Reynolds Consumer Products, which owns the Hefty brand, said Pactiv Evergreen no longer made its party cups.

Other social service organizations said they, too, had flagged clusters of suspicious cases, including in Nashville and Dallas.

“We’re waiting for the congressional hearing that’s like, ‘How did this happen to all these kids?’” Mr. Haygood said.

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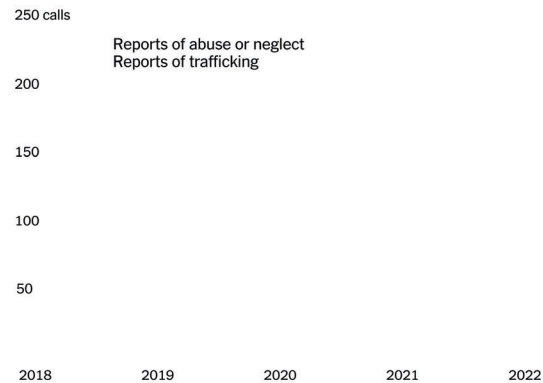
In the last two months, congressional leaders from both parties have questioned why so many migrant children ended up in exploitative jobs, and two oversight hearings are planned in the House on Tuesday.

An H.H.S. spokeswoman said the department was aware that some migrant children worked long hours because they are under intense pressure to earn money, but the agency's legal responsibility for children ends once they are released. Still, the department is working to provide a few months of case management to all unaccompanied migrant children, she said.

For now, most children released to sponsors have little support aside from an H.H.S. hotline. According to internal documents obtained by The Times, reports of trafficking to that hotline increased by about 1,300 percent over the past five years.

### Reports of Trafficking and Abuse of Migrant Children

Monthly calls to H.H.S. reporting trafficking, neglect or abuse of minors placed with sponsors.



Source: A New York Times analysis of data from the Department of Health and Human Services • By Eli Murray

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In one call last year, a child living in Charlotte, N.C., said his sponsor had found him a job in a restaurant and told him “he needs to work to eat.” In another, a child said his sponsor had never enrolled him in school after he was released from an El Paso shelter, and was forcing him to pay for rent and food.

The H.H.S. spokeswoman said the agency asks local law enforcement to check on children who might be in danger.

### A Hard Life in Florida



Three boys from Guatemala who were released to the same sponsor in Florida and work full time in construction. “There are a lot of kids here living the same life,” Antonio said. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Antonio arrived at the border shortly after turning 14, and spent several weeks at a shelter before moving to Florida. A former neighbor had agreed to be his sponsor, but Antonio, who had never spent a night away from his town, had not understood

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/17/us/politics/migrant-child-labor-biden.html>

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how isolated he would be in the United States.

He took jobs with employers willing to hire a child without a work permit — sometimes in landscaping and sometimes in housecleaning. He also enrolled in eighth grade and discovered that he loved biology.

He scraped by until the end of the school year, but he needed to earn more money. Instead of continuing to ninth grade, he found the job packing vegetables. He worked numbing shifts that left him chilled each night even though he worked in the heaviest jacket he could afford. A spokeswoman for the company, Jalaram Produce, said it does not hire minors.

Antonio had not told anyone back home how much he was struggling. “I don’t want them to worry about me,” he said. His father became more absent during the pandemic, and he knew his grandmother had no other way to feed his young sisters. He said he might feel less lonely after he turned 16 and qualified to enroll in night school.



Antonio called his middle school graduation the proudest day of his life. He bought a frame for his certificate and sent a photo to his siblings back home. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/17/us/politics/migrant-child-labor-biden.html>

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This was a common hope among migrant children in his neighborhood. A few blocks away, a boy working construction said he felt ashamed about not knowing how to read. He, too, was released in 2021 — at age 12 — and was immediately put to work by a man who had sponsored at least five children. At a day-labor pickup site, a 13-year-old released last year to a man he had never met said he wished he could enroll in middle school and start learning English.

“People don’t know,” Antonio said, “but there are a lot of kids here living the same life.”

## Warning Signs

Inside the White House, Ms. Rice was at the center of the migrant children crisis. As she pressed to move children out of shelters more quickly, clues began to emerge about what was happening to them once they left.

In the summer of 2021, near the height of the crush at the border, H.H.S. managers wrote a memo detailing their worry about increasing reports that children were working alongside their sponsors, a sign of possible labor trafficking. Ms. Rice’s team received the memo, and Ms. Rice was also told what it said, according to two people familiar with the conversations.

Andrew J. Bates, White House deputy press secretary, disputed that, saying Ms. Rice “did not see the memo and was not made aware of its contents.”

Around the same time, Ms. Rice’s team was told about concerns over a large group of children who had been released to one city in Alabama, according to six current and former staff members. The situation was the subject of frequent updates as H.H.S. sent case managers to the city to check on children, and coordinated with the Labor Department and Homeland Security Investigations to look into whether they were working in poultry plants.

One former top White House adviser remembered thinking at the time that the development was worrisome and that it suggested other cases could be going overlooked.

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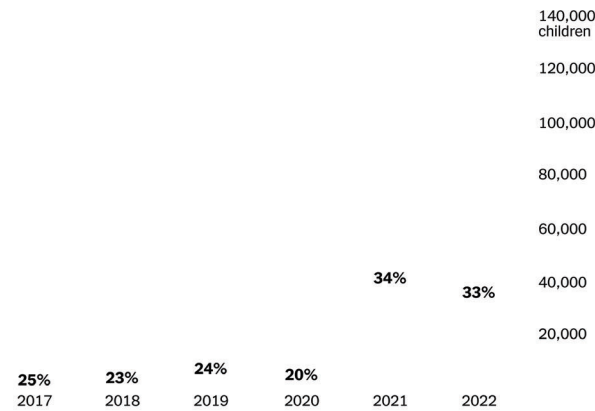
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A White House spokeswoman denied that senior officials were told about the situation.

A few months later, Ms. Rice's staff learned that H.H.S. could not reach a growing number of migrant children just a month after their release, according to a former senior White House official.

#### Losing Track of Sponsored Children

An increasing share of migrant children **could not be reached** by H.H.S. after a month.



Source: A New York Times analysis of data from the Department of Health and Human Services •  
 Note: Cases where children were marked "not applicable" as participants in a followup contact by H.H.S. were excluded. • By Eli Murray and Michael H. Keller

But the White House largely treated these as discrete events, not as signs of a mounting problem.

Tyler Moran, Mr. Biden's senior adviser for migration at the time, said she relied on H.H.S. to tell her how to weigh information, such as the memo from the department's worried managers and the calls to children that were going



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unanswered. Staff members, she said, had not pointed to a broader child labor crisis. “The White House deferred to the agencies to let us know when things were really a problem,” Ms. Moran said.

The Department of Labor was sending up signals of its own. In 2022, investigators began uncovering signs of migrant child labor inside industrial workplaces, including several auto part factories in the South. The department put out news releases warning of a rise in child labor violations.

Last summer, labor investigators began a major operation at a sanitation company that eventually found that more than 100 mostly Spanish-speaking children were working the overnight shift scouring meatpacking plants around the country. Many of the children had come through the migrant shelter system and been released to sponsors.

As investigators found more and more migrant children working for the cleaning company around the country, H.H.S. briefed Ms. Rice’s team about the situation regularly over a period of months, according to two people familiar with the conversations.

The Labor Department also included details about the sanitation company and auto parts operations in weekly cabinet-level reports. “It was like, ‘We have problems here,’” said Martin J. Walsh, the secretary of labor until last month. “We sent reports to the White House, so they knew we were working on this stuff.”

When the Labor Department updated its public dashboard in December, it showed a 69 percent increase in child labor violations since 2018.

A spokeswoman for the Labor Department said that the White House had been aware of the rise in child labor because it was widely public. But Mr. Bates, the White House deputy press secretary, said officials there had not known of the increase in child labor until The Times’s February report.

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**‘At Least I’m Helping’**

“What I want most for Antonio is for him to be able to go back to school,” said Pastor Abel Gomez, left, who leads the Spanish-language church that Antonio attends. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Even after Ms. Brandmiller’s warnings, the man who had sponsored Antonio, Juan Rivera, was allowed to receive another boy: He said he sponsored a 15-year-old and set him up with a job on a palm tree plantation.

Mr. Rivera said in an interview that he had done Antonio a favor by helping him come to the United States. He kept records of his expenses, including the cost of picking up Antonio after he left the shelter, food and clothes when he first arrived, and a twin-size mattress for his shared room. The debt had taken Antonio about a year to pay off.

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He said he occasionally saw Antonio in the area and assumed that he was working hard and sending money home. “American kids just study, but our kids are poor and have to work,” he said. “One has to suffer to earn a little money here.”

This spring, Antonio’s landlord decided the house had become overcrowded. Antonio found a new home, but the rent was twice as high. He changed jobs again, picking up better-paying day labor shifts, and said he no longer hoped to attend night school. Instead, he is trying to save several thousand dollars to hire a lawyer who might help him secure a permit to work legally, in a less grueling job.

“I need to earn lot of money now,” Antonio said. “It’s gotten hard, but at least I’m helping.”

On Sundays, he attends a Spanish-language church with a vibrant youth group. The pastor, Abel Gomez, said Antonio sometimes sits with him after the service and cries about the pressure he feels.

“What I want most for Antonio is for him to be able to go back to school,” Mr. Gomez said. “But I know it’s complicated for him because there’s no one to support him.”

Mr. Gomez said he would like to help young congregants like Antonio more — even take them in. But it would be impossible. There are too many in the same situation, and more seem to arrive each week.

Ana Ley contributed reporting. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Migrant Children Worked As U.S. Ignored Warnings

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/17/us/politics/migrant-child-labor-biden.html>

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## U.S. FAILED TO SAFEGUARD MANY MIGRANT CHILDREN, REVIEW FINDS

By Hannah Dreier, Feb. 15, 2024

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/15/us/migrant-child-labor-review.html>

*Many sponsors were inadequately vetted and safety checks went unfulfilled, an independent watchdog found. Children ended up in dangerous jobs across the country.*

An independent government watchdog found serious lapses at the Department of Health and Human Services in its protection of children who migrate to the United States on their own, according to a report released Thursday.

H.H.S., the Federal agency responsible for sheltering migrant children when they arrive by themselves, repeatedly handed them over to adult sponsors in the United

States without thorough vetting and sometimes failed to conduct timely safety checks on children once they were released, said the report by the department's inspector general.

"I would define these gaps as very serious," said Haley Lubeck, the project leader for the review. "We know that these children are especially vulnerable to exploitation."

The findings echoed *New York Times* reporting that the screening of sponsors and other safeguards for migrant children broke down during the first years of the Biden administration as hundreds of thousands of children crossed the border amid a pandemic-era economic collapse in parts of Central America.

Migrant children have ended up working dangerous industrial jobs in violation of child labor laws across the country—in slaughterhouses, factories, construction sites and elsewhere, *The Times* found. Some have been gravely injured or killed.

The report follows a June audit that H.H.S. conducted in response to *Times* reporting that found that many children were living with strangers who expected or even forced them to work. That audit revealed that government case workers had released more than 340 migrant children to adults who were sponsoring 3 or more children who were not family members.

In early 2021, record numbers of children started crossing the border faster than H.H.S. could process them. With no room left in shelters, many children stayed on cots in crowded tents, sparking public outrage. The Biden administration pressured staff members to move the children out of shelters more quickly, and government workers said they saw children being sent to adults who clearly intended to put them to work.

H.H.S. is supposed to call all children a month after they begin living with adult sponsors. But data obtained by *The Times* showed that over 2 years, the agency could not reach more than 85,000 children. In Thursday's report, the inspector general found that in more than a fifth of cases, H.H.S. workers did not make these calls in a timely way, and in some instances, waited nearly a year.

In other cases, the review found, government workers skipped important safety checks, including looking into whether adults had abused children in the past, or ensuring that the addresses to which children were released were actual residences. In a third of cases, sponsors submitted illegible identification. In other cases, the agency sent children to sponsors without making mandatory home visits.

The report also found that some protective measures, including periodic reviews by case coordinators, were removed when shelters were overcrowded.

One child who said he had not received the mandatory follow-up call is Wander Nimajuan. He was 13 when he was released in 2022 to a man whom H.H.S. case-workers listed as an unrelated adult. His mother had arranged for him to travel to the United States because the family was struggling in Guatemala. He said he had expected to continue studying in middle school. Instead, his sponsor put him to work immediately.

Wander has spent the past 2 years working in roofing, the most dangerous job in the country for young people outside of agriculture. "I would have liked to talk to someone," he said.

An H.H.S. spokesman, Jeff Nesbit, said the new report raised issues the agency had "already improved," including through better policies and a joint task force with the Department of Labor. "These changes simultaneously prioritize child welfare and safety while minimizing the time children spend in congregate care settings," he said.

In the past year, H.H.S. has created a team that focuses on identifying cases of exploitation of migrant children, committed to providing universal case management for children after they are released, and begun offering more children free legal services.

The inspector general for the Labor Department is also looking into how officials there have handled the recent surge in child labor.

*Hannah Dreier is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter on the investigations team. Email her at hannah.dreier@nytimes.com.*

Mr. BISHOP. The Federal Government has precipitated and is facilitating this humanitarian catastrophe. The unaccompanied children are released from the HHS shelters right into the hands of these sponsors despite multiple warnings from staffers within the agency that the vetting process was failing to protect children.

The Biden administration was so focused on moving people through the system as fast as possible that they failed to ensure

the safety of the children they were releasing. Many of these children already suffered at the hands of criminal cartels on that treacherous journey to the border, only to find themselves exploited again after leaving Government custody.

The human cost of this impossible-to-understand bad judgment is simply heartbreaking and tragic. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses as we shine a light on this monumental failure.

Mr. Chairman, thank you. I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bishop follows:]

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DAN BISHOP

NOVEMBER 19, 2024

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank our witnesses for joining us today to examine this tragic crisis enabled by the Biden-Harris administration's gross mismanagement of caring for migrant children.

Under the Biden-Harris administration, over 526,000 unaccompanied alien children—or UACs—have crossed the Southwest Border—an unprecedented number. Each year from 2021 to 2023, CBP encountered over 130,000 unaccompanied children—more than twice the levels seen under the Obama and Trump administrations.

While CBP is usually the first point of contact for UACs who cross the border, the Health and Human Services Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is primarily responsible for the care and placement of these children. Much of this work is done in partnership with nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that provide shelter and services.

Under the Biden-Harris administration, these NGO's received a windfall of taxpayer money through ORR, whose budget for its unaccompanied children program was \$6.9 billion in fiscal year 2023.

Southwest Key Programs, the largest housing provider of unaccompanied children, received more than \$2.5 billion in taxpayer funding over the past 3 years. This summer, the Federal Government sued Southwest Key, alleging that employees engaged in a pattern of sexual abuse and harassment against the children in its shelters and failed to take sufficient action to protect the children in its care.

Another company, Deployed Resources, has had a contract for a migrant facility in Greensboro, North Carolina since May 2022.

Thirty-nine-point-five million dollars has already been spent, with another \$64 million obligated, but incredibly, according to HHS, no children have been in care at the facility from the time it became operational in March until it went into standby in June.

What did we spend all that money on?

The Biden-Harris administration placed political aims above the welfare of unaccompanied migrant children who crossed, or were trafficked across, the Southern Border, releasing UACs with inadequate vetting and follow-up to avoid the bad optics of crowded facilities.

ORR releases children to sponsors in the United States. Thorough vetting of these sponsors is absolutely critical. Unfortunately, the Biden-Harris administration's push to quickly release migrants resulted in countless cases of migrant children being released to sponsors with major red flags, placing children at risk of exploitation.

Far too often, children are released to sponsors who do not care about their welfare and intend to exploit the child through child labor or more heinous forms of trafficking.

Should we really be rushing to release children to individuals who are trying to sponsor multiple unrelated migrant children?

This is a systemic failure that has put thousands of vulnerable children in risky situations here in the United States.

This failure goes well beyond the vetting issues on the front end. As an inspector general report earlier this year made clear that the Federal Government cannot account for tens of thousands of children that HHS released to sponsors.

Thirty-two thousand children didn't show up for their immigration court hearings.

Those hearing dates are one of the only opportunities that ICE must engage with unaccompanied children and observe signs of trafficking or exploitation.

What happened to those 32,000 children? We don't know. We can't reach them.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Over 290,000 have been released by HHS without a notice to appear for an immigration court date. There is no way for ICE to monitor the location and status of these migrant children or verify their safety.

We've asked and even subpoenaed HHS for information about the screening of potential sponsors and the children that they've lost contact with.

What is happening to these migrant children?

In many cases documented by investigative journalists with the *New York Times*, children released to sponsors, who may not even be related to the child, ended up working dangerous jobs to pay off debt or send money back home, often working night shifts or dropping out of school.

Mr. Chairman, I request to enter 3 articles into the record: *Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S.*; *As Migrant Children Were Put to Work, U.S. Ignored Warnings*; and *U.S. Failed to Safeguard Many Migrant Children, Review Finds*.

The Federal Government is facilitating this humanitarian catastrophe.

The unaccompanied children are released from the HHS shelters right into the hands of these sponsors, despite multiple warnings from staffers within the agency that the vetting process was failing to protect children.

The Biden-Harris administration was so focused on moving people through the system as fast as they could that they failed to ensure the safety of the children they were releasing.

Many of these children already suffered at the hands of criminal cartels on the treacherous journey to the border, only to find themselves exploited again after leaving Government custody.

The human cost of this crisis is simply heartbreaking and tragic. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses as we shine a light on this monumental failure.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman yields. Thank you, Chairman Bishop.

I now recognize the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability, the gentleman from Maryland, Mr. Ivey, for his opening statement.

Mr. IVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to join with both of you in my comments regarding Chairman Bishop of North Carolina. We had a chance to work together on a subcommittee, several hearings, actually, with respect to forced labor, and I appreciate the work that we were able to do together on that. We also serve on the Judiciary Committee together. I share the view about his insight, his legal acumen, and his energy and passion that he brings to these.

I was mentioning to him, I was campaigning for another candidate down in North Carolina and happened to see some of his commercials down there, and I realized what a full-contact sport politics is in North Carolina. I'm going to stay in Maryland, I guess.

But I do appreciate the fact that you've done such great work. The fact that you're leaving public office, I assume, does not mean you're leaving public service, so I look forward to your continued work. As they say, God is not finished with you yet.

To the matters of the day, I do want to say this. I actually share in the concerns that have been voiced I think by all three of my colleagues so far with respect to the dangers and the horrors that these kids have been facing, as they not only face sometimes death, sometimes maiming, sometimes sexual assaults as they make this trip to the United States, but that the system has let them down here when they get to the United States.

I think those have been well-documented not only by this committee but *New York Times* reporter Hannah Dreier. I believe these

are the 3 articles that Chairman Bishop just put into the record, and I reference these as well.

One of my colleagues from Michigan, Hillary Scholten, said that “stories of kids dropping out of school, collapsing from exhaustion, and even losing limbs to machinery are what one expects to find in a Charles Dickens or Upton Sinclair novel but not an account of everyday life in 2023, not in the United States of America.”

So I think we can all agree that there are horrific circumstances here in the United States right now that these young people are facing. I think we have to try and figure out how to work our way out of that.

I’ll say this, too. I mean, we’ve got a new administration coming in. I’ve heard some comments by some of the nominees, and I’m not sure that what they’re proposing actually would necessarily address this particular problem. There’s a lot of focus on shutting down the border, and, you know, that’s certainly of interest, I think, to many of us on that front. But figuring out what to do with the kids that are here, I think, is the immediate challenge that this hearing I hope will focus at least in part on.

Because, as has been stated, there’s at least—I think 320,000 is the number that I’ve heard—here in the United States, many of whom have not been located, many of whom we don’t know what they’re doing or how they’re doing. I do want to make sure we figure out how to touch base with them and help get them on the right track. Many of them are due for court proceedings. I don’t know that those are on track. Apparently they are not. I think we need to address that too.

I know my colleagues have made some comments about money, but, you know, unfortunately, I think money’s going to be relevant to trying to address these problems. It’s going to be expensive to locate these kids. It’s going to be expensive to try and put them back in connection with their parents, to the extent they are here. To the extent there’s a decision about sending them back to a different country, that’s going to be expensive. To the extent there’s a decision made about keeping them here, that’s going to be expensive too.

I do want to note that the fiscal year 2024 Congressionally-enacted budget for this particular issue, Unaccompanied Children Program, was \$100 million less than the prior year and the President’s request, and then for the fiscal year 2025 budget approved by the House Committee on Appropriations, more than \$3 billion less than the prior year and what the President requested.

Now, money doesn’t fix everything. You know, I’m of the mindset that money can play a role but there’s got to be other types of impact that can make a difference on these sorts of things, but I really do think money’s going to have an impact here.

Mr. Correa referenced a moment ago the issue about unrepresented minors not getting any legal representation to the extent they’re coming through court. Some of them might not speak English. Some of them might be too young to understand what’s going on. Some of them might be old enough to understand what’s going on, but I can tell you, the immigration process is a complicated legal system.

Now, I remember in this committee, when we were voting on—I think it was H.R. 2, if I recall correctly—Mr. Magaziner offered an amendment to that bill that would've provided funding for legal representation for kids in these circumstances, and that was voted down and has not been included. So I hope that's one of those things that we can revisit as we move forward with this.

I'll say this, as well. I think that one of the things that we really need to do is make sure that we're—well, I'll say it this way. I read in the testimony 2 statements—well, multiple statements, actually—about the harvesting of organs from children, and that was news to me. When I looked for footnotes and references and citations to support those claims, I didn't see them.

So, I'll say, you'll have a chance to testify about those when your time comes, but those are very serious allegations. To the extent that that's actually taking place, I would strongly support the effort to energize Department of Justice, the FBI. To the extent my—I know I've got some colleagues that want to defund them, but I don't think they're going anywhere; at least I hope not.

I hope that we can try and address whatever these types of issues may be—certainly the sexual assault, certainly the trafficking, certainly the international cartel activity. I know the Department of Justice has had some success there, especially with the Sinaloa Cartel, but we've got a long ways to go to actually make a dent on that activity.

Then, Mr. Carrell, I guess—you know, I've just got to mention this before you have a chance to testify, and you can address it. But, you know, staff found a couple of quotes from you about punching—I guess it was the Speaker—square in the head, and “the mass deportations will be swift, but they will be deadly.” I'm concerned about those kinds of comments.

Now, you'll have a chance to speak to those things. You know, I don't know that mass deportations are going to be the way to go, especially with respect to the children, unaccompanied children issue, but you'll have a chance to discuss that. I look forward to questioning you about it as well.

But to all of those here today, I'll say this: These are very serious problems. These are very serious concerns. These children are very much at risk here in the United States. We want to make sure that we do everything we can to address those problems and help to get those children back on the right track, as well as the immigration issue as a whole.

So, Mr. Chairman, I thank you again for giving me a chance to speak.

Mr. Bishop, I've got to thank you one last time for your service.

Mr. BISHOP. Thank you, sir.

Mr. IVEY. Michael Jordan—you know, I guess he's kind of a GOAT out of North Carolina. Maybe you can be the Republican GOAT for Congress out of North Carolina as well.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Ranking Member Ivey.

Other Members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

[The statement of Ranking Member Thompson follows:]



## STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BENNIE G. THOMPSON

NOVEMBER 19, 2025

I'm glad we are here today to talk about protecting the most vulnerable among us.

We should all agree that children, all children, deserve to be safe and cared for. No child should be placed in an unsafe home, exploited, or forced to work in a dangerous place.

Unfortunately, this happens all too often—to both American children and migrant children.

And unaccompanied children—those children who arrive to the United States without their parents and without immigration status—are among the most vulnerable. And the most in need of our protection.

These children, often fleeing violence in their home countries, come to the United States alone, seeking asylum and sanctuary. They are children in need.

These children can become victims of traffickers on their way to the United States, and can become victims of traffickers once inside the United States.

The stories we've all read about children being exploited and forced to work in unsafe environments are heartbreaking. As some of the witnesses noted in their testimony, this has been a real problem going back over a decade.

No matter the administration, this is unacceptable.

The Federal Government must ensure appropriate care for these children and prioritize their safety and well-being.

While the Biden administration has made positive steps, there is more to be done. This should not be an issue of politics—it should be about common decency and humanity.

Yet, I fear that migrant children are being used yet again by Republicans to score cheap political points.

When Trump was last in the White House, Republicans didn't focus on helping children.

Instead, the Trump administration separated thousands of children from their parents, and President-elect Trump's new border czar wants to do it again.

He wants to conduct massive raids on the immigrants in our communities, including those with American citizen children.

And this Congress, my Republican colleagues chose to ignore requests from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) for new laws that would protect children.

They ignored a request to allow HHS to partner with the Department of Justice for anti-trafficking programs.

They also ignored a request to lower the cost-sharing requirements for grants that help trafficking victims, which make it easier for victims to get the help they need.

They also ignored a request to expand training programs that teach parents and caregivers about preventing human trafficking among youth.

Instead of passing these proposals, my Republican colleagues passed legislation that put unaccompanied children in even more danger.

Their legislation would allow unaccompanied children to stay in Border Patrol's jail-like facilities for weeks.

They would also send unaccompanied children back to the places they fled, where they are at enormous risk for exploitation and abuse.

They would also make it harder for children to obtain lawyers to help them navigate our incredibly complex legal system.

Democrats want to help children, not put them in more danger. I hope the witnesses today have recommendations for doing this.

Mr. HIGGINS. I am pleased to welcome our panel of witnesses.

I ask that our witnesses please rise and raise your right hand.  
[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. HIGGINS. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Thank you, and please be seated.

I'd like to now formally introduce our witnesses.

Mr. J.J. Carrell is a retired U.S. Border Patrol agent with a distinguished 24-year career, most recently serving as deputy patrol agent in charge of the San Diego Sector.

Ms. Ali Hopper is a nationally-recognized counter-trafficking expert and policy advocate dedicated to combating human trafficking and exploitation.

Ms. Kathy Larin serves as director in the Government Accountability Office's Education, Workforce, and Income Security Team. Her portfolio covers a broad range of issues, including child welfare and refugee resettlement.

Ms. Tara Rodas—how do you say your last name, ma'am?

Ms. RODAS. "Rodas."

Mr. HIGGINS. "Rodas."

Ms. Tara Rodas is testifying in her personal capacity as an anti-human-trafficking advocate, but, professionally, Ms. Rodas is an 18-year veteran of the Federal inspector general community.

In 2021, Ms. Rodas was detailed to the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement. As a detailee, she blew the whistle on the failures of the Unaccompanied Children Program and was threatened with retaliation and investigation.

I thank the witnesses for being here today.

The witnesses' full statements will appear in the record.

I now recognize Mr. Carrell for 5 minutes to summarize his opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF J.J. CARRELL, PRIVATE CITIZEN, RETIRED  
DEPUTY PATROL AGENT IN CHARGE, U.S. BORDER PATROL**

Mr. CARRELL. Chairman Higgins, Ranking Member Correa, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Ivey, and the Members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the evil of child trafficking caused by the open-border policies under President Joe Biden and his administration.

I served in the United States Border Patrol for 24 years until I retired as a deputy patrol agent in charge of San Diego Sector. I worked under 5 Presidential administrations, and only 1 President secured the border—President Donald Trump. Border Patrol agents went from working and being supported by the greatest border President in American history to the worst, President Joe Biden.

My last year in the Border Patrol was Joe Biden's first year in office. On his first day in office, I watched in disbelief as 94 executive orders cascaded down from Washington, DC, obliterating every immigration policy that had been providing the most secure border in America's history. Border Patrol agents were forced to carry out unconstitutional orders that violated every law in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

President Biden, through Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, created policy out of thin air, ignored Federal immigration law, and facilitated the largest mass invasion into America that the world has ever seen.

The United States of America will have spent hundreds of billions of dollars in 4 years to fund the needs of over 50 million illegal aliens that populate our Nation. Between 1 in 6 and 1 in 7 residents in America is an illegal alien. America has suffered the greatest demographic shift in modern history.

After serving in the United States Border Patrol for 24 years, spending a year researching and writing a best-selling book enti-

tled “Invaded: The Intentional Destruction of the American Immigration System,” and filming 2 documentaries, I state with complete certainty that Biden, Harris, and Mayorkas intentionally, strategically, and purposely weaponized illegal immigration and used it as a tool to fundamentally transform America.

Inside this invasion, the unspoken evil of child trafficking and, more specifically, child sex trafficking has flourished. At the end of this current administration, the number of children trafficked will have grown to over 550,000 unaccompanied alien children, known as UACs. This horrific number of children will have been arrested, released into America, and then lost.

To put this into context, during President Trump’s last year in office, Customs and Border Protection arrested 30,557 UACs who were accounted for and not lost. Conversely, in the first year of Biden’s Presidency, CBP arrested 147,975 UACs, most of which are unaccompanied for and lost.

In a 2023 Congressional hearing, Health and Human Services’ Xavier Becerra and Director of Office of Refugee Resettlement Robin Marcos were forced to admit that their agency had no contact with over 85,000 UACs; they were lost.

What did DHS, HHS, and ORR do to correct this humanitarian disaster? Nothing. In fact, all 3 agencies created further policies and procedures to increase the efficiency of moving UACs from the border to the interior of the United States to unknown and unvetted sponsors. Unaccompanied alien children were being handed off to total strangers. Then they disappeared into the darkness of labor and sex trafficking.

In fact, a year later, in August 2024, the inspector general with oversight over DHS issued a report stating the number of lost UACs was not 85,000, it was over 320,000.

My business partner, Ryan Matta, and I spent 6 months traveling across America filming a documentary titled “What is Treason? #Trafficked.”

The evil of child sex trafficking is difficult to digest and understand. However, after conducting numerous interviews with officers, agents, and whistleblowers from every alphabet agency and department, it was made clear to us that the Federal Government knowingly and actively facilitated these criminal acts.

After several exhaustive months of filming, interviewing, and then editing this documentary, I state without reservation that the United States Federal Government is the world’s largest child-sex-trafficking organization in modern history.

The probability that thousands of these UACs are being raped at this very moment is 100 percent.

The call to action has 3 parts—my call to action—and they’re swift, and they happen at the same time.

Every means necessary is to be taken to ensure all 4 borders of the United States of America are sealed shut.

No. 2, there’s a law enforcement—a national law enforcement emergency to locate and rescue every single one of the 550,000 unaccompanied alien children that are lost.

No. 3, a full-scale investigation of every U.S. department, agency, and every NGO participating in this criminal act shall be launched, and every person involved shall be arrested.

Finally, the intentional opening of our borders is an act of treason.

I encourage questions, and I—so I may further articulate this allegation.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Carrell follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF J.J. CARRELL

NOVEMBER 19, 2024

Chairman Higgins, Ranking Member Correa, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Ivey, and Members of the subcommittees, I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the evil of child trafficking caused by the open border policies under President Joe Biden and his administration.

I served in the United States Border Patrol for 24 years until I retired as a deputy patrol agent in charge in San Diego Sector. I worked under 5 Presidential administrations and only 1 President secured the border, President Donald Trump. Border Patrol Agents went from working and being supported by the greatest border President in American history to the worst, President Joe Biden.

My last year in the Border Patrol was Joe Biden's first year in office. On his first day in office, I watched in horror as 94 Executive Orders cascaded down from Washington, DC obliterating every immigration policy that had provided the most secure border in America's history. Border Patrol Agents were forced to carry out unconstitutional orders that violated every law in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

By the action of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, President Biden was able to create policy out of thin air, ignoring Federal immigration law, and facilitating the largest mass invasion into America that the world has ever seen.

By the end of the Biden administration, approximately 12,000,000 illegal aliens will have been arrested and, essentially, every one of those illegal aliens will have been released onto the streets of America.<sup>1</sup> In 2023 and 2024, DHS was forced to admit that Customs and Border Protection (CBP) used both commercial and private airlines to fly hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens into America. DHS also openly admits to losing 3,000,000 illegal aliens as they absconded through the unprotected and open borders. These illegal aliens are classified as "get-aways".

DHS admits to arresting, releasing, flying into America, and losing between 15 and 16 million illegal aliens in 4 years.

The data used by DHS and CBP are misleading and false. For the record, immigration experts believe that the flights into America carried millions of illegal aliens. The true number of "get-a-ways" who crossed the border is, actually, between 15,000,000 and 18,000,000 illegal aliens. The total and true number of illegal aliens entering America in 4 years is 30,000,000.

After serving in the Border Patrol for 24 years, spending a year researching and writing a best-selling book entitled *INVADED: The Intentional Destruction of the American Immigration System*,<sup>2</sup> and filming two documentaries: *WHAT IS TREASON? #TRAFFICKED*<sup>3</sup> and *WHAT IS TREASON? INVADED*<sup>4</sup> I state, with complete certainty, that Biden, Harris and Mayorkas intentionally, strategically, and purposely weaponized illegal immigration and used it as a tool to fundamentally transform America.

Biden, Harris, and Mayorkas have committed the crime of treason against the United States of America.

From the first day of Joe Biden's Presidency to the present, there are anywhere from 5,000 to 20,000 illegal aliens entering the United States of America each day. By the end of Biden's term in office, he will have accomplished the following:

- 30,000,000 illegal aliens will have entered America unlawfully

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>.

<sup>2</sup> Carrell, J.J., *INVADED: The Intentional Destruction of the American Immigration System*. United States of America: Carrell, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Matta, Ryan, director. *WHAT IS TREASON? #TRAFFICKED*. Carrell Entertainment, LLC & Ryan Matta Media, 2024, 1 hr., 46 min. <https://rumble.com/v5ewdmy-what-is-treason-trafficked-vip-only-do-not-share-private-screening.html>, <https://www.thisistreason.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Matta, Ryan, director. *WHAT IS TREASON? #INVADED*. Carrell Entertainment, LLC & Ryan Matta Media, 2024, 1 hr., 44 min. <https://rumble.com/v5k0tr8-what-is-treason-inaved-released-101024-by-jj-carrell-and-ryan-matta.html>, <https://www.thisistreason.com>.

- Approximately 11,000,000–12,000,000 illegal aliens will have been arrested and released into America
- Over 180 nations will be reported in the United States Border Patrol arrest data
- Approximately 60–70 percent of all illegal aliens are single-adult military-aged males
- Over 932,000 Venezuelans will have illegally entered America
- Over 500,000 Haitians will have illegally entered America
- Over 131,000 Russians will have illegally entered America
- Over 326,000 Chinese will have illegally entered America—and of these, there are tens of thousands that are soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA)
- Over 250,000 Special Interest Aliens/Terrorists will have illegally entered America
- 60–80 percent of every woman and child will have been raped or sexually assaulted making their journey to America
- Over 550,000 Unaccompanied Alien Children (UACs) will have illegally entered America
- The vast majority of the 550,000 UACs will have been lost into labor and sex trafficking.

The destruction of America is visible in every facet of American life from the biggest metropolitan cities to the smallest towns across America. The United States of America will have spent over \$1 trillion in 4 years to fund the needs of the over 50,000,000 illegal aliens that populate our Nation. Between 1 in 6 and 1 in 7 residents in America is an illegal alien. America has suffered the greatest demographic shift in modern history. The fundamental transformation of America has begun.

This invasion of 30,000,000 illegal aliens entering America in 4 years was created and facilitated by Democrat representatives in office but it was funded by Republican representatives in office. This act of treason is a uni-party effort.

Inside this invasion, the unspoken evil of child trafficking and, more specifically, child sex trafficking, has flourished. At the end of this current administration, the number of children trafficked will have grown to over 550,000 UACs. This horrific number of children will have been arrested, released into America and then lost. To put this into context: during President Trump's last year in office, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) arrested 30,557 UACs who were accounted for and not lost. Conversely, in the first year of Biden's presidency, the CBP arrested over 147,975 UACs, most of which are unaccounted for and lost.

In a 2023 Congressional hearing, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Xavier Becerra denied knowing that over 85,000 UACs had been lost. In another Congressional hearing that same year, Director of Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) Robin Marcos was forced to concede that her department had no contact with over 85,000 UACs. They were lost.

What did the DHS, HHS, and ORR do to correct this humanitarian disaster? Nothing. In fact, all 3 agencies created further policies and procedures to increase the efficiency of moving UACs, their ages ranging from newborn infants to 17-year-olds, from the border to the interior of the United States to unknown and unvetted sponsors. Unaccompanied alien children were being handed off to total strangers. They then disappeared into the darkness of labor and sex trafficking.

What was the result of this criminal negligence?

A year later, the inspector general with oversight of DHS stated in a 2024 report that the number of UACs lost had surpassed 320,000. When you understand the policies and procedures of what constitutes a "welfare check" on UACs establishing them as accounted for and protected, you would then know the horrific truth that every one of the 550,000 or more UACs in America are lost.

These children are being labor-trafficked, sex-trafficked, barbarically harvested for their organs and, quoting President Trump, "A lot of them are already dead."

My business partner, Ryan Matta, and I spent 8 months traveling across America while filming our documentary entitled, *WHAT IS TREASON? #TRAFFICKED*.<sup>3</sup> What we discovered, through numerous interviews with Border Patrol agents, CBP officers, DHS employees, FBI agents, former CIA officers, HHS whistleblowers, FBI whistleblowers, organizations that combat child sex trafficking and individuals that worked inside the non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that traffic children, were the grotesque evils of child sex trafficking and criminal acts committed by our own Government.

The current Federal Government knew, in the first few months of the Biden-Harris administration, that the number of UACs entering the country was spiking to never-before-seen statistics. However, they did nothing to stop it. Instead, the conveyor belt of child-trafficking production was more heavily funded and procedures

were put in place to ensure the maximum output of these innocent and most vulnerable children.

The Biden-Harris government knows that transnational criminal organizations from across the globe have discovered and are exploiting loopholes in the child sponsorship program. Human smuggling cartels specializing in children are smuggling the children over the border. They then wait for the Border Patrol to arrest these children. Because of the *Flores* Settlement Agreement, the Border Patrol's internal procedures are to release these children to NGO's within 72 hours.

The NGO's then have a total of 20 days from the date of arrest to release the children. These NGO's then coordinate with HHS and ORR to reunite these children as quickly as possible with the same cartels that reside within the United States. There are no background checks or DNA tests on the sponsors who receive these children. There are no site visits to ensure the child's safety or to confirm the child has been taken to a home that actually exists.

The probability that thousands of these UACs are being raped at this very moment is 100 percent.

After several exhaustive months filming, interviewing, and then editing this documentary, I state, without reservation, that the United States Federal Government is the world's largest child sex trafficking organization in modern history. This is not just my belief, it is the adamant belief of every person we interviewed for this documentary.

The call to action has 3 parts. All 3 parts are to happen simultaneously:

1. Every necessary measure is to be taken to ensure all 4 borders of the United States of America is sealed shut.
2. A national law enforcement emergency shall be declared in order to locate and rescue every single one of the missing 550,000 unaccompanied alien children.
3. A full-scale investigation of every U.S. department, agency, and every Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) participating in this criminal act shall be launched. Every person involved shall be arrested.

The intentional opening of our borders is an act of treason. I encourage questions so I may further articulate this allegation.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Mr. Carrell.

I recognize Ms. Hopper for 5 minutes to summarize her opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF ALICIA HOPPER, PRIVATE CITIZEN, CONSULTANT ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING, SADULSKI ENTERPRISES, LLC**

Ms. HOPPER. Chairman Higgins, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, and Ranking Member Ivey, and the distinguished Members of the committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify and for prioritizing this important issue.

Human trafficking is one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our lifetime. In the 5 minutes I speak today, men, women, and children are being sold, exploited, and brutalized within our borders.

As a Hispanic mother, this crisis is deeply personal to me. I have witnessed first-hand the unimaginable suffering experienced by migrants on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. In one interview I conducted, a local resident, whose property straddles the border, told me about the screams of women and children he hears, including just 2 days before my visit.

I walked these very paths, and I found discarded clothing, personal belongings, and chilling evidence of brutal assaults, all under the control of ruthless cartels like the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. No one passes through without their approval.

Among the discarded items, I found IDs, many belonging to children—some real, others forged or burned. One was the passport of a 5-year-old Colombian girl, a haunting reminder of the dangers these children face.

Traffickers erase migrant identities to smuggle them in under false names. In an interview with a former Sinaloa Cartel affiliate, he revealed how cartels use advanced technology to forge documents and erase children's identities before crossing into the United States.

Tragically, the horrors don't end at the border. The very system meant to protect vulnerable children has become a trafficking pipeline. An OIG report recently revealed that 324,000 unaccompanied children processed at the border are currently accounted for.

Policies from the Biden-Harris administration prioritizing speed over safety have placed children with unvetted sponsors, increasing their risk. Furthermore, this administration's decision to eliminate DNA testing to verify familial relationships has created dangerous loopholes which traffickers are now currently aware of and actively exploiting.

A young girl who arrived at the border in the custody of individuals claiming to be her family was bruised, disoriented, and in pain. Medical examinations revealed that she had been raped. Yet she was sent back to her abusers because no verification was done to confirm her guardianship. This is not an isolated case but a glaring failure of the system, leaving children in the hands of those who exploit them.

The failure extends beyond the Government to NGO's contracted by ORR to care for these children. During my research, I interviewed auditors tasked with inspecting an NGO-run facility in Pecos, Texas, and it exposed a lack of oversight, with critical information filtered to mask abuse, neglect, and trafficking, as seen in the DOJ lawsuit against Southwest Key for sexual abuse of children in those shelters.

Meanwhile, taxpayer dollars fund no-bid contracts for these NGO's, whose CEOs have tripled their salaries, hire staff teaching migrant girls to dance provocatively, and continue receiving payments for undelivered services.

The crisis does not end there. Trafficking extends beyond sexual exploitation and forced labor to organ harvesting. During a recent interview I conducted in a Central American prison, the convicted trafficker described organs being harvested in places like veterinary clinics in Merida, Mexico, recounting the removal of 3 livers, often sold to U.S. buyers. Another trafficker revealed that migrant children are the frequent targets. My colleague, Dr. Jarrod Sadulski, testified last year about a 12-year-old boy whose eye was harvested in Mexico for \$15,000.

We need rigorous oversight, strong accountability, and, where necessary, criminal prosecution of those who fail to protect these children. We must designate cartels as terrorist organizations, reinstate DNA testing, and demand accountability from NGO's and Government agencies responsible for these children.

With this new administration, the American people have issued a clear and urgent mandate, one that now rests in your hands. With top-down support, the trust of the American people, and the eyes of the world upon you, you have a profound opportunity to lead with decisive action.

Today, over 324,000 children are unaccounted for, each one a life in desperate need of our protection. We cannot afford to wait any longer. These children's future depends on what we do today.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.  
[The prepared statement of Ms. Hopper follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALICIA HOPPER

Chairman Higgins, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, Ranking Member Ivey, and distinguished Members of the committees, thank you for prioritizing this urgent issue. We are facing one of the most significant humanitarian crises of our time. In the 5 minutes I have to deliver this testimony, women and children here in the United States will be sold into trafficking and disappear. Unaccompanied migrant children will continue to be exploited, extorted, abused, and neglected—tragically, a direct consequence of the Federal Government's failure to meaningfully vet their sponsors.

This is not a political issue, this is a humanitarian crisis, one that is costing the lives of countless children. I've witnessed this devastation first-hand. I have been on the front lines at the border, in Mexico, and throughout Central America, and what I've seen is gut-wrenching. The disastrous effects of the current administration's immigration policies are fueling child trafficking, and I have seen cartel members, with children in their grasp, operating with impunity at our borders.

In my efforts to further grasp the depth of this crisis, including the trafficking of children, I have taken steps to understand the inner workings of these operations. I've interviewed former sex traffickers and cartel members, both in the United States and abroad, who are currently or were previously incarcerated. These conversations have given me critical insights into the realities at our Southwest Border.

Cartels bring trafficking victims to the border and rely on a vast network of gangs to facilitate the trafficking operations within the United States. This activity has surged under the Biden administration. My research has uncovered the complex system of stash houses on both sides of the Southwest Border, where gangs and cartels hold and exploit their victims. I've personally seen stash houses used by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel as lookout points, and I've encountered cartel members both at the border and in Mexico, continuing their operations with alarming boldness.

JACUMBA, CA/MEXICO BORDER

Recently, I returned from the border with my research partner, Dr. Jarrod Sadulski. During our time there, we interviewed a property manager overseeing a large, unfenced border property in the Jacumba, CA area—a site frequently exploited by cartels and traffickers for migrant smuggling. What we uncovered was deeply disturbing.

On this property, migrants are led down 1 of 2 paths, depending on their ability to pay. Higher-paying migrants from Asia, the Middle East, and Turkey are funneled through a route that shows little evidence of exploitation. However, the second path, designated for poorer migrants from Central and South America, reveals a much darker reality. The property manager told us of the consistent screams of migrant women and children being sexually assaulted—screams that are heard regularly along this path. Just 2 nights before our arrival, those horrifying cries echoed once again, but the property manager, out of fear for his own safety, didn't dare investigate. He knows all too well that neither law enforcement nor Border Patrol can protect him. This area, like many others, is controlled by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, operating with impunity right on U.S. soil.

In one instance, a young, bloodied girl being chased ran up to him on the property. I walked both paths, and evidence of sexual assault was apparent on the second path. I found torn clothing indicative of exploitation, particularly of young female teenagers. I examined the sizes of clothing that reflected sexual assault. Some were children. I examined different parts of the trail where the sexual assault routinely occurs, which included a brush area that provides concealment if Border Patrol aircraft fly through the area.

Following my exploration of the alarming realities of human trafficking and exploitation, I ventured to another path in Jacumba, CA, notorious for the smuggling and trafficking of migrants. This route, like many others, is tightly controlled by the cartels—no one passes through without their approval or involvement. As I walked along the pathway near the border, discarded identifications littered the ground, many belonging to children. Initially, we wondered why so many were left behind—some valid, many forged, often burned, torn, or buried. Among the debris, I found



the passport of a 5-year-old Colombian girl, hauntingly staring back at me from the photo. In that moment, I was struck by the harrowing realities children like her face at the hands of these cartels.

Delving deeper into this crisis, we uncovered a chilling reality: individuals are deliberately erasing their identities to enter the United States under false names. Our host, Cory Gautereaux, who lives on the border and has offered invaluable insights into this situation, has collected hundreds of IDs issued from various countries around the world. This collection underscores the global scope of this tragic phenomenon. The discarded identifications highlight a disturbing truth—those smuggled through this area effectively lose their original identities. This issue extends beyond immigration; it poses a significant national security threat. Some individuals are concealing criminal histories or their countries of origin, but when children's identities are erased, even darker questions emerge: Where are they coming from? Are they being exploited? What horrors have they endured to reach this point?

To gain a more comprehensive understanding, I interviewed a former Sinaloa Cartel affiliate who had previously worked as a sex trafficker in Southern California before his incarceration. His extensive knowledge of trafficking in this region revealed that cartels routinely discard IDs to create new identities just before crossing the border. He detailed how scanners are utilized in vans to produce these new documents. At one point along the border, we even observed a van on the Mexican side that matched his description, reinforcing the alarming reality of how these operations are executed. This on-going crisis demands urgent attention and action to protect vulnerable lives caught in this web of exploitation.

#### LIVE & IN-PERSON MIGRANT BORDER CROSSING

While conducting human trafficking research at the border last month, I witnessed a shocking scene: a child being handed through the border wall panels by a masked cartel member to an adult on the other side. Two cartel members in ski masks were present during this exchange. With Border Patrol nearby, we approached the area, and from about 15 feet away, I captured this photo as one of the cartel members flashed a peace sign (introduce picture as evidence). They utilized a black rope ladder to smuggle over 2 adults connected to the child. One cartel member even took a photo to document the successful crossing, referred to as “proof of life.”

#### STAGING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A disturbing aspect of cartel operations is the sexual exploitation that occurs at specific points along the smuggling route. Scholarly research spanning over a decade has documented what cartels refer to as “rape trees”—designated spots along the route where such exploitation takes place. These trees are marked by hanging undergarments as a grim symbol of the violence endured by victims (*The Performative Speech and Silence of Rape Trees: Staging Sexual Violence Against Migrant Women in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*). Tragically, during our time on the border, we discovered a rape tree, and our host informed us that since our visit, additional undergarments have been found on that same tree. We also observed a van used for smuggling people to the border, which contained a large amount of undergarments that further, further reflecting the pervasive sexual exploitation in this area.

#### OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Under the current Presidential administration, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has processed and sent 329,457 unaccompanied children to sponsors between Oct. 2021 and July 2024. In contrast, only 124,627 children were sent to sponsors during the period from Oct. 2017 to Sep. 2020. This represents a staggering 164 percent increase, highlighting a significant rise in the number of children who are at grave risk while being smuggled and trafficked to the border. This alarming trend underscored the urgent need for effective policies and protections to safeguard these vulnerable children.

Cartels are actively targeting migrant children for exploitation in the United States through the Unaccompanied Children (UC) program, and this alarming trend has intensified under the Biden administration. The cartels have taken advantage of the fact that the administration no longer requires DNA testing to verify familial relationships with child sponsors. It is essential for you to understand the dire circumstances faced by these innocent unaccompanied children. One heartbreaking case involved a little girl who crossed the border in Arizona with individuals claiming to be her family, though they were not. This situation is tragically common. When she arrived, she had bruises covering her legs and complained of stomach pain, prompting her to be taken to the hospital as a precaution. There, it was dis-

covered that this little girl had been raped. Even more distressingly, despite the trauma she endured, she was returned to those who falsely claimed to be her family due to the discontinuation of DNA testing. This is a horrifying reality that is happening right here in the United States.

Children in migrant groups are often sold to traffickers when it becomes apparent that their families cannot afford the unexpected expenses imposed by the coyotes embedded within these smuggling networks. In a migrant shelter in McAllen, Texas, a mother who had traveled to Texas from Reynosa, Mexico, refused to let her child out of her arms. She shared with staff that she had been robbed not only of her belongings but also of the 2 other children she had started the journey with in Mexico, all because she lacked the money for bribes. This heart-wrenching situation underscores the desperation that families often endure in their impossible struggle to find safety.

The strategies employed by cartels are constantly evolving and rapidly improving, as they increasingly leverage cloud technology to monitor the finances and demographic information of child trafficking victims. This creates a digital trail that is often completely overlooked. Cartels provide unaccompanied migrant children with the names and contact information of individuals designated as potential sponsors once the children are processed by the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Post-placement protections for migrant children are alarmingly inadequate. In one instance, law enforcement conducted a welfare check on 25 unaccompanied migrant children but could only locate 2 of them. Disturbingly, some sponsors reported that the children never arrived at their intended destinations. In another troubling instance, a sponsor provided an address in Delaware that turned out to be nothing more than an open field, raising serious concerns about the safety and legitimacy of such sponsorships.

Based on my research, ORR has failed to adequately protect unaccompanied children in several critical areas:

- *Vetting Sponsors.*—There is a significant absence of thorough background checks, leading to children being placed with sponsors who in some cases have turned out to be gang members, individuals on terror watch lists, known pedophiles, or those who ultimately abuse or traffic them.
- *Home Studies.*—ORR has not conducted home studies to ensure that children are being placed into suitable environments.
- *Information Sharing.*—The agency does not share sponsor information with State child protective services or law enforcement, hindering efforts to ensure child safety.
- *Well-Being Checks.*—After a child is placed with a sponsor, ORR makes only a single phone call to check on their well-being. If neither the child nor the sponsor answers, no further follow-up is conducted.
- *Tracking Unaccompanied Children.*—The failure to track unaccompanied children once they are delivered to sponsors has resulted in ICE being unable to issue Notices to Appear (NTAs), exacerbating the risks these children face.

#### NGOS

This lack of oversight extends beyond sponsor vetting; through my research, I've discovered that the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) relies on NGO contractors to manage influx facilities. This raises critical concerns about the need for greater accountability within these facilities to ensure the safety of migrant children. Additionally, NGO's often use staffing agencies to provide personnel, which has resulted in inadequately vetted staff having unsupervised access to children, without the necessary background checks or security clearances.

#### ENDEAVORS

I conducted interviews with auditors tasked with inspecting the NGO Endeavors in Pecos, Texas. One auditor explained that while ORR has an on-site monitor, they often receive "filtered information" from Endeavors regarding what is actually happening at the facility. This lack of transparency can hinder ORR's ability to be aware of incidents and ensure compliance with their policies. A former supervisor at the Endeavors facility detailed how, during a surge of unaccompanied children, the facility was grossly unprepared. Staff arrived with little to no experience or training, and background checks, including fingerprinting, were sometimes completed a year after hiring.

Case managers on-site reported that the same addresses were frequently used to sponsor children, raising further red flags about the vetting process. Although the facility is designed to accommodate children aged 13 to 17, the former supervisor explained that Endeavors sometimes knowingly allowed adults to remain, opting not

to process the paperwork that would alert ICE to their status and prevent deportation. The third-party auditor and compliance supervisor also shared that Endeavors leadership discouraged her from documenting concerns in writing, further obstructing transparency regarding sponsor vetting.

The dysfunction in the Unaccompanied Children (UC) system is so pronounced that during a recent flight from San Diego to Florida, I encountered several unaccompanied children on-board. When I inquired with the flight attendant about how common it is for unaccompanied minors to travel without escorts, she confirmed it is a frequent occurrence. She also mentioned that UC migrant children are often taken to the wrong airport or dropped off at gates with no waiting sponsors, highlighting the systemic issues at play.

The on-going crisis involving the exploitation of children through the UC program underscores the urgent need for reform in how we manage this system to mitigate further risks of exploitation and trafficking.

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING INVOLVING JUVENILE ORGANS

Building on the systemic issues highlighted earlier, it's crucial to address one of the more insidious aspects of human trafficking: organ harvesting. Recently, I conducted research in a prison in Central America, where I spoke with a former sex trafficker and a member of a Mexican cartel incarcerated for arms trafficking. Through these discussions, I learned that organ harvesting thrives due to the desperate demand from buyers. When families face the anguish of having a dying loved one and can't find the needed organ, they often resort to traveling to Mexico in search of a solution.

The trafficker recounted chilling details of witnessing multiple organs harvested in Mérida, Mexico, noting that such practices are alarmingly common in both veterinary clinics and hospitals in the region. He emphasized that American buyers frequently seek out these illicit organ trades. Disturbingly, news reports from August 2024 surfaced about 2 American college girls who may have been drugged with the intent of having their organs stolen while on the Yucatan Peninsula.

In my conversation with the former sex trafficker and ex-Sinaloa cartel member, he revealed the lengths family members will go to for a dying relative, illustrating how organ traffickers exploit this vulnerability. These traffickers often take what he described as a "custom order" for specific organs and then target areas where migrants congregate on their way to the U.S. border. Migrant camps, in particular, serve as hotspots for exploitation, leaving individuals especially susceptible to these heinous acts.

The former sex trafficker also pointed out that under the Biden administration, human trafficking has escalated, as cartels and gangs are reaping substantial profits. Many organizations that previously shied away from human smuggling are now deeply involved, capitalizing on the current lax immigration policies.

Despite the grim realities I've uncovered regarding human exploitation at the border, I remain hopeful—hopeful in you. I believe in the power of bipartisan action to enact meaningful legislation that can alleviate the crisis threatening lives. The current immigration system fails everyone, and it is imperative to establish legal pathways that include proper vetting for entering the United States. We must send a clear message to the cartels that the border is no longer open and empower Border Patrol with the funding and resources necessary to secure the border rather than merely processing migrants who have been smuggled into the country.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my research and I welcome your questions.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Ms. Hopper.

I now recognize Ms. Larin for 5 minutes to summarize her opening statement.

#### **STATEMENT OF KATHRYN A. LARIN, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, WORKFORCE, AND INCOME SECURITY, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE**

Ms. LARIN. Chairman Higgins, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, Ranking Member Ivey, and Members of the subcommittees, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss GAO's work on the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement and its role in the care and release of unaccompanied children.

In reports we issued in 2016 and 2020, we called on the agency to better ensure that those who provide care to unaccompanied children are qualified, to strengthen its oversight and monitoring of facilities housing these children, and to better track services that are provided to children after they're released to sponsors.

HHS has made significant progress in addressing our recommendations, but, as I will discuss today, more can be done to safeguard unaccompanied children.

Every year, thousands of children enter the United States without a parent or guardian and without lawful immigration status. The number of unaccompanied children has increased substantially over time, from about 14,000 in 2012 to around 119,000 in 2023. Many of these children have been exposed to trauma and violence, and they're at increased risk of becoming victims of child trafficking.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement, or ORR, is the primary agency responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of children that enter the country unaccompanied. ORR awards grants to providers that care for children in shelters, foster homes, treatment facilities, and other types of facilities until the children are placed with sponsors. Both State licensing agencies and ORR play a role in overseeing the facilities to ensure the health and safety of children in their care.

Reports we issued in 2016 and 2020 identified several significant lapses in ORR's implementation of policies and procedures affecting the quality of care provided to these children. Since that time, ORR has taken action to address all 9 of our recommendations and we have closed 5 recommendations as implemented.

Specifically, with regard to ensuring that care providers are qualified to provide care, we found that ORR did not have up-to-date and accurate information about whether applicants were licensed and, as a result, awarded grants to providers who did not have a license to operate or who were unable to obtain one.

We also found that ORR either did not have information or did not consider information that they did have about past allegations and concerns when awarding the grants, including concerns that providers were not meeting standards to protect the health and safety of children. As a result, grants were renewed even when there were significant outstanding child safety concerns uncovered during monitoring.

We made 3 recommendations to address these gaps, and ORR has fully or partially addressed all 3.

With regard to oversight and monitoring of facilities, we also found significant gaps. These ranged from providers not consistently notifying ORR about issues that could affect their State license to ORR and State licensing agencies failing to share information about their activities and findings, which could hamper effective oversight.

We made 4 recommendations to address these deficiencies, and ORR has taken action on all 4 and fully addressed 2.

In addition, we found that ORR was not meeting its own monitoring goals. For example, they weren't always notifying providers right away when they found a compliance issue, and they weren't following up to ensure that issues were resolved in a timely way.

Our recommendation in this area was fully addressed.

I'd like to turn now to the question of what happens to children after they're released from ORR care. In 2016, we found there was limited information on follow-up and services provided to children after they were placed with sponsors. At that time, only a small percentage of children were eligible for post-release services, but as of November 2023, all children and sponsors are to have 3 virtual check-ins to confirm that children are residing with their sponsors, enrolled in and attending school, aware of upcoming court dates, and are healthy and safe.

We recommended that ORR develop a process to ensure information on its post-release efforts is reliable and systematically collected, and this recommendation is still relevant and open.

ORR has taken some action to revamp its case management system, to include tracking of children post-release. Officials have told us that these enhancements will be complete at the end of 2024.

This concludes my statement, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Larin follows:]

STATEMENT OF KATHRYN A. LARIN

NOVEMBER 19, 2024

GAO HIGHLIGHTS

Highlights of GAO-25-107840, a testimony before the Subcommittees on Border Security and Enforcement and Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives.

#### *Why GAO Did This Study*

Thousands of children enter the United States without a parent or guardian and without lawful immigration status each year. Many unaccompanied children have been exposed to trauma and violence and travelled great lengths to get to the United States. In addition, unaccompanied children may be at greater risk becoming child trafficking victims.

These children are generally referred to ORR for care by the Department of Homeland Security. ORR is responsible for coordinating and implementing the care and placement of unaccompanied children. In fiscal year 2023, ORR cared for about 119,000 unaccompanied children, according to agency data.

This testimony summarizes findings from GAO's 2016 and 2020 reports on ORR's role in the care and release of unaccompanied children. It provides an update on ORR's efforts to address 9 recommendations contained in those reports. The reports identified several significant lapses in ORR's implementation of policies and procedures that could affect the quality of care provided to these children.

GAO's 2016 and 2020 reports contain a detailed description of the methodology used. Generally, GAO reviewed relevant Federal laws and regulations and ORR policies and monitoring documentation. GAO also obtained the views of a range of relevant stakeholders such as ORR officials, State licensing agencies, staff at grantee facilities, and others.

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN.—EFFORTS BY THE OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT TO ADDRESS GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *What GAO Found*

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has taken several steps to address prior GAO recommendations related to its role in caring for unaccompanied children—those that enter the United States without a parent or lawful immigration status. ORR awards grants to providers that operate facilities to house and care for unaccompanied children.

In its 2020 report, GAO found that ORR had awarded grants for 219 facilities operating in 25 States. ORR and State licensing agencies each play a role in overseeing facilities and ensuring that they meet health and safety standards, among others. Facilities generally must be licensed to operate in the State.

ORR took steps to sufficiently address 5 GAO recommendations, while ORR has partially addressed 4 others. The 9 recommendations were related to:

- *Ensuring care providers are qualified (3 recommendations).*—GAO's 2020 report found that ORR's grant announcements used to solicit care providers for unaccompanied children were unclear. Specifically, it was unclear what information applicants were to submit on their licensing status and related concerns. This information helps ensure that providers are qualified to care for unaccompanied children. ORR took steps to address 2 recommendations that staff verify applicants' licensing and performance information. ORR partially addressed a third recommendation by requiring in recent announcements that applicants report any allegations of abuse or neglect or adverse licensing actions. GAO will close this recommendation when ORR clarifies that applicants should report licensing issues at all facilities that they operate.
- *Oversight and monitoring of facilities (3 recommendations).*—GAO's 2020 report also found that ORR did not provide clear instructions to grantees on including State licensing citations in their performance reports to ORR, which is needed for effective oversight of ORR facilities. ORR addressed 2 of GAO's recommendations by collecting information from its grantees on any State licensing citations and notifying grantees and ORR staff that grantees were required to report this information. ORR also addressed a third recommendation to develop plans to help meet its monitoring goals.
- *Information sharing (2 recommendations).*—In its 2020 report, GAO also found limited information sharing between ORR and State licensing agencies. ORR has partially addressed the recommendations by establishing communication channels and points of contact in some States. GAO will close the recommendations when ORR completes outreach to all States.
- *Tracking post-release services (1 recommendation).*—GAO's 2016 report found that there was limited information available on post-release services that ORR provides. These services include linking families to education and community resources, in-home counseling, and case management. Tracking these services would allow the information to be compiled in summary form and provide useful information to ORR and others. GAO will close this recommendation when ORR completes improvements to its case management system to enable tracking of post-release services.

Chairmen Higgins and Bishop, Ranking Members Correa and Ivey, and Members of the subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work related to the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) responsibilities for unaccompanied children. Every year, thousands of children enter the United States without a parent or guardian and without lawful immigration status. Primary responsibility for ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of these children after they enter the country lies with ORR.

In 2016 and 2020, we issued reports related to ORR's role in the care and release of unaccompanied children.<sup>1</sup> These reports identified several significant lapses in ORR's implementation of policies and procedures that could affect the quality of care provided to these children. Our recent efforts have focused on monitoring the agency's progress in addressing recommendations contained in those reports.<sup>2</sup> Of 9 recommendations we made in our 2016 and 2020 reports, ORR has addressed 5 of them.<sup>3</sup> ORR has partially addressed the remaining 4 recommendations.

My statement today will focus on ORR's efforts related to: (1) ensuring care providers are qualified; (2) overseeing and monitoring facilities that care for unaccompanied children; and (3) tracking services that are provided to these children after

<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Unaccompanied Children: HHS Can Take Further Actions to Monitor Their Care*, GAO-16-180 (Washington, DC: Feb. 5, 2016) and GAO, *Unaccompanied Children: Actions Needed to Improve Grant Application Reviews and Oversight of Care Facilities*, GAO-20-609 (Washington, DC: September 15, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>We have also issued reports related to the care and custody of unaccompanied children while they are in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security. For more information, including the status of recommendations that we have made in these reports, see: GAO, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: Actions Needed to Ensure Children Receive Required Care in DHS Custody*, GAO-15-521 (Washington, DC: July 14, 2015) and *Southwest Border: Actions Needed to Improve DHS Processing of Families and Coordination between DHS and HHS*, GAO-20-245. (Washington, DC: February 19, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>There are a total of 11 recommendations contained in our 2016 and 2020 reports. Nine are discussed in this testimony. This testimony does not discuss 2 recommendations in the 2016 report, 1 of which relates to how ORR determines the number of beds needed to house unaccompanied children, and 1 of which is similar to a monitoring-related recommendation in our 2020 report. ORR has addressed both these recommendations.

they are released to sponsors. My statement is based primarily on the findings from our 2016 and 2020 reports. Each of our prior reports contains a detailed description of the methodology we used. Generally, we reviewed relevant Federal laws and regulations and ORR policies and monitoring documentation. We also obtained the views of a range of relevant stakeholders such as ORR officials, State licensing agencies, staff at ORR grantee facilities, and others.

The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted Government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

#### BACKGROUND

Unaccompanied children are those who arrive in the United States without lawful immigration status and without a parent or guardian available to provide care and physical custody for them. These children are generally referred to ORR for care by the Department of Homeland Security.<sup>4</sup> ORR is responsible for coordinating and implementing the care and placement of unaccompanied children.

ORR is required to promptly place unaccompanied children in its custody in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interest of the child. In addition, ORR must provide proper physical care, including suitable living accommodations, and appropriate medical care and educational services. According to ORR, all children in its care receive classroom education, mental and physical health services, case management, recreation, and unification services that facilitate their release to family members or other sponsors who can care for them. ORR awards grants to care providers that operate facilities to house and care for unaccompanied children.<sup>5</sup> The majority of children in ORR custody are cared for in shelter facilities. However, some are cared for in other settings, such as secure shelters for children with an offender history or residential treatment centers for children with diagnosed mental health disorders. In 2020, we reported that ORR had awarded grants for 219 facilities operating in 25 States.<sup>6</sup>

ORR and State licensing agencies each play a role in overseeing facilities and ensuring that they meet health and safety standards, among other things. With a few exceptions, facilities must be licensed to operate in the State.<sup>7</sup> Generally, both State licensing agencies and ORR monitor the facilities.

The number of unaccompanied children referred to ORR for care has increased substantially over time. In fiscal year 2012, nearly 14,000 children were referred to ORR. By fiscal year 2019, this number rose to more than 69,000 children. The agency's most recent data show that ORR cared for about 119,000 unaccompanied children in fiscal year 2023.<sup>8</sup> Many unaccompanied children have been exposed to trauma and violence and travelled great lengths to get to the United States. In addition, unaccompanied children may be at greater risk of child trafficking victimization.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Generally, children are to be transferred from DHS to HHS custody within 72 hours after a determination is made that they are unaccompanied children. In past work, we have recommended that both DHS and HHS should collaborate to address information-sharing gaps to ensure that ORR receives information needed to make decisions for unaccompanied children, including those apprehended with an adult. The departments concurred with these recommendations and they have been partially addressed based on a number of steps DHS and HHS have taken to better share information on unaccompanied children. As of September 2024, the departments are continuing to work on a new interagency agreement to govern information sharing. GAO-20-245.

<sup>5</sup>The grants are cooperative agreements that are funded for a 3-year project period. Funds are awarded for the second and third years based on approved continuation applications, subject to satisfactory progress by the grantee and a determination that continued funding would be in the best interest of the Federal Government.

<sup>6</sup>GAO-20-609.

<sup>7</sup>In 2021, Texas and Florida State agencies that had previously licensed ORR grantee facilities were directed to discontinue these licenses. In States that do not allow State licensing of programs providing care and services to unaccompanied children, ORR expects these facilities to meet the State's licensing requirements that would otherwise be applicable. In addition, ORR funds facilities, which may be unlicensed, to provide temporary additional bed capacity during emergencies or influx periods. ORR provides additional monitoring to these unlicensed facilities.

<sup>8</sup>Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, "Fact Sheets and Data," <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data>.

<sup>9</sup>GAO, *Child Trafficking: Addressing Challenges to Public Awareness and Survivor Support*, GAO-24-106038 (Washington, DC: December 11, 2023). Child trafficking generally refers to human trafficking involving individuals under the age of 18. Children may be trafficked for the

ORR TOOK STEPS TO ADDRESS 2 OF 3 RECOMMENDATIONS AIMED AT ENSURING  
PROVIDERS CARING FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN ARE QUALIFIED

Our 2020 report found that ORR's grant announcements used to solicit facilities to provide care for unaccompanied children were unclear about information applicants were required to submit regarding their licensing status or related concerns and past allegations of abuse or neglect. As a result, applicants provided inconsistent information.<sup>10</sup>

State licensing concerns may arise when providers do not meet certain standards, including standards related to the health and safety of children in care. We also found that ORR did not systematically confirm the State licensure information submitted by applicants or document a review of their past performance on ORR grants, when applicable.

Reviewing and obtaining consistent information on State licensure status and grantee past performance are key parts of ensuring that ORR providers are qualified to operate facilities to care for unaccompanied children. Taking these steps helps ORR reduce the likelihood of awarding grants to organizations that cannot obtain a State license or have a history of poor performance.

To address these concerns, we made 3 recommendations to ORR. The agency has taken steps to address 2 of them and has partially addressed the third recommendation (see table 1).

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purposes of commercial sexual exploitation, forced labor, or both. Survivors of child trafficking may suffer harmful, long-lasting effects, such as depression, suicidal thoughts, and substance use disorders.

<sup>10</sup>GAO-20-609.



TABLE 1: STATUS OF GAO RECOMMENDATIONS TO ORR RELATED TO ENSURING CARE PROVIDERS ARE QUALIFIED TO OPERATE FACILITIES FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN, AS OF SEPTEMBER 2024

Recommendation	Steps taken by ORR	Status
<p>The director of ORR should clarify in its grant announcements the information and supporting documentation applicants are required to provide in their grant applications with respect to their State licensing status, eligibility, and allegations and concerns.</p> <p>The director of ORR should take steps to develop, and ensure that officials reviewing grant applications implement a process to verify the accuracy and completeness of information reported by grant applicants on State licensing status, eligibility, allegations, and concerns.</p> <p>The director of ORR should ensure that the grant review process includes a documented review of applicants' past performance on ORR grants for those that have previously received grants to care for unaccompanied children. This could include, for example, a systematic review of previous quarterly and annual performance reports and a review of corrective actions issued by all ORR monitoring staff to all ORR-funded facilities previously operated by the applicant.</p>	<p>ORR's recent grant announcements have required applicants to report allegations of abuse and/or neglect, as well as any denial, suspension, and/or revocation of their license over the prior 5 years.</p> <p>ORR updated its guide for staff reviewing grant applications and training curriculum to add instructions for assessing licensing information included in grant applications. Staff are to determine whether the applicant is currently licensed and in good standing in the State in which it is proposing to provide services. Staff are instructed to take steps to verify the grantee's license and determine whether it has any disciplinary actions against it.</p> <p>ORR updated its staff guidance and training curriculum on conducting and documenting reviews of grantee performance. ORR staff are to use information from grantee quarterly progress reports to ensure grantee performance is satisfactory and determine whether funding should be continued for another budget period. Staff are directed to pay particular attention to grantees' descriptions of any issues they experienced in the past reporting period. This includes all documented State licensing allegations or concerns, any corrective actions issued by ORR or others, and the steps the grantee took to resolve these issues.</p>	<p>Open: partially addressed. We will close this recommendation when ORR releases future grant announcements clarifying that applicants are to report licensing issues at all facilities that they operate.</p> <p>Closed: implemented.</p> <p>Closed: implemented.</p>

Source: GAO-20-609 and GAO review of Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) documentation/GAO-25-107840.

ORR ADDRESSED 3 OF 5 RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO STATE LICENSING CITATIONS,  
INFORMATION SHARING, AND MONITORING OF FACILITIES CARING FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

ORR facilities generally must be licensed by a State licensing agency to provide residential care and services for unaccompanied children, or meet State licensing requirements if they are located in a State that does not allow State licensing of programs providing care and services to unaccompanied children, as previously noted.<sup>11</sup> States set the minimum standards of care for their facilities, including those related to child health and safety and physical building standards. State licensing agencies issue citations to State-licensed ORR grantees if licensing violations are found and grantees are expected to address them.

Our 2020 report found 2 areas lacking clarity regarding grantees' reporting of State licensing citations to ORR.<sup>12</sup> First, ORR did not provide clear instructions to grantees on whether and how they should include State licensing citations in their quarterly performance reports to ORR. Second, some ORR staff did not have a clear understanding of what grantees should report to them about State licensing citations. As we reported in 2020, ORR needs this information to have a record of State licensing deficiencies and whether they were addressed and to conduct effective oversight of ORR facilities.

To address these concerns, we made 2 recommendations to ORR that have been implemented by the agency (see table 2).

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<sup>11</sup>ORR also requires its grantees to comply with various other requirements, such as those related to fire, health, and other safety standards.

<sup>12</sup>GAO-20-609.

TABLE 2: STATUS OF GAO RECOMMENDATIONS TO ORR RELATED TO GRANTEE REPORTING OF STATE LICENSING CITATIONS, AS OF SEPTEMBER 2024

Recommendation	Steps taken by ORR	Status
The director of ORR should clarify in its instructions to grantees the information they are required to report on State licensing citations in their quarterly performance reports.	ORR is using its grantee quarterly performance report to collect information on any State licensing citations a grantee received during the quarter. ORR sent an email notifying grantees that they were required either to report any State licensing citations, suspensions, or revocations that the grantee or any subrecipients had received during the quarter or affirmatively note that no such licensing issues had occurred.	Closed: implemented.
The director of ORR should take steps, such as through guidance or training, to ensure that project officers clearly understand the requirement that grantees report State licensing citations at any of their facilities within 24 hours and include State licensing citations in their quarterly performance reports.	ORR updated its staff training materials to clearly state that grantees must report a license revocation or suspension to ORR within 24 hours and that licensing citations should be reported in the section of the quarterly performance reports on significant findings and events.	Closed: implemented.

Source: GAO–20–609 and GAO review of Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) documentation./GAO–25–107840.

Our 2020 report also found that information sharing between ORR and State licensing agencies was limited. In addition, State licensing agencies and ORR staff said that improved information sharing would benefit their monitoring of facilities. Information sharing between ORR and State licensing agencies is important to ensure that both entities are aware of on-going issues at ORR facilities.

To address these concerns, we made 2 recommendations, which ORR has partially addressed (see table 3).

TABLE 3: STATUS OF GAO RECOMMENDATIONS TO ORR RELATED TO INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN ORR AND STATE LICENSING AGENCIES, AS OF SEPTEMBER 2024

Recommendation	Steps taken by ORR	Status
The director of ORR should work with State agencies that license ORR-funded facilities to develop a plan for mutual information sharing, including processes for ORR outreach to States during the grant application review process and on-going information sharing on ORR and State monitoring processes and identified deficiencies.	<p>ORR is working to connect with State licensing agencies to establish communication channels to discuss any questions about licensing requirements that arise during the grant application review process. According to ORR, its goal is to develop mutually beneficial information-sharing relationships. ORR has entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with 1 State licensing agency.</p>	Open: partially addressed. We will close this recommendation when HHS has demonstrated its outreach to all States where it has licensed grantee facilities about developing information-sharing protocols.
The director of ORR should ensure that ORR provides and maintains a current point of contact for each State agency that licenses ORR grantees to facilitate information sharing regarding ORR-funded facilities.	<p>ORR had a list of points of contact at 49 States' licensing agencies, as of February 2024. According to ORR, it plans to update the spreadsheet quarterly.</p>	Open: partially addressed. We will close this recommendation when ORR has demonstrated that it has provided an ORR point of contact to State licensing agencies to whom they can direct questions or concerns.

Source: GAO–20–609 and GAO review of Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) documentation./GAO–25–107840.

With respect to monitoring, ORR requires grantees to take corrective action to address noncompliance it identifies through monitoring. Our 2020 report found that ORR had not met some of its monitoring goals or notified grantees of the need for corrective actions in a timely manner.<sup>13</sup> We also found that ORR had not ensured the facilities it funded were audited for compliance with standards to prevent and respond to sexual abuse and sexual harassment of children in their care, as required by ORR regulations. Without action, ORR risked continuing to not meet its own monitoring goals and requirements, which are designed to ensure the safety and well-being of children in its care.

To address these concerns, we made 1 recommendation, which ORR has implemented. Our recommendation called on ORR to develop a plan to guide and focus the agency's efforts to meet its goals to:

- conduct on-site monitoring visits to each facility at least every 2 years in accordance with ORR policy,
- report any noncompliance to the facility within 30 days of the site visit, in accordance with ORR policy, and
- conduct an audit of each facility's compliance with ORR standards on preventing and responding to sexual assault.

ORR fully addressed our recommendation by developing plans to address these issues. One plan for calendar year 2024 articulates ORR's goals to increase its workforce capacity to meet monitoring needs and submit monitoring reports within ORR's required time frames. It also identifies targets, time frames, and staff responsible for meeting its on-site facility monitoring goals. In addition, in October 2021, ORR contracted with an outside organization to conduct compliance audits related to preventing and responding to sexual assault, and this contract specifies time frames for conducting the audits.

Going forward, continued work remains for ORR to meet the targets established in its plan. According to ORR officials, they lack the staff resources to fully meet their goals for increased monitoring of some facilities. For example, ORR documentation shows that as of April 2024, staff had met the requirement to monitor all of its standard, State-licensed facilities within a 2-year period. However, 24 facilities in Texas and Florida, which no longer license ORR grantees, were overdue for the more frequent, quarterly visits ORR now conducts to these facilities.<sup>14</sup> Further, in fiscal year 2023, ORR documentation shows that on average ORR staff took 31 days after a monitoring visit to submit the report to the facility, instead of the 30 days required to notify each facility as outlined by ORR policy. For 7 facilities, staff took over 45 days to send the report.

With respect to auditing facilities' compliance with standards on preventing and responding to sexual assault, as of October 2023, ORR's new contractor had conducted audits at all facilities that had not been audited by the original contractor within the initial 3-year period set in regulation, according to ORR officials.<sup>15</sup> These officials told us they anticipated audits at an additional 70 facilities would be completed by October 2024. In addition, officials said that a newly-formed Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect team within ORR was working with the contractor to ensure they meet the time lines specified in the contract going forward.

#### ORR HAS PARTIALLY ADDRESSED 1 RECOMMENDATION RELATED TO GRANTEE FOLLOW-UP WITH CHILDREN AND THEIR SPONSOR AFTER RELEASE FROM ORR CARE

In 2016, we reported that there was limited information available on post-release services provided to children after they leave ORR care.<sup>16</sup> Since that report, ORR has made changes to the timing and frequency of certain post-release services.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, in November 2023, ORR reported that post-release services providers would become responsible for a series of 3 virtual check-ins with all children and

<sup>13</sup> GAO-20-609.

<sup>14</sup> For States that stopped licensing ORR grantees, ORR now conducts quarterly monitoring visits.

<sup>15</sup> Each facility that houses unaccompanied children must be audited at least once within 3 years of February 22, 2016, and during each 3-year period thereafter. 45 C.F.R. § 411.111(a).

<sup>16</sup> GAO-16-180.

<sup>17</sup> At the time of our 2016 report, ORR provided post-release services to a small number of children, such as those who were victims of trafficking. ORR also conducted safety and well-being calls for all unaccompanied children released to sponsors. ORR guidance required the calls to occur 30 days after children were released from ORR care to sponsors. Staff were required to make a reasonable effort to contact the children and document the results of the call in the children's case files.

sponsors.<sup>18</sup> These providers would be expected to confirm that children are residing with their sponsors, enrolled in and attending school, aware of upcoming court dates, and healthy and safe.

Our recommendation from 2016 remains relevant. We recommended that ORR develop a process to ensure all information collected through its post-release efforts are reliable and systematically collected. Doing so, would allow this information to be compiled in summary form and provide useful information to other entities internally and externally.

ORR has begun taking some actions to address this recommendation, including awarding a contract in September 2023 to revamp its case management system known as the UC Portal. According to ORR, the contractor will replace and build technology to support the recent expansion of post-release services. The agency reported that responses from the virtual check-ins, including information on services provided, will be collected directly into the UC Portal.<sup>19</sup> In November 2023, ORR updated the UC Portal to include additional tracking of children post-release, including screens to update the child's current location, history of the child's moves, and whom the child is living with.

ORR reported that by the end of 2024, the Portal will be updated further to enhance and digitize information on post-release services. We are continuing to monitor ORR's efforts to address this recommendation and will close it once ORR completes improvements to the UC Portal and demonstrates that it can use the portal to collect reliable post-release services data and disseminate it internally and externally, as appropriate.

Chairmen Higgins and Bishop, Ranking Members Correa and Ivey, and Members of the subcommittees, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Ms. Larin.

I now recognize Ms. Rodas for 5 minutes to summarize her opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF TARA LEE RODAS, PRIVATE CITIZEN, FORMER DEPUTY TO THE DIRECTOR OF THE FEDERAL CASE MANAGEMENT TEAM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

Ms. RODAS. Good afternoon, Chairman Higgins, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, Ranking Member Ivey, and distinguished Members of the committees. I thank you for inviting me to testify at this critical hearing on the crisis of trafficked, exploited, and a staggering 320,000 missing migrant children.

Today, my goal is to spark action to rescue children, prosecute traffickers, and dismantle trafficking infrastructure. We must prevent children from being lost into slave labor, commercial sex, organ harvesting, and other unspeakable evils.

Migrant children are working overnight shifts in slaughterhouses and factories, and some may die today because they don't have the knowledge or skills to do the job that they're supposed to be doing, but they're doing it because they need to repay debts to their smugglers and traffickers.

Children, boys and girls, are being sold for sex. Just last month, I spoke with a care provider in Florida who told me about cases of migrant children as young as 8 with sexually transmitted diseases—8 years old.

Last week, I spoke with a private investigator in Texas who shared challenges trying to find an emergency shelter for this one

<sup>18</sup> From November 30, 2023 through July 31, 2024, unaccompanied children were most commonly released from ORR care to a sponsor that was a parent or legal guardian, according to ORR data.

<sup>19</sup> According to ORR's Policy Guide, post-release services may include linking families to educational and community resources, home visits, case management, in-home counseling, and other social welfare services, as needed.



girl—she's only 12—an unaccompanied minor who was 9 months pregnant and about to go into labor.

How did we get here? How did we get here?

For over a decade, the United States Department of Health and Human Services has been responsible for the suffering of countless children. HHS has a 10-year, demonstrated record of losing children to sponsors who abuse, exploit, traffic, and harm children in unthinkable ways.

Now, to be fair to HHS, they are not an investigative or law enforcement agency. HHS simply does not have the knowledge, skills, ability, or the tradecraft to protect children from traffickers.

Child trafficking has evolved into an international syndicate of gangs and cartels. It's highly organized and efficient. It mirrors the tactics and operations of terrorist organizations.

Smugglers and traffickers have moved more than 500,000 children. They flooded across our borders, and we have delivered them to criminals and traffickers and members of transnational criminal organizations, who are using the UC program as a white-glove delivery service of children. Criminal sponsors are defrauding the U.S. Government by using this Government program as a logistical chain in their trafficking operation.

These children are not merely victims; they are hostages of transnational criminals and the financial backbone of material support for organizations seeking to profit off of the lives of children. This simply must change.

Now, there is hope if we act with urgency. Let's implement simple safety measures like DNA testing for children and their sponsors. Let's implement stringent—stringent—penalties, like prison, for sponsors who are unable to produce the children they are in charge of.

Again, there's hope if we act, but action must include oversight, transparency, and accountability.

Now, according to oversight conducted by Senator Grassley, who's been a true champion of these endangered children, HHS failed to fully comply with subpoenas that were issued by DHS to investigate evidence of child exploitation the Senator referred to law enforcement earlier this year.

That's just simply unacceptable. HHS should be commanded to comply with the Inspector General Empowerment Act to enable cross-agency data sharing.

Let's treat child trafficking as the national security threat that it truly is. Let's mobilize the full power of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to dismantle these criminal networks.

No. 1, we can elevate the activity of child trafficking on the NIPF, which is the National Intelligence Priorities Framework.

No. 2, we can designate child trafficking as a terrorist activity so that centers like the National Counterterrorism Center, the Terrorist Screening Center, the National Targeting Center can provide the manpower, the tradecraft, and immediate implementation of targeting these trafficking networks.

Every child lost to the current system is a tragedy. We cannot be a Nation that looks the other way. We have a moral imperative to care for children that the Government takes into custody. The

time to act is now. Children are in need now. Children are depending on you now.

I thank you for your time and your attention to this crisis of these trafficked, exploited, and missing children. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Rodas follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF TARA LEE RODAS

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2024

Chairman Higgins, Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Correa, Ranking Member Ivey and distinguished Members of the committee: Thank you for inviting me to testify at this critical hearing on the crisis of trafficked, exploited, and missing migrant children. Chairman Bishop, I thank you for joining Senator Grassley and more than 40 other legislators in signing the letter to President Biden and Vice President Harris urging them to stop covering up the migrant child crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Today, my goal is to spark action: (1) action to rescue children and (2) action to prevent children from being lost in slave labor,<sup>2</sup> commercial sex,<sup>3</sup> organ harvesting,<sup>4</sup> and other unspeakable evils.<sup>5 6</sup> Prior to action, it's critical to obtain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the data and information from all parties involved, including but not limited to HHS, DHS, and DOJ, as authorized under the Inspector General (IG) Empowerment Act of 2016.<sup>7 8</sup>

Today, as we speak, children are preparing to work grueling overnight shifts in slaughterhouses, restaurants, and factories.<sup>9</sup> Some children may die today in jobs they don't have the knowledge or skills to do<sup>10</sup> in order to repay never-ending debts to their smugglers and traffickers.<sup>11</sup> Today, children are being sold for sex.<sup>12</sup> Some children, girls and boys, will get sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>13</sup> Some girls—as young as 12, 11, or even 10 years old—will give birth to children of their own. “Forced labor and prostitution among underage migrants have more than tripled under [the current administration].”<sup>14</sup> Today, desperate children will call hotlines, to report they are being abused, neglected, and trafficked.<sup>15</sup>

For at least a decade, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been responsible for the suffering of countless children.<sup>16</sup> This assessment is based solely on the information currently available;<sup>17</sup> however, it has been established that the unknown factors significantly outweigh what is known. This MUST change.

I'm confident we all agree that children should be protected and defended. HHS has failed at that mission. HHS has a 10-year demonstrated record<sup>18</sup> of losing children to sponsors who traffick, exploit, and harm children in unthinkable ways (see 2-Page Fact Sheet).

<sup>1</sup> Grassley Leads Bicameral Colleagues in Calling Out Abuses in the Biden-Harris Unaccompanied Migrant Children Program (senate.gov).

<sup>2</sup> Grassley Highlights Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children During Senate Roundtable.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Central American trafficker describes what happens to children at the hands of cartels (youtube.com).

<sup>5</sup> [https://youtu.be/Mp9E5nkr-wQ?si=m1k\\_l3jK-28Rbva](https://youtu.be/Mp9E5nkr-wQ?si=m1k_l3jK-28Rbva).

<sup>6</sup> RECORDS: HHS Sent Unaccompanied Minors to Sponsors with MS-13 Ties, Potential Trafficking Rings (senate.gov).

<sup>7</sup> CIGIE Statement on the Signing of the IG Empowerment Act.pdf (ignet.gov).

<sup>8</sup> BILLS-114hr6450enr.pdf (Congress.gov).

<sup>9</sup> Slaughterhouse series/NBC News.

<sup>10</sup> Children Risk Their Lives Building America's Roofs—The New York Times (nytimes.com).

<sup>11</sup> Finding The Feds' Missing Children/CHILD TRAFFICKING IN AMERICA (muckraker.com).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Whistleblower Reveals 'Tax Dollars' Spent to 'Put Migrant Children in the Hands of Criminals'/Project Veritas.

<sup>13</sup> Health Department released thousands of illegal immigrant kids with latent tuberculosis infections—Washington Times.

<sup>14</sup> Inside America's Fastest-Growing Criminal Enterprise: Sex Trafficking/The Free Press.

<sup>15</sup> Alone and Exploited—The New York Times (nytimes.com).

<sup>16</sup> Majority & Minority Staff Report—Protecting Unaccompanied Alien Children from Trafficking and Other Abuses 2016–01–282.pdf (senate.gov).

<sup>17</sup> 21st SW Grand Jury Releases Shocking Report/My Florida Legal.

<sup>18</sup> Overwhelmed Federal officials released immigrant teens to traffickers in 2014—The Washington Post.

To be fair, HHS is not an investigative or law enforcement agency.<sup>19</sup> They simply do not have the knowledge, skills, ability, or tradecraft to protect children from traffickers. President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for HHS Secretary, Robert Kennedy, Jr., is aware of this crisis and his talented team is discussing solutions to end this crisis.

Child trafficking has evolved into an international syndicate of gangs<sup>20</sup> and cartels that is highly organized and very efficient. Smugglers and traffickers, during this administration, have moved many of the more than 500,000 unaccompanied children that have flooded across the U.S. Southern Border.<sup>21</sup> James O'Keefe's film "Line In The Sand" shows exactly how children are moved through a vast network of NGO's and delivered to sponsors.<sup>22</sup>

Sadly, due to the failed open border policies of the Biden-Harris administration, we have delivered these unaccompanied children to criminals, traffickers, and members of transnational criminal organizations<sup>23</sup> who are using the UC Program as a white glove delivery service of children. These criminal sponsors are defrauding the U.S. Government by using the UC Program as the logistical chain of their child trafficking operation.<sup>24</sup>

In June 2021, while serving at Pomona Fairplex Emergency Intake Site (EIS) as the deputy to the director of the Federal Case Management Team, I (and the Team) began reporting suspicious sponsor and suspected trafficking cases. In June 2021, we thought less than 50 children were affected. After funneling more than 8,300 children through the EIS in less than 6 months, we knew thousands were affected. In February 2023 we learned from Hannah Dreier at the NYT that 85,000 children were missing.<sup>25</sup>

Yet no action has been taken to rescue children. No action was taken to prevent other children from being lost in slave labor, commercial sex, organ harvesting, and other unspeakable evils.

Then, in July 2024, we learned that the Biden-Harris administration has lost track of more than 320,000 children.<sup>26 27 28</sup> HHS ignored warning signals, demonstrated they were unable to identify trafficking patterns and went so far as to establish a fundamentally flawed rule,<sup>29</sup> which demonstrated a clear inability to comprehend the emerging threat landscape, accurately identify trafficking patterns, and recognize critical indicators and warnings. Meanwhile, forced labor and prostitution among underage migrants has more than tripled.<sup>30</sup>

It's astonishing. How can this happen? It happens because HHS lacks oversight, transparency, and accountability.

HHS must commit to oversight, transparency, and accountability.

The UC Portal database is the official system of record for the UC Program. Currently, HHS denies direct access to the UC Portal data to law enforcement and others who could use it to identify trafficking activity, rescue exploited children and conduct critical oversight of the UC placement program.<sup>31</sup> But, there are simple data sharing and data analytics solutions<sup>32</sup> that will lead to the rescue of children, the prosecution of criminal sponsors & traffickers, and the dismantling of trafficking infrastructure.

Data from the UC Portal database needs to be examined by expert data analysts in the inspector general (IG) community. The IG Empowerment Act of 2016 granted

<sup>19</sup> [carey-testimony.pdf \(house.gov\)](#).

<sup>20</sup> [Gangs and Human Trafficking/National Gang Center \(ojp.gov\)](#).

<sup>21</sup> Scott, Grassley, and Bicameral Colleagues Call Out Abuses in the Biden-Harris Unaccompanied Migrant Children Program—U.S. Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina ([senate.gov](#)).

<sup>22</sup> [Line in the Sand Movie](#).

<sup>23</sup> (460) DHS Insider Blows Whistle on Int'l Child Sex Trafficking Gangs Exploiting 'Reasonable Fear' Loophole—YouTube.

<sup>24</sup> [rodas-testimony.pdf \(house.gov\)](#).

<sup>25</sup> [Alone and Exploited—The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#).

<sup>26</sup> Biden-Harris admin loses track of 320,000 migrant children—with untold numbers at risk of sex trafficking and forced labor ([msn.com](#)).

<sup>27</sup> Management Alert—ICE Cannot Monitor All Unaccompanied Migrant Children Released from DHS and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Custody.

<sup>28</sup> <https://x.com/MJTruthUltra/status/1845201479818412334> [Bob Unanue, CEO of Goya Foods].

<sup>29</sup> Grassley and Senate Republicans Demand Changes to Biden Admin Rule Endangering Safety and Wellbeing of Unaccompanied Alien Children.

<sup>30</sup> Inside America's Fastest-Growing Criminal Enterprise: Sex Trafficking/The Free Press ([thefp.com](#)).

<sup>31</sup> Grassley Leads Bicameral Colleagues in Calling Out Abuses in the Biden-Harris Unaccompanied Migrant Children Program ([senate.gov](#)).

<sup>32</sup> Statement of Michael E. Horowitz, concerning "Overseeing the Overseers: Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency @ 10 Years" ([pandemicoversight.gov](#)).

IGs the ability to request and match datasets across Federal agencies by exempting IGs from the Computer Matching Act.<sup>33</sup>

Children could be rescued, criminal sponsors and traffickers could be prosecuted, and trafficking networks could be dismantled if the IG had direct access to data in the UC Portal database and could match it with other data at agencies, not limited to but including, DHS and DOJ. It's unthinkable that HHS Secretary Becerra is withholding critical information regarding children and their sponsors, that could save the lives of children.<sup>34 35</sup>

It's devastating to know that after nearly 3½ years of sounding the alarm, no significant action has been taken to rescue children. According to oversight conducted by Senator Grassley, who has been a true champion for these endangered children for the last decade, HHS failed to fully comply even with subpoenas issued by DHS as it investigated evidence of child exploitation he referred to law enforcement earlier this year.<sup>36</sup> At least in part because of this obstruction, law enforcement was able to find less than 4 percent of their targets (children and sponsors).<sup>37</sup> This must stop, and sharing of this data will help stop it.

In the new administration, there are simple fixes that Border Czar Tom Homan, HHS Secretary Robert Kennedy, Jr., DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, and others can do to defend and protect children:

- implement simple safety measures to include but not limited to DNA testing
- implement stringent penalties, including but not limited to imprisonment for sponsors who are unable to account for a child's whereabouts
- hold release of all children until we rescue the missing children
- order HHS to share their data and comply with The IG Empowerment Act<sup>38 39</sup>
- elevate the activity of child trafficking on the National Intelligence Priorities Framework<sup>40</sup>
- designate child trafficking as a terrorist activity so that centers such as the National Counterterrorism Center<sup>41</sup> (CTC), Terrorist Screening Center<sup>42</sup> (TSC), and National Targeting Center<sup>43</sup> (NTC) can provide manpower, tradecraft, and immediate implementation of targeting trafficking networks.

In closing, I'm confident we all agree that children should be defended and protected. I'm eager to work with you to:

1. Rescue Children
2. Prosecute Traffickers and other Criminal "Sponsors"
3. Dismantle Trafficking Infrastructure.

Thank you for your time and attention to the crisis of trafficked, exploited, and missing migrant children.

I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.

## 2-PAGE OVERVIEW OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN HHS'S UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN (UC) PROGRAM

### SUMMARY

Smugglers and child traffickers are recruiting, harboring, and transporting children to the United States; using force, fraud, and coercion; for the purpose of involuntary servitude, debt bondage, slavery, commercial sex, and possibly forced organ harvesting. By exploiting flawed policies and deficiencies in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children & Families (ACF) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) Unaccompanied Children (UC) Program, a sophisticated network of smugglers and traffickers are using the U.S. Government as part of the logistical chain of their child trafficking operation. Although the causes of the recent surge of Unaccompanied Children (UCs) is debated, all stakeholders agree one reason migrant children make the perilous journey to the United States

<sup>33</sup> [BILLS-114hr6450enr.pdf \(Congress.gov\)](#).

<sup>34</sup> April 17, 2024—Attorney General Miyares Demands Biden Administration Address Missing Migrant Children Crisis ([state.va.us](#))

<sup>35</sup> [02-22-ia-ms-ut-dhs-fbi-auc-final.pdf \(scag.gov\)](#).

<sup>36</sup> Grassley Alerts DHS, FBI to Evidence of Human Trafficking; Calls for Immediate Action to Locate & Rescue Migrant Children ([senate.gov](#)).

<sup>37</sup> Grassley Leads Bicameral Colleagues in Calling Out Abuses in the Biden-Harris Unaccompanied Migrant Children Program ([senate.gov](#)).

<sup>38</sup> CIGIE Statement on the Signing of the IG Empowerment Act.pdf.

<sup>39</sup> [BILLS-114hr6450enr.pdf](#).

<sup>40</sup> [ICD\\_204\\_National\\_Intelligence\\_Priorities\\_Framework\\_U\\_FINAL-SIGNED.pdf \(NIPF\)](#).

<sup>41</sup> [NCTC Home](#).

<sup>42</sup> Terrorist Screening Center—FBI.

<sup>43</sup> CBP National Targeting Center/U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

is they are “brought into the United States by human trafficking rings.” (As per HHS’s Fact Sheet).

DOCUMENTATION OF A DARK DECADE OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN HHS’S UC PROGRAM

- 2014 newspaper article highlighting the failures of HHS to protect minors from trafficking: Overwhelmed Federal officials released immigrant teens to traffickers in 2014—The Washington Post
- Senator Rob Portman’s opening remarks at the 2016 Congressional hearing on HHS placement of migrant children highlighting how HHS placed UCs in the hands of traffickers: Portman’s Opening Remarks—HHS Puts Children in the Hands of Traffickers
- The 2016 Congressional report highlighting HHS’s failure to protect children from trafficking: Majority & Minority Staff Report—Protecting Unaccompanied Alien Children from Trafficking and Other Abuses 2016–01–282.pdf (senate.gov)
- The FRONTLINE documentary “Trafficked in America” highlighting how teenagers from Central America were smuggled into the United States by traffickers who promised them jobs and a better life—only to force them to live and work in virtual slavery to pay off their debt. Trafficked in America (full documentary)/FRONTLINE\_Youtube
- August 21, 2021 and October 21, 2021 interviews of DHS Whistleblower, Aaron Stevenson, who exposed how MS–13 and other Transnational Criminal Organizations are sponsoring children through the HHS UC Program.
- DHS Insider MS–13 (August 2021 interview in the shadows)
- DHS Insider Goes PUBLIC (October 2021 on the record)
- U.S. probes trafficking of teen migrants in August 2021 Trafficking Teen Migrants for Poultry-Plant Work
- August 2022 news article on HHS’s child trafficking operation: child-trafficking-operation-at-southern-border
- August 2022 interview of Whistleblower from MVM (the contractor responsible for transporting UCs around the country in the middle of the night) highlighting how UCs are delivered to sponsors the UCs don’t know: <https://youtu.be/B2IU9FvIJtc>
- August 2022 interview with a Central American trafficker describing the horrifying realities Unaccompanied Children face in the United States to include labor trafficking, sex trafficking, and forced organ harvesting: <https://youtu.be/ksJkZeHxk1s>
- November 29, 2022 press release and shocking video exposé (PART 1) on child trafficking by Project Veritas: PV\_Child Pimped Out for Sex
- November 30, 2022 shocking video exposé (PART 2) detailing how traffickers exploit illegal child labor with social security fraud; minor forced to pay back ‘debt’: PV\_Traffickers Exploit Illegal Child Labor
- January 19, 2023 video highlighting how at least 50 migrant children were found working graveyard shifts cleaning Midwest slaughterhouses: <https://youtu.be/7haUShzBsrc>
- Feb 28, 2023 NYT article “Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the US” exposing how migrant children are working and dying in the United States. NYT-Alone and Exploited
- March 1, 2023 NBC report titled “Feds expand probe into migrant child labor in slaughterhouses” probing how children from Central America were brought to the United States to work: <https://youtu.be/EjXgGIZISrM>
- March 6, 2023, Aaron Stevenson & Tara Rodas (aka “Double Trouble”) on the Kyle Seraphin Show: Double Trouble
- March 29, 2023 3rd Presentment of the Florida Statewide Grand Jury: FLGrandJuryPresentment–3–29–23
- April 12, 2023 USDA letter to Members of the Meat and Poultry Industry warning them to crack down on illegal child labor. Combating illegal child labor (usda.gov)
- April 12, 2023 NBC news “A 16-year-old says he’s still cleaning a Kansas slaughterhouse months after his employer was fined for employing kids” exposing Dept of Labor’s inability to control illegal child labor. 16-Year-Old Slaughterhouse
- April 12, 2023 War Journalist shows Rape Kits for migrants that are paid for with Government money. Michael\_Yon-Rape Kits Given to Migrants
- April 13, 2023 NBC news segment identity-theft-linked-to-illegal-work-in-slaughterhouses
- April 17, 2023 Letter from Florida AG Moody to Congress regarding HHS’s & DHS’s trafficking of UCs: 4–17–23 Letter\_AG\_Moody

- April 17, 2023 NYT article, “As Migrants Were Put to Work, US Ignored Warnings.” NYT-US Ignored Warnings
- April 26, 2023: Testimony before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement will hold a hearing on “The Biden Border Crisis: Exploitation of Unaccompanied Alien Children”
- Link to Mrs. Rodas’ Testimony: Tara Lee Rodas Full Opening Statement
- Link to full Congressional hearing: <https://www.youtube.com/live/Ehul6b-t09M?feature=share>
- July, 26, 2023 interview of 2-time whistleblower, Carlos Arellano, on The Kyle Seraphin Show: <https://rumble.com/v32dld0-nyc-migrant-hotel-whistleblower-carlos-arellano-speaks-out.html>. This clip shows workers at the Row NYC complaining about safety concerns: <https://youtu.be/A88SHSGrHDU>
- October 2, 2023 Muckraker Twitter (X) undercover report “Federal Child Trafficking Pipeline Exposed.” <https://rumble.com/v3mfhq7-Federal-child-trafficking-pipeline-exposed-the-real-sound-of-freedom-muckra.html>
- October 16th promo for “Police State.” Aaron Stevenson & Tara Rodas were featured together: Twitter Promo-Police State
- October 27th exposé by America’s Future of 4 HHS Whistleblowers: Where Did The Children Go? [Americasfuture.net](https://Americasfuture.net)
- October 30, 2023, 4th Presentment of the Florida Grand Jury Florida—4th-Presentment-of-the-21st-Statewide-Grand-Jury
- Nov 3rd Press Release & Call to Action by America’s Future on HHS’s proposed rule change that would make trafficking of the children more easy: Press Release: America’s Future Issues Call To Action: Oppose HHS’s Proposed Rule
- November 29, 2023 Aaron & Tara on the Kyle Seraphin Show Opposing HHS’s Proposed Rule Change: Kyle Aaron Tara
- December 18, 2023 MSNBC exposé titled “Slaughterhouse Children.” Slaughterhouse Children: Child Labor Exposed
- December 28, 2023 article by Hannah Dreier of the NYT: [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/28/us/migrants-children-data.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.K00.TtLo.xM2tex0SU\\_Cv&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/28/us/migrants-children-data.html?unlocked_article_code=1.K00.TtLo.xM2tex0SU_Cv&smid=url-share)
- August 8, 2024 article in NY Post: Biden-Harris admin loses track of 320,000 migrant children ([nypost.com](https://nypost.com))
- August 19, 2024 DHS OIG Report: Management Alert-ICE Cannot Monitor All Unaccompanied Migrant Children Released from DHS and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Custody
- September 25, 2024 exposé: Finding The Feds’ Missing Children/CHILD TRAF-FICKING IN AMERICA ([muckraker.com](https://muckraker.com))
- October 14, 2024 expose in the Free Press: Inside America’s Fastest-Growing Criminal Enterprise: Sex Trafficking/The Free Press ([thefp.com](https://thefp.com))

A sampling of the evidence above shows that HHS has lost control of the UC Program. Immediate steps must be taken to safeguard vulnerable, migrant children who come into the custody of HHS. It is unacceptable for a Federal Government agency to place children in the hands of unvetted and unsafe “sponsors” who are criminals, traffickers, and members of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs). HHS is distributing migrant children across the country (through a sophisticated delivery network), bypassing State authorities in a secretive manner with limited transparency and inadequate oversight. This lack of openness, consent, and coordination is unacceptable and is contributing to the abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation, and trafficking of migrant children.

#### CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

1. 12/5/22: Letter from 3 U.S. Senators to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs requesting a hearing to investigate Mrs. Rodas’ claims: 79E2D68B-E48E-4FC2-8A52-879041840686 ([senate.gov](https://senate.gov))
2. 12/5/22: Letter from 5 U.S. Senators to HHS Secretary Becerra requesting a response to Mrs. Rodas’ allegations: BEEFDA90-4130-4BAF-BBAA-8F5080C35930 ([senate.gov](https://senate.gov))
3. 4/26/23: House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement hearing “The Biden Border Crisis: Exploitation of Unaccompanied Alien Children,” (1) Tara Lee Rodas Full Opening Statement (2) Full Congressional hearing: <https://www.youtube.com/live/Ehul6b-t09M?feature=share>
4. 9/12/2023: Press conference outside the U.S. Capitol, Rep. Smith announced new legislation called the “Safeguarding Endangered Children, Unaccompanied and at Risk of Exploitation Act of 2023” aka the “SECURE Act of 2023.” Ex-

DHS agent who inspired ‘Sound of Freedom,’ GOP rep demand Biden admin find 85K ‘missing’ migrant kids/Fox News

5. 9/13/2023: Testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security: An Unbearable Price: The Devastating Human Costs of the Biden-Mayorkas Border Crisis—Committee on Homeland Security (house.gov)

6. 9/14/2023: Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations: Children Are Not for Sale

7. 12/4/2023: Press Release from Senator Grassley’s office opposing HHS’s Proposed Rule Change: Grassley and Senate Republicans Demand Changes to Biden Admin Rule Endangering Safety and Wellbeing of Unaccompanied Alien Children

8. 1/22/2024: Press Release from House Judiciary Committee: Chairman Jordan Subpoenas HHS Secretary Becerra for Information on Criminal- and Gang-Affiliated UACs, Placement of UACs/House Judiciary Committee Republicans

9. 1/24/2024: Press Release from Senator Grassley: Grassley Alerts DHS, FBI to Evidence of Human Trafficking

#### DATA FIDELITY, DATA FUSION, DATA DISTRIBUTION A PACE-LIKE SOLUTION TO COMBAT CHILD TRAFFICKING

by Aaron Stevenson (former DHS intel) and Tara Rodas (former HHS detailee)

##### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A PACE-like entity can centralize and fuse data across DHS, DOJ, HHS, and other agencies to uncover patterns in child trafficking networks that isolated systems cannot detect. This will create the ability to both (1) rescue children and (2) prevent other children from being lost in slave labor, commercial sex, organ harvesting, or other activities.
- By streamlining the flow of intelligence through watch-list packages, the PACE-like system enables real-time collaboration between Federal, State, and local law enforcement to respond swiftly to trafficking threats.
- Integrating contractor and NGO performance data allows a PACE-like model to proactively identify fraud, waste, and abuse, enhancing accountability and safeguarding resources intended for vulnerable children.

Just as the PRAC’s PACE offered a solution to pandemic-related oversight challenges, a similar approach can be applied to address the trafficking of Unaccompanied Children, where the need for coordinated data analysis and integration across agencies is critical.

The solution to the trafficking crisis of Unaccompanied Children (UC) shares significant parallels with the challenges faced during the pandemic response, particularly in terms of resource distribution and oversight. During the pandemic, multiple Government agencies struggled to track and account for large-scale disbursements of relief funds, due to disjointed systems and lack of coordination.

The Pandemic Analytics Center of Excellence (PACE) at the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee (PRAC)—using the best practices from the former Recovery Accountability and Transparency (RAT) Board’s Recovery Operations Center (ROC), which supported OIGs in oversight of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—emerged as an effective solution to these problems, empowering oversight through the consolidation of data from different agencies. The PACE utilized advanced data analytics to detect fraud, waste, and abuse, identifying patterns that individual departments or contractors alone could not.

A PACE-like entity operating under the framework of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) could be critical in addressing the growing issue of child trafficking by harmonizing the efforts of different agencies involved. Such an entity would play a vital role in fusing information from various Government departments, identifying trafficked children and sponsors, and pushing vital intelligence to law enforcement at all levels.

##### DATA INTEGRATION FOR IDENTIFYING TRAFFICKED CHILDREN AND SPONSORS

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) currently manage the process for handling Unaccompanied Children who cross the border. The children are initially apprehended by Border Patrol (BP) and/or Customs and Border Protection (CBP) under DHS, held for up to 3 days, and then transferred to HHS custody. HHS is responsible for placing these children with sponsors, often relying on contractors to manage case files and perform the necessary due diligence.



However, existing challenges are threefold:

- HHS lacks access to critical datasets from other agencies like DHS, the Department of Justice (DOJ), and State or local law enforcement databases
- HHS lack tradecraft and ability to identify trafficking patterns
- DOJ/DHS/non-Federal law enforcement have demonstrated an inability to accurately and timely find trafficked children
- HHS remains an unresponsive entity to adhere to subpoenas.

This fragmentation creates gaps which traffickers have operated freely.

A PACE-like entity could solve this by centralizing access to these disparate datasets, creating a comprehensive, real-time database that includes immigration data (DHS and layered through numerous compartments), criminal records and unclassified intelligence information of transnational criminal organizations (DOJ), sponsor verification data (HHS), and more. By aggregating data from across these Federal departments and integrating it, this entity would enable the capabilities to quickly, efficiently, and thoroughly identify the children and sponsors for accountability and if necessary, recovery operations. This entity could identify patterns and anomalies in the sponsor system that suggests trafficking activity, such as (but not limited to):

- Multiple children placed with a single sponsor
  - A pattern commonly associated with trafficking networks
- Sponsors with criminal records or known ties to human trafficking
  - Data integration could flag potential traffickers that might have otherwise been missed in isolated departmental checks
- Frequent movement between States or sudden transfers of sponsorship
  - Another red flag that could indicate trafficking networks shuffling children to avoid detection.

By merging all this information, the PACE-like entity would create a comprehensive and constantly updated footprint of child placements, ensuring that trafficked children and fraudulent sponsors are more quickly and accurately identified.

Once the PACE-like entity successfully identifies suspicious patterns and trafficked individuals, the next vital step is to ensure that this intelligence is swiftly communicated to the appropriate law enforcement agencies for action.

#### DATA SHARING AND LAW ENFORCEMENT COLLABORATION

Once the PACE-like entity identifies suspicious patterns or confirmed cases of trafficking, it must act quickly to distribute this information to law enforcement agencies. A key function of this model would be the creation and dissemination of “watch-list packages” (CBP conducts transnational organized crime [TOC] watchlisting) for Federal, State, and local law enforcement. This would mirror the pandemic-era data-sharing approach, where Federal agencies used tools like the PACE to push important fraud data to local levels.

In practice, this would work as follows:

- Watchlist Packages
  - Whenever the PACE-like entity identifies a suspicious sponsor or trafficking network, it can automatically generate a detailed watch-list package, which includes all relevant data (criminal history, sponsor records, movement patterns, etc.) and flags the individual or group for immediate investigation.
- Interagency Data Flow
  - These packages could be pushed to agencies ranging from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to State and local police, who would be equipped with the necessary intelligence to track down traffickers or intervene before children disappear into exploitative networks.
- Real-Time Alerts
  - Law enforcement could be alerted in real-time to emerging threats or anomalies. This allows immediate action on suspicious sponsor applications or child transfers, improving response times and potentially preventing trafficking incidents.

This systematic flow of information would allow Federal, State, and local agencies to operate cohesively in targeting traffickers. The ability to access unified data from multiple agencies and quickly disseminate it to law enforcement will ensure that critical information doesn’t slip through bureaucratic gaps, as it often does in the current system.

While timely information sharing with law enforcement is crucial for addressing immediate threats, the PACE-like entity’s role extends further—identifying and mitigating fraud, waste, and abuse in the broader system, especially within NGO’s and contractors tasked with handling these vulnerable children.

## DETECTING FRAUD, WASTE, AND ABUSE IN NGO'S AND CONTRACTORS

Much like how PACE was instrumental in identifying fraudulent contractors and bad actors during the pandemic, a PACE-like entity overseeing child trafficking could identify cases of fraud, waste, and abuse among the non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and contractors tasked with managing the care and placement of children. Currently, these organizations operate under HHS and often rely on case workers, some of whom are volunteers or contractors, to verify sponsor information and manage child cases.

The complexity of these contracts—ranging from case management to transportation and service delivery—presents ample opportunity for exploitation, especially if oversight is weak. A PACE-like model can apply the same pattern analysis and fraud detection techniques used to uncover financial fraud during the pandemic to track misuse of Government resources in this context, which would include (but not limited to):

- Analyzing Contractor Performance
  - By integrating contract and case management data, this entity could identify patterns of underperformance or fraud by NGO's and contractors, such as mismanagement of cases, improper screening of sponsors, or the misallocation of funds intended for child services.
- Spotting Fraudulent Activity
  - The PACE-like entity could also identify contractors or NGO's with unusually high rates of sponsor placements that later turn out to be fraudulent, suggesting complicit behavior or negligence in vetting. Using a combination of contract data, payment information, and case outcomes, this entity could flag bad actors and push that information back to HHS for contract termination or legal action.
- Reducing Waste
  - By automating the analysis of contracts and service delivery outcomes, this entity could also help reduce waste and improve the efficiency of the system, ensuring that funds allocated for the care of Unaccompanied Children are spent effectively and not lost to inefficiency or corruption.

By tackling these systemic inefficiencies and potential abuses, the PACE-like entity ensures a more transparent and accountable framework, setting the stage for a comprehensive solution to combat child trafficking and better protect unaccompanied minors.

## LASTING IMPACT

In addition to its primary role of identifying trafficked children and fraudulent sponsors, the PACE-like entity would play a crucial role in shaping and informing border policies to prevent trafficking before it occurs. By analyzing large datasets and detecting patterns of exploitation, this entity can provide key insights and recommendations that drive the creation of best practices at the border.

One significant policy enhancement that could be supported by this entity is the implementation of mandatory DNA testing for individuals claiming to be relatives of unaccompanied minors. Currently, sponsors can sometimes falsely claim familial ties, which traffickers exploit to gain custody of children. Mandatory DNA testing would help confirm familial relationships, drastically reducing fraudulent claims. By analyzing data from such tests in combination with other records, the PACE-like entity would be able to monitor trends and continuously refine screening processes to make them more effective.

Additionally, this entity could guide data collection efforts at the border, recommending the capture of biometric data (e.g., fingerprints, facial recognition) and cross-referencing it with criminal records and watch lists from DOJ and DHS databases. This integration of data collection practices would ensure that individuals attempting to exploit or traffic children are flagged before they can enter the system.

Through its insights, this entity could advocate for other key policy recommendations, such as (but not limited to):

- Continuous vetting procedures for sponsors, which include background checks across multiple agency databases.
- Continuous monitoring of sponsor-child relationships post-placement, to identify any red flags of trafficking or abuse.
- Inter-agency collaboration protocols, ensuring that border officials, case workers, and law enforcement agencies follow consistent and thorough screening methods to prevent trafficking.

By continuously refining these practices based on emerging trafficking patterns, the PACE-like entity would not only respond to trafficking incidents but also prevent future cases by shaping more robust, data-driven policies at the border.

## CONCLUSION

The creation of a PACE-like entity under CIGIE could significantly enhance the ability to combat child trafficking by centralizing and analyzing data from across Government departments, identifying trafficked children and fraudulent sponsors, and pushing critical intelligence to law enforcement. The integration of data sets from DHS, DOJ, HHS, and other sources would allow for a more holistic view of trafficking networks and improve the identification of fraud, waste, and abuse within the system. By providing law enforcement with real-time, actionable intelligence and rooting out bad actors among NGO's and contractors, this approach could help protect vulnerable children and bring traffickers to justice.

*Systems of Data*

- HHS
- DHS
- DOJ
- And other various agencies.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Ms. Rodas.

Members will be recognized by order of seniority for their 5 minutes of questioning. An additional round of questioning may be called after all Members have been recognized.

I need to advise Members, we have votes scheduled for 4 o'clock, so I'm going to be strict about 5 minutes. Please watch the clock, keep your questioning to 5 minutes.

I now recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

America needs to understand that the historical model of the cartel operations has changed quite drastically in the last 4 years.

We had always envisioned that the criminal cartels, essentially born in their modern form in the 1980's and 1990's, have taken control of the criminal operations and the pipelines for drugs and human beings across Central America and Mexico up to our entire Southern Border, which is 1,954 miles of sovereign border. As Americans, we envision the cartels operate south of that border. They traffic drugs and human beings to the border, they make a lot of money doing it, it's all criminal, they're brutal. We have envisioned that there was always a measure of sovereign protection of our Nation at the Southern Border and cartel operations sort-of stopped.

We also recognize that, within the interior of our country, we have traditional criminal networks that exist in our densities of population, commonly run by gangs. Those operations, although similar to cartel operations, were not nearly as organized or incredibly well-funded, but they operated independently of the cartels in many, many hundreds of factions across the country.

What America has to understand right now is that the cartel operations now operate across the entire United States, and their pipelines continue through Central America and Mexico, across our Southern Border, into our major cities. I have reports of entire buildings held by cartels, old hotels and apartment complexes the cartels are buying for cash, taking possession of for cash. They are running their operations out of there—not one, but several buildings like that in the density of population, a network of sexual slavery operations and drug distribution operations, each easy to walk away from on short notice of a pending raid by law enforcement.

America has to understand that this has happened; that, historically, the cartels would bring their product—human beings and drugs—to the Southern Border, there'd be some level of interaction

by CBP, by Federal law enforcement, State and local law enforcement, and then unaccompanied children would be processed through HHS and turned over to nongovernmental organizations, where they would be turned over to family sponsors, either family or non-family, but sponsors that were vetted in some manner.

This is a memorandum of understanding that operated for a long time—it was quite significant—between the Office of Refugee Resettlement and United States Department of Health and Human Services, the beginning process by which unaccompanied children were delivered to sponsors that were vetted.

Because of the volume of children that were coming across in the last 4 years—and a part of that, the HHS and DHS joint statement of termination of this agreement—and this is from March 2021, my brothers and sisters. This was a policy decision to step away from the strict means by which these children were monitored and controlled. What it was replaced with was this Sponsor Care Agreement—there’s nothing to this; it’s 3½–2 pages of nothing—that the criminal networks can easily take advantage of. So we have now delivered hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied children to unvetted sponsors that have enslaved them across our country.

Ms. Hopper, you have done some brilliant research on the connection between trafficking—human trafficking—south of the border and as it networks into our country. Please expound upon what I’ve been discussing today.

Ms. HOPPER. Thank you, Chairman Higgins.

You’re correct, the terrorists, the cartels—sorry, the terms are interchangeable to me—they do know our policies and the 94 actions that were rescinded upon the new current administration coming in.

They actually do use our programs and the manner in which we process unaccompanied children against us. They actually use Border Patrol and refer to them as “migrant Uber.” They know, once migrants cross the border, it’s one phone call away; the Border Patrol picks them up and processes them. Then they know to write the number and name of the sponsor of the child—sorry.

Mr. HIGGINS. I’m not stopping you. I’m just telling you we’re out of time here.

Ms. HOPPER. Oh. Sorry.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, ma’am.

My time has expired, and I recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Correa, for 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. CORREA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I hear your testimony, and anybody who’s listening to your testimony has to cringe, to think of what you’re saying and the words, what they mean.

Looking at some data, the biggest number, the biggest group of sex-trafficked minors, reported cases, are American-citizen children of the United States. So the Chairman’s discussion that this is an international ring operating—rings, I should say—operating across international lines is absolutely correct.

We have a lot of work to do. We’re going to have to work with our partners to make sure we begin to address this challenge.

You know, last week, I heard David Beasley, former Governor of South Carolina, speaking. He was at The Aspen Institute talking

about hunger in the world. It was interesting because, at this lecture, it was standing-room-only. We had Senators and Congress Members there listening to his discussion.

His message was a sad one. It was a message, a warning to us. He was telling us that hunger around the world is only going to get worse. The situation around the world is in a crisis mode, and as soon as parts of the world like Africa and the rest of Latin America begin to really starve, heaven help us.

If you don't take my word for it, take his. He won a Nobel Prize recently. He is former head of the U.N. world food relief organization.

I say this to you because, again, during my opening statement I said, we've got to figure out the roots of this challenge. We can shut off the border. We'll do that. I doubt if it's going to work. You're still going to have children being trafficked. There's always a way when there's a profit to be made.

So, in my 3 minutes I have left, I'm going to—very complex issue, trying to break it down into little pieces. But I'm going to ask each one of you, very succinctly, tell me, what would you do that would be quick and effective to stop sex trafficking?

Mr. Carrell? In a few words, a couple of sentences.

Mr. CARRELL. Yes, sir.

In order to stop child sex trafficking coming across the border, the border must be closed, period.

Mr. CORREA. To tourists? To commerce? All of the above?

Mr. CARRELL. Sir, we have ports of entry. That's where we come through, ports of entry. We don't come—

Mr. CORREA. Thank you.

Mr. CARRELL [continuing]. Through a steel fence. No, thank you.

Mr. CORREA. Ms. Hopper, what would you say? What would your answer be?

Ms. HOPPER. To actually build on what Mr. Carrell was saying, once the borders are closed, reinstate DNA testing.

Mr. CORREA. Thank you.

Ms. Larin.

Ms. LARIN. You know, we found that child trafficking is complex. It involves law enforcement, it involves services to children, it involves multiple programs across the Federal Government. I think better coordination between those programs will help.

Mr. CORREA. Ms. Rodas.

Ms. RODAS. I believe we must designate child trafficking as a terrorist activity. This would unlock critical counterterrorism tools, including expanded intelligence collection, interagency collaboration, and financial sanctions to dismantle trafficking infrastructure through interagency cooperation.

Mr. CORREA. Would that include additional resources?

Ms. RODAS. No.

Mr. CORREA. OK. Thank you.

Ms. Larin, I'm going to focus on you in the last minute I have.

Twenty-twenty, GAO identified a host of problems with the Trump administration management of temporary shelters: failing to check State licenses of providers who ran these shelters, failing to conduct audits to ensure the facilities met standards, insufficient information sharing with their agencies.

Anything happen with that? Were those issues taken care of?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah. As I mentioned in my testimony, we made 8 recommendations covering all of those deficiencies that we found in our work during 2018 and 2019. Of them, 5 of the recommendations have been closed as implemented, and 3 of the recommendations are still open but progress has been made to address them.

Mr. CORREA. Which ones would those be, in the last 30 seconds here?

Ms. LARIN. I'm sorry?

Mr. CORREA. Which of the 3 recommendations are still open?

Ms. LARIN. There's still recommendations open related to maintaining—ensuring that policies are being followed and maintaining records accurately.

Mr. CORREA. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I'm out of time. I yield.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman yields.

Mr. Bishop is recognized.

Mr. BISHOP. So, Mr. Carrell, we're hearing some amazing things today: children being sacrificed to harvest organs. Of course, somebody said they don't—Mr. Ivey said he's not so sure about that. You've got the amazing 8-year-old with sexually transmitted diseases, 12-year-old 9 months pregnant.

My colleagues on the Minority are very concerned, though, about your language. What do you think of that?

Mr. CARRELL. I find it fascinating and interesting that, after hearing about all this testimony—and, right now, thousands of children are being raped; that's just statistical probability, 100 percent. Children are being murdered. I'm going to quote President Trump when he said, "A lot of these children are already dead."

What I find fascinating is, all of this that we've got to talk about, all this tragedy that we're dealing with, and we want to talk about what I said about Speaker Johnson in a podcast that I don't even remember.

I think maybe it goes back to the Congressman. Would he like to ask me a question that has any relevance to helping secure these children?

Then you go back further, sir. The reason why we are in this position is because we destroyed the border—not just the Southern Border, the Northern Border, and both coastlines.

This is a tragedy. It is treason, because this is not bad policy or bad mistakes or somebody's incompetent; this is intentional. So, when you do intentional acts against your Nation, that is treason.

I'll be glad to talk about Speaker Johnson and him funding NGO's to the hilt. I would love to talk about that as well.

Mr. BISHOP. Ms. Hopper, I sat in another briefing on this subject, and one of the witnesses there, a libertarian guy as I recall, sort-of said, these people that have all gone off-grid, the people that ORR can't contact, that there's no problem, and if they don't want—they sort-of live—they don't want to have contact with official sources, but they're fine.

I find that to be amazing, but can you respond to that? I mean, you've seen a fair number of things, it sounds like.

Ms. HOPPER. So, if American citizens can't deflect from agencies like CPS and just respond and say, "Oh, these children are fine,

you don't need to do a home check" or foster-care checks or welfare checks on American citizens, and you don't take American citizens' words that the children are fine, why would you take the word of a sponsor who you don't know, don't have accurate background records?

If they are an illegal migrant, many background checks haven't been done on them. So we are handing kids over to known MS-13 members and known pedophiles.

So I'm sorry, I'm not willing to take someone's word that the child is OK.

Mr. BISHOP. Isn't that unbelievable, callous indifference, to take the position that these people are just, you know, not wanting to be in touch with authorities? Isn't that a horrific disregard of human beings that you know are being abused and suffering? Would you agree?

Ms. HOPPER. I agree.

Mr. BISHOP. Ms. Rodas, what—one of the—Mr. Correa, I believe, just made the point that the United States is already the—I think he said the leading location of sex trafficking in the United States. We've been having whatever resources are in law enforcement already sorely tested.

What will happen to the American children that might be rescued from sex trafficking if our already over-taxed, over-burdened law enforcement resources have to bear this additional immense burden? What's going to—aren't they all going to suffer, all the children who would benefit from those services, if you just have more and more of them, unless we can pay more and more?

How much would it cost, how many trillions of dollars would it cost to stop this entirely?

Ms. RODAS. Well, I would submit that you could save a few billion dollars by not running the program in the manner that it's being run.

I'm very unclear as to why we're luring children to the United States to be the white-glove delivery system of these children to known MS-13, 18th Street Gang, Russian Balkan crime syndicates, and other unsavory characters?

We've known since February 2021, when DHS whistleblower Aaron Stevenson came forward, we've known since 2015, when DHS whistleblower Jason Piccolo came forward, that children are being used. So we—

Mr. BISHOP. My time's expired.

Ms. RODAS. Yes, sir.

Mr. BISHOP. Very well said. Someone may get a chance to follow up.

I yield back.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Ivey is recognized.

Mr. IVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Rodas, you picked up 2 books there. What were they?

Ms. RODAS. So this book is actually called "Out of the Shadows" by Dr. Jason Piccolo. He was the very first whistleblower, in 2015, so prior to when the Chairman referenced the severing of the DHS and HHS information-sharing agreement because they didn't want chilling on their sponsors.

At one point, this brave whistleblower, when he was looking and had the ability to look at the data, said, hey, we are giving children to criminals and pedophiles and traffickers. That was 2015.

Mr. IVEY. OK. That was 2015.

What was the other book I think you had?

Ms. RODAS. Oh, it wasn't a book, sir.

Mr. IVEY. Oh, I'm sorry.

Ms. RODAS. No, I referenced Aaron Stevenson, who is the DHS whistleblower from 2021.

Mr. IVEY. Uh-huh.

Ms. RODAS. He was the TOC Mission expert—that's the Transnational Organized Crime Mission expert. He identified the very first time in the history of the program that a TOC member, because of all the relaxation of the vetting, was able to sponsor a child.

That brave whistleblower lost his job for coming forward to expose child sex trafficking.

Mr. IVEY. All right.

Let me ask a couple of questions to follow up on what I think I've heard. I think you and Ms. Hopper mentioned resuming DNA testing—

Ms. RODAS. Yes, sir.

Mr. IVEY [continuing]. As steps that should be taken?

Prison for sponsors who lose their—I wrote "charges," but unaccompanied children—I think that was you, Ms. Rodas—as a solution?

Ms. RODAS. Yes.

Mr. IVEY. OK.

Do you know if there's Federal law that covers that, or do you think Federal law would need to be implemented to address that?

Ms. RODAS. We would probably need to say—yeah, we would need to put in a law, because it doesn't currently exist.

I think it's very important for people to understand—

Mr. IVEY. All right.

Ms. RODAS [continuing]. Just like PRS is not enforceable—

Mr. IVEY. Fair enough. I'm running out of time. I apologize.

You also mentioned that you thought this was a 10-year problem. You raised concerns about HHS not having the tools or the expertise to address some of these problems because of the cartel involvement, I take it, that has become part of this?

Ms. RODAS. Well, even Mr. Carey, who used to formally be with HHS, he's even said, they're not law enforcement. They know—

Mr. IVEY. OK.

Ms. RODAS [continuing]. They're not law enforcement.

Mr. IVEY. So that would be DOJ, then, potentially, or other law enforcement entities that should be more involved with this?

Ms. RODAS. Absolutely.

Mr. IVEY. All right.

Then—boy, I think this was Ms. Larin?

You mentioned—to Mr. Correa too—that some of the changes that had been made—more accurate licenses, better information regarding past allegations of misconduct—because sometimes entities would, even though they'd been identified for misconduct, would



still be receiving unaccompanied children—that that needed to be addressed.

Is that fair?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah, that's correct.

Mr. IVEY. All right.

Then you said something about improving the ability to confirm that kids are in school, aware of their court dates and the like.

I was curious about how that would be done. Would that—you'd have to increase the number of people who have oversight over these children? Or how would that work?

Ms. LARIN. I mean, what we're really asking for is documentation. We're asking that, when they reach out and children receive post-release services, HHS keeps a record of that so that they can show which kids have gotten the services, which haven't.

Mr. IVEY. I see. So when the—

Ms. LARIN. That's what they haven't been able to do.

Mr. IVEY [continuing]. Kids reach out, if they call, for example, that that would be tracked?

Ms. LARIN. Exactly.

Mr. IVEY. OK.

Then, Mr. Carrell—I apologize; I'm running out of time—you had 3 points—well, first of all, let me—let's—the organ harvesting issue.

So, Ms. Hopper, I think you identified issues, but I think the ones you mentioned were in Mexico. Are there any you're pointing to in the United States? Not that that makes it better, but I just want to make sure we know what we're talking about here.

Ms. HOPPER. You are correct. You had mentioned that there were no footnotes. I was not going to put an incarcerated cartel member's information out there, but that would be the footnote.

However, they were harvested for buyers that were in the United States looking for those organs.

Mr. IVEY. Well, for footnotes, what I would mean in that instance would be, for example, if there are cases that have been brought to prosecute, you could cite those.

But the fact that—I just want to nail down, they are not in the United States.

Mr. Carrell, you made an allegation about organ harvesting as well. Are you saying that's taking place in the United States or somewhere else?

Mr. CARRELL. In my documentary, I interview multiple people—

Mr. IVEY. Please give me the quick answer.

Mr. CARRELL. Yes, this is happening in America. To deny that is—

Mr. IVEY. I'm not asking you to deny it. But have any charges been brought against anyone for doing that?

Mr. CARRELL. I don't know that right now, sir.

Mr. IVEY. OK.

Then you mentioned that, as your 3 parts to your solution, every single one of the 550,000 unaccompanied children should be identified.

After they are identified, what is the next step in the process that would happen there? What happens to those kids after we identify them?

Mr. CARRELL. We make sure they're safe.

Mr. IVEY. By—in what way? What do you have in mind?

Mr. CARRELL. What do you mean by “what”—I don't understand the question, by what way?

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. CARRELL. I don't understand.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Guest is recognized for 5 minutes for questioning.

Mr. GUEST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Carrell, first, I want to thank you for your 24 years of service to your country and for all that you are doing to call attention to the crisis along our Southwest Border.

Ms. Hopper, I also want to thank you, as well, and direct my questions first to you, Ms. Hopper.

You state in your written testimony, you talk about this not being a political issue, that this is, in fact, a humanitarian crisis that has costed the lives of countless children. You go on to talk about the devastation that you've seen first-hand and that you have seen cartel members operating with impunity along our Southwest Border.

We are well aware of human trafficking and the number of individuals who are brought into the country illegally, both children and adults, some of those forced into modern-day slavery to pay back the cost of their safe travel across the border.

We're also very well aware of sex trafficking. We're aware that individuals are brought into the country and they're sex-trafficked once they are—sex-trafficked once they've entered the country.

You do a great job in your report talking about issues of sexual violence that occur during transit. You talk about that—you say here that there's a disturbing aspect of cartel operations and the sexual exploitation that occurs at specific points along the smuggling route. You even refer to those as what are known as “rape trees,” where young women and in some cases possibly young men are sexually assaulted by those individuals that are giving them passage across the border.

So, while we as the committee are well aware of those allegations, you also bring up another disturbing, shocking new category, I guess, if you will—and I think, Mr. Carrell, you may have addressed that briefly as well—involving the harvesting of organs and that drug cartels are now moved into this new category of activity involving organ harvesting.

In many cases, it seems like, from reading your testimony—I'm going to ask you to expand on that in just a minute—that these are migrants who are attempting to travel into the United States—that drug cartels are, in cases, harvesting organs of those individuals. You said that this is a common practice that occurs at both veterinarian clinics and hospitals, I'm assuming there in Mexico.

You even talk about a report from August 2024 where there were 2 American college students who were there in Mexico who were drugged, with the belief that they were to be apprehended so that their organs could be harvested.

So, as we move into this, I just want to give you a minute to enlighten our committee about what you have found as it relates specifically to drug cartels, which are now moving into this disturbing new arena of harvesting organs of individuals attempting to come to the United States.

Ms. HOPPER. Thank you for the opportunity to expand on that.

During the interview with the former Sinaloa Cartel affiliate, he expanded on a lot of these, a lot of what you highlighted.

He expanded on the fact that these migrant children, especially if they're traveling without their parent, there is no way to communicate whether they've made it through their journey or not. If a cartel member or a smuggler gets a call that there is a specific organ that they're looking for, they will scout out those organs, and especially focus on migrant children, namely for the fact that they are vulnerable, they're unable to fight back, and, you know, as horrid as it sounds, their organs are more, you know, intact and in better shape.

So there is no way to communicate with these children once they've crossed into the border, so they kind-of disappear along the way.

Mr. GUEST. Mr. Carrell, let me ask you, since you've also talked on this subject, briefly, do you agree with the assessment of Ms. Hopper on the organ harvesting? Do you have anything that you would like to add?

Mr. CARRELL. Organ harvesting is real. To think that it's not—that we're trafficking—this Federal Government is bringing children over that are being lost, sexually mutilated, sexually raped, murdered, and then we're shocked or appalled that there could be organ harvesting?

The people I've interviewed, multiple people, said—and I asked them, is this an anomaly, is this a one-off? No. This is pervasive and is growing daily.

Mr. GUEST. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman yields.

Mrs. Ramirez is recognized for questions.

Mrs. RAMIREZ. Thank you, Chairmen and Ranking Members.

You know, I'm not surprised that my Republican colleagues here, including one who has so candidly and callously posted racist tweets about Haitian immigrants, are calling up yet another witness with no credibility on the hearing topic, who believe in conspiracy theories, write about it and promote lies, all to write extremist ideologies, to be here.

On your X account, Mr. Carrell, formerly Twitter, you asked, "What is treason?" Well, let me answer for you. This right here, this is treason.

In one of your tweets, you claimed violent January 6th rioters who destroyed public property and attempted to stop a democratic transition of power as "political prisoners." I find it to be shameful that a former law enforcement agent would defend a mob who beat law enforcement officers protecting this very building.

In another post, you write, "Mass deportations will be swift, but they will be deadly." Actually, I agree with you on that; they will

be deadly. So I find it unforgivable that you, Trump, and Republican Members of this committee would even advocate for it.

In another post, you say, we should destroy the Federal Government and that the Federal Government is the enemy. I find it odd, considering you were once a Federal employee and you've been begging to come back into the incoming Trump administration for a new job.

Last, you posted that the Federal Government is the epicenter of pedophilia—an outright falsehood, with perhaps the exception of Trump's stellar Attorney General pick.

I have no questions for you. No one serious about our role here should be asking you questions. Your misleading statements are counterproductive.

This committee, tomorrow, is supposed to be having—although I'm hearing we may not have—a committee hearing on worldwide threats. To me and so many others, the fearmongering, the racist “invasion” rhetoric that you and extremist Republicans spread, in my opinion, is probably the truest threat to our homeland.

So, Ms. Larin, I want to ask you a question.

First, let me start by saying, more than 4,000 children were forcibly separated from their parents under Trump's family separation policy, including infants who were literally removed from their mothers' arms.

Because of that administration's cruelty and incompetence, more than 1,400 of these children still have not been reunited with their parents more than 6 years later. They may never be reunited with their parents.

Trump has said that he will do it again; he will deport and separate families.

Ms. Larin, can you tell us why it's been so difficult to reunite children separated under President Trump?

Ms. LARIN. You know, there are several reasons.

First, there was no planning before the separation policy was put in place, so DHS and ORR didn't have an opportunity to put procedures in place to track the children.

There was no database that both agencies could access and share to track the whereabouts of the children. In HHS's database, ORR's database, there was no field to indicate even whether a child had been separated from a parent.

So it became a very labor-intensive paper process to reunite children with their family members that has taken many years and, as you say, is on-going.

Mrs. RAMIREZ. Do you think that particularly the babies, the toddlers, the 1-year-olds who were ripped away from their families will ever be reunited?

Ms. LARIN. They were particularly difficult to reunite because they could not advocate for themselves.

Mrs. RAMIREZ. Yeah. Thank you.

Look, folks, you're going to—you have a trifecta. You'll have an opportunity to pass solutions. We want to address the issues, and, look, I'm the first to tell you, I don't want to hear about one woman being raped crossing that border. My mother experienced it while pregnant with me, crossing that border.

So let me tell you something. If you decide that you are going to be the party that's going to bring solutions and create the legal pathway so no child is kidnapped, raped, or no woman is, then I look forward to working with you on that.

But if all we're going to continue to do in this committee is bring people here who continue to dehumanize children and families who are risking everything because they have lost everything crossing that border, then I'm going to continue to push back and fight back.

Because I actually understand what's happening in these countries. I have visited these countries. I want to get to the root cause of migration. I want to get to solutions. You've been talking about policy solutions; you're——

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mrs. RAMIREZ [continuing]. Going to have the opportunity to do it.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentlewoman from Georgia, Ms. Greene, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. GREENE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The root cause of migration is a Federal Government that has legalized an invasion into this country. That's the root cause.

You talk about treason. I can tell you right now, I consider that treason against American citizens. This has been an invasion in this country, and the cartels have benefited by tens of billions of dollars.

Mass deportations cannot happen fast enough, not fast enough, not for the cartels, terrorist gangs, and criminals that have made billions and billions of dollars, and children have been the biggest victims of it.

Human trafficking is a \$150-billion-a-year industry. In 2021, Georgia had one of the highest number of cases per capita that were reported through trafficking hotlines. Approximately one-third of all human-trafficking victims are children.

The United States is one of the top destinations for human trafficking and is among the largest consumers of child sex. That is sick. The average age of entry into the commercial sex market is 12 years old.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have been complicit—complicit—just as you testified, Mr. Carrell, in making the United States Federal Government the world's largest child-sex-trafficking organization in modern history. My God, what has happened to our country?

This administration has adhered to our enemies and allowed cartels and coyotes to make around \$13 billion a year in human trafficking alone. Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and Mayorkas have allowed over 500,000 unaccompanied alien children to cross our border.

As Mr. Carrell testified, the probability that thousands of these alien children are being raped at this very moment is 100 percent.

Ms. Rodas, you further highlighted that when we learned in February 2023 that 85,000 of these children were missing, zero action was taken to rescue the children, and zero action was taken to prevent other children from being lost in slave labor, commercial sex, organ harvesting, and other unspeakable evils.

I don't care if the organ harvesting happened in Mexico. If the buyers are in the United States, we've got a serious problem.

Consequently, more than a year later, in July 2024, we learned that this administration has lost track of more than 320,000 children. How on Earth do we do that?

The failures, that's how. These are the results of Democrat policies. The Democrats want to claim moral superiority and accuse us of family separation policies. Well, they are the party of child sex trafficking. The American people spoke out about that on the election.

Surrendering control of our borders to the cartels, expediting vetting processes, and refusing to share data with law enforcement so they can dismantle the trafficking infrastructure are the policies of Democrats. More than 100 children being released to the same address in Austin, Texas, is a policy of the Democrats.

Mr. Carrell, in your documentary, "What Is Treason?", there are some very heart-wrenching claims about the trafficking of unaccompanied children. Several of the most disturbing claims we heard are: Religious organizations and NGO's are operating as co-conspirators. These organizations are used as the pipeline to traffic the children to the end abuser, in many instances. Other disturbing claims made include pedophilia rings purchasing children, as well as organ harvesting.

Can you please talk in specifics about the evidence and finding of your research that have led you to these conclusions?

Mr. CARRELL. That's a great question, because the problem—the Federal Government does not have the ability, the capacity, or the manpower to move 30 million people that have crossed the border in the last 4 years into America. They can't. So who do they partner with? The Federal Government partner with the NGO's, all cloaked under the umbrella of religion.

Ms. GREENE. They're paying them with American tax dollars, by the way.

Mr. CARRELL. We are talking about—this is Joe Biden's numbers and statistics. In 4 years, he will have spent over \$700 billion on illegal immigrants, to surpass \$1 trillion. That's the range that we have.

I'm telling you, these NGO's are making tens and hundreds of billions of dollars, and they are the traffickers.

Ms. GREENE. But, Mr. Carrell, can you talk specifically about the organ harvesting? Where do we find evidence of this? Who do we need to talk to?

Mr. CARRELL. Well, this is just like somebody says, "Well, show me where the drug cartels are." They're not showing you where they are. The organ harvesting is not going to—they're not going to show you. It's not "60 Minutes." They're not going to come and show you, "Hey, this is what we're doing, this is how it's going."

Ms. GREENE. Uh-huh.

Mr. CARRELL. I'm talking to people that are inside the belly of the beast that are hunting children down to save them, to going after organizations that go after the—

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentlewoman's time has expired.

Mr. CARRELL. This is happening in America. Undeniable.

Ms. CLARKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman—

Mr. HIGGINS. Representative Clarke is recognized for 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. CLARKE. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank the Ranking Members.

The energy in this room is just so toxic. But let me share facts.

President-elect Trump and his would-be newly-appointed border czar, Tom Homan, who is known as the “father of family separation,” falsely claimed that people will not come to the United States border if they know they will be ripped apart from their family.

Yet, under their watch and the cruel policies, illegal entry at the border increased dramatically under Trump’s first term, before the pandemic halted migration around the world. Fact.

Caring for children was not and is not a priority for the Trump administration. The Trump administration had no plans for how to care for the children they ripped away from their parents. GAO found that the Trump administration had no contingencies in place to deal with the thousands of children they separated from their families, and this is why children remain separated to this day.

So, Ms. Larin, could you explain more about what GAO found and why this became such a large problem?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah, we looked at the family separation policy back when it was happening, and, as I mentioned before, we found that there was a lack of planning; there was a lack of consistent data that DHS and HHS had on these children; there was no way to record which children had been separated from their parents.

Yeah, the separation policy created a crisis at ORR because they weren’t prepared for the number of very young children. Most shelters were really geared toward 13- to 17-year-olds and weren’t really ready to take care of infants and young children. So they really had to scramble to be able to do that, and it created a crisis.

Ms. CLARKE. This is a fact.

My Republican colleagues pretend to care about children, but their actions say otherwise. They defended President-elect Trump’s family separation policy, put kids in cages, joked about it, and left kids at the mercy of the cartels by making them wait in Mexico under the Migrant Protection Protocols.

Just this Congress, they tried to undo protections for children in the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. Why don’t we hear Republicans talk about the harm that those policies do to children? Hm.

When they have full control of the Government next Congress, I hope to see my colleagues take actions to make children safer.

Director Larin, your agency completed a report in December 2023 that analyzed Federal efforts to counter child trafficking and made several recommendations.

Ms. Larin, can you speak to those recommendations and how the Biden administration has made efforts to resolve them?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah. We found that, while there are a number of programs that serve all human-trafficking victims, including children, there were 6 programs specifically in the Federal Government, both at the Department of Justice and at HHS, that are focused on children. What we recommended is that an interagency task force be formed to ensure that those efforts are coordinated so

that children who are victims receive the services that they are entitled to.

That recommendation to both DOJ and to HHS has been implemented. There is an interagency task force to coordinate.

Ms. CLARKE. Very well.

Are you aware of whether concerns about the lack of contingencies and appropriate planning were raised before family separation was implemented?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah. The lack of planning meant that the agencies had to figure it out on the fly. That was really—the key deficiency was a system for tracking where the children were. That's what didn't exist, because there was no time to plan for it.

Ms. CLARKE. Well, I thank you very much for your response.

Mr. Chairman, I think that, you know, this is a very serious issue, but the way that this committee has conducted this hearing, bringing entertainment to the table to share with us their opinions and opine without facts, this committee has never done that. I see that that's the rabbit hole we're going down. Mr. Chairman, we need to put this in check before it gets out of hand.

I yield back.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentlelady yields.

The gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Ezell, is recognized.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's pretty obvious today that we have a lot of differences of opinions. I've spent my entire life until coming to Congress as a police officer, a sheriff, a chief of police, and I have seen first-hand—I have held a victim's hand who has been violently raped and abused. Let me tell you something: It is the worst thing you will ever witness in your life, to see a victim of rape and terrible abuse. There's nothing that can compare to it except for murder, and that victim is no longer able to speak. But I have seen first-hand just how terrible it is.

So, no secret here that the border's wide open. It's no secret that everything has been going on for the last 3½ years.

What I've heard today—Ms. Larin, with all due respect, I've heard you answer questions several times about lack of planning on the Trump administration for whatever failures they had.

So tell me what some of the planning, successful planning, that we have seen over the last 3½ years out of this Biden administration to stop some of these hundreds of thousands of people coming across this border. What have this Biden administration done in the last 3½ years to plan and to stop what we have seen?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah, I can't speak to border-control issues.

Mr. EZELL. Uh-huh. OK. But what I've heard you say multiple times: a lack of planning, a lack of planning. I haven't seen very much planning coming out of this administration.

So what I'd like to go into, what I'd like to ask Mr. Carrell and anybody else that would like to answer this: Can you name some of these NGO's that have specifically taken these hundreds of millions of dollars and not used it to protect these children?

Mr. CARRELL. Catholic Charities. Lutheran Family Services. Jewish Family Services.

I spoke to a gentleman that works in DHS; he actually sends the electronic fund transfers. I asked him, "Sir, tell me, who do you



send—who are you responsible for, and how much is the largest check you’ve cut?” He said, “I am over Jewish Family Services, and I cut a check for \$600 million.” I said, “Is that for, like, 3 years?” He told me, “J.J., get in the game. That’s 2 or 3 months, and it’s renewable.”

That’s one NGO.

I said, “Well, Catholic Charities is bigger than Jewish Family Services.” “Yes. They get the same or more.”

You’re talking about billions upon billions of dollars given to NGO’s to further the trafficking of all—of everyone crossing the border, to include children.

Mr. EZELL. Uh-huh.

Ms. Rodas, I understand you were on detail to care for and place children entering into the United States via the Southwest Border with sponsors in the United States.

While serving on detail at HHS, I understand you sounded the alarm about how HHS handled these unaccompanied children. Thank you for your bravery.

Do you believe any of these concerns were taken seriously?

Ms. RODAS. Congressman, no, sadly, I don’t.

As I was raising the alarm, along with other wonderful people who were on the site—Deb White, a fellow whistleblower—we were told, “You are not to be investigating the sponsors. Your job is to get the child to that sponsor.”

When we had children who were going to addresses that we had already ID’ed as having multiple children, and I’m talking to the boss, who is an attorney, my superior, the director, she said, “Tara, you need to understand, at HHS, we only get sued if we keep kids in care too long. We don’t get sued by traffickers.”

That is appalling, that I heard from a Federal Government employee regarding children who we knew were going to addresses that were already under investigation. I’ve never witnessed anything in my whole life, and had I not seen it with my own eyes, I’m not sure I could believe it.

Mr. EZELL. What happened as a result of you pushing the envelope?

Ms. RODAS. Well, I wasn’t the most popular person on the site.

But when DHS whistleblower Aaron Stevenson sounded the alarm and went public in August 2021 and I saw that they were MS-13 and 18th Street Gang—my husband is from El Salvador, so I know that this is not a good thing, to be giving children to MS-13—they discovered that I went to the Department of Justice Office of Inspector General and HHS Office of Inspector General, and it took them less than 20 days to falsely accuse me of wrongdoing, threaten me with investigation, walk me off the site, the “perp walk” in front of your peers, and take my badge.

So that’s how much they appreciated that I was revealing that children were being sponsored by MS-13.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman yields.

The gentleman from New York, Mr. Suozzi, is recognized.

Mr. SUOZZI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to also wish my best wishes to Mr. Bishop. I really—whenever anyone asks me about him, I said, he’s really a very smart guy. You’ve got a lot of tremendous ability.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I have to tell you, I’m very sad, the whole thing’s very sad. I look up at the Capitol dome sometimes, and I’m inspired by it every time I look at it, but I think to myself, boy, that really hides a lot of dysfunction. You come into a beautiful hearing room like this, you see the drapes and the chandeliers and this dais, and it seems, you know, so wonderful, and there’s a lot of dysfunction.

It’s sad, the stories everybody’s telling here today about kids being raped, people being trafficked, organs being harvested, families being separated, kids in cages, parents worried about their children, people trying to make money off of other people’s misery. All we do is, we—I heard a lot of stuff I agree with here today, but all we do is point fingers at each other.

Ms. Rodas, you talked about a whistleblower in 2015 talking about sex trafficking. It didn’t start all of a sudden one day on January 20, 2021. It’s been going on for decades. We spend all of our time blaming each other and trying to point at bogeymen instead of doing our jobs in the U.S. Congress to try and find agreement with each other.

I’ve got great friends on the other side of the aisle. We’ve been talking about what can we do to find some common ground to secure the border, to fix the broken asylum system, to treat people like human beings and address some of the thorny problems related to DACA and TPS and farm workers and health care workers and Afghan readjustment. We’ve got a lot of common-ground agreement.

But people are terrified, on both sides of the aisle, of speaking up, because they’re afraid that the extremists in their party are going to cut their legs off if they dare try to work with the other side.

The toxicity that we hear in this hearing room and in the media constantly, instead of trying to actually solve the problem, where these kids are suffering every day, where families are suffering—blame, blame, blame, blame. We’ve got to do our jobs to find common ground to help people that are suffering.

We can find clever things for us to say about you guys and for you to say about us. “Ha, I got him. I showed him.” “Look what I got you on. I got you on one.” Let’s do our jobs. Let’s solve the problem.

So thank you to the witnesses for being here today. I know many of you have devoted your lives to try to address these problems. I appreciate it.

I’ve only got a minute and a half left, but—I’m not even sure what to ask you, really, other than, what’s the one thing you’d like us to do, Ms. Rodas? What’s the one main thing you want us to do?

Try and do it quick so I can give everybody a shot to speak.

Ms. RODAS. For me, I’m going to stick with that we need to designate child trafficking as a terrorist activity. I think this would unlock the critical counterterrorism tools, expanded intelligence, interagency collaboration—

Mr. SUOZZI. All—all complicated things. It's so complicated to deal with these problems. You cannot solve complicated problems in an environment of fear and anger and blame. You can only do it when people who are reasonable are willing to sit down across from each other and say, I think this; or, I think that; well, how about this; or, how about—and find common ground.

So thank you, Ms. Rodas.

Ms. RODAS. Thank you.

Mr. SUOZZI. Ms. Larin, do you want to say anything?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah. I would say, the key is oversight. We have programs that are in place, and the problems occur when the implementation is not done correctly.

Mr. SUOZZI. Who do we need to do the oversight? The Congress needs to do the oversight? Or do we need—is there—Inspector General? Who should be doing a better job of oversight?

Ms. LARIN. Yes. All of the above.

Mr. SUOZZI. Thank you, Ms. Larin.

Ms. Hopper, are you back to DNA?

Ms. HOPPER. I would like to echo what Tara said as far as designating these organizations as terrorists.

Mr. SUOZZI. Thank you very much, Ms. Hopper.

Mr. Carrell.

Mr. CARRELL. Yes, sir. The root cause of all this is the open borders and the——

Mr. SUOZZI. We have to secure the borders. There was a bipartisan deal to secure the borders. I've got a new proposal to secure the borders. No asylum applications in between the ports of entry; that's what I'm in favor of. No Executive Order, no—Congress says, no asylum applications in between the ports of entry.

Let's create Safe Mobility Offices. You want to do "Remain in Mexico"? I don't want you to remain in Mexico. I want you to remain in other countries all throughout the world and apply there, and if you apply there and you get denied, you don't come in; if you get accepted, you come in. Safe Mobility Offices throughout the country.

Thank you, Mr. Carrell.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mrs. McIver is recognized for 5 minutes for questions.

Votes have been called, and we're trying to close out quickly.

Mrs. MCIVER. Thank you, Mr. Chairmen and Ranking Members and our witnesses, for joining us today.

Homeland security extends beyond protecting our borders and ports of entry. It's about ensuring that these protections are implemented fairly and equitably. The pathway to citizenship is thought to unlock prosperity, but not everyone has the same key.

I commend the Biden-Harris administration for taking significant steps to improve the care and safety of unaccompanied children, including addressing the harm caused by family separations during the Trump administration.

However, more must be done. Like my colleague from New York, the fine gentleman from New York, stated, we must talk about what we should be doing to address the problem.

We know that the Biden administration has also come to Congress for help with the resources needed to do more.

My question is to Ms. Larin.

Can you also describe some of the assistance that the Biden administration has asked for from Congress? Have you received that help yet?

Ms. LARIN. Yeah, I actually can't speak to that. I am not familiar with the Biden administration's request.

Mrs. MCIVER. OK. That's interesting. All right.

My closing, because I know we have to rush to votes, is that Congress has a responsibility to come together to fund and support these critical efforts. Our conversation today is vital, even though it's a little toxic, to advancing fair and equitable practices that protect all children within our borders and those seeking safety and refuge here.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back my time.

Mr. HIGGINS. The gentlelady yields.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony today and Members for the questions.

Mr. Correa, do you need—

Mr. CORREA. Yeah. I'd like to submit something for the record if it's the right time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HIGGINS. So let's do that now.

Mr. CORREA. I'd like to submit a statement for the record from the Kids in Need of Defense, some recommendations on how the Government can protect some of these children.

Mr. HIGGINS. Without objection.

Mr. CORREA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The information follows:]

#### STATEMENT OF KIDS IN NEED OF DEFENSE (KIND)

NOVEMBER 19, 2024

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) is the leading U.S.-based organization dedicated to the protection of unaccompanied children. KIND was founded by the Microsoft Corporation and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Special Envoy Angelina Jolie. We have provided legal representation to more than 16,000 children in U.S. immigration proceedings, provided legal rights education to more than 75,000 children in the United States, and formed pro bono partnerships with over 800 corporations, law firms, law schools, and bar associations to provide children with pro bono representation. KIND's social services program facilitates the coordinated provision to unaccompanied children of counseling, educational support, medical care, and other services. KIND also helps children who are returning to their countries of origin to do so safely and to reintegrate into their home communities. KIND's programs in Mexico and Central America work to address the root causes of forced migration and help protect the safety and well-being of migrant children at every phase of their migration journey. Through its European Initiative, KIND and partners in Belgium, France, Greece, Ireland, and the United Kingdom work to ensure access to high-quality pro bono legal assistance for unaccompanied children in Europe.

Each year, thousands of unaccompanied children arrive to the United States, having fled extreme violence, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and other dangers in their countries of origin. Many of these children come from countries across Central America, and increasingly, from throughout the Western Hemisphere, as global displacement has reached historic levels due to war, political unrest, natural disasters, and other threats in many parts of the world. Unable to find safety in their countries of origin, children are often forced to undertake dangerous journeys, and once in the United States, face complex immigration proceedings. These children, many of whom have experienced severe trauma, confront numerous obstacles after arrival, including limited resources, language barriers, and the need to navigate the complex U.S. immigration system, often on their own.

Recognizing the unique vulnerability of unaccompanied children, Congress created fundamental procedural protections designed to help these children fairly access protection and navigate immigration proceedings to prevent their return to harm or exploitation. These safeguards, enacted on a broad bipartisan basis through the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA), build upon foundational child welfare safeguards for all children in Federal immigration custody that are embodied within the *Flores* Settlement Agreement, signed by the Federal Government in 1997.

The necessity of these protections—and Government-wide efforts to ensure the well-being of unaccompanied children—have only grown in importance in light of recent media articles and investigations and Congressional oversight documenting devastating and wide-spread labor exploitation, including in various cases labor trafficking, of unaccompanied migrant children throughout many U.S. companies and industries. Many children have worked long hours or overnight shifts in factories producing goods or cleaning dangerous industrial equipment. Harmful conditions have led to chronic illness, the loss of limbs, and other severe injuries. These reports have garnered critical attention to the need for a coordinated, whole-of-Government effort to eradicate such exploitation, protect unaccompanied children's safety, and empower children to thrive.

KIND strongly supports interagency efforts to prevent and combat child trafficking and labor exploitation and to uphold TVPRA and *Flores* protections, which play an important role in reducing children's vulnerability and facilitating their access to legal processes and supportive services that can advance safety and stability and mitigate risks of mistreatment. We remain deeply concerned, however, about recent Congressional proposals that, by weakening existing legal protections for unaccompanied children, would make these children more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, not less.

As Congress considers measures to protect unaccompanied children it is essential that any proposals build on existing legal protections and treat unaccompanied children as children first and foremost—leveraging a trauma-informed and holistic response to meeting the needs of this particularly vulnerable population.

KIND recommends the following practical and achievable measures to reduce trafficking and exploitation risks to unaccompanied children, achieve new processing and resource efficiencies, and best deploy the expertise and experience of border personnel: (1) ensure robust compliance with anti-trafficking safeguards provided for by the TVPRA and ensure the ability of unaccompanied children to request protection at U.S. borders; (2) hire child welfare professionals in CBP facilities; (3) expand legal and social services for unaccompanied children; (4) support specialized children's dockets; and (5) ensure safe reintegration services for children who are ordered removed or have requested to return to their country of origin.

#### PREVENTION OF TRAFFICKING OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AT U.S. BORDERS

When first arriving to the United States, unaccompanied children are initially processed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which must comply with specific protections provided for by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA) regarding identification, screening, and transfer of unaccompanied children. Enacted with broad bipartisan support, the TVPRA created additional procedural safeguards for unaccompanied children in the immigration system to help ensure children's cases will be appropriately considered to prevent children's return to trafficking and other harm. Prior to the law's creation, border authorities often rapidly returned children back across the border to Mexico or to other countries without any assessment of whether the child would face persecution or other harm if returned. Traffickers and other criminal actors, accustomed to these practices, often waited on the other side of the border to target or recruit returning children.

The TVPRA's safeguards have protected thousands of children from trafficking, exploitation, and other harm and ensured that the Federal Government will be able to appropriately receive, screen, and care for unaccompanied children. Under the law's provisions, CBP must conduct an initial screening of unaccompanied children from Mexico and Canada to determine whether the child is at risk of or has a history of being trafficked, credibly fears persecution if returned, and is able to make an independent decision to withdraw their application for admission to the United States.<sup>1</sup> If indicators of harm or risk are present, the child cannot make a voluntary decision about withdrawing their application, and/or CBP cannot make a decision within 48 hours, the child must be immediately transferred to ORR custody. For un-

<sup>1</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1232(a)(2).

accompanied children from all other countries, the TVPR—A provides that CBP must identify the child as unaccompanied within 48 hours and make a referral to ORR within 72 hours. ORR, which was tasked by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 with care and placement of unaccompanied children based on its experience with refugee children,<sup>2</sup> conducts intake screenings to identify indicators of trafficking or other protection concerns once a child is transferred to the agency's care.

Additional TVPRA protections help ensure that unaccompanied children are able to better navigate a system designed principally for adults and that the Government can fully evaluate children's cases for legal protection. These protections include access to counsel and independent child advocates, exemption from the 1-year filing deadline for asylum claims, and the opportunity for unaccompanied children to have their asylum claims first heard in a non-adversarial interview setting before U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).<sup>3</sup> Compliance with the TVPRA's safeguards at all times remains a critical component of migration management and safe, orderly, and humane border processes to ensure that children are never deported to trafficking and other harm and that they are able to obtain lasting protection.

Mindful of the need for improved care and protection of children during border reception, Congress has directed and on a bipartisan basis supported funding for the Department of Homeland Security to hire licensed child welfare professionals along the U.S.-Mexico border. These professionals, who will have expertise in identifying protection needs and trafficking indicators, will help advance child well-being at a critical point in a child's search for protection. They will also strengthen border security by freeing up agents and officers to focus on vital law enforcement functions for which they are specially trained. Efforts to place child welfare professionals in border facilities must be accompanied by DHS's robust compliance with national minimum standards for care and treatment of children in Federal immigration custody, as provided for by the *Flores* Settlement Agreement. By providing for children's unique needs in—all border processes and ensuring robust compliance with TVPRA and *Flores* protections, the Federal Government can better prevent trafficking and other harm and foster greater trust among children and families that can aid in the early identification and investigation of trafficking concerns.

Several prior border policies in the United States and the region have placed limitations on the ability of asylum seekers to request protection. The Federal Government has exempted unaccompanied children from many of these policies, such as Remain in Mexico, the Title 42 policy, and recent border asylum regulations, consistent with legal protections provided by the TVPRA.

It is imperative that all border policies recognize the particular vulnerability of unaccompanied children, uphold specific protections provided by the TVPRA, and ensure that unaccompanied children are exempt from any restrictions that limit, bar, or delay access to the border to apply for protection.

#### IMPORTANCE OF LEGAL AND SOCIAL SERVICES TO ADDRESSING TRAFFICKING AND OTHER RISKS

Pursuant to the TVPRA and related legal settlements and regulations, unaccompanied children transferred to ORR care are to be placed into the "least restrictive setting" in the child's best interests.

ORR maintains a nationwide network of more than 289 facilities and programs in 29 States that it funds to provide temporary care and custody of unaccompanied children,<sup>4</sup> including transitional foster care placements, shelters, and residential treatment centers. ORR provides for children's basic care, medical care, counseling, recreation, and educational services, among other needs.

ORR works to reunify children in its care with safe and suitable sponsors pursuant to numerous policies and consistent with requirements set forth in the TVPRA. This process includes the potential sponsor's completion of an application, and any required criminal background checks and public records checks. Pursuant to the TVPRA, ORR is also required to conduct home studies for certain particularly vulnerable children and may also conduct such studies in other cases where it may help in evaluating the sponsor's safety and suitability.<sup>5</sup> Following approval of a sponsor and the child's release, ORR conducts safety and well-being follow-up calls within 30 days to verify the child's safety, that they are living with a sponsor, that they know of pending court proceedings, and that they are enrolled in school.<sup>6</sup> Al-

<sup>2</sup> 6 U.S.C. § 279.

<sup>3</sup> See 8 U.S.C. § 1232; 8 U.S.C. § 1158(a)(2)(E).

<sup>4</sup> ORR, Unaccompanied Children Bureau Fact Sheet (Nov. 1, 2024), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/fact-sheet/programs/uc/fact-sheet>.

<sup>5</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1232 (c)(3)(B).

<sup>6</sup> ORR Policy Guide § 2.8.4.

though ORR's role with a child formally ends after release, the TVPRA requires ORR to provide post-release services for unaccompanied children for whom a home study is required and also authorizes ORR to provide such services for other children with mental health or other needs who may benefit from them.<sup>7</sup> ORR provides limited funding for these services; however, the comprehensiveness and duration of services varies depending on a child's needs, available funding, and the child's geographic location. Historically, a small percentage of children have received case management and post-release services, and where provided, such services typically only endure for a couple months. ORR also operates a National Call Center hotline that is operational 24/7 to connect children, sponsors, and providers with support and assistance.<sup>8</sup>

Pursuant to the TVPRA, ORR also must "to the greatest extent practicable" provide unaccompanied children with "counsel to represent them in legal proceedings or matters and protect them from mistreatment, exploitation, and trafficking."<sup>9</sup> ORR is also authorized to provide independent child advocates to represent the best interests of especially vulnerable children.<sup>10</sup> Currently, however, many children must navigate complex immigration proceedings without an attorney. ORR has set a goal of ensuring legal representation for 100 percent of unaccompanied children by 2027, an important commitment that will necessitate on-going support by both the agency and Congress. Fulfilling this aim will prove beneficial in identifying and mitigating myriad risks that unaccompanied children may be facing, both related to and independent of their immigration case.

Unaccompanied children are often eligible for various forms of humanitarian protection. Applying for such protection necessitates that the child disclose and be interviewed about sensitive information regarding harm and trauma they have experienced—a significant challenge for many children who have survived serious violence, threats, or abuse, including at the hands of adults and other authority figures. In the months or years working on the child's legal case and due to the confidentiality of the attorney-client relationship, the child may develop the trust and rapport with an attorney that is necessary to be able to disclose experiences of trafficking, exploitation, or other circumstances giving rise to a need for protection. Children may also share information indicating unstable housing, financial insecurity, health challenges, issues at school, or other challenges that could exacerbate their vulnerability to trafficking and other harm and suggest a need for social services support or engagement by child welfare professionals or other authorities.

Attorneys can work with the child to screen for any legal protections for which the child is eligible, provide the child with information about child labor laws and other legal rights, refer the child to trusted community organizations and other professionals for social and other services, and work with the child to assist them, where appropriate, in reporting concerns to child welfare or law enforcement authorities. Legal assistance may also include helping eligible children to apply for a Child Eligibility Letter or interim assistance with the Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP). This form of assistance offers children who have experienced or potentially experienced trafficking to access services and benefits to the same extent as refugees. These benefits include case management; food and cash assistance, health insurance, education, and housing.<sup>11</sup> Interim assistance can also help eligible children access the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program, which provides for children's care with a foster family or in a group home. Without an attorney, however, child survivors of trafficking may remain unaware of protections for them and could become vulnerable to re-trafficking and other exploitation.

For many children, legal assistance can make a life-saving difference—facilitating access to humanitarian protection so the child will not be deported to harm and helping children find safety from situations of violence, abuse, trafficking, and exploitation they may confront in the United States. Attorneys can also help children apply for work authorization, which provides a vital form of Government-issued photo identification for children, even when not used for work. Such identification

<sup>7</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1232 (c)(3)(B). Pursuant to the ORR foundational rule and related policy, such services "may include linking families to educational and community resources, home visits, case management, in-home counseling, and other social welfare services; as needed." 89 Fed. Reg. 34384, 34587 (Apr. 30, 2024), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2024-04-30/pdf/2024-08329.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> ORR, Office of Refugee Resettlement National Call Center, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/orr/national-call-center-eng.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1232(c)(S).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at § (c)(6).

<sup>11</sup> See Dep't of Health and Human Services, ACF, Office on Trafficking in Persons, Child Eligibility Letters <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/victim-assistance/child-eligibility-letters>.

is frequently necessary to access services such as health insurance, to obtain a social security card, or to receive a driver's license. For older youth, work authorization can improve access to safe, lawful jobs that enable children to more easily avoid exploitative situations and harmful working conditions.

The importance of offering post-release legal and social services for unaccompanied children cannot be overstated.<sup>12</sup> Long-standing child welfare and medical research has documented the potential for traumatic experiences, known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), to have long-term impacts for children's development, health, and well-being, including in adulthood.<sup>13</sup> Unaccompanied children often endure numerous ACEs and significant trauma due to prior experiences. However, children frequently have only limited access to case managers, social workers, or supportive services after they are released from Government care.<sup>14</sup> Legal and social services can help to ensure children's needs are promptly identified and addressed and build on children's existing self-help skills and resilience. Such assistance can help mitigate risks to children and promote safety in both the short- and long-term.

#### CONCERNS ABOUT CHILDREN MISSING OR TRAFFICKED FOLLOWING RELEASE FROM ORR CARE

Recent news reports and Congressional oversight efforts have galvanized concern for children's safety after release from ORR custody. Some of these efforts have inaccurately indicated that nearly 85,000 unaccompanied children are "missing" or being trafficked, based on information that ORR was unable to reach children during follow-up safety and well-being calls. Reports have also misleadingly asserted that 300,000 unaccompanied children were "lost" by DHS, misrepresenting information in an August 2024 report by the DHS Office of Inspector General stating that DHS had not filed Notices to Appear (NTAs) in immigration court for these unaccompanied children.<sup>15</sup> Based on this information, Members of Congress have advanced several proposals that would enact new restrictions on sponsors, limit TVPRA protections, and risk prolonged detention of children.

While efforts to ensure children's safety are paramount at all times, data about ORR call pick-ups is not a reliable indicator of children's safety or trafficking risk. There are many reasons why a child or family may not have responded to ORR's calls. A child or sponsor may not have been home or available to respond to the call, may not have recognized the caller's phone number, or may have recently changed their phone number. By indicating that tens of thousands of unaccompanied children have been trafficked, based on missed phone calls, these mischaracterizations risk diverting resources away from current trafficking investigations and assistance for children currently experiencing harm.

Such reports also obscure the limitations of existing data. To date, data on trafficking and exploitation of unaccompanied children in the United States and worldwide remains incomplete, and accurate data collection remains a necessary priority. Various factors exacerbate these limitations, among them inconsistent methods for identifying and documenting trafficking and exploitation; fear among survivors that reports could lead to immigration enforcement or retaliation against the child and their family; and confidentiality protections and concerns.<sup>16</sup> Improving children's access to necessary services and expanding training about all forms of trafficking

<sup>12</sup> See generally Migration Policy Institute, *Strengthening Services for Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Communities* (2021), [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/rnpi-unaccompanied-children-services\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/rnpi-unaccompanied-children-services_final.pdf) [hereinafter "MPI report"].

<sup>13</sup> CDC, *About Adverse Childhood Experiences*, <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See MPI report, *supra* note 12, at 1 ("In most years, only a minority of children receive case management, legal services, or both, and most children receive no Federal follow-up services other than a call 30 days after their release to check on their safety and well-being.")

<sup>15</sup> See Associated Press, *FACT FOCUS: Claims that more than 300,000 migrant children are missing lack context*, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-misinformation-migrant-children-missing-7ab0cea2fd2238346197429e952baa8b>.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., AAP, *Clinical Report, Exploitation, Labor and Sex Trafficking of Children and Adolescents: Health Care Needs of Patients*, <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/151/1/e2022060416/190310/Exploitation-Labor-and-Sex-Trafficking-of-Children?autologin-check=redirected> ("Reliable national prevalence data for child labor and sex T/E in the United States are not yet available."); U.S. Department of State, *About Human Trafficking*, <https://www.state.gov/humantrafficking-about-human-trafficking/> ("It is hard to find reliable statistics related to human trafficking. The quality and quantity of data available are often hampered by the hidden nature of the crime, challenges in identifying individual victims, gaps in data accuracy and completeness, and significant barriers regarding the sharing of victim information among various stakeholders. For these reasons, data and statistics may not reflect the full nature or scope of the problem.")



among agencies and providers can promote better data collection and enhance programming for impacted children.

Similarly, claims that children are missing based on DHS's having not filed Notices to Appear for court proceedings mischaracterize protections for unaccompanied children in the U.S. immigration system. Following an unaccompanied child's arrival to the United States and consistent with the TVPRA, DHS places the child in full immigration removal proceedings, in which the child will have an opportunity to apply for any protections for which they are eligible, including affirmatively applying for asylum with USCIS. Typically, Immigrant and Customs Enforcement does not file the child's NTA with the immigration court to formally commence the child's proceedings until after the child is released from ORR. This is essential to ensure the child has an opportunity to obtain legal counsel prior to proceedings and also recognizes that a child may be released to the care of a sponsor in a different State or location than they initially arrived to the United States. Without such delayed filings, notices may be sent to locations where children no longer reside, creating significant due process concerns and administrative inefficiencies for ICE, the immigration courts, and children and their families alike. DHS's not having filed an NTA with the immigration court does not correlate with a child's being missing or trafficked.

Indeed, prevention of trafficking and other harm is best achieved not through immigration enforcement against vulnerable children, but in ensuring the availability of appropriate screening and services for them. The provision of post-release legal and social services is critical. Additional measures across Government agencies can bolster fair adjudication of children's protection cases, identify trafficking of children, and help ensure children's safety.

#### SPECIALIZED CHILDREN'S DOCKETS IN IMMIGRATION COURT

The Executive Office for Immigration Review recently issued policy guidance encouraging the creation of specialized children's dockets to address the legal cases of unaccompanied children.<sup>17</sup> These dockets will ensure that immigration judges specially trained in child-centered and trauma-informed practices oversee children's cases—improving the quality of adjudications, ensuring children's access to legal protections available through other agencies such as USCIS, and enabling efficiencies for Government agencies administering and working amid court dockets. Under these dockets, DHS attorneys will be similarly trained in forms of legal relief available to children, child-sensitive interviewing techniques, and trauma-informed practices. Children's dockets can also facilitate the identification of and provision of assistance to child victims of trafficking by enabling the presence of trained non-profit attorneys and organizations at court locations who can screen children for protection needs, provide information to children about their legal rights, and connect children with services providers and professionals. Together, these measures can create a more child-centered adjudication process that can mitigate risks to children and enhance access to vital protection.

The EOIR guidance reflects in important respects key provisions of the Immigration Court Efficiency and Children's Court Act,<sup>18</sup> bipartisan legislation introduced in Congress in 2023. Further, language in the bipartisan fiscal year 2025 Commerce, Justice, and Science (CJS) appropriations report commends EOIR for its establishment of these dockets and requires the agency to report on their implementation. Additional efforts to implement and expand these dockets promise improvements to safety and protection for children and administration and efficiency for the Government.

#### SAFE RETURN AND REINTEGRATION SERVICES

Protection of unaccompanied children at all points necessitates ensuring that children are never returned to harm—and that any child ordered removed or requesting to return to their country of origin will be safely received and cared for following return. The TVPRA directs the Federal Government to consult Department of State reports on Human Rights and Trafficking in Persons in evaluating whether a child may be safely returned to a country and similarly provides for a return and reintegration pilot program to protect children from trafficking and exploitation and to implement best practices for safe return and reintegration.<sup>19</sup> To date, several

<sup>17</sup> Executive Office for Immigration Review, Director's Memorandum 24-01: Children's Cases in Immigration Court, Dec. 21, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-12/dm-24-01.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> H.R. 6143; S. 3178.

<sup>19</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1232(a)(S)(A)–(B).

nonprofit organizations, including KIND and its community-based partners in Guatemala and Honduras, have collaborated to provide return and reintegration services that help to screen unaccompanied children for any protection needs or other concerns, provide predeparture counseling, coordinate safe reception, and connect children with reintegration services upon their return. In addition to helping to ensure that children are not returned to harm and assisting their safe return, these services can help to prevent future trafficking and other harm by facilitating children's access to protection, education, housing, medical and mental health care, counseling, case management, and opportunities that can reduce the need for children to re-migrate and undertake dangerous journeys to find safety and assistance. By helping children to secure protection at the earliest point possible, these services can also reduce pressure on U.S. border operations and facilities.

KIND recommends that the Federal Government formally establish and dedicate on-going funding for a return and reintegration program for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to be led by individuals with expertise in child migration and child protection. This may be achieved through partnerships with community-based organizations that can help to improve the accessibility of services for children wherever they are in need. Additional efforts can grow such programs over time to reach children returning to any countries of origin, including through cross-border case management.

#### CONCLUSION

KIND welcomes Congress' continued commitment to the well-being of unaccompanied children at all points in their migration journey. We urge Congress to ensure that all Federal agencies uphold critical anti-trafficking protections created by the TVPRA as well as the *Flores* Settlement Agreement; and support critical services that can help reduce children's vulnerability to harm, help children secure lasting safety, and nourish children's resilience to grow and make valuable contributions to their communities and the United States.

Mr. HIGGINS. Again, I thank the witnesses for your testimony today and the Members for their questioning.

The Members of the subcommittees, both, may have additional questions for the witnesses, and we would ask the witnesses respond to these in writing.

Pursuant to committee rule 7-delta, the hearing record will be open for 10 days.

Without objection, the subcommittees, both, stand adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:13 p.m., the subcommittees were adjourned.]

## **A P P E N D I X**

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### **SUPPLEMENTAL STATEMENT OF TARA LEE RODAS**

#### **TOC Statement to the Committee**

Child trafficking is not just a humanitarian crisis, it is a direct threat to our national security. Over 320,000 unaccompanied migrant children remain unaccounted for, many exploited by transnational criminal organizations that treat these children as commodities.

To combat this, we must elevate child trafficking as a priority on the National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF). This designation will unlock critical tools, including integrated data systems across agencies like HHS, DHS, and DOJ, enabling us to analyze trafficking patterns in real-time.

We must mandate DNA testing for sponsors to prevent fraudulent claims and impose severe penalties on those complicit in trafficking. Additionally, auditing NGOs and contractors for compliance will close gaps that traffickers exploit.

These actions, paired with prioritization at the highest intelligence levels, will dismantle networks, rescue victims, and restore trust. The stakes couldn't be higher. It's time to act decisively to protect our children and secure our nation's future.

### **Statement on Designating Child Trafficking a Terrorist Activity (NCTC Solution)**

Child trafficking in the United States is no longer just a humanitarian crisis—it mirrors the tactics and operations of terrorist organizations. Over 320,000 unaccompanied children are missing, many exploited for forced labor, sexual abuse, and other horrors. These children are not merely victims—they are hostages of transnational criminal organizations and the financial backbone of material support for organizations seeking to profit off the lives of children and change the American way of life.

**Given the facts, my recommendation is:** We must designate child trafficking as a terrorist activity. This would unlock critical counterterrorism tools, including expanded intelligence collection, interagency collaboration, and financial sanctions to dismantle trafficking infrastructure through interagency cooperation.

By classifying traffickers as terrorists, we can identify their networks to rescue the children, impose the maximum penalties and send an unequivocal message that this will not be tolerated in the United States of America. Counterterrorism units could target traffickers, while severe penalties would deter future crimes.

This designation aligns with our national security priorities: rescuing these children, dismantling trafficking operations, and preventing future exploitation. These children are our future, and their protection must be a national imperative. It's time to act decisively and send a clear message—those who profit from these atrocities will face the full weight of our justice system.

## Elevating Child Trafficking on the National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF)

By Aaron Stevenson (former DHS Intel Analyst) and Tara Rodas (HHS Whistleblower)

### 1. Situation Overview

From an intelligence standpoint, the trafficking of migrant children represents a complex, multilayered threat encompassing humanitarian, criminal, and national security dimensions.

**Human Cost:** Over 320,000 unaccompanied migrant children remain unaccounted for within U.S. borders. Intelligence sources indicate that these children are being funneled into forced labor, sexual exploitation, and potentially organ trafficking.

**Systemic Failures:** Data silos and interagency inefficiencies within HHS, DHS, and DOJ have created critical vulnerabilities, exploited by organized trafficking networks.

**Criminal Exploitation:** Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) are leveraging U.S. government programs, such as the Unaccompanied Children (UC) Program, as logistical channels for trafficking. This infrastructure is now weaponized against the very individuals it was designed to protect.

### 2. Threat Assessment

The exploitation of children is not a peripheral issue; it is central to TCO operations. Here's what the intelligence indicates:

**Scale of Trafficking:** TCOs and other bad actors are utilizing sophisticated methods to mask their operations, including fraudulent sponsor claims, rapid interstate transfers, and legal loopholes.

**Indicator:** Sponsors receiving multiple unrelated children—patterns typical of trafficking networks.

**Emerging Networks:** Intelligence shows increased coordination between international smugglers and domestic criminal groups. U.S. border policies inadvertently provide a pathway for these networks.

**National Security Risk:** Beyond the immediate humanitarian crisis, trafficking networks fuel corruption, undermine law enforcement, and weaken public trust in government institutions.

### 3. Intelligence Gaps

Key gaps hinder effective countermeasures:

**Data Access:** HHS maintains critical records of unaccompanied minors but restricts access to law enforcement agencies. This lack of transparency obscures trafficking patterns.

**Cross Agency Integration:** Current systems lack the capability to fuse data from multiple agencies, preventing holistic analyses.

**Accountability:** Contractors and NGOs responsible for child placement operate with insufficient oversight, leaving room for negligence or complicity.

#### 4. Recommendations

As an intelligence analyst, the following solutions are proposed to disrupt trafficking networks and rescue victims:

1. Integrated Data Systems: Create a centralized, interagency database to analyze migration trends, sponsor histories, and criminal activities in real time.
2. Preemptive Measures: Introduce mandatory DNA testing to verify familial relationships for all sponsor claims, closing a critical loophole.
3. Intelligence Targeting: Elevate child trafficking as a priority on the National Intelligence Priorities Framework (NIPF). Deploy advanced analytical tools and personnel to identify and dismantle networks.
4. Enforcement Action: Impose strict penalties for sponsors and facilitators involved in trafficking. Use data-driven insights to guide law enforcement operations.
5. NGO Auditing: Conduct performance audits on NGOs and contractors handling child placements. Ensure compliance with antitrafficking protocols.

#### 5. Conclusion

The trafficking of migrant children is not merely a humanitarian issue; it is a direct threat to the integrity of our nation. These children are invaluable—not only as individuals with inherent worth but as members of our collective future.

Failure to act decisively will embolden criminal networks, perpetuate human suffering, and erode public trust in governance. Immediate and coordinated action is required to restore oversight, accountability, and justice.

## Designating Child Trafficking a Terrorist Activity

By Aaron Stevenson (former DHS Intel Analyst) and Tara Rodas (HHS Whistleblower)

### 1. Situation Overview

Child trafficking in the United States has escalated beyond a humanitarian crisis—it now mirrors the structure, tactics, and objectives of terrorist organizations. Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) involved in trafficking are sophisticated, profit-driven networks operating with the intent to exploit and destroy human lives.

Designating child trafficking as a terrorist activity will unlock critical resources, tools, and authority to dismantle these networks effectively and decisively.

**Human Impact:** Over 320,000 unaccompanied children are missing, many forced into labor, sexual exploitation, and other atrocities. These children are not just victims; they are hostages of criminal syndicates using fear, coercion, and violence to perpetuate their operations.

**Operational Sophistication:** Trafficking networks employ complex logistical strategies, including fraudulent documents, rapid interstate transfers, and international partnerships, echoing the tactics used by terrorist organizations to evade detection.

### 2. The Case for Designation

The parallels between trafficking networks and terrorist organizations are clear:

**Intent to Instill Fear:** Traffickers use violence and psychological manipulation to control victims and prevent them from seeking help, creating environments of perpetual fear.

**Organized Networks:** These groups operate with hierarchical structures, cross-border alliances, and logistical hubs that mirror terrorist cells.

**Exploitation for Profit:** Like terrorist organizations, traffickers fund their operations by exploiting human lives, making billions of dollars annually while devastating communities.

**Threat to National Security:** The unchecked trafficking of children weakens U.S. borders, undermines public trust in government, and provides avenues for the infiltration of criminal and extremist elements.

### 3. Designation Benefits

By designating child trafficking as a terrorist activity, the U.S. can unleash a broader array of tools to combat these networks:

**Expanded Intelligence Collection:** Agencies such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Terrorist Screening Center (TSC), and National Targeting Center (NTC) will be empowered to track and dismantle trafficking networks.

**Freezing Assets:** Trafficking networks will face financial disruption through asset freezes and sanctions, cutting off their ability to profit from human suffering.

**Enhanced Collaboration:** Designation would mandate interagency cooperation, ensuring data sharing across DHS, DOJ, HHS, and intelligence agencies.



Direct Action: Counterterrorism units can be deployed to target high-value trafficking networks, employing tactics used against terrorist organizations.

#### 4. Recommendations for Immediate Action

1. Formulate and Execute a National Strategy: Develop a counter-trafficking strategy under the National Security Council (NSC) that treats child trafficking with the urgency of counterterrorism efforts.
2. Leverage Intelligence Infrastructure: Task the NCTC, TSC, NTC and other entities with creating watchlists of traffickers, sponsors, and enablers.
3. Impose Severe Penalties: Classify traffickers and those complicit in their operations as domestic and international terrorists, subject to maximum penalties under anti-terrorism laws.
4. Disrupt Financial Networks: Expand sanctions and seize assets tied to individuals and organizations profiting from trafficking operations.
5. Mobilize Federal Resources: Deploy task forces with specialized training in counterterrorism to investigate and dismantle trafficking operations at the state and local levels.
6. Mandatory DNA Testing: Ensure that all sponsors undergo DNA verification to prevent fraudulent claims by traffickers and predators.

#### 5. Strategic Objectives

The designation of child trafficking as a terrorist activity aligns with three critical national security objectives:

Rescue and Recovery: Mobilize resources to locate and recover missing children before further harm occurs.

Network Dismantling: Leverage counterterrorism techniques to identify and eliminate trafficking infrastructure.

Prevention Through Deterrence: The severe consequences associated with terrorism designations will deter individuals and organizations from engaging in trafficking activities.

#### 6. Conclusion

Child trafficking is no longer just a moral failing—it is a direct threat to the security of the United States. By treating traffickers as terrorists, we send an unequivocal message: those who profit from the suffering of children will face the full force of our nation's power.

This designation will empower law enforcement, intelligence, and military resources to rescue victims, dismantle networks, and ensure justice is served. The stakes could not be higher. These children are the future of our nation—and their protection must be our top priority.



