

## FACT SHEET

# RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

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Recent policy changes by the Trump administration have created significant new challenges for unaccompanied children seeking protection in the United States. These policy shifts span multiple areas: the termination of legal aid programs, reduction in immigration court capacity, stricter sponsorship requirements, and shifts in various administrative practices – this, as the administration works to tighten border controls and slashes the funding of [trusted local institutions](#). This piece explores recent policy developments in this area, and how they threaten to leave tens of thousands of vulnerable children without adequate support as they navigate our byzantine immigration system.

## WHAT RECENT ACTIONS HAS THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION TAKEN TO UNDERCUT ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING LEGAL SERVICES FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN?

On February 18, 2025, the Trump administration [halted funding for organizations that offer legal services for unaccompanied children](#). The “stop-work” order calls for the complete, immediate and indefinite halt to all legal aid work associated with the Department of Health & Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)-administered [Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program](#), which includes many services including know your rights orientations and direct legal representation, health services, and English language training. This news comes weeks after a [federal judge blocked](#) the Trump administration’s efforts to end funding for other legal access programs, including the Legal Orientation Program administered by the Justice Department (DOJ).

Groups like Acacia Center for Justice, which offers critical legal support to some 26,000 vulnerable unaccompanied children in its network, has said that this decision “puts children who have already experienced severe trauma at [risk for further harm or exploitation](#).” Among other things, these partners play an important role in improving court efficiencies by ensuring that children show up for their immigration court proceedings.

## WHAT CHANGES HAVE BEEN MADE REGARDING THE ORR’ POLICIES FOR SPONSORS OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS?

ORR plays a critical role in the care of unaccompanied children, including placing them with vetted sponsors, typically adult family members. In its first month, the Trump administration has implemented stricter security protocols for individuals seeking to sponsor unaccompanied children. Under these new policies, sponsors must now:

- Submit fingerprint background checks for all adult sponsors, adult household members, and adult caregivers where the child will live;
- Provide unexpired and legible copies of identification documents; and
- Present original (not copies of) unexpired identification documents when presenting themselves for fingerprinting and when the child is released to their care.

To be clear, ensuring the safety and well-being of these children is paramount, and previous ORR practices and procedures had already taken this into account. Unfortunately, there is a track record showing that these

heightened requirements may actually deter qualified sponsors from coming forward to accept care for these children, their integration into stable home environments. In fact, during the first Trump term the administration had to [backtrack on a similar policy](#) because the heightened checks did not yield “additional information in revealing risks to the children” and “meant children were staying in HHS care much longer.”

A robust body of research has found that extended periods in detention facilities has detrimental effects on the mental and emotional health of unaccompanied minors. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network notes that [prolonged detention may exacerbate trauma-related symptoms](#) and hinder the child’s ability to adjust to new environments. In addition, delays in placement with sponsors can disrupt the child’s education and access to community resources, further impeding their development and well-being.

## **SHIFTING TO THE COURTS, WHAT HAS THE ADMINISTRATION DONE WITH RESPECT TO IMMIGRATION JUDGES AND COURT POLICIES IMPACTING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN?**

DOJ has [dismissed 20 immigration judges](#), including 13 who had not yet assumed their roles and five assistant chief immigration judges. This decision threatens to exacerbate the existing backlog of over 3.7 million cases in immigration courts. For unaccompanied children, this reduction in judicial resources could lead to prolonged case processing times, extended stays in government custody, and delayed reunification with family members or sponsors. Meanwhile, this comes at a time that the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) has rescinded several policies that will also increase processing burdens in the courts, such as curtailing [interpretation services](#) in the courts and ending a “[friends of the court](#)” policy, which permitted assistance to respondents during proceedings. Collectively, these policy shifts may lead to a higher likelihood of unaccompanied children facing deportation without fully understanding their rights or the legal process.

## **IS THE ADMINISTRATION’S CLAIM THAT 300,000 UNACCOMPANIED MIGRANT CHILDREN “ARE LOST” ACCURATE?**

The claim that over 300,000 unaccompanied migrant children are “lost” [lacks context and is misleading](#), according to many observers. A [report](#) by the the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Office of Inspector General indicated that between 2019 and 2023, approximately 32,000 unaccompanied children did not appear for their scheduled immigration court hearings, and that DHS did not file notices of court dates for about 291,000 migrant children as of May 2024. However, this [does not mean these children are missing](#) – many are still residing with sponsors or family members, awaiting proper scheduling of their hearings. They may have not received notices for several reasons, including administrative errors at DHS and case backlogs within the immigration system. The Trump administration’s mischaracterization of these children as missing is reckless – it is stoking unwarranted public fear, deepening its dangerous “invasion narrative,” and could produce harmful policy based on false pretenses.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADDRESS THESE CONCERN CHANGES?**

The change in policy in this area represents a serious departure from how the U.S. treats vulnerable unaccompanied children; indeed, they risk creating a generation of children who face deportation without adequate legal representation or due process, potentially returning them to dangerous situations they fled. This is not to say that sensible reforms to our existing processes aren’t warranted – such as hiring more immigration judges and ensuring claims are adjudicated quickly – but those should be undertaken smartly and in a way that balances the nation’s right to administer its own border with its humanitarian obligations to children seeking refuge.