This is what can happen when immigrant kids reach U.S. border

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A few boys try to make calls as they are joined by hundreds of mostly Central American immigrant children who are being processed and held at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nogales Placement Center on June 18, 2014, in Nogales, Arizona. Photo by: Ross D. Franklin/AP Photo

News reports revealed that the U.S. government couldn't account for the locations of nearly 1,500 immigrant children. Some people wondered how this could happen and who was at fault.

As with much to do with the federal government, it's complicated.

There are essentially three issues that have become mixed up in recent days. One issue is minors arriving at the border without adults. Another is separating children from their parents at the border. The third issue is families seeking asylum. Asylum is different from regular immigration. Asylum is for people moving to the U.S. to get away from problems like violence or discrimination in their homelands. Asylum seekers can apply for asylum only once they are at the border or inside the U.S.
Did the Trump administration separate children from their parents at the border, then lose track of the children?

No, the 1,475 children arrived at the U.S. border alone, without their parents. Most of the children came from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala in Central America. They were fleeing violence and uncertainty in their home countries.

The children are considered unaccompanied minors, meaning they came to the border without adults. Under U.S. law, they cannot be deported, or sent back, right away. They are placed with sponsors, who are typically close relatives such as parents, siblings, aunts or uncles who live in the United States. About 1 in 10 of the minors are placed with people who aren't related to them.

Placing these children with sponsors is a rule that dates back to the Obama government.

The government's Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, is in charge of placing the children with sponsors. Steven Wagner works for HHS. Although the government doesn't know where the children are, Wagner said the children are not "lost."

After a child is placed with a sponsor, Wagner said that child is no longer in the protective care of HHS. The department is no longer "legally responsible," he said.

The agency tried to check in on thousands of children by calling their sponsors, he said. In 1,475 cases, nobody picked up the phone.

He said many sponsors did not answer the phone because they were living in the country illegally and did not want to talk with federal agents. Wagner said that does not mean the children are missing.

"There's no reason to believe that anything has happened to the kids," he said. "If you call a friend and they don't answer the phone, you don't assume that they've been kidnapped."

Why the confusion? One reason: The administration's new zero tolerance policy

The administration of President Donald Trump announced a new rule in May. There would be a "zero tolerance" rule for families trying to cross the border illegally, it said.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions is the government's top lawyer and law enforcement official. He said the government will take legal action against anybody who crosses the U.S. border illegally. He said that if adults bring children with them, the government will separate them from the children. "If you don't like that, then don't smuggle children over our border," he said.

The Trump administration insists that this is not a new rule. Children have been placed in foster care when their parents were criminally charged with crossing the border illegally.
Because of the "zero tolerance" rule, there are more separations happening. However, White House official Stephen Miller said on May 29 that the rules have not changed.

**The other reason: The Trump administration is cracking down on asylum seekers**

People who present themselves at U.S. borders are allowed to claim asylum. The government is taking a stronger position on this as part of President Trump’s attempts to limit immigration.

Sessions has spoken out against the asylum system. He said the system is abused by immigrants and "dirty immigration lawyers."

In many cases, the government denies asylum claims and treats those cases as criminal. This leads to more children being separated from their families.

**What does this have to do with the Obama administration?**

The rules about placing unaccompanied minors with sponsors and separating children from their families were in place during the administration of former President Barack Obama. The rules go back to the administration of former President George W. Bush.

The Trump government said it’s time to change those laws to ensure for quicker, safer and kinder deportation rules. They want rules that allow families to stay together and face deportation together.

To do so, Miller said, Congress needs to pass laws to increase the number of centers where immigrants are held. That way families can be held together as they wait to be deported.

Miller added that the root problem is at the border. It would be easier to solve other immigration problems if we solved the problems at the border, he said.