



Fact-checking Trump's family separation claims

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Pushing back against an explosive "60 Minutes" report about his immigration policies, President Donald Trump revived false claims that downplay his controversial practice of separating immigrant families at the southern border.

The episode of "60 Minutes" highlighted the saga of more than 2,600 children who were separated from their parents after illegally entering the US this year. The report revealed that the policy began earlier than acknowledged and detailed an internal probe at the Department of Homeland Security that found major problems with the plan's implementation, including that computer systems erased data meant to link children to their parents, complicating efforts to reunite families later on.

The centerpiece of Trump's pushback, which he tweeted Sunday night after the show, is that he "had the exact same policy as the Obama Administration," regarding family separation. He repeated this on Monday, telling reporters on the South Lawn of the White House, "Obama had a separation policy. We all had the same policy ... but people don't like to talk about that."

Trump also suggested former President George W. Bush followed similar practices.

Simply put, this isn't true at all. Trump and former President Barack Obama did not have "the exact same policy." In some ways, they had opposite policies. The family separation crisis was triggered last spring when Trump tweaked the status quo he inherited from Obama and ramped up strict enforcement of federal immigration laws that were already on the books.

"It certainly wasn't the exact same policy," said Jessica Bolter, a researcher with the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute who has published 200 pages of reports on Trump's immigration policies.

Under past administrations, some border-crossers were occasionally prosecuted, and were thus separated from their families. Children were separated from parents when authorities had concerns for their well-being or could not confirm that the adult was in fact their legal guardian. Prosecution was more common in cases with more severe crimes, like drug-running.

The Trump administration told a federal court that more than 2,600 children were separated from their parents during the crisis this summer. Comparable statistics from previous administrations aren't available because the blanket practice was not in place and separations were more sporadic, according to immigration experts.

"There were some instances of parents being separated from their children" in the past, said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "But no administration has institutionalized the practice of family separation on such a scale, as intentionally and as broadly as the Trump administration attempted over the summer."

The main difference between Trump and Obama, as both experts noted, centers on how they handled immigrants caught near the US-Mexico border. Under Obama, the Justice Department was given broad discretion on who should face criminal charges, and federal prosecutors rarely went after families.

But in April, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Justice Department would prosecute 100% of illegal border-crossers in a policy known as "zero-tolerance." Adults went to jails and awaited criminal proceedings. Children were sent to detention centers run by the Department of Health and Human Services, and some were eventually placed in foster care.

This specific change "led to the inevitable separation of parents and children," Bolter said.

The internal DHS report mentioned in the "60 Minutes" segment concluded that the agency struggled to accurately maintain complete and reliable data on children that got separated.

"This wasn't a common practice in the past, so records were not well-kept," Bier said. "That's the best evidence that we have that this practice was not something in regular occurrence."

In a carefully crafted statement attacking "60 Minutes," DHS spokeswoman Katie Waldman didn't go as far as Trump did in his tweets. She accurately noted that past administrations separated some families, but never claimed that Trump and Obama followed identical policies.

"Most significantly, 60 Minutes continued to ignore the reality that at least the last two Administrations had held children separately from illegal alien adults in cases where it was necessary for the welfare of the child or to prosecute a federal crime," Waldman said.

The difference is in the syntax. Waldman is stating the fact that families were separated under Obama and Bush. That's true. Some families were torn apart. But there was no blanket policy of separation, and the number was significantly lower, according to experts Bolton and Bier.