

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



Reunification of migrant families not handled well

Martin W.G. King

August 5, 2018

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services took a victory lap July 26 when it told U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw in San Diego it had reunited another 1,442 migrant children with their families, thus, it claimed, substantially meeting a deadline set by the judge a month earlier. It previously released many of the infants and children under five who had been in its custody.

But HHS has little to be proud of: It was still holding 711 children as of the 26th, the most recent date for which figures are available. Altogether, the government took 2,342 children from parents under the anti-migrant zero-tolerance policy announced April 26.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, then Homeland Security secretary, first broached the idea of seizing and incarcerating migrant children as a deterrent to illegal border crossings in early 2017. It's no surprise then that Homeland Security seized 1,728 children from their parents as part of a secretive family separations "pilot program" in the El Paso area that ended only in February. Bumbling in the same way they did months later, Homeland Security and HHS failed to implement effective systems for the eventual reunification of children with parents.

HHS told the judge Aug. 3 that 572 of the children still in its custody aren't "eligible" for reunification. In some cases, it said, the parents are unfit because of a criminal history, even of a vehicular offense, or a communicable disease. Others are ineligible, it said, because the parents have been deported and the government doesn't know their whereabouts. It had the sheer gall to suggest in court Friday the American Civil Liberties Union, whose suit a month ago prompted the judge to set deadlines for returning the children, should have to track down the parents already deported. Its own work, it seemed to say, should be considered done. Is there a problem?

Yes, there is.

Fuzzy Math

President Donald Trump has demonized the migrants as a pretext for stripping them of their rights. On March 16, he told a group of law enforcement officers in California that undocumented residents were "animals." He has cast the migrants as thugs and rapists and used false or misleading statistics to buttress his case. The Washington Post debunked some of his most recent claims on July 6, finding that he not just combined figures for legal and undocumented immigrants, but exaggerated the figures and confused arrests with convictions.

Moreover, in exhaustive research published in March, the New York Times, in collaboration with the Marshall Project, a nonprofit that focuses on criminal justice issues, found crime “fell more often than it rose” in areas with a heavy influx of immigrants. And the libertarian Cato Institute presented research in 2015 that “criminal conviction and arrest rates in Texas for undocumented immigrants were lower than those for native-born Americans for murder, sexual assault and larceny.” Nonetheless, Gallup says, half of Americans, pummeled with anti-immigrant rhetoric, believe immigrants worsen crime.

Blame Game

As the senior writer at the National Crime Prevention Council, I acquired an intimate knowledge of the principle you never blame the victim. Of many reasons, the most important is it is unjust. A woman is not responsible for her rape because she had too much to drink; the perpetrator is held to account. But in branding migrants as lurking criminals, the president has found it easy to blame them for their plight and claim they are “getting what they deserve” – even seizure and incarceration of their children.

Throughout history, tyrannical regimes have dehumanized minorities to justify maltreatment or dispatch to terrible fates. Here, we should have seen it coming. In his first TV interview after his election, on “60 Minutes” on November 13, 2016, Trump said he would “immediately” deport “two million – it could even be three million” – undocumented residents. “We are getting them out of our country or we are going to incarcerate,” he declared. As president, he urged publicly that due process not be provided to either the undocumented or the migrants at the border.

The president has cultivated this xenophobic petri dish of bias and blame solely to stoke his base. Victory laps are not in order.