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Migrant children caught in cross hairs of misplaced hostility

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services took a recent victory lap when it told U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw in San Diego that 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 age five that had been in its custody.

But HHS has little to be proud of: It was still holding an estimated 700 children. Altogether, the government took 2,342 children from their parents under the anti-migrant zero tolerance policy announced on April 26.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, then Homeland Security secretary, first broached the idea in early 2017 of seizing and incarcerating migrant children as a deterrent to illegal border crossings. 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 the children with their parents.

HHS told the judge that many of the 700 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. Therefore, it asserted, the number of children it must still return is quite small, and its job is largely done. Is there a problem?

Yes, there is.

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 that 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 found “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 reports, half of Americans, pummeled with anti-immigrant rhetoric, believe immigrants worsen crime.

As the senior writer at the National Crime Prevention Council, I acquired an intimate knowledge of the principle that you never blame the victim. Of the many reasons, the most important is that it is unjust. By example, a woman is not responsible for her rape because she had too much to drink; the perpetrator is held to account. But in branding the 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 Nov. 13, 2016, Trump said he would “immediately” deport “2 million — it could even be 3 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.