

# WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

## Trump's now-ended policy of breaking up immigrant families not new, advocate says

Michael Hewlett

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Breaking up immigrant families is nothing new, said David Fraccaro, executive director of FaithAction International House in Greensboro.

In recent weeks, President Donald Trump and his administration have gotten intense criticism over a zero-tolerance policy of prosecuting anyone caught crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. That policy has led to more than 2,300 children being taken from their migrant parents. Lawyers and advocates say many of those migrant parents are fleeing from persecution and violence in their home countries.

In addition, Attorney General Jeff Sessions has narrowed the criteria for granting asylum, saying that domestic and gang violence are not grounds for asylum.

On Wednesday, Trump signed an executive order ending the practice of separating families at the border. But that doesn't end the zero-tolerance policy, and it will result in families being detained together. That is likely in violation of a 1997 federal court decision that limits the amount of time children can be held in immigration detention centers. The Trump administration wants to amend that decision.

Fraccaro said he has seen families being torn apart by the United States' immigration policy for at least 20 years.

"It's very important to understand that family separation has been happening for decades," he said Friday. "I'm glad that this moment seems to be a tipping point. I'm hoping that people don't stop there and (they) bring about an end to an unnecessary detention and deportation policy."

FaithAction advocates for and provides services to immigrant families.

According to the Washington Post, the Obama administration deported millions of undocumented immigrants but the focus was on gang members, people who posed a national security risk and people who had committed felonies. Under the Trump administration, U.S.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents have been much more aggressive in arresting and seeking the deportation of undocumented immigrants who have little to no criminal record.

Those arrests have led to parents being detained, leaving behind their children and other family members, Fraccaro said.

“Those children suffer greatly in our community,” he said. “They have panic attacks. We know this from speaking with counselors and working with their parents.”

Trump campaigned on protecting the U.S.-Mexico border and has argued that illegal immigrants are driving up violent crime rates.

However, several studies, including one from the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, show no correlation between illegal immigration and an increase in crime rates. One study from March said that violent crime drops in places where there is an increasing number of undocumented immigrants.

No children sent to Winston-Salem

Two immigration lawyers in Winston-Salem said they have not had any clients who have had their children taken from them due to the recent zero-tolerance policy. And they don't know of any children sent to any kind of facility here in Winston-Salem.

“This year I have seen more than 15 clients who came to the border (to seek asylum),” said Alan Doorasamy, a Winston-Salem lawyer who does both criminal defense and immigration law. “They came to the actual border and asked for entry and they were released. All of them were released. I saw the moms and their kids in my office. This was prior to Jeff Sessions' zero tolerance. I saw lots of moms in my office last year and the year before.”

Now, migrants are either getting apprehended crossing the border and being detained for prosecution or they are having a hard time seeking asylum, immigration lawyers said.

Helen Parsonage, a Winston-Salem immigration lawyer, said immigrants have a legal right to seek asylum and it doesn't matter whether they came to the country legally or illegally. But immigrants are finding it harder to apply for asylum, or are forced to wait days on end before they can talk to a Border Patrol agent. Sometimes, they give up and cross the border.

“You have to remember they're fleeing,” she said.

For many of these immigrants, the only alternative to going to the U.S.-Mexico border is to stay in their home country and risk violence. “People don't do this for fun,” she said.

Margaret Taylor, an expert on immigration at Wake Forest University School of Law, said because immigrants had a legal right to seek asylum, they were rarely prosecuted if they came into the country illegally. They could get a preliminary interview so that federal immigration officials could assess whether migrants had a credible fear of returning to their home country. Then, they would be released on parole and asked to return. Eventually, a hearing would be held.

But now, everything is chaotic, Taylor said. The executive order doesn't really solve anything, and it appears the federal government has no clear way of reuniting parents with their children.

"We have credible accounts of parents being deported without their children," she said.

Parsonage said some of these children are too young to provide immigration officials with any information about their parents.

She said it is not only appalling that children are being kept in what she calls prisons but that the federal government has no way of tracking them.

"If a person gets arrested and goes to jail, the jailer will take away your wallet and stuff and give you a receipt and put it in a bag," she said. "They apparently didn't do that (with migrant children). You get a receipt for a wallet but you get nothing when they take away children."

And, Taylor said, parents who want to seek asylum might not do so because they are more concerned about where their children are being held.

"We've never had this zero-tolerance policy because it subverts that policy that says you have a right to apply for asylum," she said.

Fraccaro said he is glad that people are starting to take notice of the country's immigration policies.

"We know it's personal for us," he said. "We see these cases on a daily basis. This is not about politics; it's about how we treat human beings."