

FEWER UNACCOMPANIED

Decrease comes as feds slower to release children

BY RACHELLE BLIDNER
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The number of unaccompanied minors who moved to Long Island declined by more than 50 percent last year, even as more crossed the United States border with Mexico, new federal data shows.

The decrease came as fewer migrant children were released from federal custody and spent more time in government shelters under President Donald Trump's efforts to crack down on illegal immigration, according to data and experts.

The number of unaccompanied minors who settled with relatives and sponsors in Nassau and Suffolk counties in fiscal year 2018 dropped by 54 percent to 830, compared with 1,804 in 2017, according to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Nassau and Suffolk counties have some of the largest populations of migrant children awaiting immigration proceedings while staying with family and sponsors, data show.

Suffolk County ranked fourth in the nation with 5,269 migrant children, while Nassau dropped from eighth to ninth place, with 4,286.

The fate of migrant children is a key issue in the fight in Washington, D.C., over illegal immigration, which touched off the 23-day federal government shutdown.

As Democrats battle Republican Trump over his request for a \$5.7 billion southern border wall, about 800,000 federal workers nationwide are going without pay. Congress has been unable to pass spending bills to keep nine agencies open.

In a prime-time address from the Oval Office Tuesday night, Trump said immigrant children who have crossed the border illegally are "used as human pawns by vicious coyotes and gangs," and called them among "the biggest victims by far of



Patrick Young, program director of the Central American Refugee Center in Hempstead, said new procedures slowed the release of kids.

our broken system." He said they need humanitarian aid and more shelter beds.

Trump argued that he "asked Congress to close border security loopholes, so that undocumented children can be safely and humanely returned back home."

The shutdown comes as the number of people apprehended crossing the border illegally has dropped from a peak of 1.6 million in 2000 to near record lows of 396,579 in 2018, according to U.S. Border and Customs Protection.

At the same time, more unaccompanied minors have been apprehended in the United States, which saw fewer than 8,000 a year for nearly a decade before 2012, according to the U.S. Administration of Children and Families.

That figure rose to more than 49,000 in 2018, up by 20 percent from 2017, according to ACF. That's still below the peak of 59,170 in 2016.

Yet fewer came to Long Island.

In the 2018 fiscal year, 452 migrant children settled in Suffolk and 378 moved to Nassau, the resettlement office said. Another 200 unaccompanied children arrived in October and November, after the Sept. 30 close of the fiscal year.

In 2014, the peak year so far for immigration of unaccompa-

nied minors to Long Island, 3,046 came here, according to the resettlement office, which is responsible for caring for unaccompanied minors and finding suitable sponsors.

Experts said the Trump administration's zero-tolerance immigration policies made it more difficult to unite children with relatives and sponsors, causing kids to stay longer in shelters — if they were released at all.

"There were all these new procedures put into place last year that dramatically slowed the release of children," said Patrick Young, program director of the Central American Refugee Center in Hempstead, which provides legal services to immigrants. "We began to see children staying in these shelters for months as these new procedures worked themselves out."

Some 35,000 of the approximately 50,000 unaccompanied minors who entered the federal shelter network in fiscal year 2018 were released within the year, according to the ACF.

In 2016, the year before Trump took office, 52,147 of the 59,170 who were apprehended were released.

The children who were released in 2018 had been in federal shelters for record lengths of time, with average stays of 60 days, up from 48 the year be-



Central American migrants climb on a train during their journey

830

Number of unaccompanied minors who settled with relatives and sponsors on LI in 2018

452

Number of migrant children who settled in Suffolk in the 2018 fiscal year

SOURCE: U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement

fore, according to ACF data.

While the policy of separating children from relatives at the border has received the most attention, other new policies created a backlog of kids in shelters, experts said. More than 14,000, a record, were in federal custody in December, according to federal data.

Releases last year were delayed by more extensive background checks, which included fingerprinting potential spon-

sors and, for about six months, anyone in their households, experts said.

It also may have been more difficult to place children with sponsors because they may have been more afraid of coming forward, experts said. The agency conducting background checks shared that information with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement as part of a new partnership, leading to concerns about deportation.

MINORS ON LI



toward the U.S.-Mexico border, in Ixtotec, Mexico, on July 12, 2014.

378

Number of migrant children who settled in Nassau in the 2018 fiscal year

200

Additional unaccompanied children who arrived on LI in October and November

Because it took more time and resources to vet sponsors, average stays at least doubled at the only shelter for unaccompanied minors on Long Island, MercyFirst in Syosset, president and chief executive Gerard McCaffery said.

That left fewer beds available for arriving migrant children at both MercyFirst, which has 68 beds, and elsewhere. Across the country, “thousands” of children were wait-

ing for spots in shelters nationwide at one point, said McCaffery said, citing daily federal reports shelters receive.

Several shelters around the country expanded to meet demand last year, particularly as the 2,400 children separated from their families often ended up in the same shelters as unaccompanied minors. In Texas, children were housed in an old Walmart and in temporary tents.

Children in “tent cities” did not receive the same services that they would have in other shelters, including schooling and access to social workers, who help reunite them with sponsors and families, McCaffery said.

Reunification was “not happening with those kids in the tent cities,” McCaffery said. “It was a real mess.”

ACF said unaccompanied minors “are placed in an appropriate setting” while the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services locates suitable sponsors.

The number of children in federal custody decreased to 11,400 this month, ACF said. Experts attributed the drop to the rollback of the mandate to fingerprint everyone in the host family household, which came after two children in custody died in December.

Long Island has a significant population of unaccompanied minors in large part because it has such a large Central American community — the fifth biggest in the United States — to take them in, Young said.

Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador accounted for 92 percent of the unaccompanied minors apprehended in 2018, federal statistics show.

The majority of unaccompanied minors come from Central America because of violence and gang issues there, he said.

“They’re released here because that’s where their family lives,” said Young, an immigration law professor at Hofstra.

However, Trump and other officials have cited the influx of unaccompanied minors as a factor in the local resurgence of the MS-13 Salvadoran gang and its acts of brutal violence, particularly in Suffolk.

Then-Suffolk County Police Commissioner Timothy Sini said in 2017 that while “the vast majority” of unaccompanied minors “are law abiding residents . . . and there are many success stories regarding these children,” a “disproportionate number of MS-13 gang members are” unaccompanied minors.

WHITE HOUSE TWEETS ABOUT LI STABBING

BY STEFANIE DAZIO
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A tweet from the White House sought to connect debate over illegal immigration to a Huntington Station stabbing allegedly committed by three MS-13 gang members last week.

Three suspects are charged in the attack on a group of Huntington High School students on Wednesday, chasing them after they left a Burger King on New York Avenue and assaulting them with bats and knives, authorities have said.

The suspects, Ramon Arevalo Lopez, 19, Oscar Canales Molina, 17, and Nobeli Montes Zuniga, 20, all of Huntington Station, had allegedly entered the country illegally, according to Suffolk County District Attorney Timothy Sini. All three have pleaded not guilty and are due back in court this week.

“We welcome immigrants who come here legally, but not illegal gang members,” the White House tweeted on its official account on Friday afternoon, during a partial federal government shutdown related to debate over a border wall.

“This week a HS student was stabbed by 3 MS-13 members,” the tweet continued. “According to police, the attackers had entered the U.S. illegally, were picked up by DHS, but were released by judges.”

The tweet linked to an ABC/7 story, which was widely shared online.

It’s not clear if the attack was gang-related, but law enforcement officials said the three suspects are connected to MS-13 and were in the Suffolk County Police Department’s database of likely gang members.

Arevalo Lopez’s attorney, Jason Bassett of Hauppauge, said his client is not a gang member.

“Ramon is not a member of MS-13 (or any other gang) — being ‘confirmed’ in some ill-conceived database isn’t proof of anything,” Bassett said in a statement Saturday morning.

“Accusations made during a press conference aren’t proof of anything. Certainly tweets from a White House with a tenuous relationship with the truth aren’t proof of anything. While so many of our civil liberties have come under attack recently, we still cling to the idea that one is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Ramon is innocent of the charges against him.”

Suffolk Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) “liked” the White House’s tweet and separately tweeted “Let the Feds charge them!!!” in response to a Suffolk County Police Department tweet about the arrests.

Trump has not tweeted about the attack on his personal account. The president has, however, made Long Island a focus of his campaign against MS-13.

In a visit to Brentwood in 2017, Trump described MS-13 as a “vile criminal cartel” that has “transformed peaceful parks in beautiful neighborhoods into bloodstained killing fields.”

He attended an anti-gang forum in Bethpage last year and criticized immigration laws that he said had helped the gang to grow.

“Crippling loopholes in our laws have enabled MS-13 gang members and other criminals to infiltrate our communities, and Democrats in Congress refuse to close these loopholes, including the disgraceful practice known as catch and release,” Trump said there.

The president also invited the families of Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens, two teenagers allegedly killed by MS-13, to attend his 2018 State of the Union. He mentioned the Brentwood students as “precious girls” during his speech.

In June, Trump again mentioned Long Island as a center of gang violence.

“We have liberated towns like it was captured by a foreign country . . . we have liberated towns out in Long Island,” Trump said at a Minnesota rally.

@WhiteHouse

“We welcome immigrants who come here legally, but not illegal gang members. This week a HS student was stabbed by 3 MS-13 members. According to police, the attackers had entered the U.S. illegally, were picked up by DHS, but were released by judges.”

