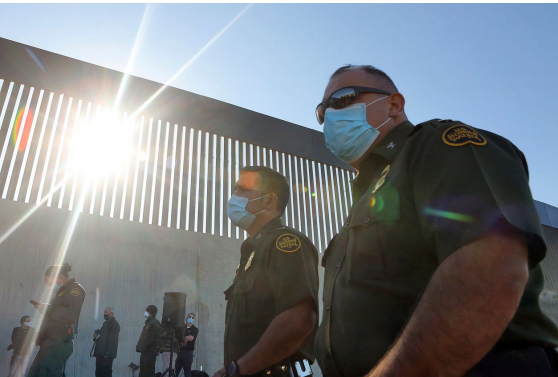


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IT Snafus Added Confusion to Migrant Family Reunification, Watchdog Says

Old systems maintained by the Department of Homeland Security failed to track migrants that were separated at the U.S. border



U.S. Border Patrol agents listen to Acting Homeland Secretary Chad Wolf give a speech in front of a new section of the border wall Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020, in McAllen, Texas.

PHOTO: JOEL MARTINEZ/THE MONITOR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [David Uberti](#)

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Outdated information technology contributed to the Department of Homeland Security's struggle to track migrant families detained at the U.S. border, an internal watchdog says, leaving the number of families separated still unclear.

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DHS Inspector General Joseph Cuffari said in a report made public Monday that "known IT deficiencies" at the agency's law enforcement arm prevented it from accurately tracking family members detained during the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" policy in 2018.

"Because of these IT deficiencies, we could not confirm the total number of families DHS separated during the Zero

Tolerance period," Mr. Cuffari wrote. "These conditions persisted because [Customs and Border Protection] did not address its known IT deficiencies, such as adding capability to track family separations, before implementing Zero Tolerance in May 2018."

The Trump administration's policy to prosecute migrants who crossed the border illegally separated thousands of children from their parents in detention facilities, leading to an outcry from many human-rights advocates. Although a federal judge within months ordered the administration to [reunite the families](#), officials at the inspector general's office in the Department of Health and Human Services said last year that "informal" data collection meant the exact number of separations [might never be known](#).

The DHS [inspector general report](#), sent to acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf last week, argued outdated IT systems not properly integrated between departments

added to the confusion.

“Without the ability to track and share data on family separations and reunifications, CBP adopted various ad hoc methods to work around system limitations, but these methods led to widespread errors,” Mr. Cuffari wrote.

Those efforts, he added, required roughly 28,000 man-hours from Border Patrol agents and \$1.2 million in overtime pay. Representatives of his office didn’t immediately respond to requests for comment on how DHS systems proved ineffective.

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A DHS official disputed some of the inspector general’s findings, saying the report didn’t include the “full range of sources and methods” used by DHS, HHS and the Justice Department to verify the number of migrant children separated from their parents.

“As a result, the degree of certainty between the multiagency reunification effort and [Office of Inspector General’s]

limited analysis were not remotely comparable,” wrote Jim Crumacker, DHS’s liaison to the inspector general.

An agency spokesman declined to comment further. A representative for Customs and Border Protection didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Government watchdogs previously criticized federal agencies’ disjointed IT systems, citing a lack of funding, limited authority for chief information officers and turnover within IT departments. For DHS, the inspector general said in previous reports, such deficiencies could inhibit border security and slow the process of directing disaster relief.

Although officials within DHS have laid out plans to modernize their systems in recent years, Mr. Cuffari wrote in the report made public Monday, many haven’t been completed.

“Until DHS addresses these issues,” he added, “it will continue to face significant challenges to accomplish mission operations efficiently and effectively.”

Attorneys for families separated at the U.S. border in 2018 said in a lawsuit last month that they still couldn’t locate parents for at least 545 migrant children.

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