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# Families Separated Under Trump 1.0 Now Fear They Will Never Be Reunited

President's team is still debating how to abide by a settlement requiring reunification

By [Elizabeth Findell](#) [Follow](#)

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Jose Barrera at his home in Florida. PHOTO: SAUL MARTINEZ FOR WSJ

Jose Barrera fled deteriorating safety conditions in Honduras to find work in the U.S. in 2019, but he wasn't prepared for what happened when he crossed the border into South Texas. Immigration authorities took his then-4-year-old son from him, detained Barrera for more than six months and then deported him back to Honduras without his little boy.

His wife did frantic research to find their child, and was able to get him returned home, after he had spent most of the year in a child-detention center away from his parents. But the trauma has lingered: More than five years later, Barrera said he and his son are still dealing with the strain in therapy.

“It was very bad, and for my son it was worse,” Barrera said. “I would not wish this on anyone.”

Seven years after the first Trump administration implemented a zero-tolerance criminal-prosecution policy that separated thousands of migrant children from their parents, some 3,200, such as Barrera, were reunited during the Biden administration. An estimated 1,000 remain separated.

Hours after President Trump returned to power on Jan. 20, one of his first moves was to rescind the task force working to reunite families and provide benefits to those who had been torn apart during his first term. The move threw into further question the degree to which the next administration will continue the reunification efforts, which are required by law under a 2023 court settlement.

Trump’s team is still debating how to abide by that settlement—and whether it will at all, according to people familiar with the discussions.

The Department of Homeland Security directed a request for comment to the Justice Department, which didn’t respond.

Advocates for the separated families, many of whom have spent years knocking on doors in rural villages looking for deported parents, are still getting phone calls with leads.



Immigrant children being housed in tents next to the Mexican border in Tornillo, Texas, in 2018. PHOTO: MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS

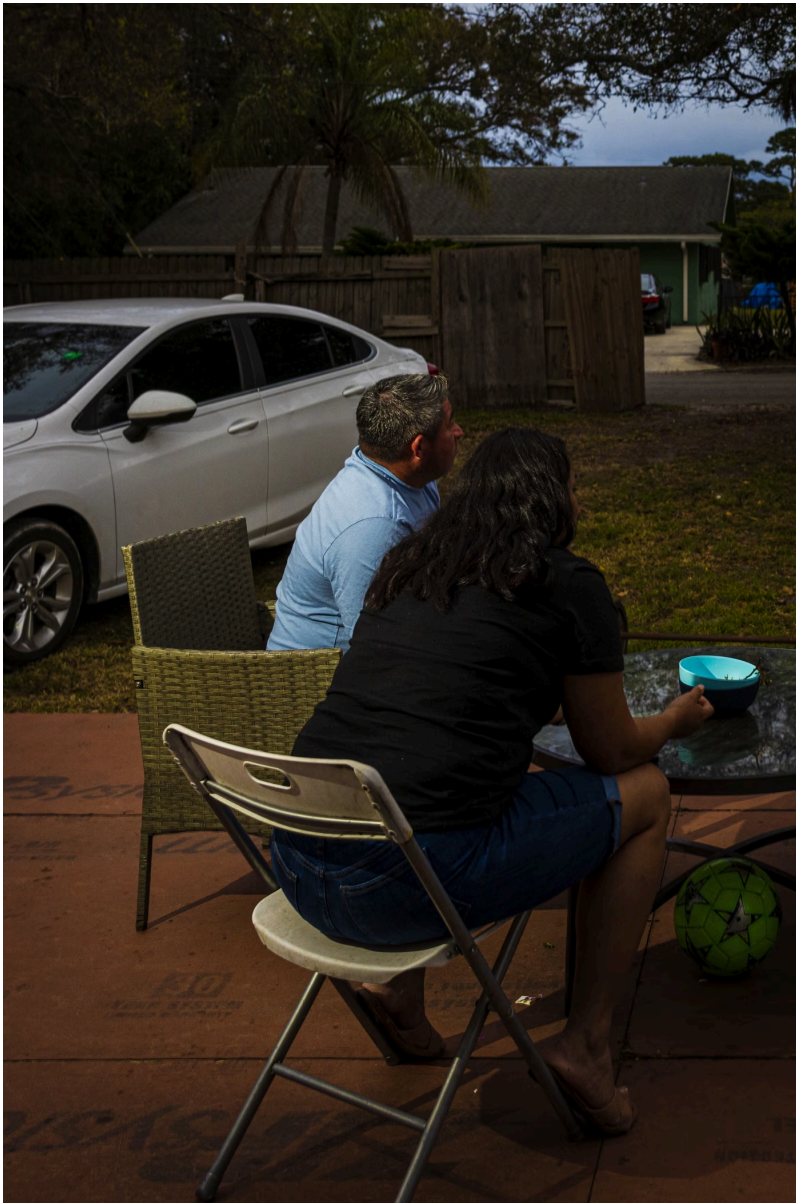
“The elimination of the task force reinforces that the Trump administration has never really come to grips with the harm they did to little children,” said Lee

Gelernt, an American Civil Liberties Union civil-rights lawyer who led the class-action lawsuit by affected families. He said the administration will quickly find itself back in court if it doesn't abide by the requirements of its settlement.

The settlement barred the U.S. government from separating families at the southern border through 2031. The government also is required to continue reunification efforts and to grant services to families such as behavioral-health and legal assistance. Reunited families are anxiously waiting to see how Trump will handle settlement provisions to allow them to keep living in the U.S. Many who were granted an initial three-year probation in the U.S. are now looking to make use of a settlement process to extend that time, or a preferential process for longer-term asylum, but are worried that it might not be granted under Trump.

Tom Homan, Trump's border czar who helped design the first-term family-separation policy, has said he wants to detain and deport families together. In cases of families already living in the U.S., where members may have mixed legal status, Trump has said the same.

"The only way you don't break up the family is you keep them together and you have to send them all back," Trump told NBC News in December.



Jose Barrera and his family in the backyard of their home. PHOTO: SAUL MARTINEZ

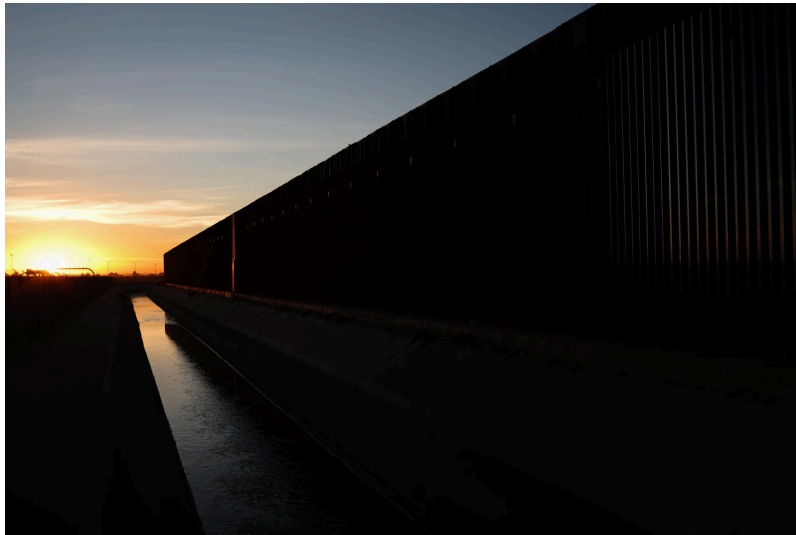
After his deportation, Barrera said a pileup of medical bills for his elderly parents and the money he owed to the smugglers who had taken him north left him no choice but to try again. He came back to the U.S. three years ago and received legal assistance under the class-action settlement.

Barrera has received temporary legal parole and, in December, was able to bring the rest of his family to live with him in Florida. His three children are in school, and Barrera is working in construction. They feel blessed, he said, but also uncertain: Barrera's three-year parole period will expire next year, and it will be up to the Trump administration to renew it.

“We are very worried because we hear the news and don’t know what the outcome will be,” he said.

The zero-tolerance policy, formally implemented in 2018, resulted in the separation of at least 4,000 families crossing the southern border before Trump was forced to call it off after public outcry. He had previously cast the separations as an unavoidable result of “criminal prosecution for lawbreaking” at the southern border.

Because the government didn’t keep records of the families and many parents were deported to remote, indigenous villages, finding and reuniting them was difficult.



Fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas. PHOTO: CHARLY TRIBALLEAU/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Children and parents at the border may still be separated under some exceptions, including if the parent is a threat to the child or to national security, and lawyers are watching closely to see if use of those exceptions increases now that Trump is in office.

“It would be a huge mistake for them to violate the terms of the settlement in a really overt way,” said Ann Garcia, a staff attorney at the National Immigration Project.

Attorneys are waiting for DHS to outline its process for carrying out the settlement requirements without the task force.

In Central America, nonprofit workers with only a parent’s name and country of origin have spent years scouring rural churches, clinics and markets, leaving notes for anyone who might have leads. The work has become more difficult over time but has resulted in calls back as recently as last year, said Nan Schivone, legal director for Justice in Motion, which has led the effort. At times, the workers have found that parents are no longer alive, she said.

Gelernt called the trauma of the separations long-lasting.

“We see children who still stand by the door wondering if men are going to come and take them from their parents,” he said.

—Michelle Hackman contributed to this article.

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