

Opening Statement

Chairman Elijah E. Cummings

Hearing with Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin K. McAleenan

July 18, 2019

Today, the Committee is examining the Trump Administration's inhumane policy of separating children from their families at the border and the dangerous conditions in which they are being held.

Last Friday, we issued a staff report summarizing data on children who were separated from their families by the Trump Administration. This report was based on information that we forced the Trump Administration to produce to the Committee pursuant to bipartisan subpoenas after they refused to provide it voluntarily for months.

The report found that the Administration's child separation policy was more harmful, traumatic, and chaotic than previously known. The report also described specific case studies of ten children who were separated by the Trump Administration, including several who were under two years old. We sent our report to the Department last week, and we will be asking our witness about these children this morning.

Today, we will hear from the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, Kevin McAleenan. He was originally invited to testify at our hearing last week, but he asked for his appearance to be postponed until today. We accommodated his request, and we thank him for being here.

Mr. McAleenan is one of the key architects of the Trump Administration's child separation policy. Last April, he sent a memo to Secretary Nielsen explaining how they could "direct the separation of parents or legal guardians and minors held in immigration detention." He recommended going forward with this policy, and she agreed.

They separated thousands and thousands of children from their parents under this policy—until public outrage and a federal court forced them to stop.

Mr. McAleenan and other senior Administration officials admitted that one of their purposes of separating children from their families was to deter immigrants and asylum-seekers. General Kelly said this. Attorney General Sessions said this. And Mr. McAleenan admitted as much in an interview last June, when he said the "intent" of the policy was to "dissuade crossing between ports of entry."

Tragically, under Mr. McAleenan's leadership, the Trump Administration failed to track separated children and their families so they could be reunified.

Mr. McAleenan has claimed that the Administration "kept very careful records between the relationships between parents and children."

But that is not accurate. Our Committee has now obtained data under subpoena showing a chaotic system in which children and parents were repeatedly moved to multiple facilities and in which parents were repeatedly deported without any idea where their children were.

Our findings are corroborated by multiple reports from independent Inspectors General and the Government Accountability Office, which concluded that the Trump Administration made no serious effort to track separated children and had no plan to reunify them.

Finally, while Mr. McAleenan has acknowledged overcrowding at detention centers, he has claimed publicly that reports of filthy and dangerous conditions are “unsubstantiated.”

This is also inaccurate. Last week, we heard testimony from the IGs that substantiated these reports in graphic detail, and they provided photographic evidence as well.

The Administration wants to blame Democrats for this crisis, but it is the Trump Administration’s own policies that are causing these problems:

- It was the Trump Administration that implemented the “zero tolerance policy,” separated thousands of children, and increased the number of people in detention.
- It was the Trump Administration that cancelled effective policies from the last Administration that reduced unnecessary detentions.
- It was the Trump Administration that shut down the Family Case Management Program, in which social workers helped migrant families find attorneys and navigate the court system with a 99% success rate for attending court appearances and check-ins with ICE.
- It was the Trump Administration that ended the Central American Minors program, which allowed children fleeing Central American countries with a relative in the United States to apply for asylum—from their home countries.

These were all policy decisions made by the Trump Administration. They all increased the number of people being held unnecessarily in detention. And they all contributed to the conditions we are now witnessing.

The damage the Trump Administration has inflicted—and is continuing to inflict—will impact these children for the rest of their lives. Today’s hearing is one more step in our Committee’s effort to determine the scope of this damage and begin to address it.