

Dozens of migrant children reported missing in Houston, raising alarms

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Unaccompanied migrant children from Central and South America stand in line as they await to be processed by border patrol agents after crossing the Rio Grande river into the United States from Mexico, in Roma, Texas. (Reuters photo)

Houston, September 3 (RHC)-- Federal and local officials are scrambling to locate close to a dozen unaccompanied migrant children, after Houston police raised concerns about dozens of migrant children reported missing in the Texas city since last year, according to U.S. government officials and related

emails reviewed by Reuters.

The cases underscore the challenges for U.S. President Joe Biden's administration as it faces a record number of unaccompanied kids arriving at the southwest border it must be safely and quickly released to sponsors in the United States.

Earlier this summer, a Houston police detective alerted the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) after discovering what looked like a pattern of migrant kids missing from the homes of their U.S. sponsors, according to an HHS official, who declined to be identified.

HHS is the federal agency that oversees the custody and release of children after they have crossed the US-Mexico border without a parent or legal guardian. In August, in a rare step, the HHS refugee office implemented an emergency supervisory review of releases of unaccompanied kids to non-parent sponsors in the Houston area, according to the HHS official and an internal email seen by Reuters.

The agency found that since late last year, 57 unaccompanied migrant kids had been reported missing in Houston, the HHS official, and two additional sources familiar with the situation said. Included in the count were nine kids who ran away from HHS shelters in the Houston area, the official said.

As of August 26, 46 of them had been confirmed safe, the official said. So far authorities say they have found no evidence of sex or labor trafficking. Some of the missing children who have been located are now 18 or older. A handful left the homes of relatives acting as sponsors to join parents who were in the United States, the official said, adding that the number of cases being reviewed is small compared to the volume of overall releases to the area.

Harris County, Texas, where Houston is located, is the No.1 destination for releases of unaccompanied minors, with more than 6,300 released between October 2021, when this fiscal year began, through June 2022.

More than 200,000 non-Mexican minors - who cannot be quickly turned around at the border – have been caught crossing alone since Biden took office in January 2021.

Early in Biden's presidency, the rise in unaccompanied minors overwhelmed Border Patrol stations, leaving children stuck in crowded conditions beyond a legal limit of 72 hours. Biden officials took steps to expand emergency shelters and streamline the release of children to sponsors – usually parents or relatives – in the United States, while at the same time seeking to ensure they are not sent to homes where they could face danger or mistreatment.

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