Americans support releasing migrant children from detention and oppose family separation, new data shows

People who do support such policies feel that the U.S. is culturally threatened by Latin American immigration

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Detaining migrant children and separating migrant families at the border were among President Donald Trump's most notorious immigration policies. Activists have been pressuring President Biden to do more to reverse these. We researched the history of and support for these and other border policies in our book "Walls, Cages, and Family Separation: Race and Immigration Policy in the Trump Era." What we found might be useful for those trying to craft effective policies that Americans are likely to support. We find that Americans are strongly opposed to detaining migrant children. Separating families is also unpopular, but Republicans and people anxious about cultural change support that policy more than others do.

A look at family separation and detention policies

Trump's "zero tolerance" policy separated more than 5,500 migrant children from their parents after the families crossed the U.S. border without documents. Many of these children were reclassified as unaccompanied minors and sent to shelters and detention facilities, while their parents were deported.

Since his inauguration, Biden has attempted to reverse or limit some of Trump's most restrictive immigration practices, including those related to detention and family separation. His administration rescinded the Trump administration policy of expelling unaccompanied migrant children, instituted as a coronavirus prevention strategy, and moved to speed the release of unaccompanied minors already in detention. The Biden administration also recently released all families and children from Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Berks County detention center, long criticized by activists for its conditions and how long children were detained. Most recently, the administration announced that parents deported without their children could be reunited in the United States and that "lawful pathways" would be explored to allow them to remain in the country.

But two things are complicating such efforts. First, unaccompanied minors are arriving at the southern border at a rate higher than ever before. Second, coronavirus social distance requirements mean that fewer of them can be housed in the same place than before the pandemic. And so, the administration is reopening several temporary child migrant shelters, including some with histories of sexual abuse, overcrowding and other poor conditions.

The Biden administration is debating what to do on these controversial policies. Our research on public opinion might be useful in establishing policy solutions most likely to be supported.

How we did our research

We conducted an online survey in August 2019 of a nationally representative sample that included 1,109 White respondents, using the survey firm Prolific. Because data show that Americans of color are more unified on these issues than White Americans, we focused on White Americans' opinions. Doing so allowed us to better understand the factors associated with a wide range of opinions on detention and family separation.

Americans are divided by party in their opinions of some immigration policies, like the border wall — strongly supported by Republicans and strongly opposed by Democrats. But our research found that Americans of both parties were united against detaining migrant children.

We asked respondents which of three things federal immigration authorities should do with migrant children: detain them; release them to sponsors and family members; or deport them. Overall, 82 percent supported releasing children to sponsors or family members. Only 11 percent supported deporting them, and only 6 percent said they should be kept in immigrant detention facilities.

That does vary by party. Fully 97 percent of Democrats supported releasing the children, while 57 percent of Republicans did — a significant majority for both parties. Only 16 percent of Republicans selected child detention as the best policy, while 27 percent thought they should be deported. Overall, the vast majority of Americans oppose child detention and support releasing them.

Partisan differences in support for family separation

Family separation is also unpopular. Sixty percent of people in our sample said they strongly opposed it; another 20 percent opposed it "somewhat."

But Democrats and Republicans had more sharply different views on family separation than they did on child detention. Among Democrats, 97 percent again disapproved of the policy either strongly or somewhat, while only 50 percent of Republicans did. However, only 17 percent of Republicans supported it strongly.

Cultural threat can motivate opinions on family separation

What lay behind some of these opinions? Worry about how immigration from Latin America is changing American culture, which we call "cultural threat." Among those who strongly feel immigration is a cultural threat, only 49 percent oppose separating families. Fully 90 percent of those who feel immigration poses a low cultural threat — or almost all of them — opposed separating families. These results are consistent with racialized threat narratives on immigration, which often frame Latinos as a threat in terms of negative potential impacts on job opportunities, changing language and customs, as well as other broader cultural, societal and economic harms.

We also tested whether the opinions we found could be explained by other important characteristics, such as education, gender or income. We found that perceptions of cultural threat and identifying as a Republican were significantly and strongly associated with greater support for family separation even when taking these other considerations into account.

The Biden administration continues to face even greater pressure as the number of unaccompanied minors entering the country continues to grow and some migrant children face prolonged detention. But releasing children and not keeping them in detention is not only what activists want, but also what the public supports. Some Republican elected officials are framing the issue as a crisis, but the Biden administration has declined to do so. Past research has shown

framing immigration as a crisis has significantly contributed to the Latino threat narrative and driven negative immigration rhetoric. Our results demonstrate how threat perceptions can greatly influence opinions on immigration policy. As such, it will be important for the Biden administration to carefully consider how it will address these threat narratives and frame its own policies to generate public support.

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