



When Antonio Diaz Mendez arrived in the U.S. from Guatemala at age 14, he was already deep in debt and largely on his own. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

As Migrant Children Were Put to Work, U.S. Ignored Warnings

The White House and federal agencies were repeatedly alerted to signs of children at risk. The warnings were ignored or missed.

By [Hannah Dreier](#)

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In the spring of 2021, Linda Brandmiller was working at an arena in San Antonio that had been converted into an emergency shelter for migrant children. Thousands of boys were sleeping on cots as the Biden administration grappled with a record number of minors crossing into the United States without their parents.

Ms. Brandmiller's job was to help vet sponsors, and she had been trained to look for possible trafficking. In her first week, two cases jumped out: One man told her he was sponsoring three boys to employ them at his construction company. Another, who lived in Florida, was trying to sponsor two children who would have to work off the cost of bringing them north.

She immediately contacted supervisors working with the Department of Health and Human Services, the federal agency responsible for these children. "This is urgent," she wrote in an email reviewed by The New York Times.

But within days, she noticed that one of the children was set to be released to the man in Florida. She wrote another email, this time asking for a supervisor's "immediate attention" and adding that the government had already sent a 14-year-old boy to the same sponsor.

Ms. Brandmiller also emailed the shelter's manager. A few days later, her building access was revoked during her lunch break. She said she was never told why she had been fired.

Over the past two years, more than 250,000 migrant children have come alone to the United States. **Thousands of children have ended up in punishing jobs across the country — working overnight in slaughterhouses, replacing roofs, operating machinery in factories** — all in violation of child labor laws, a recent [Times investigation](#) showed. After the article's publication in February, the White House announced [policy changes and a crackdown](#) on companies that hire children.

But all along, there were signs of the explosive growth of this labor force and warnings that **the Biden administration ignored or missed**, The Times has found.

Again and again, veteran government staffers and outside contractors told the Health and Human Services Department, including in reports that reached Secretary Xavier Becerra, that children appeared to be at risk. The Labor Department put out news releases noting an increase in child labor. Senior White House aides were shown evidence of exploitation, such as clusters of migrant children who had been found working with industrial equipment or caustic chemicals.

As the administration scrambled to clear shelters that were strained beyond capacity, children were released with little support to sponsors who expected them to take on grueling, dangerous jobs.

In interviews with The Times, officials expressed concern for migrant children but shifted blame for failing to protect them.

H.H.S. officials said the department vetted sponsors sufficiently but could not control what happened to children after they were released. Monitoring workplaces, they said, was the job of the Department of Labor.

Officials at the Labor Department said inspectors had increased their focus on child labor and shared details about workers with H.H.S., but said it was not a welfare agency. And White House officials said that while the two departments had passed along information about migrant child labor, the reports were not flagged as urgent and did not make clear the scope of the problem. Robyn M. Patterson, a White House spokeswoman, said in a statement that the administration was now increasing scrutiny of employers and reviewing its vetting of sponsors.

“It’s unacceptable that companies are using child labor, and this administration will continue working to strengthen the system to investigate these violations and hold violators accountable,” the statement read.

But the White House declined to comment on why the administration did not previously react to repeated signs that migrant children were being widely exploited.

“If I saw it, they could have put it together,” said Ms. Brandmiller, who is also an immigration lawyer. “There were so many opportunities to connect those dots that no one ever did.” An H.H.S. spokeswoman said the agency had no record of Ms. Brandmiller’s concerns. The company that ran the emergency shelter declined to comment.

Ms. Brandmiller said she still worried about the 14-year-old boy, Antonio Diaz Mendez.

Antonio is living in Florida City, Fla., far from his family in Guatemala. In an interview last summer, he sat on the mildewed porch of a house crowded with other migrant children. He said he was working long shifts in a refrigerated warehouse, packing vegetables for distribution around the country, and had not seen his sponsor in months.

He missed his grandmother and sometimes went days without talking to anyone. He wanted to go to school, but felt trapped because he needed to earn money to repay his debts, support himself and help his siblings. No one, he said, had ever come to check on him.