

IMMIGRATION

Reporting on missing migrant children

How reporter Kristian Hernández uncovered a growing trend of missing migrant children in the U.S.



by **Kristian Hernández**

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The Agua Blanca valley in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in December 2018. This region has one of the highest child malnutrition rates in Central America and the most unaccompanied minors coming to the U.S. (Kristian Hernández / Center for Public Integrity)

Reading Time: 4 minutes

I started reporting on missing migrant children four years ago, almost by accident. I was trekking up a steep muddy road in the northern highlands of Guatemala, looking for the mother of a 16-year-old who drowned in the Rio Grande, when a man outside a small chapel greeted my fixer and me. The man waved and asked if we needed help.

We stopped for a minute to catch our breath. Half panting, I shared with the stranger that I was investigating a story for the Center for Public Integrity about [migrants who died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border](#). The man, a local pastor, looked out over a vast valley and said there had been many cases there involving migrants who crossed into the U.S. and were never heard from again. Most, like the boy I was reporting on, were children who left on their own, looking for work in order to help their family escape poverty and hunger.

For the past year, I've been trying to find out what happened to the more than 700,000 migrant children who came to the U.S. alone during the past decade. Underpinning that was a question: Why did they embark on such a dangerous journey?

In order to understand what forces young children to leave their countries, I've [traced the long-established family networks that brought them here](#) and [studied the origins of child migrant labor in the U.S.](#) I've also tried to counter, through [their own voices](#), the [lies and misconceptions about these children](#) reverberating from the halls of power.

As part of a 10-month investigation in collaboration with Scripps News, we uncovered that every year, [thousands of migrant children disappear](#) from their homes shortly after arriving in the U.S. But there is no clear local, state or federal government agency taking responsibility for searching for many of these missing children or investigating why a growing number have disappeared.

According to the FBI, more than 98% of all children that go missing in the U.S. are found. But the numbers for migrant children are grim. Less than 1% of the 3,340 migrant children reported missing to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services between October 2019 and April 2023 have been found.

HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement would not release information about where these kids were reported missing, so Scripps News investigative producer Karen Rodriguez and I filed dozens of open records requests with local law enforcement departments, large and small. But almost all of them denied our requests, citing open cases or juvenile privacy laws.

The small town of Culpeper, Virginia, was one of the few that gave us access. Thirty-five migrant children, mainly from Guatemala, have disappeared from there since 2017. Sgt. Norma McGuckin, a detective with the Culpeper Police Department, said that getting the children's faces on TV would help her find the 26 still missing.



Journalist Kristian Hernández pauses for a photo on a 2023 reporting trip in the small rural town of Culpeper, Virginia, where at least 35 unaccompanied migrant children have gone missing since 2017. (Kristian Hernández / Center for Public Integrity)

Scripps News reporters and I visited Culpeper several times to talk with local officials and sponsors the missing migrant kids had lived with before disappearing.

And our analysis of previously unreleased federal data of nearly 400,000 unaccompanied minor placements revealed how a growing number of these children were being sent to live with distant relatives and unrelated sponsors. These placements correlated with an unprecedented influx of unaccompanied minors during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the U.S.-Mexico border was closed to almost everyone except these children.

In Culpeper, many of the migrant kids reported missing were placed with strangers and ran away shortly afterward. The 15 children found by McGuckin left to live with family members in the U.S. or to find work. But the sponsors who reported the migrant children missing had very little information to help police find them.

It was like “looking for ghosts,” McGuckin said as she tried to describe the difficulties of her job. Sometimes she didn’t even have a photo of the missing child to make a flier that could be posted alongside pictures of other missing children.

As we continued our reporting and followed the sergeant’s work for months, we discovered major discrepancies in how the federal government shared information with law enforcement.

We contacted HHS, asking why it denied information in its case files to some investigative agencies. HHS denied multiple interview requests. However, we also brought our findings to the attention of

state and local officials and the Guatemalan Embassy in Washington, D.C., which raised the same concerns to the federal government.



Four months after our first inquiry, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, or ORR, updated its policy to allow local law enforcement immediate access to photos and potential contact information after a migrant child is reported missing.

But the most important thing we found after studying Culpeper: While thousands of migrant children are missing, they're not all being trafficked or exploited, as dozens of Republican U.S. lawmakers and state attorneys general have claimed for the past year.

Republican officials accused the Biden administration of losing 85,000 migrant children who came to the U.S. alone. But the 85,000 figure refers to the number of children who could not be reached during follow-up calls, also known as welfare checks, ORR representatives make after a child is released from federal custody. The number was reported by the [New York Times in February 2023](#).

Our investigation found that ORR received 6,318 calls, mostly from sponsors, reporting missing or runaway migrant children between January 2018 and April 2023. We also found that the number of calls more than doubled every year since 2020.

The story provided the first real numbers behind the story of missing unaccompanied migrant children and highlights the systemic failures leading to their growing numbers nationwide. But most importantly, our story helped change a policy that was keeping investigators like McGuckin from accessing vital information that could help them find these kids.

I am proud to share that our story was republished by more than 50 news outlets since it went live on February 23, including news organizations on both extremes of the U.S. immigration debate. We are also providing data and tools to local reporters across the country to help them conduct their own investigations.

Investigative journalism takes time. It has many challenges and unexpected turns. But it's worth the investment because stories like this can help bridge the gap on issues such as immigration where people are so far apart that they've stopped listening to each other and fail to see the full picture.