

## 4,000 Migrant Kids Might Have to Spend the Rest of Their Childhood in Federal Custody

By **Gaby Del Valle** Jul 24, 2019



Thousands of migrant kids could spend the rest of their childhoods in federal custody because the government hasn't been able to find their sponsors.

Approximately one-third of the children held in shelters operated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, or more than 4,000 kids, have been designated "Category 4," meaning they have no identifiable sponsor in the U.S., [CBS News reports](#). This doesn't necessarily mean that the government hasn't tried to find their sponsors, usually relatives or family friends living in the U.S. It just hasn't been able to.

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It also means that these children will be held indefinitely until — or unless — a sponsor comes forward.

The number of Category 4 designations is unprecedented — and, according to one anonymous ORR official who spoke with CBS, “alarming.” During the Obama administration, the rate was around 10 percent, former ORR director Bob Carey told CBS.

The reason for the spike in Category 4 designations isn’t immediately clear, though CBS did speak with one attorney who said one of his clients was labeled Category 4 after being separated from his father at the U.S.-Mexico border last summer.

But that doesn’t explain why 4,000 children, some of whom arrived after the family separation policy ended, seem to have no sponsors. Experts who spoke with CBS have a few theories: Prospective sponsors could have been spooked by a federal policy requiring sponsors to be fingerprinted. Certain caseworkers, who are employed by the nonprofits that operate the shelters, not by the government, may simply not be conducting thorough enough searches. Caseworkers are responsible for finding prospective sponsors and vetting them to ensure they’re able to take in migrant kids, a process that occasionally includes visiting sponsors’ homes to make sure they’re suitable for children.

Conditions vary from shelter to shelter. Some shelters are operated by nonprofit organizations that contract with the government. Others — notably the temporary Homestead shelter in south Florida — are operated by for-profit companies and have been accused of not having children’s best interests in mind.

“At Homestead, they had one caseworker who doesn’t speak a word of Spanish,” Hope Frye, an immigration attorney who regularly visits migrant children in federal custody, previously told VICE News. “The children at Homestead said, ‘Our caseworker changes so much, we don’t even know her name.’”

Category 4 kids held at shelters like Homestead and other shelters that house teenagers are at most imminent risk. When children in ORR custody turn 18, they lose all the protections guaranteed to migrant children — and, in some cases, they’re transferred into the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.