

## Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2019, CBP reported apprehending more than 527,000 noncitizen family unit members at or between U.S. ports of entry along the southwest border—a 227 percent increase over fiscal year 2018. In April 2018, the U.S. Attorney General issued a memo on criminal prosecutions of immigration offenses, which DHS officials said led to an increase in family separations.

GAO was asked to review issues related to DHS's processing of family units. This report examines (1) CBP data on apprehended family unit members; the extent to which (2) CBP and (3) ICE developed and implemented policies and procedures for processing family units; and (4) how DHS and HHS share information about UAC. GAO analyzed record-level DHS and HHS data and documents; interviewed DHS and HHS officials; and visited DHS locations in California and Texas where CBP apprehensions of family units increased in 2017.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations to DHS and one to HHS. Among them, CBP should develop and implement additional controls to ensure that Border Patrol agents accurately record family unit separations in data systems. GAO also recommends that ICE systematically track in its data system the family units ICE separates. Further, DHS and HHS should collaborate about information sharing for UAC. DHS and HHS concurred with the recommendations.

[GAO-20-245](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or [gambler@gao.gov](mailto:gambler@gao.gov).

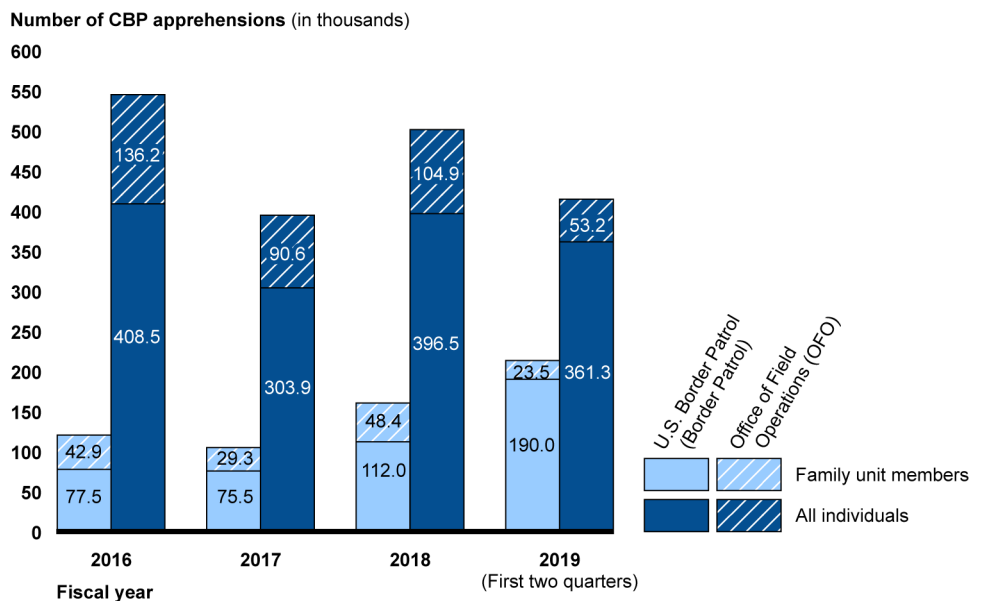
## SOUTHWEST BORDER

### Actions Needed to Improve DHS Processing of Families and Coordination between DHS and HHS

## What GAO Found

Data from the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) indicate that apprehensions of family unit members (noncitizen children under 18 and their parents or legal guardians) grew from about 22 percent of total southwest border apprehensions in fiscal year 2016 to about 51 percent of such apprehensions during the first two quarters of fiscal year 2019—the most current data available. During this period, CBP data indicated that most apprehensions of family units—about 76 percent—occurred between ports of entry by the U.S. Border Patrol (Border Patrol). With regard to family separations, from April 2018 through March 2019, CBP data indicate it separated at least 2,700 children from their parents, processing them as unaccompanied alien children (UAC) and transferring them to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

**U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Number of Southwest Border Apprehensions and Family Unit Member Apprehensions, Fiscal Year 2016 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2019**



Source: GAO analysis of Border Patrol and OFO data. | GAO-20-245

Notes: GAO used "number of apprehensions" rather than "number of family unit members apprehended" as the unit of analysis because an individual may have been apprehended multiple times in the same year. GAO determined that OFO did not have a unique identifier for approximately 11 percent of all of its apprehension records during the period of the review. Hence, GAO could not independently confirm these records as reliable and excluded them from the analysis. Numbers are also rounded.

CBP's October 2015 *National Standards on Transport, Escort, Detention, and Search* defines a "family unit" to include one or more non-U.S. citizen juveniles accompanied by their parent(s) or legal guardian(s).

CBP developed some policies and procedures for processing family units but does not have sufficient controls to ensure effective implementation. For example, CBP policy requires that Border Patrol agents and officers track apprehended

family unit members and, if applicable, subsequent family separations in agency data systems. GAO's analysis of Border Patrol documents and data indicates that its agents have not accurately and consistently recorded family units and separations. Specifically, GAO examined a nongeneralizable sample of 40 HHS records for children involved in family separations between June 2018 and March 2019 and matched them to Border Patrol apprehensions data for these children. GAO found Border Patrol did not initially record 14 of the 40 children as a member of a family unit (linked to a parent's record) per Border Patrol policy, and thus did not record their subsequent family separation. GAO found an additional 10 children among the 40 whose family separations were not documented in Border Patrol's data system as required by CBP policy during this period. Border Patrol officials were unsure of the extent of these problems, and stated that, among other things, data-entry errors may have arisen due to demands on agents as the number of family unit apprehensions increased. Thus, it is unclear the extent to which Border Patrol has accurate records of separated family unit members in its data system. Further, Border Patrol agents inconsistently recorded information about the reasons for and circumstances surrounding family separations on required forms. Developing and implementing additional controls would help Border Patrol maintain complete and accurate information on all family separations.

DHS's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is, among other things, responsible for detaining and removing those family units apprehended by CBP. ICE officers are to determine whether to accept or deny a referral of a family unit from CBP for detention in one of ICE's family residential centers, release family unit members into the interior of the United States, or remove family unit members (who are subject to final orders of removal) from the United States. ICE has procedures for processing and releasing family units from ICE custody. However, with regard to family unit separations, ICE relies on a manual process to track separations that occur in ICE custody (generally at one of ICE's family residential centers) and does not systematically record this information in its data system. Without a mechanism to do so, ICE does not have reasonable assurance that parents whom ICE separated from their children and are subject to removal are able to make arrangements for their children, including being removed with them, as provided in ICE's policy for detained parents.

In 2018, DHS and HHS developed written interagency agreements regarding UAC. However, DHS and HHS officials stated they have not resolved long-standing differences in opinion about how and what information agencies are to share related to the care and placement of those children, including those referred to HHS after a family separation. GAO found that DHS has not consistently provided information and documents to HHS as specified in interagency agreements. HHS officials also identified additional information they need from DHS, about those adults apprehended with children and later separated, to inform their decisions about placing children with sponsors and reunifying separated families, when necessary. Increased collaboration between DHS and HHS about information sharing would better position HHS to make informed and timely decisions for UAC.