

## Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2019, CBP reported apprehending more than 527,000 noncitizen family unit members (children under 18 and their parents or legal guardians) at or between U.S. ports of entry along the southwest border—a 227 percent increase over fiscal year 2018. GAO was asked to review issues related to families—including family units—arriving at the southwest border.

This report examines the extent to which DHS has identified, collected, documented, and shared information its components need to inform processes for family members apprehended at the border. GAO analyzed DHS documents; interviewed DHS officials; and visited DHS locations in Arizona, California and Texas, where CBP apprehensions of family units increased in 2017. GAO compared the information gathered with leading practices in collaboration to evaluate DHS components' processes for apprehended family members.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to DHS, including that DHS identify the information its components collectively need to process family members apprehended together, collect and document that information at the time of apprehension, and evaluate options for developing a unique identifier shared across DHS's data systems to link family members apprehended together. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

## SOUTHWEST BORDER

### Actions Needed to Address Fragmentation in DHS's Processes for Apprehended Family Members

## What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) processes to identify, collect, document, and share information about family members apprehended at the southwest border are fragmented. DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehends family members and determines how information about each individual—and his or her relationship to other family members—will be collected and documented. Other DHS components, such as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), use information collected at the time of apprehension to inform how those who are members of a family, including children, will proceed through immigration proceedings. Family members apprehended at the border and placed into expedited removal that indicate an intention to apply for asylum, or a fear of persecution or torture or fear of return to their home country, are referred to DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for a credible fear screening. However,

- DHS has not identified the information its components collectively need about apprehended family members. Each DHS component collects information to meet its own operational needs, and does not consider the information needs of other components. For example, the information about family members that CBP needs differs from the information about family members that USCIS needs. CBP officials told us they would not generally identify spouses and children age 18 to 21 apprehended with a parent as family members, although USCIS's definition of a dependent for credible fear screening purposes includes spouses and unmarried children under age 21.
- CBP collects information about certain family members for its operational purposes, but does not collect and document information at the time of apprehension that other DHS components may later need. Specifically, CBP collects and documents information about parents and their children under age 18 who are apprehended together. However, consistent with regulation, USCIS policy is to include any dependents who arrived concurrently with the principal applicant, such as a spouse or unmarried child under age 21, on a principal applicant's positive credible fear determination if the dependent wants to be included. According to USCIS and ICE officials, it can be difficult to identify spouses and children age 18 to 21 because CBP does not regularly document such family relationships.
- DHS does not have a mechanism to link the records of family members apprehended together across its components that need this information. As a result, DHS components may not have access to all the information about family members they need to make effective operational decisions.

Because DHS has not identified the information all of its components collectively need to process family members apprehended at the border, collected and documented that information at the time of apprehension, and evaluated options to share that information across components, consistent with leading practices in collaboration, DHS risks removing individuals from the United States who may have been eligible for relief or protection based on their family relationship.