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ARRESTS OF FAMILIES CROSSING BORDER HIGHEST IN FIVE YEARS

Trump administration blames increase on 'vulnerabilities' in U.S. immigration law

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More than 90,000 immigrants traveling as part of a family have been arrested crossing the U.S. border illegally in the last 11 months, the highest such number in at least five years, according to data released by the Trump administration Wednesday.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan said 12,274 people traveling as part of a family, mostly from Central America, were arrested at the border in August. Last month's arrests marked a 38 percent increase over July, when just over 9,000 were apprehended.

Total family apprehensions since October, the beginning of the federal fiscal year, is already higher than for any complete prior fiscal year for which data is available.

The total number of people arrested at the border in August rose about 20 percent from the prior month, to more than 37,500.

Mr. McAleenan said Wednesday that the rise in arrests of families was a "very direct response to the vulnerabilities" in U.S. immigration law and that the government has little ability to deter immigrant families and children traveling alone from crossing the border illegally.

"There are no consequences to being apprehended, in fact they are seeking to be apprehended to start their processing of being allowed into the country and start their court process," Mr. McAleenan said. "It is a crisis of significant proportion."

The Trump administration has been struggling to curb the flow of illegal border crossers, particularly families, in recent months. Its policy of separating parents and children and criminally prosecuting the adults was scuttled in late June after widespread criticism.

A federal judge in San Diego also ordered a halt to the effort and directed the government to reunite more than 2,500 children separated from their parents. The government has been scrambling to find hundreds of parents who were deported without their children and several hundred immigrant children remain in the government's care.

As part of a decades-old court ruling known as the Flores Agreement, the government isn't allowed to detain immigrant children in jails that aren't licensed child-care facilities for more than 20 days. Other laws govern the treatment of children who are caught crossing the border alone and are cared for by the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement before being placed with sponsors in the U.S.

Mr. Trump and other administration officials have said the Flores case and other laws are legal loopholes that encourage more illegal immigration. A federal judge in Los Angeles

earlier this year rejected an administration request to ease the rules in the Flores settlement to allow for parents and kids to be jailed until their immigration cases are decided.

Last week the administration announced plans to rewrite government regulations about jailing immigrant families and effectively end the Flores agreement. The proposed change is likely to be challenged in federal court.