

1. OVERVIEW

This document describes how we identify children in U.S. immigration court data, and why we use three different methods rather than one. A more detailed version of this methodology documentation is available upon request.

EOIR's coding for unaccompanied children became unreliable after 2017, to the point that the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) suspended publishing juvenile data in December 2021 and has not resumed. Peer-reviewed research has developed alternatives, but they carry their own limits. We therefore report three measures side by side, because their disagreement describes the width of the uncertainty and a single number would imply a precision the data do not support.

Counts here come from the extract through August 31, 2026 and are subject to revision in later releases. They move with each monthly extract. The methods do not.

2. THE THREE METHODS

	Method	What it measures	Population
A	EOIR's own codes	What the court itself records as unaccompanied	299,533 cases ever coded; 96,391 still coded today
B	Galli & Padilla, adapted	Intended as who was probably unaccompanied. In practice, closer to minors in removal proceedings	728,960 cases; 401,245 to 425,736 excluding cases that qualify on age alone, meaning the only record evidence is that the person was under 18
C	All children	Every child in court, regardless of accompaniment	208,837 removal orders, January 2025 to August 2026

The populations overlap heavily, but none contains the others. The main reason B and C differ is family grouping: Method B excludes a case where a linked lead or rider is 18 or older, so children who arrived with a parent are excluded by design, while Method C counts them.

The population counts above are not comparable: A and B are all-time case counts, C is an event count. Measuring all three over January 2025 to August 2026, in removal cases, excluding venue changes and transfers, and counting each case once gives the comparison directly. Method C reads 208,048 cases on that basis, against 208,837 orders, a difference of 0.4%. Each case still qualifies on its whole history, so no method is redefined; only the events counted are restricted to the window.

Method	Cases with a removal order	Decided cases ending in removal	Removals in absentia
A, still coded unaccompanied	6,100	43.6%	81.1%
A, ever coded unaccompanied	15,838	46.2%	76.4%
B, excluding age-only cases	34,458	49.4%	85.9%
B, as adapted	66,804	51.5%	83.9%
C, all children	208,048	69.4%	68.9%

Two things stand out. Removal rates run from 43.6% under Method A's current coding to 69.4% for all children, and all four unaccompanied measures fall between 43.6% and 51.5%, well below the rate for children generally. Every measure of unaccompanied children also shows a higher share of removal orders issued without the child present, so 68.9% is a floor as an estimate for unaccompanied children rather than a typical value for them. Method A is small because its coding field broke down after 2017, not because it screens harder, so it is not a narrower Method B and the two do not sit on a single scale.

The larger point is the spread. The same data and the same rules produce anywhere from 6,100 to 208,048 cases with a removal order, depending only on which definition is used. Thus, all figures from this analysis should state the method behind the calculation.

3. DATA SOURCE

Agency	Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), U.S. Department of Justice
How obtained	Proactive disclosure — EOIR publishes monthly case data extracts to its public FOIA Library (justice.gov/eoir/foia-library-0) pursuant to the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016
Primary tables	Case table and Proceedings table (joined on case identifier), together with the Juvenile History table and its juvenile status lookup. The Case table supplies birth date, date of entry, and case priority code. The Proceedings table supplies completion date, decision code, administrative completion code, in absentia flag, case type, and hearing location. The Juvenile History table supplies the juvenile status recorded for each case (UJ, J2, AJ, J, J1, NA)
Supporting tables	Case Priority History table (unaccompanied child processing priority, current and historical), Lead and Rider table (case links, with creation and severance dates), and the hearing location lookup table (used to classify juvenile dockets)
Extract used	All case history through August 31, 2026.
Release cadence	EOIR publishes updated extracts approximately monthly. Figures for prior months may be revised in subsequent releases as EOIR corrects or updates its own records.
Sources cited	Galli, Chiara, and Tatiana Padilla. 2025. " New Data on Unaccompanied Minors in US Immigration Court (2009–2023) ," International Migration Review 60(3): 1812–1842. DOI 10.1177/01979183251316528. Open access, CC BY-NC. U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for Immigration Review, EOIR Case Data Code Key . Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), " Immigration Court's Data on Minors Facing Deportation is Too Faulty to Be Trusted ," and " Unaccompanied Children in Immigration Court: About the Data ." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, " Referrals ," Research & Data . Published July 14, 2025; updated September 8, 2026.

4. KEY DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Unaccompanied child (UAC)	Under U.S. law, a person under 18, without lawful immigration status, for whom no parent or legal guardian is available to provide care and physical custody. Each method approximates this definition, but none implements it directly.
Ordered removed	An immigration judge issued a removal order. Whether a deportation was carried out is tracked by ICE and is not in EOIR data or confirmed by this analysis.
In absentia	A decision issued when the respondent did not appear at the hearing.
Case	A single respondent's matter, with a unique identifier. A case may contain several proceedings, each corresponding most closely to a scheduled hearing event.

Lead and rider	Linked cases, normally a principal applicant and dependents, commonly used to group family members for docketing. Each retains its own identifier and decision history. The coding is occasionally inverted, so the lead cannot be assumed to be the adult. Roughly 88% of links are active; Method B uses active links only, since it asks whether an adult is on the case now.
Juvenile docket	A docket established within a court to hear the cases of children under 18, with some accommodations for the child's developmental capacity. It includes children held in Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) shelters, children released to sponsors, and children who do not have a parent in removal proceedings.
Notice to Appear (NTA)	The charging document DHS files to begin removal proceedings. It can be filed at any time, including years after entry, so where it substitutes for a missing entry date it overstates age at arrival. Until DHS files one, a case does not appear in EOIR data at all.

5. DATA PROCESSING

Field handling that applies to all three methods

Four characteristics of EOIR's date fields materially affect the results, and some fail silently.

- **Birth dates are stored as text in month and year form.** Only 13 records of 6.9 million use an ISO-style date, so reading the field as a date discards essentially the whole column without an error and every age flag stops firing. This is the most consequential trap here. Birth dates are always included on the NTA but only as a month and year, so they are assumed to fall on the 15th, following TRAC and Galli & Padilla.
- **Entry dates contain a placeholder.** December 1, 1990 appears 14,433 times, roughly double the next most common value. It is a system default, so those cases are treated as having no entry date and fall back to the NTA date. Left in, they compute as adults and are wrongly excluded.
- **Impossible ages are set to missing, rather than dropped,** which keeps the case in Method B on other flags and removes it from Method C, which requires a usable age. Negative ages and ages over 100 at entry are data-entry errors.
- **"Most recent" juvenile status means most recently created, not most recently modified.** The last-modified date is empty on at least one record for 94% of cases, and empty sorts ahead of any real date, so ordering on it selects the oldest record and returns 272,446 cases, neither of the two Method A populations.

Method A: EOIR's own codes

EOIR confirmed to a TRAC FOIA request that it identifies unaccompanied children using the Juvenile History table and no other field. Method A reproduces the government's own method so its flaws can be measured.

- **Included: UJ and J2,** Unaccompanied Juvenile and Unaccompanied Juvenile (Asylum), the only codes that name unaccompanied status. **Excluded: AJ** (accompanied), **J** (does not distinguish accompanied from unaccompanied), **J1** (collapses released to a guardian and turned 18 into one code, making it uninterpretable), and **NA** (not applicable, the dominant code after 2017). Galli & Padilla exclude J and J1 for the same reason.
- **Two populations, both reported.** Ever coded, meaning UJ or J2 at any point: 299,533 cases, for historical and population questions. Currently coded, meaning the most recent status is UJ or J2: 96,391 cases, for who is recorded as unaccompanied today.
- **They diverge by a factor of three mainly because of the July 2026 bulk recoding, and the field records current custody status, not how the child arrived.** TRAC's documentation states the tag "always indicates the present status of the child, and not the original situation." In practice it updated inconsistently in both directions. It rarely moved when children aged out: before 2026, about 88% of ever-coded cases still carried the code. Then in July 2026, 150,759 of those cases picked up a new NA record in a single

month, half the historical population; in a large subset examined, 99.96% were adults by then, and the code applied was NA rather than J1. The current code now largely answers whether the person is still a child. EOIR has not documented the change, so treat the current-code figure as provisional until it holds across several data releases.

- The method overcounts and undercounts, and the errors do not cancel.** It overcounts because adults who aged out stayed coded, and because children with a parent in the United States, for example a parent in withholding-only proceedings that cannot include a dependent, may be processed as unaccompanied at the border and keep that designation. No court-based method can identify the latter group, and we have not sized it. It undercounts because coding collapsed: after 2017, 79% of table records carry NA, and by case start year, ever-coded cases fell from 48,840 in 2016 to between 5,993 and 11,360 a year for 2022 through 2024, a fall from 45.4% of minors to between 1.6% and 5.6%. TRAC separately found that 50% of people aged 0 to 17 at their NTA were absent from the juvenile file; that figure is TRAC's and we have not reproduced it. **The net direction is therefore unknown.**
- Against children DHS referred to HHS, the gap is starker.** EOIR's code covered about four in five referred children in fiscal years 2014 to 2016, 121,218 against 150,392 referrals, and about one in ten in fiscal years 2021 to 2024, 48,691 against 468,892. Three caveats: this compares annual totals rather than matching individuals, ORR counts fiscal-year referrals while our cases are counted by calendar year of case start, and not every referred child receives an NTA. Fiscal 2012 and 2013 are excluded because the juvenile codes were created in September 2014. None of these plausibly explains a fall from four in five to one in ten.
- We do not use the UC case priority code as the definition.** It identifies 25,840 cases against 299,533, and 98.9% of those 25,840 already carry UJ or J2, so it is a narrow subset rather than an alternative, and using it alone would discard roughly 274,000 cases. It serves as supporting evidence only, as Flag 4 in Method B, read from Case Priority History together with the current value, which returns 68,499 cases against 25,840 from the current value alone, of which 63,106 survive Method B's other exclusions.

Method B: Galli & Padilla, adapted

Galli & Padilla built this method to work around the post-2017 coding failure, identifying 483,432 unaccompanied minor cases between 2009 and March 2023. That figure is theirs; our population carries no date restriction, so the two are not comparable. This is an adaptation, not a replication.

#	Flag	Effect
1	Age 18 or older at arrival, where age is known	Exclude
2	Under 18 at arrival	Include
3	Coded UJ or J2 with an NTA before January 1, 2018	Include
4	Carries the UC processing priority	Include
5	Heard at a juvenile docket	Include
6	Heard at a family docket	Exclude
7	Heard at an ICE detainee docket, never at a juvenile docket	Exclude
8	Lead and rider both under 18	Include
9	Either lead or rider is 18 or older	Exclude

- **We apply a net rule rather than the published sequence.** A case is included if at least one inclusion flag fires and no exclusion flag does. The authors instead apply inclusions, then exclusions, then Flag 5 last so a juvenile docket can restore a case Flag 1 excluded on apparent age. We chose the net rule for auditability, since order-dependent logic is hard to verify and this analysis underpins external reporting. The cost has not been measured. Under the net rule Flag 8 adds nothing, because Flag 2 already catches it, so eight flags do the work.
- **Age at arrival** runs from birth date to entry date, falling back to the NTA date. **Missing age never excludes a case:** 48,805 cases in the population, 6.7%, have no age and stay in on other flags.
- **18- and 19-year-olds on juvenile dockets are kept and reassigned age 17**, following Galli & Padilla’s method. The data support this for about half the group: among juvenile-docket cases, ages 14 to 17 derive from the NTA date 14.9% of the time against 50.7% for 18- and 19-year-olds. The other 2,484 cases have a real recorded entry date and may be adults never moved off the docket, children who aged out, or entry-date errors. The carve-out retains roughly 5,100 cases, 0.7% of the population; restricting it to NTA-derived ages would drop about 2,500, a 0.34% difference, which we report as a sensitivity figure.
- **Flag 5 may be overinclusive, to a degree we cannot measure.** Removal from a juvenile docket on turning 18 was handled inconsistently, and the working threshold was 21 at some points, so docket membership reflects administrative practice as much as age. This matters because Flag 5 is the second-largest contributor, at 288,423 cases.
- **Docket classification cannot be done by keyword alone**, because many juvenile dockets carry the name of the organization running the ORR shelter rather than any word indicating children. Rules apply in fixed precedence: explicit override, family keywords before juvenile keywords so “Adults With Children” is not read as juvenile, juvenile keywords, dedicated docket, a guard preventing “detained” matching inside “non-detained”, detention keywords, the location’s detention type flag, parent-location inheritance, then other or unknown, which is neutral. 40 locations are classified by hand, each with a recorded reason. The full override list and remaining classification detail can be shared upon request.
- **Other departures.** Flag 4 unions the priority history with the current value, which can only add cases. Dedicated Dockets are excluded, which the paper does not do, on the grounds they were established for family units: 6,221 cases would otherwise have qualified, 0.85% of the total, of which 95.5% qualify on age alone and only 66 were ever coded unaccompanied. No date restriction is applied, which is the main reason our figure exceeds 483,432.

What the method actually contains. Flags overlap, so these do not sum.

Flag	Cases meeting it	Share of 728,960
Flag 2, under 18 at entry	675,074	92.6%
Flag 5, juvenile docket	288,423	39.6%
Flag 3, pre-2018 J-code	168,906	23.2%
Flag 4, UC priority code	63,106	8.7%
Age not recorded	48,805	6.7%
Qualifying on age alone	327,715	45.0%

45% of Method B qualifies on age alone. Those 327,715 cases have no juvenile docket, no J-code and no UC priority. The only evidence for their inclusion is that the person was under 18 at entry, which establishes they were a child, not that they were unaccompanied. That portion alone exceeds Method A’s entire ever-coded population. The exclusions miss them because only about five family-docket locations exist and Flag 9 requires a formal lead or rider link, so a child who arrived with a parent, was never linked, and was not heard at a recognizable family docket

passes through both. This matches the authors' own characterization: their pull "tracks closer with minors in removal proceedings than UCs."

Against Method A, 281,459 cases are in both, 18,074 in A only and 447,501 in B only. B therefore contains 94% of A, so the two do not substantially disagree about who qualifies; what B adds rests mostly on age alone. Running the other way, 144,277 cases have evidence beyond age that EOIR never coded, equal to 48% of A, which is the best available, if imperfect, measure of what the government's field misses. Of the 18,074 B drops, 11,479 were under 18 at entry, mostly because of a detention-only docket history (4,465 of 7,990 such cases) or an adult on the linked case (6,712 of 6,784). That second group is linked to the adult late far more often than ordinary family arrivals and carries the UC priority in 38.8% of cases, a pattern consistent with children who arrived alone and were joined to a relative's proceeding later. The exclusion is applied as published by Galli & Padilla, and its size is stated here.

The narrow version restricts Method B to cases with a juvenile docket, an unaccompanied code, or the UC priority: 401,245 cases. Because Flag 3 accepts codes only on pre-2018 cases, 24,491 EOIR-coded cases still fall out; accepting codes from any year gives 425,736. Both rules are defensible, so we report the range. All three signals are EOIR fields with known defects, so evidence beyond age is better than age alone but not clean.

The ceiling. Validated against ORR custody data, the method captured 95% to 96% of children in custody for 2012 through 2020 but only 41% for 2021 through 2022, because DHS did not file NTAs. As of May 2024, more than 291,000 unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border had not been placed in proceedings. Galli & Padilla's J-code validation of 91% to 94% was possible only for pre-2018 data, so no benchmark exists for 2025 and 2026.

In short, Method B is EOIR's unaccompanied population plus a large body of minors in removal proceedings whose accompaniment is unknown.

Method C: all children

Method C counts children who were under 18 on the day their case was decided, from the birth date in EOIR's own records. It makes no accompaniment distinction, and it is the only method that counts children linked to a parent's case, which B excludes by design and A does not systematically code.

- **Included: a usable birth date and a computed age of 0 through 17 at decision.** Ages outside that range, including negative ages where the decision date precedes the birth date, and cases with no usable birth date, are excluded. No imputation.
- **No lead or rider filter**, so a child linked to a parent's case is counted like any other, once per case.
- **Age is anchored at decision, not arrival.** A child who arrived at 15 and was decided at 19 is not counted.
- **Venue changes and transfers are excluded from the denominator.** Two administrative completion codes mark a case moving rather than ending, and cases carrying them continue in a later proceeding 99% to 100% of the time. They are one in five children's completions, and counting them as decided inflates the denominator and can count the same child twice. Administrative completions that genuinely end a case are kept, since ending without a removal order is a real outcome.

Why it exists. A birth date does not get reclassified, so this method is immune to coding drift in Section 5, which neither A nor B can guarantee. It is the floor on children in court, by the court's own record of age.

What it is not. It is not a measure of unaccompanied children. It is dominated by children in family cases: 92% of children's removal orders sit in cases linked to a family member's case, and 72.6% are for children under 13. Children who arrived with family but were never formally linked are counted as though they were on their own.

Coverage. Birth date is present for about 85% of decisions in the window, 1,868,021 of 2,199,849, so these figures are a floor. Monthly coverage runs 82% to 89% and declines from about 88% in early 2025 to about 83% by mid-2026, the same direction as the rising removal rate, so part of that trend may reflect completeness rather than court behavior; the counts remain a floor throughout, and because coverage declines across the window the rise in raw counts is understated rather than inflated. Missing birth dates are also not random with respect to outcome, being absent for 1.65% of removals against 3.67% of non-removal decisions, which slightly overstates the removal rate. Read trends from the raw counts rather than the shares, since the share ordered removed also moves with how many cases close for other reasons each month.

6. LIMITATIONS & KNOWN DATA GAPS

- **Voluntary departure is not counted**, so a court resolving cases that way appears more lenient than it is. It cannot be isolated without decoding EOIR's proceeding decision codes, which we have not done, so Galli & Padilla's deportation figures, which include it, are not comparable to ours.
- **These are case and event counts, not counts of children.** A child may hold more than one case, Method C counts removal orders rather than individuals, and the data carry no person-level identifier.
- **Counting grain differs by method.** A and B are all-time population counts with no date restriction; C is an event count inside a window. Comparing 728,960 to 208,837 implies a relationship that does not exist. Section 2 reports all three on one grain and window, which is the comparison the headline figures cannot support.
- **Children without an NTA are absent entirely.** They never enter immigration court, so no court-based method can see them.
- **Recent months are incomplete.** EOIR revises prior months in both directions, so read the last month or two cautiously.
- **Undocumented batch events occur.** Two single-code events appear in this extract, in June 2025 and July 2026, each moving tens to hundreds of thousands of cases at once, so a sharp month-over-month swing should be checked as a possible processing artifact before being read as a real change.
- **The removal-order code has a second documented meaning**, also marking a zero-bond decision, and nothing in the data separates the two. Testing indicates at most 0.5% of its use could be zero-bond, too small to affect any figure here.
- **Detention status is not controlled for.** Detained cases carry higher removal rates generally, and whether docket composition explains geographic or judge-level variation is untested.
- **The docket classifier is unaudited outside the 40 hand-reviewed locations.** Keyword rules cover roughly 610 locations coded other or unknown; a spot check of about 15 found 7 were ORR juvenile shelters the rules missed, so an unknown number remain misclassified in both directions. Five further locations could not be confirmed against published sources and each carries low volume.

7. ANALYTICAL DECISIONS

- **Three methods rather than one**, because none can be defended as correct and showing their disagreement describes the uncertainty honestly.
- **Method A is retained despite its flaws** and reported under two definitions, because it is the government's own baseline and a single figure would have to choose between ever and currently recorded, which after July 2026 differ by a factor of three.
- **Method C is a finding, not a fallback.** Children who fall outside the strict unaccompanied definition, such as a child whose parent is under a final removal order, are not thereby less vulnerable, and excluding them would erase a population the data can actually measure. Children in family-linked cases are kept with the linkage stated, so what changes is the framing rather than the count.

8. QUESTIONS & FEEDBACK

Please submit your request or comments [here](#).