



Crisis on the Border: Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Backgrounder

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that 90,000 unaccompanied children will migrate to the United States in FY 2014. Next year, DHS predicts that the number could spike to as many as 120,000 children, not including children traveling with a parent. While unaccompanied migrant children are by definition under the age of 18, many of these children are significantly younger. There are some reports of children as young as two or three crossing without an adult. Until 2011, the annual number of unaccompanied migrant children was steady, around 7,000 a year. After 2011 the number has roughly doubled annually. Since October 1, 2013 (the beginning of the 2014 fiscal year) 48,000 children have risked the journey to the United States. Right now 1 in 250 youth from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have come to the United States in the last 6 months, which is the equivalent of 3 or 4 students per high school.

The Sisters of Mercy's Institute Leadership Team has made addressing this humanitarian crisis a top priority.

Why is this happening?

In November 2013, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) led a delegation to Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, to determine why these children are coming at such an alarming rate. They found that while extreme poverty was a push factor, the overriding determinant was "violence at the state and local levels and a corresponding breakdown of the rule of law, [which has] threatened citizen security and created a culture of fear and hopelessness." Since 2011 the increase in children migrants from the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) is up 700% for Guatemalans, 930% for El Salvadorians and 1300% for Hondurans. The mass exodus from these three countries mirrors the dramatic increase in violence in the region. Together, they lead the world in homicide rates, with Honduras ranking number one.

Over the last few years, drug cartels, primarily the Zetas Cartel, have established operational control of many areas in the Northern Triangle countries--El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Additionally, gang culture is on the rise and many neighborhoods are now under the authority of either the 18th Street gang or MS-13. Often corrupt police forces exacerbate the fear of violence, as they have no accountability and have engaged in extra-judicial killings in Honduras. Due to an unreliable legal system, roughly 1% of crime is ever prosecuted in the Northern Triangle countries. Increasingly, a child's fate is at the hands of criminal elements. The USCCB report stated that the delegation "heard of accounts of gang members infiltrating schools and forcing children to either join their ranks or risk violent retributions to them and their families."

While the situation is bad in Guatemala and El Salvador, Honduras is the epicenter of this crisis. In some Honduran cities such as San Pedro Sula, the homicide rate is now 180 per 100,000, more than 11 times the rate of Chicago. In the region, there are approximately 70 murders a month of youth under the age of 23. In Honduras between January and March this year, the number climbed to 90 murders a month, equaling 247 deaths by April 1, 2014. Honduran males between the ages of 15 and 30 now have a 1 in 300 chance of being killed. Tragically, this problem is getting worse in the region. Since 2005, the rate of homicide of females in Honduras is

up 346%. For males, it is up 292%. Increasingly in the Northern Triangle countries, the option of staying in their community is more dangerous than risking the journey north to the United States.

Debunking the myths of why this is happening.

Currently, two misperceptions are being cited in the media and by politicians. Either that border security is too lax or that President Obama's executive action on behalf of Dreamers encourages parents to send their children to the United States. Both of these claims are wrong and need to be corrected immediately.

- **Border Security:** Since 2007, the rate of prosecution for "illegal entry" into the United States has sharply increased by 130%. Currently, the federal government spends \$18 billion on border security, more than on any other federal law enforcement agency or program. Plus, the size of the U.S. Border Patrol has doubled since 2005 and quintupled since 1993. Today there are more than 21,000 Border Patrol agents guarding the U.S. Border.
- **President Obama's DACA program:** The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was implemented in 2012 and requires the beneficiaries to have lived in the US since 2007. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees' (UNHCR) report entitled *Children on the Run* determined that unaccompanied minors are not coming because they believe they will get amnesty or a "free pass" from the U.S. government. UNHCR interviewed 404 children for two hours each to identify their motivations for leaving their countries. Violence, economic necessity and family reunification were the reasons they risked the journey.

What happens when these children are apprehended at the border?

When apprehended by Border Patrol, these children are processed and sent to a Customs and Border Patrol facility for up to 72 hours. At that time, they are transferred to the Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). They are held at an ORR facility for 14 to 30 days, until arrangements can be made to have them released to a relative or legal guardian. Right now 85 to 90% of these children are being released to family members or caretakers with notices to appear in court.

Reuniting a child with her or his family is in the interest of the U.S. government and the welfare of the child. It saves the U.S. money on caring for this child before the court hearing and it is a safer/healthier situation for the child. It is important to note that upon entering the U.S. these children are put into the deportation process. They will be required to show up for court and there is no guarantee that they will be able to stay in the United States. In order for custody to be transferred over to a family member or legal guardian, the U.S. government ensures they have the correct address where the child will be staying. Granted this is an unparalleled crisis, but other immigration-related alternatives to detention programs have upheld a great record of people showing up for their legal proceedings.

How does this relate to the debate for immigration reform?

There is a real danger of conflating both issues. While the U.S. desperately needs comprehensive immigration reform to bring relief to the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in country, the situation with these children is a humanitarian crisis. The United States is not alone in seeing this spike in refugees. There is a 720% increase in asylum claims in both Nicaragua and Belize, as people flee violence in the Northern Triangle. The UNHCR found that

58% of these youth coming to the United States qualify for specific international protection due to their legitimate claim of fear and violence.

How can we solve this problem?

Unfortunately, there are no short-term solutions. It would be in the interest of the United States to reassess our engagement in the Northern Triangle countries. The violence and extreme poverty in the region has direct connections to U.S. trade policy, the War on Drugs and our broken immigration system. These issues must be addressed in Congress; otherwise the crisis will continue to spiral out of control.

What can you do?

- Educate yourself and others about this crisis.
- [Pray. This prayer service was prepared to remember all involved in this crisis.](#)
- Call your member of Congress via U.S. Capitol's switchboard at (202) 224-3121 to urge action through the U.S. trade policy, the war on drugs and immigration reform.
- [Sign up to receive alerts on this issue from the Sisters of Mercy.](#)

Resources for more information:

[Sisters of Mercy: Delegation to Honduras Report](#)

[UNHCR: Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection](#)<http://unhcrwashington.org/children>

[USCCB: Mission to Central America: Flight of the Unaccompanied Immigrant Children to the United States](#)

[KIND \(Kids in Need of Defense\) and Center for Gender & Refugee Studies: A Treacherous Journey: Child Migrants Navigating the U.S. Immigration System](#)

[Women's Refugee Commission: Forced from Home, The Lost Boys and Girls of Central America](#)

[Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement: About Unaccompanied Children's Services](#)

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