



# The Migration of Unaccompanied Children to the U.S.:

## Factors in Successful Integration

## **Credits:**

### Authors:

- Tiara Barnwell, MSW, LGSW (USCCB/MRS Placement and Program Development Coordinator, Foster Care)
- Simy Cuervo, LPC (USCCB/MRS Children's Services Specialist, Family Reunification)
- Jennifer Siegel, MSW, formerly with USCCB/MRS

**Acknowledgements:** The authors are grateful for the assistance of many staff within USCCB/MRS to the data collection, guidance, and support: Kristyn Peck, Kathryn Kuennen, Tosin Ogunyoku-King. We are also thankful for the expertise of Sarah Parks, MSW, a consultant for this project who provided assistance with conducting and transcribing interviews with children and program staff. Finally, we acknowledge the case managers, program staff, and the unaccompanied children who agreed to share their personal stories for this report.

Thank you also to Danilo Puerto-Martinez for his extensive contributions to this project, as well as Sallie Rupe, for her support with transcribing interviews.



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# The Migration of Unaccompanied Children to the U.S.: Factors in Successful Integration



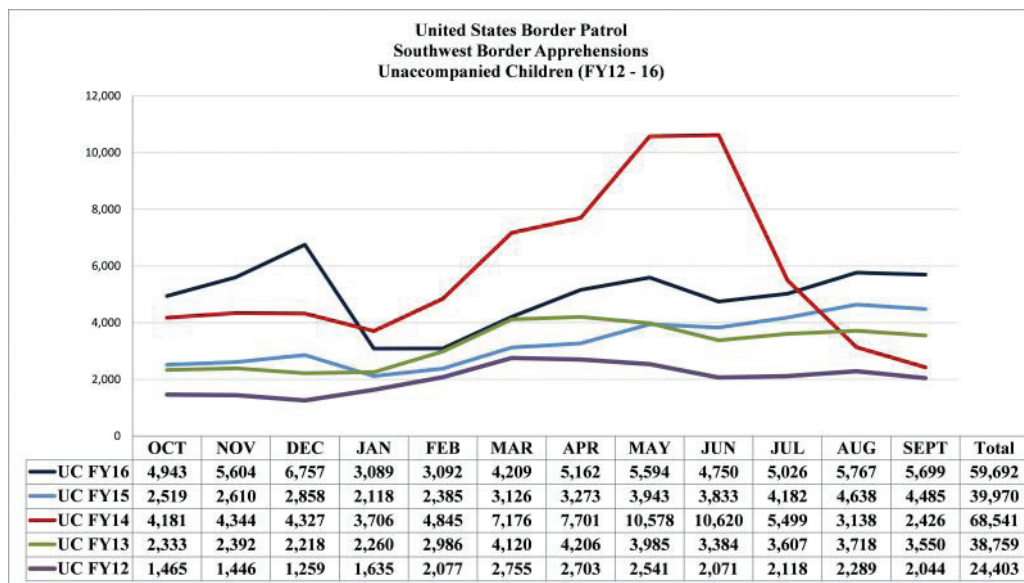
## Background

In 2014, approximately 68,000 unaccompanied children<sup>1</sup> were apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at the U.S.-Mexico border after having completed a dangerous journey through Central America<sup>2</sup> and Mexico in search of safety and stability in the United States<sup>3</sup>. This accounts for a nearly 75% increase in the number of child arrivals compared to the previous year. While migration from Central America to the United States has been increasing for many years, the recent surge resulted in heightened attention to this vulnerable population, their changing demographics, and the increasing rate at which they are seeking refuge in the United States. The number of unaccompanied children<sup>4</sup> (UC) arriving at the southern border has increased considerably since 2009 when only 19,418 were apprehended: 16,114 from Mexico and 3,304 from Central America. In fiscal year 2013 the number of UC apprehended at the border increased to 38,045 with the number of Central American youth apprehended (20,805) surpassing (for the first time?) those from Mexico (17,240). Fiscal year 2014 saw the highest number of youth apprehended from Central America (51,705), while only 15,634 were from Mexico<sup>5</sup>. Total apprehensions have decreased in fiscal years 2015 and 2016, but the trend remains that children from Central America far exceed the number from Mexico.

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The reasons behind the rise in youth fleeing Central America to come to the United States has been documented in numerous reports<sup>7</sup> in 2013 and 2014. These reports clearly cite community violence and a lack of protection for children, declining economic and educational opportunities for children and youth, and in fewer cases, the hope of reunifying with family already in the United States as key factors driving youth migration out of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

*Prior to 2002, the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was responsible for the care and custody of UC who were detained based on their lack of immigration status. This custodial relationship meant the federal government agency responsible for immigration enforcement and removal was charged with the conflicting interest of care and child protection.*



Source: Department of Homeland Security: Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Statistics<sup>6</sup>

Prior to 2002, the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was responsible for the care and custody of UC who were detained based on their lack of immigration status. This custodial relationship meant the federal government agency responsible for immigration enforcement and removal was charged with the conflicting interest of care and child protection. Consequently, in practice children were housed mainly in detention facilities and their movements severely restricted.

Child advocates reported poor conditions in the detention facilities, abuses, and lack of standards for child-appropriate care. In 1993, a class action lawsuit was filed against the INS challenging the agency's arrest, processing, detention, and release of UC in its custody. In 1996, the Flores Settlement<sup>8</sup> established minimum standards and conditions for detention, housing, and release of UC taken into the custody of the U.S. government. The Flores Settlement required the INS to reunify UC with family members and other caregivers in the United States, to include parents, legal guardians, grandparents, adult siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and, lowest on the order of preference, unrelated adults (i.e. family friends) without unnecessary delay.<sup>9</sup> It also obligated the INS to place children in



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the “least restrictive setting” appropriate to their age and any special needs.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 (HSA) reorganized federal responsibilities for UC and created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Under the HSA of 2002, DHS is responsible for apprehending, processing, and transporting apprehended undocumented children to the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR) within 72 hours.<sup>10</sup> HHS/ORR is responsible for the care and custody of UC pending the resolution of their immigration case. This legislative change allowed children to be placed in the least restrictive environment. While UC apprehended by CBP from non-contiguous countries (countries other than Mexico and Canada) are turned over to ORR’s Division of Children’s Services (DCS) custody and care upon apprehension, bilateral agreements between the United States and Mexico facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Mexican UC by establishing that such children should not be charged with unlawful entry. However, the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection and Reauthorization Act 2008 (TVPRA 2008) requires DHS to screen into ORR care within 48 hours of apprehension UC from contiguous countries (Mexico and Canada) if found to be at risk of trafficking, persecution, or lacks the ability to make an independent decision<sup>11</sup>. The TVPRA 2008 screening provisions were enacted to standardize protection measures for Mexican UC who were not being provided a meaningful opportunity to seek protection and who are at risk of trafficking or persecution.

In 2009, 6,644<sup>12</sup> youth apprehended at the border were transferred to the custody and care of HHS/ORR, while in 2014 the number climbed to 57,496.<sup>13</sup> HHS/ORR estimates that it is able to reunite an overwhelming majority (85%) of UC with a family member or other identified caregiver—known as “sponsors”—after an evaluation by a transitional care provider.<sup>14</sup> UC with identified special needs may be referred for post-release case management services through a number of ORR-funded programs. Several agencies have cooperative agreements with ORR to provide these services. USCCB’s Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) department provides family reunification services through a national network of community-based agencies which, for the purposes of this paper, will be referred to as USCCB/MRS’s Family Reunification (FR) program. Alternatively, UC who do not have viable sponsors in the community, but have potential for legal immigration relief, may be referred for long-term foster care through providers including USCCB/MRS’s national network of Foster Care programs. For the purposes of this paper, these will be referred to as USCCB/MRS’s Foster Care (FC) program. Once referred to a USCCB/MRS FR or FC provider, UC are connected with trauma-informed, culturally sensitive services that facilitate their integration into their local community and ensure their permanency, safety, and well-being<sup>15</sup>.

Upon placement with a caregiver UC face various challenges including school enrollment, forming a bond with their caregiver, language acquisition, and processing through feelings of abandonment or experiences of abuse and trauma. According to a 2012 USCCB/MRS paper titled, “The Changing Face of the Unaccompanied Alien Child: A Portrait of Foreign-

Born Children in Federal Foster Care and How to Best Meet Their Needs,”<sup>16</sup> these children arrive with significant trauma histories and face unique challenges in overcoming mental health concerns. Research by Sanchez-Cao, Kramer, and Hodes asserts that while many of these children are at risk for a variety of mental health issues, those who receive supportive services can overcome issues more easily.<sup>17</sup> These factors, combined with each youth’s unique history, play a role in his/her experience in the United States and shape his/her ability to successfully integrate into local communities.

Research related to the successful integration of UC into local communities is sparse. As this population quickly increases, it is important for practitioners in the fields of social work, child welfare, immigration, and refugee resettlement to understand those factors that support healthy integration and successful outcomes. This study seeks to assess those factors from the perspective of youth, their caregivers (whether sponsor or foster parent), and child welfare case managers.



## Goals of Analysis

Although child migration is not a new phenomenon, little research has been done to assess the factors that influence the integration of migrating children into U.S. communities, especially from the perspective of the child. As USCCB/MRS continues to offer programming to UC and as UC continue to be placed with caregivers in the United States, more research is needed. The goals of our analysis follow:

- Identify internal and external factors that successfully support child integration and those that present important challenges.
- Provide recommendations to critical stakeholders on recommendations for program development, planning, policy and practice.
- Build a framework for which future studies can be done to expand our analysis.





## Review of Literature

According to Park <sup>18</sup> , factors that contribute to positive well-being, or “life satisfaction,” for youth include parents or caregivers who are engaged and supportive, challenging activities that offer youth the ability to develop mastery and self-esteem, and quality interpersonal relationships with adults and peers.

When considering the special needs of children who have experienced migration, and the trauma that often occurs as the impetus to migrate and during migration, several studies have highlighted the importance of both internal factors (such as a youth’s goals, sense of personal agency, and coping skills) and external factors (such as supportive adults, community resources, and social or educational institutions) in the process of successful integration. In their study of unaccompanied refugee children in Europe, Eide and Hjern<sup>19</sup> state that taking the youth’s ideas, vision, and desires into account when creating a care plan, and recognizing their own agency and motivation toward their goals, is key in creating a supportive environment for adjustment. They highlight the importance of mutuality in relationships with caregivers and supportive adults, and focus on a child’s competencies by creating protective factors in the home and school settings. They emphasize the special role that schools play in creating a space for unaccompanied youth to build confidence, acculturate, and experience normalizing.

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In their study of refugee minors in Australia, Piper and Thom interviewed youth to explore what they considered to be the greatest facilitators or barriers in the resettlement process. According to youth, some of the most important facilitators to their integration process include 'education,' 'language,' 'housing,' 'money,' 'health,' 'safety,' 'friends,' 'family,' and 'school.' Youth described their greatest barriers as 'learning English,' 'having enough money,' 'isolation,' 'achieving their own goals,' and 'racism.' Other issues considered were how youth sought and found support, from whom, and how they felt about the support they received, as well as their belief that their opinions were valued <sup>20</sup>.

In their paper "A risk and resilience perspective on Unaccompanied Refugee Minors" in the United States, Carlson, Cacciatore, and Klimek <sup>21</sup> outline sources of resilience, to include positive outlook, use of healthy coping mechanisms and religiosity, and connectedness to organizations that promote healthy behaviors and social acceptance. Furthermore, they state that stability, cultural congruence, congruent expectations between youth and foster parents, as well as realistic expectations about life in the United States also fortify a child's resilience. They identify three broad categories of protective factors that build resilience: individual (including intelligence, temperament, coping skills, and faith beliefs or religiosity), family (including attachment, supervision, and stability), and environmental (including supportive adults, prosocial institutions such as schools and faith communities, and support from larger groups).

Raghallaigh and Gilligan's <sup>22</sup> research reveals insights from qualitative interviews with unaccompanied minors living in Ireland. Coping strategies of greatest

significance were 'maintaining continuity in a changed context' while at the same time 'adjusting by learning and changing,' 'adopting a positive outlook,' 'suppressing emotions and seeking distraction,' 'acting independently,' and 'distrusting.' The common element between all of these coping strategies was religious faith, which was important to all but one of the participants.

A few studies have focused particularly on the role of caregivers in providing an environment that facilitates integration. Miller, Irizarry, and Bowden <sup>23</sup> define a culturally safe setting as a "care environment focused on [unaccompanied humanitarian minors] UHM feeling safe 'spiritually, socially... emotionally (and) physically'" and where they are respected and can freely express their cultural identity. Through focus groups and interviews of 22 caregivers and 17 youth in Australia, the authors found that caregivers identified themes of 'balance between UHMs safety and integration into Australian context,' 'providing sufficient, appropriate psychological support,' and 'training' as important to meeting the children's best interests. Key themes for youth included 'broader opportunities for learning and education,' 'integration,' and 'placement (i.e. accommodation).'

In her paper "Hosting strangers: hospitality and family practices in fostering unaccompanied refugee young people," Sirriyeh <sup>24</sup> outlines three potentials "models of care" practiced by foster parents in England caring for unaccompanied youth. She finds that children fare better when "treated like family." Elements that facilitate this involve appropriate preparation of the foster family, including information about the child's history and cultural norms, as well as continued support from social managers and the agency during difficult times.



Sirriyeh indicates that the bond between youth and their foster families can be significantly impacted during “threshold moments” such as the initial meeting, pivotal moments for the child where he/she is in need of feeling safe, and supportive responses from the foster parents in building trust.

In “Post Release,” a report conducted by LIRS and that focused specifically on unaccompanied youth in the Family Reunification Program, Roth and Grace<sup>25</sup> reveal/demonstrate similarities of youth experiences in the United States as compared to studies focused in other countries. Roth and Grace highlight the resilience and importance of strong family values and ties that exist with this population. This family dynamic often sets the precedence for the success of the youth in the United States. Roth and Grace reiterate this dynamic can be a great strength, “but also an obstacle.”

One such obstacle can be the process of reunification, which can be experienced as a “shock” as children and their caregivers navigate expectations for the present and memories from the past. Many experience a more positive reunification in the initial weeks of placement—often referred to as the “honeymoon” period—but the underlying issues that may exist eventually resurface. The bond that is formed between the youth and their caregiver and the support received is often critical to their well-being. Additionally, the report highlights the importance of participation in school as a significant component in the youth’s integration process. Youth attending school have the opportunities for “finding friends, joining clubs and extracurricular activities, avoiding gangs, selecting classes, talking to teachers...and learning about American culture.” However, an educational setting can also pose a challenge to youth because of harassment from teachers and students. Finally, Roth and Grace also discuss the role that fear plays in the daily lives of the youth. UC and their undocumented caregivers often



have a fear of deportation that presents as a “threat to their daily existence” as they can avoid public spaces or important medical appointments where identification is required for fear of being “caught”.

The findings from the literature reveals the importance of a variety of internal and external factors impacting the integration process, especially those related to the community, relational support, goal-setting, and coping mechanisms. The research also emphasized the direct perspective of youth and caregivers as essential. Additionally, while the research is relevant to our target population, few studies mentioned above address the specific circumstances of UC in the United States undergoing immigration legal proceedings and integrating into U.S. societies. Therefore, USCCB/MRS identified the need to interview former UC, their caregivers, and case managers in a qualitative manner to learn what internal and external factors were most significant to their adjustment, well-being, and successful integration in the United States.



## Methodology

*All interviews were performed using an Adobe Connect online platform, which also allowed for each interview to be conducted in the UC's native language and audio recorded. The recordings were subsequently translated and transcribed. Each transcription was reviewed for common themes.*

USCCB/MRS staff used both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to gather data during this study. To begin, staff built upon the literature reviewed above to create interview templates (Appendix A) that would elicit youth, caregiver, and case manager perspectives. Qualitative interviews were conducted with youth who previously served through the FR or FC programs, as well as caregivers and case managers who serve youth during their transition into the United States. All interviews were performed using an Adobe Connect online platform, which also allowed for each interview to be conducted in the UC's native language and audio recorded. The recordings were subsequently translated and transcribed. Each transcription was reviewed for common themes.

Following the qualitative interviews, USCCB/MRS staff developed electronic surveys to gather quantitative data from the FR and FC network in line with the themes that emerged from the interviews. The surveys focused on data regarding case management, community setting, education, family and relational support, youth coping skills, legal services, and promising practices targeted to this population.



## Sample

A total of nine former UC were interviewed—five who had received services from FC and four who had received services from FR. Former UC were selected for interviews based on a willingness to participate in the interviews and through suggestions from case managers. A total of ten case managers—five from FR and five from FC were interviewed. A total of nine caregivers—five from FR and four from FC were interviewed. Case managers and caregivers were selected based on a willingness to participate. All participants were informed of the purposes of the study by USCCB/MRS staff and completed an informed consent form (Appendix B).

Following the interviews, ten programs were surveyed for additional data—eight FC programs and two selected FR programs within the USCCB/MRS network. The FR programs were chosen based on the large number of youth they serve. The sample for data collected via surveys included all youth who arrived to the program or who were released to their sponsors between January 1, 2013 and May 1, 2014. All cases assessed in this report were closed at the time of the survey and were no longer actively receiving services through ORR’s Unaccompanied Children program.

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## Research Tools

USCCB/MRS created unique interview templates for use with youth, caregivers, and case managers based on key findings from the literature review, and slightly adapted depending on whether the interviewee was connected to a FC or FR program (Appendix A). As a result, key components to be addressed were identified and focused on depending on the participant. Key components of the youth interviews focused on community and activities, safety, adjustment and integration, legal services, and youth goals. Interviews with caregivers focused on rewards and challenges, legal services, and adjustment and integration factors. Interviews with case managers focused on professional role, community and activities, adjustment and integration, and legal services.

### Youth

- Community & Activities
- Safety
- Adjustment & Integration
- Legal Services
- Youth Goals

### Caregiver

- Rewards & Challenges
- Legal Services
- Adjustment & Integration

### Case Managers

- Professional Role
- Community & Activities
- Adjustment & Integration
- Legal Services

*Finding youth and sponsors willing to participate in an extensive interview, with an interviewer they are not familiar, was challenging. Because of this, participants in the interviews were chosen based on recommendations and an expressed willingness to participate.*

The templates for youth and caregivers were translated into Spanish, and interviews were conducted in Spanish when it was the primary language of the interviewee. All interviews were conducted by a social worker, and appropriate child interviewing techniques were applied to interviews with youth.



The surveys (Appendix C) created by USCCB/MRS were provided via web link to program management staff. Programs were provided with a list of the specific sample of youth to refer to when answering questions about locality and availability of services, trends regarding stability of placements, and legal relief timeframes and outcomes. The information from the surveys was analyzed for trends related to each theme.

### Limitations

Little research has been conducted on the outcomes of this population. As such, these findings present a foundation for which further research can be conducted, taking into consideration the following limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, particularly for the quantitative assessments. Youth were chosen from only selective sites across the country who agreed to work with USCCB/MRS on the study. Connecting with this population for an interview proved very difficult. Finding youth and spon-

sors willing to participate in an extensive interview, with an interviewer they are not familiar, was challenging. Because of this, participants in the interviews were chosen based on recommendations and an expressed willingness to participate. There were no incentives given to encourage greater participation. Of those who were willing to participate, there were issues related to scheduling due

to the busy schedules of caregivers and case managers. Reliance on technology also proved to be a limitation. Due to USCCB researchers being located primarily in Washington, D.C., the use of online video conferencing software was used to conduct the interviews with caregivers, youth, and case managers. Some families found it difficult or did not have an internet connection to connect with the software used to conduct the interviews. Families needed the assistance of their case managers to overcome this challenge. Some interview data was also lost due to technical errors with the software. Lastly, as the interviews with the UC and Spanish speaking sponsors were done in Spanish, some of the nuances of the quotes were lost in translation. Therefore, the generalizability of the study is limited in scope. However, the findings of the study are significant and are intended to be foundational research as an impetus for broader analysis on this topic.





# Discussion of Findings

Using transcripts from the qualitative interviews and results from the quantitative survey of the participating programs, a comprehensive review of the collected data was completed to mine for common themes related to successful integration of unaccompanied youth. This analysis revealed six themes that promote, and at times hinder, successful integration of UCs in their communities: case management, community setting, educational system, legal system, family and relational support, and the strengths of the youth. In each area, successes and barriers applied to UC served by both Foster Care and Family Reunification programs, unless otherwise specified. Further discussion on each theme is below.

## Case Management

Case managers play a critical role in fostering aspects of successful integration for UC. They are the gateway to various needed services in the community that assist the youth in their integration. The case managers interviewed, expressed a commitment to working with UC, and display a firm understanding of the experiences of the youth. Interviews with youth, caregivers, and case managers exposed two important facets of case management that help foster successful integration of UC: the case manager's roles and the case manager's tasks and responsibilities. Qualities that were deemed helpful in this process include being culturally sensitive and

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accessible. Responsibilities, or tasks performed by the case managers include providing advocacy on behalf of the youth, providing tools for empowerment, and acting as a resource and cultural broker. Our study confirmed the significant impact case managers have on the lives of the youth and caregivers and the importance of their work in helping UC move towards successful integration. Themes identified within case management included cultural competency, accessibility, case management for caregivers, empowerment, advocacy on behalf of the youth and family, and resource brokering,

### **Cultural Competency**

One of the key characteristics of a case manager that was valued by UC and caregivers was cultural sensitivity and competency. Within the agencies participating in this study, 100% of the case managers are Spanish speaking and are either of a similar cultural background or had prior experience working with UC. Additionally, all of the participating agencies offered some form of training related to the cross-cultural and migration-related aspects of the youth. UC and caregivers remarked in various instances the importance of a case manager's ability to speak Spanish. This does not diminish the impact a non-Spanish speaker can have serving UC, but rather speaks to the importance of the youth being able to communicate their needs in their native language. One youth remarked, "When I got to the US my first social worker spoke Spanish and she told me that the program was going to help me." Others noted that being able to speak Spanish with their



case manager—as well as others—made them feel comfortable and understood.

### **Accessibility**

Another characteristic noted in the survey and interviews was a case manager's accessibility. The survey revealed that case managers often contact and support the youth and sponsor beyond HHS/ORR and USCCB/MRS program requirements. One caregiver stated, "Every time we needed help they

were there to help us." Case managers noted they are often contacted outside of their required visits with questions. One agency provides smart phones for their case managers, making it easier for case managers to be accessible to the youth and their caregiver's needs. Beyond accessibility in the physical sense, it's also important for case managers to be accessible emotionally. Interviews with youth and caregivers exposed thematic characteristics of case managers as "trustworthy" and "committed". One youth noted, "[My case worker] helped me when my mom died." Another stated, "She listened about things," and another youth: "She counseled me," "She helped me a lot." Another youth said, "I can communicate with her and talk to her, I can tell her how I'm feeling." Yet another, "She spoke with me and made me feel comfortable." The relationship the case manager builds with the youth helps the youth feel comfortable and supported, feelings that foster the youth's ability to interact more positively with the communities around them.

### **Case Management for Caregivers**

Our study also found that one of the most notable

roles of a case manager is to provide support and education for youth and for caregivers. One caregiver remarked, “Support for me was just as important as for [the youth].” Another stated, “Every time we needed help they were there to help us.” Caregivers noted that the resources and education case managers provide is critical to the success of the youth and the youth and caregiver’s relationship. Caregivers found they were prepared and equipped for the challenges that could exist with UC after the honeymoon period because of the education provided by case managers. Others found education on trauma informed care to be helpful. The majority of caregivers remarked on the importance of case managers being accessible to them, as well as the youth. Caregivers in the FR program found case managers to be safe, as one commented, “[Our case manager] is not identified with ICE or immigration officials, [which] makes it easier to interact with them.” When caregivers have access to additional information, resources, supports, and training they are better able to meet the needs of youth in their care <sup>26</sup>.

### *Empowerment*

A key responsibility of the case manager is to empower the youth, supporting them in self-determination and goals. One way this is done is through encouragement. A caregiver noted, “[The case manager] has done a lot to help him. They work hard to encourage him.” Encouragement was shown to have a significant impact on the youth in the study. This correlates with findings in the literature review, particularly Eide and Hjern, that found creating a supportive environment for adjustment was a key factor in success for unaccompanied youth. Another way case managers empowered youth was by teaching them to do things on their own and helping them in goal setting. Again, this theme was prevalent in the literature—UC find integration easier when they are able to recognize their own agency and in that find motivation to reach their goals. This is done when a supportive environment for integration is created that engenders mutuality in relationships with caregivers and supportive adults,

and focuses on a child’s competencies by creating protective factors. Helping youth identify their competencies and encouraging them helps create an environment where youth are motivated to reach their goals. “Something else that I like about the program is that they prepare us for independent living for after we leave the program. They give us a two-hour class where they teach us about money, and how to look for an apartment, etc.,” remarked one youth. A case manager stated, “I try to point out they are not just vulnerable children that arrive at the border, but they have strengths they can contribute. If [the youth] feels good about themselves, they feel stronger. I always point out, ‘you took a 3,000-mile journey; this is easier than that. Take control of these things and I will help you and teach you how. They like hearing this, it motivates them.”

### *Advocacy on Behalf of the Youth and Family*

Through our survey data we found that case managers spend on average 15-20% of their time on a case advocating on behalf of the youth and caregivers with service providers to address barriers to accessing services and resources, and most consider advocating on behalf of their clients as one of their priorities. Some families need more advocacy than others, which is often a function of the level of integration the caregivers have obtained in their communities, English language acquisition, knowledge of community resources, knowledge of their rights, and their immigration status. For example, UC may face challenges enrolling in school because of not having identifying documents (birth certificates, etc.) or not living with a biological parent or a legal guardian. Case managers often spend time advocating with school districts to ensure the youth are able to enroll in school and that they receive the proper testing for grade placement.

### *Resource Brokering*

Finally, case managers are resource brokers. As commented on throughout this study, it is ineffective





**Youth  
Perspective**

*"I feel safe with my family and the program. Also you don't see [gangs] around here like in my country."*

*Carlos, 18 years old, El Salvador\**

*\*All names have been changed to protect confidentiality*

and inefficient for case managers to simply hand over a list of resources. However, when case managers or their agencies have built relationships with service providers in the community and can provide the name of a service provider with the name of a person who works there, youth and caregivers are more likely to follow up on needed services. One caregiver commented, "The most important thing that [a case worker] has done for my children is, well, everything. They recommended the doctors, counselors, attorneys. [The case worker] has been there with us." Another stated, "I like it a lot because they gave us information and had clinics at a low cost, they had information about school, they had information about trustworthy lawyers that I could contact, they gave me their card and said if I had a question I could call them when I needed it."

### Community Setting

As the environment in which youth reside, access services, and interact with peers and adults, the community setting is an important context for the process of integration. Basic themes were highlighted in interviews as a foundation for youth to transition from survival to success. Those themes included safety, available and accessible medical and mental health services, and the opportunity to find support among peers or their ethnic community through language and cultural connections and recreational activities.

### Safety

As discussed above, several reports have documented generalized violence and the threat of gangs as a primary factor leading to the exodus of youth from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Since seeking safety was often part of their reason for migration, finding it in their new communities was also a theme of most interviews.

Youth and caregivers contrasted conditions in their home countries with their experience in the United States. "At first, I thought, since it's a big state, that it was going to be violent and full of gangs, but then I realized it has many good things," one youth reflected on where she resides now. One caregiver shared, "I think the kids feel safer. There's so much violence in Honduras. They cry when they hear about one of their friends was killed...I think they feel good here. Here things might happen to them, but because God wills it, not because of all the violence and danger." And when asked if he worried about gang violence in his community, another youth expressed, "No, not here because I feel safe with my family and the program. Also you don't see them around here like in my country." Youth noted that the ability to walk freely down the street and make safe choices to avoid dangerous interactions are important differences between the communities they fled and their new communities in the United States.

While most youth interviewed expressed feeling safer now than in their countries of origin, several also raised concerns about facing discrimination as immigrants. When asked what they would tell the President of the United States about how to best help unaccompanied youth, freedom from prejudice and inequality stood out as important to the integration process. One youth stated, "So don't judge us from where we come from or think that we're coming to do bad things. If they'd like to offer us help, then good but just please don't discriminate against us for being from another country." Another youth shared "...we should all have the same opportunities here. Some people come to do bad things, but most of us aren't that way. We just want to have the opportunity." While this paper does not address the specific role of discrimination with this population, studies

show that it has long-term impacts on physical and mental health<sup>27</sup> and educational<sup>28</sup> outcomes for similar populations.

### *Medical and Mental Health Services*

HHS/ORR is required to adhere to minimum standards established in the Flores Settlement Agreement<sup>29</sup> for UC in its custody which include access to medical and mental health care. When UC are released from ORR custody to sponsors in the community, eligibility for these critical services is dependent upon local legislation and the availability of resources. Medical and mental health care services in particular were found to be crucial to the support children receive in their new communities. One sponsor who was able to obtain health insurance for her children said, “It’s a huge blessing to have insurance for [her daughters] already [...] because the insurance they have now will cover them until 19 years, so there’s a way to take them to the hospital if they get sick. And my oldest daughter [...] is with the psychiatrist. She’s able to keep her appointments.” Another sponsor shared, “But youth need someone to counsel them. When I talk to teens about meeting with a counselor I present it as it as a chance to meet with someone in a safe and secure place that won’t weigh on their relationship with their parents or aunts and uncles.”

The majority of USCCB/MRS FR and FC programs have established relationships with local medical, mental health, and legal service providers that offer services in a language spoken by UC. But new challenges arise when youth reside 25 miles or more from the program’s office and the service providers with whom they have established partnerships. The challenge of transporting youth to appointments in rural areas where public transportation is less available is particularly challenging for FC providers. According to FC programs, only 15% of youth who lived 25 miles or more from the office have access to public transportation. Additionally, programs face

difficulty in finding providers in rural areas that can offer services in a youth’s native language. One youth who was reunified with a sponsor in an area where services were difficult to access reported that help with obtaining medical insurance and finding a doctor were the most critical supports needed.

For youth in USCCB/MRS FC programs, the ORR Treatment Authorization Request System (TARS) can create challenges in finding providers willing to use this non-insurance reimbursement system. Although TARS reimburses medical providers at the Medicaid rate, many are hesitant to provide care for a new population with an unfamiliar billing process. Programs also reported that medical providers were often discouraged by not receiving timely reimbursements through TARS or by logistical difficulties with reimbursement, so they discontinued service to youth in the program.

For youth in FR programs, lack of funding or eligibility due to legal status can significantly impact a child’s adjustment upon release. One case manager described the challenges of transferring a youth with mental health needs from a highly structured shelter into the community: “Many [children] have never been diagnosed with mental health issues and then they are, and are heavily medicated. I had one youth who was on 10 different medications after being released. I had another who was experiencing a lot of side effects from the medications. She was gaining weight and couldn’t sleep. I don’t think this is always what they need. At the shelter they aren’t there for long enough sometimes to even receive these types of diagnosis and then some of them are given these diagnoses and are overly medicated. Follow up should be mandated if they are on meds, but it’s not and in some states they can’t afford it. Mothers often aren’t educated on these medications and then the child really gets messed up because there was no weaning off.”



*"At times I felt like I wouldn't learn how to speak English, succeed in the future. So when I met people who could speak Spanish I felt comfortable. I felt happy that there were other people with whom I could speak and knew about my culture and Guatemala and we all understood each other better."*

*Mariela, age 19 Guatemala*

### **Language and Cultural Connections**

Making connections with one's own ethnic or cultural group in the community was an important way that youth began to feel at home in a new place. Many youths talked about the experience of finding a peer at school who spoke Spanish as being significant, or said that meeting other youth with a similar experience of migration was reassuring. As one youth described it, "My foster parents didn't speak Spanish. It was a struggle for us to communicate. Sometimes students feel overwhelmed by not knowing the language. And they feel that they will never learn the language. At times I felt like I wouldn't learn how to speak English, succeed in the future. So when I met people who could speak Spanish I felt comfortable. I felt happy that there were other people with whom I could speak and knew about my culture and Guatemala and we all understood each other better. There are also other people in the program from other countries with whom I can connect." FC and FR programs reported that a high number of UC had access to people of a similar ethnic, religious, or language background in their neighborhood.

While programs, case managers, and caregivers described these connections as positive, they also had concerns about the impact of spending time with predominately Spanish-speakers on a youth's English-language learning or other aspects of integration. As one foster parent put it, "If they are only with people of their own culture, then they don't integrate, but if you deprive them, that's an essential part of their own personhood and grounding as a human being."

### **Recreational and Extra-Curricular Activities**

Many youths expressed that participating in art, sports, or other outlets helped them to create

relationships, feel connected, and release energy or tension. One youth said, "I really like soccer, and I like the running because they take us to different places. It's outside with lots of friends, I can talk to them – I like that. What I like the best is running with my friends." The most common activities for youth in foster care were identified as sports (especially soccer), religious activities, arts activities, and volunteering. The most common activities for reunified youth were identified as cultural, religious activities, sports, or additional academic or English-learning activities.

According to program surveys, youth in foster care were more likely to be engaged in recreational activities than youth released to sponsors. This could be due in part to the availability of sponsors to transport youth to activities, and fear that participation in activities would reveal the youth or family member's undocumented status.

### **Educational System**

Everyone interviewed spoke to the crucial role of the school setting in assisting or hindering a youth's integration. One case worker stated it is the "key player" in integration due to the amount of time youth spend in school. We know that children and youth spend most their time in schools, and this is the space in which they learn, not just academics, but social skills and cultural norms. Case managers reported that UC did well in school when the school was accommodating to UC and their needs. They also reported that some schools have English as a Second Language (ESL) programs that are specifically tailored to the needs to the youth. Another strength that attending school provides is in the relationships youth are able to create with peers and teachers. Caregivers



also recognize the importance of youth attending school. One sponsor said, "...I want her to continue studying. She only needs a little more to finish her schooling. In our country she wasn't studying, but here she can do this for herself."

However, challenges include the ease of school enrollment in varying school jurisdictions, access to language resources, and educational programming. Case managers reported that many schools are not equipped to meet the sensitive needs of UC, either due to language barriers or trauma issues. One case manager reported that "they should have opportunities to break the cycle and economic disparity that is inevitable if no one is educated. Our educational institutions should be sensitive to the problems the youth present." Schools that are not familiar to the needs of UC tended to have misinformation or stereotypes. Case managers recommended that these schools incorporate trauma-informed practices and training specific to the needs of UC, such as on the migration context, trauma often experienced during migration, signs and triggers of trauma, and expectations for educational histories. Local community programs working with UC should develop relationships with school administration, advocate for ESL programming (if it does not already exist), and monitor of the quality of services being provided to youth. Case managers further recommended implementing an Education Community Liaison in schools who could provide the aforementioned assistance to UC; however, if establishing this position



*"What I like most about my school is my teachers' ability to teach the students. They have a lot of patience. They understand that we don't speak English, that this is a second language for us. They take the time to explain things out, and are more instructive. They make sure that we are understanding, and if we are not, they try and figure out another way to help us. They check up on us. They call us to make sure that we are doing well, that we are doing our homework, and to see if we need any more help. I feel supported by my teachers!"*

*Mariela, age 19 Guatemala*



*Most youth reported that learning English was difficult. One youth stated, "I do not like to speak English. I struggle to speak to it. Sometimes I get confused with the words and people laugh at me and it discourages me from speaking. But I know that I need to keep trying so that I can get better."*

in schools is not possible, there is federal legislation that mandates that every school district designate a school staff member as a homeless educational liaison. This person is responsible for ensuring that youth who are deemed homeless still have full and equal opportunity to enroll and attend school and connect them with local community resources. In some state jurisdictions, unaccompanied children, especially those reunited with non-parent sponsors, meet the criteria for a homeless youth and can make medical and other decisions for themselves that would normally be the responsibility of a parent/guardian. Therefore, unaccompanied children would benefit from the services of the homeless educational liaison in lieu of an Education Community Liaison to be an additional source of support and advocate for their educational needs. Educational themes identified include school enrollment, language and integrated versus isolated programming, and relationships built while in school.

### **School Enrollment**

The survey results showed that mostly all UC were enrolled in some form of educational programming. A larger majority were enrolled in a GED program. However, youth reported sometimes having difficulty when it came to school enrollment. Case managers reported that some youth in the FR program had difficulty enrolling in school because their sponsor was not a biological parent. Additionally, for youth



in the FR program, many start by attending mainstream classes and switch to a GED program. The reason for this varies but ranges from being unable to adapt to mainstream education (due to lack of previous education history), ongoing language barriers, or due to being discouraged from enrolling in school due to their age and unlikelihood of graduating with same-

aged peers. One youth reported that she wishes she could receive “a summary of class(es) because I would get confused...I stopped studying because I got bored and will do a GED (program) instead.” To help minimize this, youth suggested having more specialized, hands on assistance in school, such as through a peer mentor or school support staff. Youth reported that a peer mentor could easily help a new student find their classroom, assist them in talking to teachers, and help them practice English.

### **Language and Integrated vs. Isolated Programming**

Educational assessments are a common practice when enrolling newly arriving students. Most youth in the FR and FC programs have a range of educational backgrounds. UC with disrupted or no formal educational history can experience great difficulty adapting to the U.S. school environment. Case managers interviewed reported on the importance of appropriate assessments, designed or adapted for Spanish-speakers, for non-literate children, for children with very limited formal education, and

for youth with special needs. Many youths were considered special needs or learning disabled due to improper assessments. It is extremely beneficial to youth who attend schools that are able to provide ESL, or integrated, programming or some form of newcomer program. Integrated programming looked like a developed ESL program that allows youth to participate in mainstream classes that include built in after school supports. Isolated programming included new or underdeveloped ESL/ELL programs and rigid program models that were not tailored to the unique needs of the youth. In integrated schools, youth found peers who they could speak to in a common language and who could relate to their story. Youth felt isolated in schools without much diversity and where no appropriate supports (in-class, after school) existed.

Most youth reported that learning English was difficult. One youth stated, “I do not like to speak English. I struggle to speak to it. Sometimes I get confused with the words and people laugh at me and it discourages me from speaking. But I know that I need to keep trying so that I can get better.” Another youth stated, “Sometimes students feel overwhelmed by not knowing the language. And they feel that they will never learn the language. At times I felt like I wouldn’t learn how to speak English, succeed in the future.” When asked, both caregivers and case managers reported on the importance of having ESL programming. They also reported that ESL teachers who are also “mainstream” teachers are important because it provides a connection to both languages. Learning any language takes time and patience. But they also recognize that to succeed, they need to work hard on English. For schools that are not able to provide ESL programming, youth were asked what those schools could do to help other youth for whom English is not their first language to adapt. One youth stated, “We could help them find their classes or talk to the teacher or help with interpreting what others are saying to them, or practice English with them.” The idea of a peer program where youth who have been enrolled in school, have become familiar with the school environment, and have learned to speak English, is one schools could adopt to ease the transition. Another youth suggested, “Put them in classes in their native language. Because when I was first put into classes with all American students and speaking English I really struggled. Over the summer I took classes with kids who also speak Spanish and it was a lot easier. I was not as afraid to speak out in class because I knew that the other students or dealing with the same things that I was doing and I felt better.”

*One case worker identified supportive adults as “teachers who were passionate, guidance counselor or school social worker who was engaged, tutors and in-class interpreters. Having an identified supportive adult in the school setting made the transition easier, especially when that person spoke the youth’s language and was willing to learn what the youth needed.*

### **Relationships**

Relationships in any context can be complex, yet the health and vitality of relationships is critical to daily functioning. For UC, the ability to form healthy relationships has a significant impact on their successful integration, which proves to be true in the school setting.



Youth spend much of their day in school where they establish relationships with peers, teachers, and other supportive adults. Of youth who reported having connections with supportive adults, the majority of them met the supportive adult at school. One case worker identified supportive adults as “teachers who were passionate, guidance counselor or school social worker who was engaged, tutors and in-class interpreters. Having an identified supportive adult in the school setting made the transition easier, especially when that person spoke the youth’s language and was willing to learn what the youth needed. One youth reported on a teacher who would routinely call and check in and make sure the youth was understanding the homework assignment. Youth also expressed gratefulness to those teachers who made learning fun. One youth stated, “They make it fun to learn. For example, in biology, we created a green house and grew a lot of plants that we are going to sell. We learned which plants were going to grow back and which weren’t.” School also provides youth the opportunity to spend time with similar aged peers, who may have similar backgrounds. One youth reported, “I like hanging out with my friends at school. I met them when I was new there and didn’t speak any English and they’d be like, ‘Hey, you need to talk in English!’ At first I said no, but they told me they had to learn it too. So I started talking a little bit at a time, then I told them I was from Guatemala and they told me that they were from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, lots of places.” Another youth said, “We have classes together and we all sat down together at one table for lunch. Since we were all Latinos we get together.”



## Legal System

Children served in USCCB/MRS FC and FR programs are in removal proceedings due to their unauthorized entry into the United States. The ability of UC to remain in the United States depends on their eligibility for immigration relief. The burden of proving eligibility for immigration status is placed on the child. The U.S. immigration system is too complex for a child to navigate alone, and limited funding is available for immigration attorneys to represent UC. In this study, the youth’s immigration status was reported to have a significant impact on their ability to integrate. The confusion regarding the legal process in immigration law and the lack of legal status all produce a significant amount of anxiety for youth in the FC and FR programs. Youth in the FR program also faced further challenges including the cost and difficulties in obtaining legal representation and the extended length of time it takes for their case to process through the immigration courts.

The impact of a legal status is more notable among UC in the FR program, because UC in FC have a more clearly defined pathway to legal status in the United States and receive legal representation to assist in obtaining status. While all UC receive a legal screening while in ORR shelter care, not all UC are found to qualify for immigration relief in the United States. Only individuals identified to have a potentially viable avenue for legal status in the United States and who do not have family or friends to reunify with are eligible for the FC program. Youth in the FC program are also guaranteed legal representation funded by ORR. In contrast, UC in the FR program are not guaranteed legal representation and often face financial or geographic barriers in accessing

*One caseworker interviewed noted, “Attorneys were also very important because they helped alleviate fear in courts and brought understanding to the process.” Several youths noted that having someone explain the court process is important in helping alleviate some of the confusion and fear about going to court.*

counsel. There are also youth who, because of their legal screening, have been identified to not have a viable option for a legal status and who do not have a family member or friend to reunify with in the United States. Unfortunately, these youths generally remain in ORR shelter care until they turn eighteen, and subsequently may be placed in adult detention or released to the community. The exact number of youth in this latter category is unknown<sup>30</sup>.

### **Access to Legal Services**

UC in the United States have a right to seek legal counsel, but not generally do not have the financial means or ability to access legal counsel. While children enrolled in post-release services receive a dedicated case manager to connect them with attorneys, there are not sufficient pro bono and low-cost immigration legal services to meet the demand, and approximately 75 percent of UC are released without post-release services. Therefore, many youths seek counsel on their own. This can be costly and some attorneys may take advantage of the vulnerability of an undocumented youth and over promise, over charge, or in some cases, commit fraud. Youth who are represented by an attorney are more much more likely to obtain a legal pathway to remain in the United States. Data from Syracuse TRAC shows that 75% of cases represented by an attorney are allowed to remain in the United States, and only 15% of youth unrepresented are able to legally remain.<sup>31</sup> As one youth in the FR program lamented, “My mom wants to [get a lawyer] but it’s very expensive.” Caregivers, youth, and case managers repeatedly reported the difficulties in obtaining legal counsel: “If they don’t have the money it’s hard for them. Even though they may qualify [for a legal status] they won’t get it because they don’t have an attorney and they can’t afford it.”

### **Confusion in Court**

In addition to providing legal counsel, attorneys provide guidance on the court process and differing roles and responsibilities of people UC will encounter during the legal proceedings. One caseworker interviewed noted, “Attorneys were also very important because they helped alleviate fear in courts and brought understanding to the process.” Several youths noted that having someone explain the court process is important in helping alleviate some of the confusion and fear about going to court.

### **Lack of Status and Access to Services**

In addition to the issues noted about the immigration process, youth raised concerns about the impact of their lack of legal status in community integration. Depending on the jurisdiction or State, a lack of legal status may prevent youth from qualifying for various public benefits and it can make the school enrollment process difficult (even though it is legally not required for school enrollment<sup>32</sup>). One case worker commented, “In Georgia they do not qualify for Medicaid or any insurance programs. They are not eligible for benefits...Sponsors don’t want youth to be in sports because of health risks.” However, some states, such as California and New York, offer various public benefits to UC, including healthcare. Despite the progress made in some states, many UC across the United States are unable to access health care and mental health care due to a lack of viable health insurance to cover the cost. Although most states have State benefit options for children, UC do not qualify because of their legal status.

### **Fear of Deportation**

The UC’s immigration status produces a significant amount of anxiety, which impedes their ability to participate in school activities and other activities

in their neighborhood for fear of deportation. One youth stated, “I was really nervous. When I went to court all I kept thinking was that I could be deported at any moment.” Case managers and caregivers also lamented, “They get nervous if they don’t get papers right away;” “It makes the kids nervous, it makes them be not effective in the program, because they are constantly with this anxiety of ‘I’m going to be deported.’”

### **Long Wait Times in Court**

According to data from Syracuse University, as of the average wait time in immigration court to receive a hearing is 635 days<sup>33</sup>. In our sample, the average wait time in immigration court for a youth in FC was an average of 14 months, varying from six months to two years. Wait times for youth in the FR Program varied; obtaining an outcome in immigration court ranged from one to two years, averaging 18 months.

*Youth, caregivers, and case managers remarked about the relief the youth and caregivers felt when a legal status is obtained: “Legal status provides security” and a caregiver noted, “It’s definitely a sigh of relief. You may see a youth who was hunched over a little, and now they are standing straight because they know ‘I’m here, I’m legally here.’”*

### **Legal Status Brings Relief**

Youth, caregivers, and case managers remarked about the relief the youth and caregivers felt when a legal status is obtained: “Legal status provides security” and a caregiver noted, “It’s definitely a sigh of relief. You may see a youth who was hunched over a little, and now they are standing straight because they know ‘I’m here, I’m legally here.’” When legal relief is obtained, youth have more options to engage in communities in ways that foster integration. They can qualify for public benefits, which could include state child healthcare programs. They have access to scholarships and in-state tuition at colleges. Additionally, they can legally obtain employment. Legal status can bring a sense of belonging and hope, and alleviate fears that a deportation is looming.

### **Types of Legal Relief**

The most common type of legal relief sought by UC is Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). To be determined eligible for SIJS, a UC must be declared dependent upon a juvenile court or placed under the custody of state agencies or court-appointed individuals or entities due to a determination that reunification with one or both parents is not viable due to abuse, neglect, abandonment and that return to their country of nationality or last habitual residence is not in their best interest. SIJS enables eligible children to apply for lawful permanent residency.<sup>34</sup>

U and T visas are two avenues of relief that are available to UC under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and the subsequent reauthorizations.<sup>35</sup> U visas protect children who have suffered substantial physical or mental abuse as a result of having been victims of certain qualifying serious crimes.<sup>36</sup> T visas protect victims of severe forms of human trafficking including the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person through force,



fraud, or coercion for the purpose of sex or labor or services or the commercial sexual exploitation of any child.<sup>37</sup> UC can also be determined eligible for the same benefits as a refugee by HHS/ORR if HHS/ORR assesses that the circumstances experienced by the UC meet the federal definition of



a severe form of trafficking in persons. Eligibility as a trafficking victim by HHS/ORR does not confer immigration status but does allow eligibility for the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program and other benefits available to refugees without requiring the UC to have obtained a T visa.

Asylum is a claim that entails a child living outside their country of nationality, demonstrating a well-founded past or fear of future persecution based on a “protected ground”: race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group, and an inability or unwillingness to return to her country because her government is unable or unwilling to protect them.<sup>38</sup> The legal criteria for asylum applies to both children and adults, however the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is responsible for initial adjudication of asylum applications filed by UC. Fewer UC represented in the sample size for this study were granted asylum as form of relief, which is consistent with national trends.

### Family and Relational Support

The role of competent caregivers, supportive adults, and positive peers are foundational to the

development of all children and youth, and particularly, for UC. The fact that UC have experienced separation from their parents for any period of their lives underscores the importance of a safe and loving home environment in which they can process past trauma and begin the work of adjusting to a new

country and way of life.

Two quotes from youth demonstrate the importance of home life from different perspectives. The first said, “In my opinion if there isn’t any peace in the home, people, including me, think ‘I don’t want to go home, I want to be somewhere else’ and you are constantly thinking this all day even while you’re in school, and that’s all you think about.” And another described, “I’ll talk to my foster mom and I’ll ask her ‘What do you think of this?’ She’ll say, ‘I think that is a good idea!’, or ‘I don’t think that’s a good way to look at it.’ [...] Just knowing that there is someone supporting me, that I am not alone in all of this, that there is one place in this world where my opinion matters, my voice matters, and that I mean something to someone - that helps me a lot.”

### *Commitment and Consistency*

While no single strategy for parenting or caregiving emerged from the interviews, an underlying theme of committed and consistent care was apparent in the descriptions interviewees offered about successful reunifications and foster placements. Experienced caregivers expressed this when saying, “Not every placement has worked, but I think the ones that did,



*“Just knowing that there is someone supporting me, that I am not alone in all of this, that there is one place in this world where my opinion matters, my voice matters, and that I mean something to someone - that helps me a lot.”*

*Griselda, age 20,  
Guatemala*

I think they still consider themselves a part of our family even though they’ve moved on” or “Treat them like your family, it makes it harder to say goodbye, but easier while they are there” and “My goal as a sponsor is to make sure that they are never lacking what they need. If they want to leave, they can. But if they want help, they will have it.”

In Foster Care programs case managers characterized successful foster families as those willing to invest in youth beyond the basic requirements. As an example, foster parents could invest time in a child by taking him to all his appointments, instead of depending on program staff to fill in when scheduling was inconvenient. One foster parent described it this way: “I’ve got to get these kids into the system, [...] the doctor, the dentist, get them enrolled in school, [...] [give] them a tutor [...] everything just takes so much time [...] three years later, ok, this has played out, this is the way to do it [...] it’s been a really good experience, but it does take a lot of patience.”

In family reunification cases, sponsors are often working long hours to provide for the family, and taking their time off to invest in spending time with the youth could be challenging. One case manager remarked, “Just because we have mother and child roles it doesn’t mean they will mesh [...] The amount of time they spend to get to know each other really seems to matter.” In one interview with a youth who was reunified with her parents, there is a consistent answer to many questions: What helped you to feel safe? Who helped meet your needs? How did you get enrolled in school? Who helps you to resolve problems? To all these, she answered, “My parents.” They are the steady drumbeat in the background of her adjustment to a new life. Her goal now is to graduate from school and become a police officer. She said, “[My parents] say if I keep going like this I can do what I want to do.”

### ***Adaptability and Preparation of Caregivers***

All UC in the ORR system have experienced a transition in their care arrangements – and often times more than one transition. From the time a child leaves home in their country of origin, to apprehension by CBP, to transfer to the custody of an ORR shelter or transitional foster care placement, and finally to a long-term foster care home or to a sponsor in the community, the UC has likely experienced a variety of care settings or levels of independence. It is then the responsibility of the caregiver (i.e. a sponsor or foster parent) to provide a sense of stability to a child he or she has never met or may have been separated from for several years.

The caregiver’s ability to adjust to the unique needs and situation of each child, and to embrace the ambiguity of her role was critical. Some caregivers mentioned that the youth were different than they expected, or that they didn’t know what to expect and it was important to have an open mind when meeting the child.

### Youth Perspective

*"[My parents] say if I keep going like this I can do what I want to do."*

*Ana, age 18, El Salvador*

Many caregivers expressed the need to adapt: "You have to learn new ways to relate" and "Sometimes I'm like a friend, sometimes a mother, sometimes a sister" or "Be the parent they need at that point in time, but don't try to replace - almost like a step-parent." One caregiver summarized what it takes to be successful: "Be willing to learn, adapt and be flexible as you go along."

Program staff and case managers emphasized the importance of preparing caregivers to take on their new role, especially by offering psycho-education or group trainings. While Foster Care programs must use state-mandated curriculums<sup>39</sup> to train foster parents, these often need to be adapted to this special population. On the other hand, Family Reunification programs do not have the same type of standardized, evidence-based curriculums to draw from for the type of reunifications they support. When asked about the topics most often covered with caregivers, programs cited positive parenting techniques, the impact of trauma, the process of acculturation, cultural dynamics and education, and the relational dynamics such as a "honeymoon" period after a placement as the most common issues to be addressed.

### Support Networks



According to one program director, "The largest indicator regarding which youth would have successful integration was the integration level of the sponsor, regardless of relationship. If the sponsor spoke English, was involved at church, was able to drive legally, etc. - this made the youth much more likely to have successful integration

experiences." Case managers also noted that successful placements involved caregivers with access to a close network of friends or family. Caregivers often demonstrated by example what it means to integrate into the surrounding community, and that integration is often characterized by relying on supportive relationships. Programs report that most youth are connected to other adults outside the home, most commonly coaches, teachers, and religious leaders, as well as mentors and tutors facilitated by Foster Care programs. Youth and caregivers also highlighted the importance of positive peer relationships. As discussed above under Community Setting, these are often found at school or through the program, and many youths are drawn to peers who have a similar language background or migration experience. As one caregiver put it, "they often confide in their friends that are the same age and that have gone through similar things and this helps them feel comfortable." One youth shared the impact that these types of peer relationships can have when she said, "There was someone with whom I lived in my





*“My dream, when I was in El Salvador, was to hold a high school diploma in my hands. I was never able to accomplish it. So now that I am here, I’ve talked to my counselors and they told me that I could study and that the program was going to help me. Then I was like, ‘I want a career!’ This opportunity changed my dreams. I want to study, I want to finish high school, I want to go to college, and I want to have a career... I want to teach, I want to be a music teacher... It makes me really happy to know that there are people that support me and believe I can achieve it all, and I CAN achieve it all!”*

*Carlos, age 18, El Salvador*

foster home before, who always reminded me of my goals and how important it was for me to keep trying to accomplish them. She constantly was checking up on me to see how many I was accomplishing or how well I was doing with them, and she really helped me maintain my goals.”

In addition to finding support locally, many youths expressed the importance of the encouragement they receive from their relatives who still reside in their country of origin. Even from a distance, these relationships are a critical component of the support network for these youth, and need to be carefully maintained. As one youth stated, “My case manager, foster family, and family in El Salvador, they all tell me to keep moving forward and that there will be tough times but I have to keep going. This makes me really happy because I know that there are people who support me and care about what I do.”

### Youth Strengths

When reading the interview transcripts from case managers, sponsors/caregivers, and program management, one common word was continuously used to describe UC: Resilient. According to Masten & Powell (2003), resilience refers to “patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity<sup>40</sup>.” While research on the resiliency of the forced migrant is not new, the focus of this study was to assess specifically which strategies UC are utilizing to cope with their new life in the U.S. and it appears that they are coping very well. They are enrolled in school and working hard to achieve their dreams in order to give back to the community that has given so much to them. We also found that youth are utilizing positive coping skills, have identified goals they would like to achieve, have gained self-awareness, and are vested in helping others, either in their home country or in their communities.

### *Maintaining a Positive Outlook*

Some of the coping skills identified include UC maintaining a positive outlook on their situation. Despite the fact that all are involved in complicated and lengthy legal immigration proceedings, many report that they are hopeful that they will be allowed to stay in the U.S. in order to achieve their dream. They also indicated that they are thankful for the opportunity to attend school, be involved in community sports or events, reunite with a loved one, and not have to worry about being targeted by gang violence. For youth who have reunited with family friends, distant relatives, or other sponsors, they reported that they are able to contact and communicate with family members back in their respective home countries. They reported that being able to maintain this contact with family helps them to move forward in achieving their goals in the United States, especially during times of difficulty or adversity. Lastly, and as mentioned in the section on Community, youth reported that being able to participate in some

form of extra-curricular activity, such as exercise, art, sports, or other hobbies, is a great coping skill for them. They can release energy towards positive activities that are beneficial to them, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

### *Goal Setting*

All the youth interviewed reported that their main goal while in the U.S. is to study and to finish some form of educational programming. Due to age, education level, or other circumstances, UC may not be able to enroll in traditional, mainstream education; however, by Federal law, all youth, regardless of immigration status are eligible to enroll in school. Nonetheless, some UC may choose to enroll in alternative forms of education, such as high school equivalent, English as a second language, vocational, or technical school. Youth reported the following, “I need to be in school... to be able to study and work” and “I’m told that education is more important and is the basis for my future. So right now I am working a lot and at times it gets in the way of my education but I know that I have to keep up my studies up so that I can get a great job and make more money so I’ll be able to help my family in the future.” The promise of an education is not guaranteed or afforded to youth in their home country so they recognize the importance of being able to achieve, and have access to, this goal. Another identified goal includes employment, for those who are legally able to work. For those youth, it provides them the opportunity to be able to send financial resources to family back in their home country. It helps them to know that they can help their family even though they are thousands of miles apart.

### *Self-Awareness and Self-Advocacy*

UC also reported a tremendous amount of self-awareness. They reported having awareness of when to ask for help from their sponsor, foster parent, or case manager, without feeling as if they

are burdening anyone. One youth reported that he was not getting along with his foster parent, but was confident enough to advocate for himself to his case manager. Consequently, he was placed in a new home. Many of the youth interviewed were able to talk about their own strengths when asked by a case worker, sponsor or caregiver. Some of the self-identified strengths included persistence and a drive to succeed. Lastly, youth could identify their coping skill and reported that they could easily use this skill in times of difficulty. Youth reported that once they knew they were safe in the United States and in their placement, they knew they could start to confide in those identified to help them.

### *Helping Others*

Lastly, youth reported feeling very lucky and privileged to have been afforded the opportunities given to them in the United States. As a result, they reported a desire to want to give back and help others who may not be as fortunate. As previously mentioned, most of the youth interviewed reported a goal of being able to eventually work in order to help provide for their families back in their home country. They reported feeling grateful for their opportunities in the United States and want to be able to share this with family. Some youth who are already parents reported wanting to do well and achieve in order to provide for their own children. Due to their circumstances related to poverty in their home countries, they reported wanting “better” for their children. Finally, youth reported the desire to work in an industry where they can help others. Police officers, social managers, and teachers were some of the examples provided. One youth reported that, “a successful person has done good in the world.” When asked what they would tell the President of the United States about UC, one youth reported, “We want to help the country and we need more opportunities to do so.” These comments are inspiring and not only do we want to draw these out of the youth that we work with, ideally we want to give them the opportunity to make it a reality for them.



## Recommendations

These recommendations are directed toward nongovernmental organizations working on behalf of unaccompanied children, as well as toward individual donors, foundations, and the philanthropic sector more broadly. There is one broad principle that undergirds these recommendations: In all decisions relating to unaccompanied children, the principle of the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration; the voice, perspective, and participation of the child should be integral in their care planning; and the principle of family unity should be given due weight and consideration.

*All unaccompanied children should have counsel appointed for their immigration case in the event they are not able to find counsel themselves. All children should have the benefit of representation by an attorney to ensure all available relief is afforded to them.*

### Policy

- The Department of Justice should adopt binding regulations for all Immigration Judges, federal judges and members of the Board of Immigration Appeals that ensure the “bests interests of the child” are adopted in the procedural aspects of all immigration cases pertaining to unaccompanied children. Such regulations should be binding, uniform standards and would include a child-sensitive approach to overseeing and processing unaccompanied children’s immigration cases, protections for children testifying in court, and uniform guidelines for granting asylum or SIJS in such cases at a minimum.
- All unaccompanied children should have counsel appointed for their immigration case in the event they are not able to find counsel themselves. All children should have the benefit of representation by an attorney to ensure all available relief is afforded to them. If the child’s guardian has been unable to secure legal representation, the government should provide counsel.



- Children released from ORR custody to sponsors should be referred to a Child Advocate for additional assessment, evaluation, and support when they are at risk for complications related, but not limited to, the following categories:
  - Child/youth is residing with a sponsor with whom s/he has little or no prior relationship, the placement may be unstable due to concerns with the sponsor, or the sponsor may lack access to necessary resources to meet significant needs of the child (medical, mental health, or other unique needs);
  - Child/youth is at increased risk for abuse, abandonment, neglect, isolation, exploitation, and/or discrimination (i.e. based on physical or cognitive impairment, sexual orientation, mental health, non-Spanish or English speakers, etc.);
  - Child/youth is a survivor of trafficking or at risk for human trafficking;
  - Child/youth may need assistance with safe return to country of origin and reintegration planning;
  - There are concerns regarding the child/youth's well-being related to high-risk behavior (i.e. gang-involvement, inappropriate sexual relationships, etc.).
  
- All children released from ORR custody should be eligible for some post-release services, and that the duration and frequency of services is determined by the level of intervention needed. The youth who participated in this study and reported successful integration were receiving post release services once released from an ORR shelter. Currently, post-release services are only provided to youth who need meet certain criteria and/or need additional support once placed with a sponsor and in their community<sup>41</sup>. However, all youth released from ORR care would benefit from some level of post release services. As evidenced in this

study, there are barriers that can be difficult to navigate once youth are in the community, such as school enrollment for non-parent sponsors and access to health care (if accessible in that State). Post release services also assists UC in obtaining access to legal resources. The current lack of post-release services for the majority of unaccompanied children increases the likelihood that children will be subject to trafficking, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and family breakdown. Social service agencies that provide services to immigrant families and UC reported that they often receive calls from children who were released from ORR custody without post-release services and who are in situations of breakdown. Funding for medical and mental health services for UC receiving post-release services should also be implemented.

- ORR should strengthen the screening process of sponsors by expanding home studies for children who appear especially vulnerable. Such vulnerabilities should include at a minimum children who experience prolonged separation from their sponsors, pregnant and parenting teens, present or past suicide ideation, history of rape or sexual assault, history of substance abuse, and previously failed family reunification attempts. Home studies ensure psychosocial education is provided to the proposed sponsor on the child's current needs (with the consent of the child), assesses the sponsor's understanding of the child's needs and capacity to meet those specific needs, helps the sponsor identify his or her own strengths, and refers the sponsor to community resources and social supports. Furthermore, the case manager assesses the potential risks of the placement and provides a recommendation to ORR on whether the proposed placement is in the child's best interest while mitigating the likelihood of children being released to potential traffickers.

## Practice

- All tools, procedures, and protocols shall include the perspective of the child, and their perspective should be considered in any decisions made on their behalf. The child’s voice, perspective, and participation is integral in their care planning. Furthermore, practice and policy decisions should be informed by feedback from youth who were former beneficiaries of ORR services. A youth Advisory Committee should be created to ensure that the child’s perspective is considered.
  - The Office of Refugee Resettlement should implement a “parent-partner model” which is a peer to peer mentorship where parents who have successfully completed the reunification process act as mentors to others, providing support and guidance throughout. Several states currently implement a “parent partner model” which has been successful in promoting permanency. This model would be useful for children released from federal custody to their sponsors. The sponsors could either serve as individual mentors to other sponsors, or perhaps, more efficiently provide guidance through facilitated support groups in the community to share their own experiences, share resources, and provide mutual support to other recently reunified immigrant families.
  - The Office of Refugee Resettlement should consider utilizing a “family preservation model” for children reunifying with sponsors and have considerable medical, behavioral or mental health needs requiring more intense monitoring and support post-reunification to promote family preservation and placement stability. Key concepts of this approach include a focus on community-based services, inclusion of the child and family in the planning process, individualized services, and cultural competency. Additionally, there is emphasis on utilizing a “strengths-based” model to empower the family to identify and build on existing support networks.
  - The Office of Refugee Resettlement should prioritize community-based post release services.
- Community-based care allows for the most effective and efficient care to be provided, especially when case managers and/or their agencies have built relationships with service providers in the community. Case managers who merely provide a list of resources to a youth or caregiver, without established relationships with service providers in the community, is not providing adequate case management services.
- Religious organizations and parishes, charitable organizations, and other community organizations should consider providing support to local UC and their sponsors during their integration process in the United States, extending a hand of welcome and belonging. Support make take on the form of volunteer assistance with transportation, support with engaging local services (in schools, medical facilities, etc.), mentorship programs for both sponsors and youth, and pro-bono services from professionals in the counseling, legal, or medical fields. As Pope Francis stated concerning Central American children, “I would also like to draw attention to the tens of thousands of children who migrate alone, unaccompanied, to escape poverty and violence...who cross the border with the United States under extreme conditions and in pursuit of a hope that in most cases turns out to be vain. This humanitarian emergency requires, as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected.” The Pope has called on parishes to care for immigrants and refugees as their neighbors.
  - Schools of Social Work should consider curriculum and field placements that focus specifically on serving immigrant and refugee populations. As social workers graduate and work in various settings—medical, educational, mental health, child welfare—they are bound to work with immigrants and refugees. Having a knowledge and understanding of cultural considerations and components of immigration and forced migration equips social workers with the tools to serve migrant populations appropriately.

- Schools should implement an Education Community Liaison position to help UC navigate the school system and be an additional advocate for them in the school setting. This person would assist UC, and other immigrant populations, in the school enrollment process and ensure that the proper placement testing and placement is appropriated. If creating this role is not possible, schools could further task the federally mandated homeless educational liaison to meet the needs to UC. Additionally, the school system could, at minimum, leverage the volunteer capacity in their respective communities to support positive integration of UC. One such example could be to develop a peer mentor program where students could act as an ambassador and guide to newly arrived students.
- UC who are released from federal custody with psychotropic or any other form of prescription medication should receive specialized follow up services to ensure medications are properly monitored. Sponsors who are reuniting with UC who have been prescribed medication should receive adequate education on the dosage and side effects of the medication, as well as referrals to community organizations for specialized follow up. If a UC is released with prescribed medications follow up services with a community based psychiatrist should be required and funded to ensure proper dosage and understanding of the impact of the medication.
- All UC care providers should incorporate models of peer support into their programming which allows youth regular opportunities to interact, network, and gain support from peer beneficiaries. Specifically, prior to release, shelter and transitional care providers should utilize models for peer group support to process and prepare for release and integration into the local community.
- Foster parent recruitment and training should incorporate findings about integration as a central aspect of the fostering role; resources should be allocated to recruitment of foster parents with immigrant backgrounds, cross-cultural experience, and cultural or linguistic competencies.
- Family Reunification providers should incorporate volunteer positions that can increase youth participation in extra-curricular activities by providing transportation, developing group activities, or providing additional psycho-education to sponsors about the benefits of recreation.

## Research

- Additional research on evidence-based practices and models for case management, caregiver preparation and support, and agency service models should be funded and initiated. The process of integrating into the U.S. is daunting and confusing. All unaccompanied youth deserve to have a case manager that can address their specific needs. This could be done through a Coordinated Service Model, flexibility in case management to address specific needs, evidence-based curriculums for caregivers, and coordinated training efforts for case managers working with unaccompanied children.
- An independent evaluation should assess children and family-centered outcomes, stability (emotional, medical, legal) of children previously in federal custody, and areas needing additional research.
- The child's voice, perspective, and participation is integral in further research on this topic. All assessments, follow up, procedures, and protocols should include the perspective of the child, and their perspective should be considered in any decisions made on their behalf.
- Further research and support should be provided on behalf of children who are approaching their eighteenth birthday and not placed in Foster Care or the Family Reunification program because no reunification option exists and no legal option is available. Data is not presently available on the number of children who turn eighteen in ORR custody and little is known about their outcomes.



## Footnotes

- 1 The terms “children” and “youth” will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to children from birth to age 18.
- 2 For the purposes of this paper, migration from “Central America” is used specifically to refer to migration from El Salvador, Honduras or Guatemala only.
- U.S. Border Patrol Statistics, Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016> (accessed March 29, 2017). Hereinafter referred to as U.S. Border Patrol Statistics.
- Children under 18 years of age who enter the United States without an available legal guardian or parent to provide care and custody are referred to as Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) by U.S. law. Homeland Security Act of 2002, §462.2, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess. (2002). For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to UAC simply as unaccompanied children (UC).
- U.S. Border Patrol Statistics, <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016> (accessed March 29, 2017).
- Ibid.
- USCCB, Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States, <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/upload/Mission-To-Central-America-FINAL-2.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2017); UNHCR, Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/children-on-the-run.html> (accessed March 29, 2017); AIC, No Childhood Here: Why Central American Children Are Fleeing Their Homes, [http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/no\\_childhood\\_here\\_why\\_central\\_american\\_children\\_are\\_fleeing\\_their\\_homes\\_final.pdf](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/no_childhood_here_why_central_american_children_are_fleeing_their_homes_final.pdf) (accessed March 29, 2017); and, RCUSA, A Treacherous Journey: Child Migrants Navigating the U.S. Immigration System <[http://www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/FINAL\\_macArthur\\_layout\\_v9\\_to\\_printer.pdf](http://www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/FINAL_macArthur_layout_v9_to_printer.pdf) (accessed March 29, 2017)
- 8 Reno v. Flores, 507 U.S. 292 (1993).
- 10 DHS, Homeland Security Act of 2002, §462.2, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess. (2002), [https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hr\\_5005\\_enr.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hr_5005_enr.pdf) (accessed on March 29, 2017).
- 11 Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2008 Reauthorization, 110th U.S.C. §235(2008), a child may only be repatriated to a contiguous country if (i) such child has not been a victim of a severe form of trafficking in persons, and there is no credible evidence that such child is at risk of being trafficked upon return to the child’s country of nationality or of last habitual residence; (ii) such child does not have a fear of returning to the child’s country of nationality or of last habitual residence owing to a credible fear of persecution; and (iii) the child is able to make an independent decision to withdraw the child’s application for admission to the United States.
- 12 Office of Refugee Resettlement, Report to Congress FY 2009, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/orr\\_fy\\_2009\\_annual\\_report\\_to\\_congress.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/orr_fy_2009_annual_report_to_congress.pdf) (accessed on March 29, 2017).
- 13 Office of Refugee Resettlement, Report to Congress FY 2014, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/orr\\_annual\\_report\\_to\\_congress\\_fy\\_2014\\_signed.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/orr_annual_report_to_congress_fy_2014_signed.pdf) (accessed on March 29, 2017).
- 14 U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Unaccompanied Alien Children Program, Fact Sheet, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/fact\\_sheet.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/fact_sheet.pdf)
- 15 For more information about USCCB’s family reunification and long-term foster care programs, please refer to our website (<http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/index.cfm>) (accessed on March 29, 2017).
- 16 USCCB, The Changing Face of the Unaccompanied Alien Child: A Portrait of Foreign-Born Children in Federal Foster Care and How to Best Meet Their Needs, [http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/A-Portrait-of-Foreign-Born-Children-in-Federal-Foster-Care-and-How-to-Best-Meet-Their-Needs\\_USCCB-December-2012.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/A-Portrait-of-Foreign-Born-Children-in-Federal-Foster-Care-and-How-to-Best-Meet-Their-Needs_USCCB-December-2012.pdf) (accessed on March 29, 2017).
- 17 Sanchez-Cao, Kramer, and Hodes, “Psychological distress and mental health service contact of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children” *Child: care, health and development* 39,5 (2012) 651-659
- 18 Park, “The Role of Subjective Well-Being in Positive Youth Development” *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591 (2004) 25-39
- 19 Eide and Hjern, “Unaccompanied refugee children – vulnerability and agency” *Foundation Acta Paediatrica* 102 (2013) 666 - 668
- 20 ‘Small Mercies – Big Futures.’ PowerPoint Presentation, 2014 Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement.
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- 22 Raghallaigh and Gilligan, “Active survival in the lives of unaccompanied minors: coping strategies, resilience, and the relevance of religion” *Child and Family Social Work* 15 (2010) 226-237
- 23 Miller, Irizarry, and Bowden, “Providing culturally safe care in the best interests of unaccompanied humanitarian minors” *Journal of Family Studies* 19, 3 (2013) 276-284
- 24 Sirriyeh, “Hosting strangers: hospitality and family practices in fostering unaccompanied refugee young people” *Child and Family Social Work* 18 (2013) 5-14
- 25 Grace, B.L. and Roth, B.J. (2015). Post-release: Linking Unaccompanied Immigrant Children to Family and Community. Columbia: University of South Carolina p. 6
- 26 USCCB, Shifting the Lens: A family-focused approach to the treatment of unaccompanied children, [http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/Shifting-the-Lens\\_2015.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/Shifting-the-Lens_2015.pdf) (accessed March 29, 2017)
- 27 Pascoe and Richman, Perceived discrimination and health: A meta-analytic reviewed, <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/bul/135/4/531/> (accessed on March 29, 2017); and, Viruell-Fuentes, Beyond acculturation: Immigration, discrimination, and health research among Mexicans in the United States, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953607002729> (accessed on March 29, 2017).
- 28 DeGarmo and Martinez, A Culturally Informed Model of Academic Well-Being for Latino Youth: The Importance of Discriminatory Experiences and Social Support, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00401.x/abstract;jsessionid=F2990B7D412BBCC07261DD9FD7992DC7.f01t03?userIsAuthenticated=false&deniedAccessCustomisedMessage> (accessed on March 29, 2017).
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- 35 Victim of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (VTVPA), Pub. L. No. 106-386, 8 U.S.C. 1101 §101(a)(15)(T), 101(a)(15)(U), 214(n), 214(p), 245(1) and 245(m).
- 36 Victim of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (VTVPA), Pub. L. No. 106-386, 8 U.S.C. 1101 §101(a)(15)(U).
- 37 Victim of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (VTVPA), Pub. L. No. 106-386, 8 U.S.C. 1101 §101(a)(15)(T).
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# Where They are Now ...

## Foster Care Youth:

### **Griselda, age 20, Guatemala**

Griselda recently graduated high school and plans to pursue a college education. Griselda would like to study to be a social worker so she will be able to, “help others the way I have been helped”.

### **Carlos, age 18, El Salvador**

Carlos is currently in the 12th grade and on track to graduate high school this year. He participates in the Varsity swim and bike club and recently won a medal in swimming. Carlos plans to attend college next year and pursue a career either in music or nursing.

### **Mariela, age 19, Guatemala**

Mariela is in the 12th grade and plans on graduating and finding a job to work and support her 5-year-old son who is back in Guatemala. She enjoys playing soccer, spending time with her friends, and is involved in a leadership program through her Foster Care agency. She encourages other youth who migrate to the United States to strive for what they want, to work hard for what they want, and to not give up.

### **David, age 18, Honduras**

David is attending high school and enjoys swimming, going to the movies, playing soccer, and listening to music. He is also involved in the ROTC program at school and is considering pursuing a college education.

## Family Reunification Youth:

### **Luisa, age 16, Honduras**

Luisa is enrolled in the 12th grade and enjoys playing soccer. She participates in extracurricular activities at school and loves spending time with her little cousins. She plans to graduate high school and pursue a college education.

### **Ana, age 18, Born in El Salvador, Raised in Guatemala**

Ana is enrolled in the 11th grade at school and enjoys spending her free time with her 17-month-old son. She plans on graduating from high school and hopes to one day be a police officer.

### **Jennifer, age 19, Honduras**

Jennifer recently completed the 11th grade and is now enrolled in an alternative educational program pursuing her GED. She enjoys cooking typical Honduran food and learning about food from other cultures. Jennifer recently attained her green card and plans to continue her education and pursue a career in cosmetology.

### **Oscar, age 18, Guatemala**

Oscar is enrolled in school and says that he loves going to school! He participates in the swim team, track, and football, and is enrolled in driver's education. He would like to finish high school and serve in the United States Army. While he came to the US with the intention of working to send money home to his family in Guatemala, he discovered his love for education and despite having legal status to work, he's focusing on his education.



U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Migration and Refugee Services  
3211 4th Street  
Washington, D.C. 20017

