



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Child Migration
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I warmly hope that proper attention will be given to minor migrants who need a social environment that permits and fosters their physical, cultural, spiritual and moral development. Living in a foreign land without effective points of reference generates countless and sometimes serious hardships and difficulties for them, especially those deprived of the support of their family.

--Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 96th World Day of Migrants and Refugees

At this time we think of the many migrants, the many refugees, of their sufferings, of their life, often without work, without documents, with such grief. And we can together say a prayer for the migrants and the refugees who live in the worst and most difficult situations. --Pope Francis, January 20, 2014

BACKGROUND

Since 2011, the United States has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of unaccompanied migrating children arriving in the country, predominately at the border with Mexico. Whereas the number of children apprehended averaged 6,800 between fiscal years 2004 and 2011, the total jumped to over 13,000 children in 2012¹ and over 24,000 children in 2013.² The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Department of Homeland Security estimate that more than 60,000 unaccompanied minors could enter the United States during 2014.

Why are so many children making the dangerous journey north? Are there recent developments in these countries that have led to the spike in child migration over previous years?

There are no simple answers for the significant growth in the migration of children. A delegation of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops which visited Central America in November 2013 found that a series of interrelated factors have contributed to this dramatic increase in migration and that a "perfect storm" of a number of these root causes has coalesced to create this phenomenon. Push factors include the absence of economic opportunity, the lack of quality education and access to education generally, and the resulting inability for individuals to financially support themselves and their families in their home countries/local communities. The desire to reunify with family in the United States, in part driven by these forces, also has contributed to this increase in migration.

Generalized violence at state and local levels and a corresponding breakdown of the rule of law have threatened citizen security and created a culture of fear and hopelessness that has also functioned as a primary driver of migration. Violence and coercion--including extortion, kidnapping, threats, and coercive and forcible recruitment of children into criminal activity--are perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations and gangs. They have become part of everyday life in Central American countries, exerting control over communities.

¹ ORR Year in Review, 2012, HHS website, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-year-inreview-2012> (accessed December 12, 2013)

² About Unaccompanied Children Services, ORR/HHS website, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ucs/about> (accessed December 10, 2013)

Each country also exhibited individual challenges that have added to the push factors. In Guatemala, for example, the demise of the coffee industry in recent years has contributed to the outflow of child migrants. In Honduras, political instability in recent years has led to the absence of good governance and a breakdown in the rule of law. El Salvador is particularly dependent on remittances from the United States and thus has been severely affected by the global recession.

USCCB POSITION

Under the leadership of the Catholic bishops of the United States, Migration and Refugee Services has engaged in efforts that include the identification of children forced to leave their homelands who are in need of protection; recommendations for durable solutions through arrangements with partner agencies; the operation of direct service programs throughout the United States and its territories for refugee and immigrant children and families; the publication of white papers addressing key issues for migrating youth, analysis of programmatic trends, identification of policy solutions, and recommendations for practice shifts; and advocacy efforts that promote greater protection for child migrants.

In collaboration with the Kino Border Initiative (a binational effort to make humane, just and workable migration on the U.S./Mexican border a reality) and other migrant shelters, Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS/USA) has worked to identify the factors that increasingly motivate many Central Americans, including children traveling alone, to migrate. Using information gathered through shelter surveys, supplemented by government data, JRS/USA advocates against impunity for crimes committed against migrants and for the protection of unaccompanied migrant children and enhanced oversight and accountability in the screening process. JRS/USA also advocates for a functioning asylum system that acknowledges the evolving frontiers of persecution, especially related to organized crime.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three broad categories of specific policy recommendation to address the challenge of child migration:

Access to screening and identification ensures that no child in need of international protection is sent back to a dangerous situation. This policy would require that no children be turned back at the U.S. border before being screened and that all migration and law enforcement officials whom children encounter are trained to screen for protection needs, follow appropriate protocols, and have adequate oversight to ensure compliance. It also means the creation of safe avenues through which children could access protection without having to first undertake an extraordinarily dangerous journey.

An adequate system of protection requires the United States to update its understanding of persecution to include organized crime and other non-state actors, and a wider range of durable solutions such as resettlement for some children.

Prevention and reintegration activities seek to address the surge in unaccompanied child migration at its root and should occur on multiple levels. While governments like the United States can support Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in addressing corruption, impunity and rule of law challenges, well-designed programs can intervene at the community level to help young people find ways to survive locally—preventing gang involvement as well as migration.

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