



CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION CRISIS

Background

Since 2011, the number of unaccompanied immigrant children making the dangerous journey from Central America to the southern border of the United States has increased more than seven-fold, with arrivals exceeding 60,000 children this year. These children, many under the age of 12, are fleeing pervasive and inescapable violence in their home countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These countries are three of the most violent countries on the planet; Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, with El Salvador and Guatemala ranking third and eighth respectively. Within these communities of diminishing protections and escalating violence, children, single women, and women heads of household with young children are the most vulnerable and are therefore prime targets for violence and exploitation by the organized crime syndicates, gangs, and security forces. In all three countries, gangs, transnational criminal organizations, and narcotraffickers commit acts of violence with near impunity, while local police forces are either unable or unwilling to offer protection to the public. The State Department actually advises Americans against travel to Honduras or El Salvador, citing specifically the “critically high” levels of violence and inability of police to protect travelers or citizens.¹

When children flee their homes, however, the risks they face at the hands of traffickers, gangs, criminals, and state actors continue along the journey. The unique vulnerabilities of children have long been recognized under U.S. and international law, which is why in 2002 the care of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) was moved from the Department of Homeland Security to the Office of Refugee Resettlement within Health and Human Services. The goal of the Unaccompanied Alien Children program, which served between 6,000-8,000 children a year before 2011, is to provide holistic, child-centered care for children arriving alone at U.S. borders. Once children cross the border, they are placed in the custody of ORR where the needs and the best interests of the children are assessed. On average, children remain in ORR custody for 30 days before they are either reunited with

1 Accessed 7/27/14 U.S. Department of State “Honduras Travel Warning” 24 June 2014. Web 28 July 2014. <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/honduras-travel-warning.html>



family in the U.S., returned to their country of origin, or it is determined that they qualify for immigration status as an asylum seeker, victim of human trafficking or other serious crime, or other humanitarian relief programs. Some children without family in the U.S. are placed in foster care programs.

The crisis in Central America's Northern Triangle, however, is not just about children but about adults and families as well. In recent weeks, tens of thousands of women with children and other family units fleeing the pervasive violence of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have arrived in Texas and Arizona. Lacking the space to detain these families, many have been left at Greyhound stations² in communities across the southern border once they have been apprehended and released with a notice to appear in immigration court months or even years later. The United States is currently expanding family detention to house these newly arriving families, despite previously moving away from this inhumane and costly practice due to lawsuits and reports of abuse and mismanagement in family detention centers.³ Meanwhile, other stable countries in the region such as Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, and Belize, have reported that asylum requests from Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadorian nationals are up 712% since 2008, reinforcing the sustained and regional nature of this migration crisis.

Additional background resources:

Episcopal News Service : <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2014/07/15/el-salvador-violence-insecurity-impunity-lead-to-displacement/>

Immigration Advocacy Network July 1 Newsletter: <http://library.episcopalchurch.org/article/immigration-advocacy-newsletter-july-2014>

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- 2 Belson, Ken and Fausset, Richard. "Faces of an Immigration System Overwhelmed by Women and Children" *The New York Times*, June 5, 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/06/us/faces-of-an-immigration-system-overwhelmed-by-women-and-children.html>
 - 3 Locking Up Family Values, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2007 <http://lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/RPTLOCKINGUPFAMILYVALUES2007.pdf>



Policy proposals

There are many policy proposals in front of Congress that seek to address the rise in arrivals of unaccompanied immigrant children and families at the southern border of the United States. The majority incorrectly attribute the root cause of the crisis to the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA) of 2008, and therefore seek to repeal or weaken its provisions related to protecting unaccompanied children from Central America. In recognition of migrant children's vulnerabilities, the 2008 re-authorization of the TVPRA enhanced protections for unaccompanied minors and required that each child arriving from noncontiguous countries be screened in an individualized and appropriate manner for trafficking and asylum-related concerns. If changes to this law are pushed through Congress, however, children will lose their meaningful opportunity to have their story heard and apply for asylum, or be cared for by child welfare personnel as they pursue their protection claim. Instead, they would face deportation to potentially life-threatening situations at the hands of traffickers and gangs, which is the flawed process currently in place for Mexican children.

An immediate response to this crisis is needed, but removing key protections from bipartisan legislation, especially at a time when more children are in need of these life-saving protections, is the wrong response. Rooted in the protection of vulnerable children and the regional scope of this humanitarian crisis, The Episcopal Church urges Congress to support legislation that will:

- Ensure that the wellbeing of vulnerable children is the driving force behind our policy response. Children should not be treated as an enforcement priority but should have access to child welfare personnel, legal counsel, and the services they need to navigate the immigration system. The TVPRA and other laws governing the protection and care for these children should not be changed and increases to family detention should be opposed.
- Provide vital funding for refugee services in FY14 and FY15. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within Health and Human Services is the office that provides lifesaving support services to resettled refugees, asylees, Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa recipients, Cuban and Haitian entrants, and survivors of human trafficking and torture.



JUSTICE *and* ADVOCACY MINISTRIES

ORR is also responsible for providing care for unaccompanied immigrant children, and earlier this summer \$94 million was reprogrammed away from services to refugees in order to care for rising numbers of unaccompanied children. ORR needs at least \$1.2 billion in additional funding in 2014 to care for vulnerable children and replenish reprogrammed funds. The U.S. must show leadership by protecting unaccompanied children while maintaining our commitment to refugee resettlement and serving all of the populations within ORR's mandate equally by providing additional funding in FY14 and robust funding in FY15.

- Avoid conflating the need for emergency funding with sweeping policy decisions. The violence in Central America that has displaced millions and forced tens of thousands of children to flee is an emergency situation that requires an emergency response. Without additional funding for ORR, refugees and other vulnerable groups, and the communities that welcome them across the country, will face significant impacts as early as August 2014. Changes to immigration policy decisions that reduce due process for children, however, signify a significant and weighty change in U.S. humanitarian policy and law. Changes of this magnitude must be considered carefully and deliberately on their own.

How you can help

In addition to taking action through the Episcopal Public Policy Network (<http://advocacy.episcopalchurch.org/home>) in support of vulnerable immigrant children, families, and all refugees, there are many ways to get involved in the church-wide response.

Donate

Episcopal Migration Ministries has established a fund for monetary donations to assist dioceses, congregations, and its affiliate network partners that are working with these populations in the impacted areas and across the country. You may send your gift to "DFMS," memo line "Child Migrant response," to Episcopal Migration Ministries, 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017.



Additionally, the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas is on the frontline of compassionate response to Central American children and families who have been released from detention and are on their way to their next destination. The Diocese has established a fund to receive all monetary contributions for this work, led by St. John's, McAllen and Christ Church, Laredo. Checks should be made out to the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, noted for Emergency Relief. They can be mailed to: Episcopal Diocese of West Texas, P.O. Box 6885, San Antonio, TX 78209. For more information, visit: <http://www.dwtx.org/department-ministries/communications/dwtx-blog/immigration-situation-in-south-texas-appeal> (<http://bit.ly/1lNMG9n>).

Act

Mapping the Church's Response: Across the country and The Episcopal Church, congregations and individuals are engaging in a compassionate response to the Central American migrant children situation. We are updating a nation-wide map as information becomes available. Is your diocese, congregation, or wider community responding to the crisis? Please tell us; email emm@episcopalchurch.org.

Immigration Services: Pro-bono immigration services are in high demand and Episcopal Migration Ministries is currently compiling a roster of immigration attorneys. If you are an attorney and would like to get on the roster, or if you are interested in additional immigration law training, please email us at emm@episcopalchurch.org.

Foster Care: Episcopal Migration Ministries refers inquiries about foster care for unaccompanied immigrant children to Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) department of Migrant and Refugee Services. LIRS and USCCB are the only agencies in the United States designated to provide foster care services to unaccompanied immigrant children.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT FOSTER CARE SERVICES FOR
UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT CHILDREN:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

please call or email migratingchildren@usccb.org, 202-541-3081

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service:

www.lirs.org/fostercare; email fosterparentinfo@lirs.org, 410-230-2757

Brochure about Foster Care of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children (<http://bit.ly/1kfnSgL>)

Frequently Asked Questions about Foster Care (<http://bit.ly/1rFBPqk>)

Post-Release Services: The Austin Office of Refugee Services of Texas is an affiliate of Episcopal Migration Ministries. While only an Episcopal Migration Ministries affiliate through its Austin office, Refugee Services of Texas has its own five-city network of service providers in Amarillo, Austin, Dallas, Ft. Worth, and Houston. The RST-Houston office provides post-release services to children and families who have been released from detention. You can support their work by visiting www.rstx.org/houston.

Foundation Cristosal: Foundation Cristosal (<http://cristosal.org/>) is a human rights-based community development organization with Anglican/Episcopal roots. It works in El Salvador to strengthen the ability of the poor to act for justice and development as equal citizens in a democratic society. Cristosal's Human Rights Office meets one-on-one with Salvadorans and their families who are threatened by violence and are seeking refugee status internationally. Their work also focuses on addressing the root causes of violence and poverty in El Salvador that force families to flee or send family members abroad. Access the resources below to learn more about its valuable work.

Foundation Cristosal: [July 24, 2014 news update](#)

Episcopal News Service: [El Salvador: Violence, insecurity, impunity lead to displacement, Faith-based NGOs respond](#) (<http://bit.ly/1tKrOG4>)

To learn more about Cristosal, email info.cristosal@gmail.com, or call toll free at (315) 307-0005.



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