

# Migration of Unaccompanied Children on the Rise

The unprecedented rise in arrivals of unaccompanied migrant children is fast becoming a humanitarian crisis. Before 2012, the number of arriving unaccompanied children averaged between 6,000 and 7,000 annually. In FY 2013, Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS-ORR) served 24,668 children, almost double the 13,625 from the year before. In FY 2014, it is anticipated that approximately 60,000 children will come to the United States; most from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Initially, the majority of children making the dangerous journey to the United States were boys. However, an increase in gender-based violence in these countries has forced a growing number of girls to undertake the arduous journey. The growth in unaccompanied children in the United States is, for the most part, a result of "push factors" forcing them to leave their countries of origin. Many children from Mexico and Central America are fleeing violence, poverty, drug trafficking, gender violence, or extortion. Others are seeking to reconnect with family members. A number of these children will qualify for relief on humanitarian grounds.

More information is available at [unhcrwashington.org/children](http://unhcrwashington.org/children). Child welfare advocates are adamant about the need to provide immigrant children with the least restrictive care within a community-based setting that meets the best interests of each child and are calling on Congress and the administration to ensure the protection and care of unaccompanied migrant children. Their recommendations include:

- Increase funding levels to ORR, which are currently inadequate to meet the expanding need.
- Ensure unaccompanied children are treated in a way that reflects their unique vulnerabilities, provides for their safety, and invests in their long-term integration and access to justice.
- Improve the trafficking-screening training and protocols along the border so that children entering the United States are properly evaluated and that victims of trafficking and persecution are effectively identified and referred for appropriate services.
- Place children in community-based care, NGO child welfare shelters, and other settings reflecting the needs of each child, including therapeutic placements, mentor homes, and foster homes for young children and pregnant and parenting teens, rather than placing such children in large institutional settings.
- Require that all children released from federal custody receive follow-up services to ensure their safety and well-being.
- Provide legal representation for all unaccompanied migrant children.
- Remove barriers to accessing services for all vulnerable migrant children granted immigration status.
- Address the root causes of forced migration.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Migration and Refugee Services (MRS), recently developed the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program, which works with agencies around the world as well as in the United States to provide services to unaccompanied immigrant children, to help with re-uniting them with parents or other relatives, and to provide and oversee foster care when relatives cannot be located.

More information can be found at [tinyurl.com/na9weus](http://tinyurl.com/na9weus) or by contacting Kristyn Peck ([kpeck@uscgb.org](mailto:kpeck@uscgb.org)) for details about plans for longer-term childcare need including housing in smaller community-based residential facilities and transitional foster care. In addition Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) is seeking help from Catholic organizations to meet staffing and housing needs for unaccompanied child migrants.

CCUSA is looking for Catholic agencies with bilingual case managers, licensed clinicians, immigration lawyers, and medical staff of all kinds able to serve unaccompanied child immigrants for a minimum of two weeks. Organizations with qualified staff are asked to contact Kristan Schlichte at [kschlichte@catholiccharitiesusa.org](mailto:kschlichte@catholiccharitiesusa.org). Catholic Charities is also helping to coordinate US government outreach to the Catholic community. The government is interested in leasing facilities that could house 200-300 children. Buildings must be located within 50 miles of a metropolitan center; contain at least 40,000 square feet of open space and 40 square feet of space per child; and provide a secure and accessible environment. Empty office buildings, college dorms, retreat centers, seminaries, or religious houses may be suitable. Additional information may be obtained from Katie Oldaker at [koldaker@catholiccharitiesusa.org](mailto:koldaker@catholiccharitiesusa.org).

Once immediate needs are met, CCUSA will begin collecting material items such as diapers, teddy bears, clothing, etc. In the meantime, CCUSA is accepting monetary contributions at [catholiccharitiesusa.org/](http://catholiccharitiesusa.org/).