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Why Children are Fleeing Central America

Congress Needs to Take a More Balanced Approach to the Humanitarian Crisis

Since last October, more than 52,000 unaccompanied children have fled unspeakable conditions and crossed into the United States. Most have come from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. By year's end, that number is expected to grow to between 70,000 and 90,000. The Department of Homeland Security is preparing for more than 100,000 children to arrive in 2015. The United States is witnessing a humanitarian crisis in this situation.

Many members of Congress are focusing on detention centers and how fast the United States can send these children back to their home countries. Few are asking this question: *What are we sending these children back to?* Without addressing the root causes of this crisis, such as poverty and violence, this situation will continue. More and more children will be driven to flee their home countries in search of greater educational and economic opportunities, safer and more stable communities, and a path out of hunger.

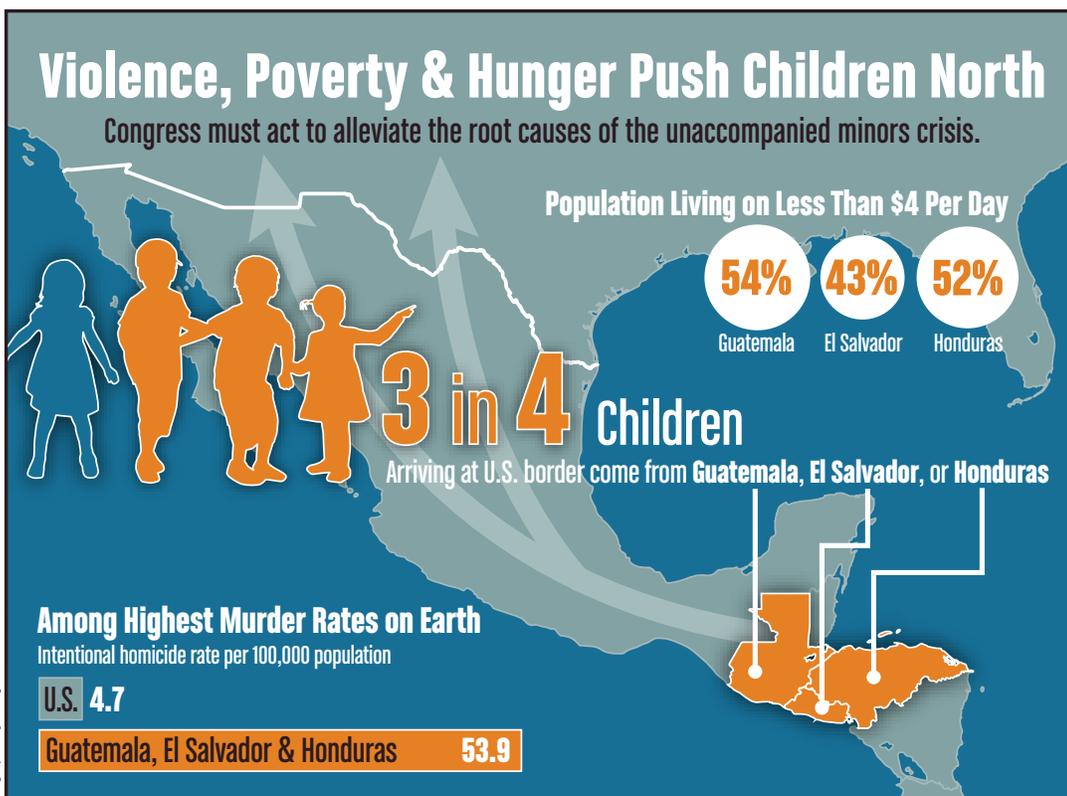
This crisis is not just about the surge of new arrivals in

the United States. It is also about the conditions of poverty, hunger, and violence that force children to leave their homes on a very dangerous and uncertain journey:

- 75 percent of these children are coming from three countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.
- More than half of the citizens of Honduras and Guatemala live on less than \$4 a day.
- About half of all Guatemalans suffer from moderately or severely stunted growth.
- Honduras has the highest murder rate per capita in the world. It is almost five times that of Mexico and twice that of Detroit.
- Residents of all ages, including children, in these countries are getting caught in gang-related violence.

The United States is not the only country experiencing this surge of unaccompanied children coming into its territory. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees reports that Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize have seen a 712 percent increase in children's applications for asylum. Other neighboring countries have seen a 700 percent increase in the last year.

Congress needs to take a balanced approach to this crisis. It needs to address not only the children who have arrived in the United States already but also the root causes of the crisis in the home countries of these children. Congress needs to enact targeted policies that address economic and security concerns so that fewer children are forced to migrate and risk their lives in what is an extremely dangerous journey into the United States.



- The U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development support many economic development, health, education, social service, democracy, and security programs in the region. However, these programs can be better structured to address the root causes of migration. Our federal government can also support new initiatives that help strengthen the governments of countries that have high numbers of residents who are migrating.
- Churches have responded in the United States by opening their doors and offering assistance to the children here. But their efforts are not enough. Congress has yet to act, and Bread for the World is concerned that it may not take a balanced approach and address the root causes of poverty and violence in its response.

Thus, in any legislation responding to the surge in unaccompanied minors crossing the border, Congress should also address the root causes, by:

- Directing the Government Accountability Office to study the impact our foreign assistance programs are having in deterring migration to the United States and other surrounding countries;
- Developing strategies for achieving sustainable and

lasting economic development in the region that includes increased development budgets to address economic and security factors that force adults and children to flee;

- Focusing on the implementation of long-term repatriation programs that prioritize job training and education for children deported back to their home countries;
- Investing in agricultural development for smallholder farmers, nutrition programs, and food security that has been proven to reduce hunger and malnutrition;
- Directing the State Department to designate a high-level coordinator, such as an ambassador-at-large for children in adversity, and establishing an office to be the focal point for policy formulation and response to the humanitarian concerns facing children, such as those fleeing violence and hunger in Central America; and,
- Accelerating the Millennium Challenge Corporation's engagement in Central America to encourage countries to prioritize good governance, build democratic institutions, and invest in needed domestic infrastructure projects.

Contact your members of Congress today!

Urge them to pass legislation that addresses the root causes of hunger, poverty, and violence that are driving the surge of unaccompanied children crossing the border.

Go to www.bread.org or call 800-826-3688.



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