

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 potentially reaching as high as 90,000 children this year. Many these children, a growing share of whom are under the age of 12, are fleeing pervasive and targeted violence in their home countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

These countries, collectively known as the “Northern Triangle” of Central America 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 police and judicial protections and escalating violence, children, single women, and single mother households with young children are the most vulnerable and are often prime targets for violence and exploitation by organized crime syndicates, gangs, and security forces.

In all three countries, gangs, transnational criminal organizations, and narco-traffickers commit acts of violence with near impunity, while local police forces are either unable or unwilling to offer protection to the public. In fact in many cases, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala, the police are also perpetrators of violence, either because they are in league with organized criminal groups or because they participate in “social-cleansing” campaigns in impoverished and violent neighborhoods. The U.S. State Department has advised that levels of violence are “critically high” in El Salvador and Honduras and warns of the inability of police to protect citizens.¹ The United States is not alone in experiencing an increase in migration from the Northern Triangle. Other countries in the region, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica and Belize, have reported that asylum requests from Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran nationals are up 712% since 2008, reinforcing the sustained and regional nature of this forced migration crisis.

When children flee their homes they face many risks at the hands of traffickers, gangs, criminals, and public authorities 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 released to a family member or a foster family in the U.S. pending a determination of their best interests and status in immigration proceedings. A government adjudicator will determine whether a child should be returned to their country of origin or whether they qualify for immigration status as an asylee, victim of human trafficking, or under another form of humanitarian relief.

The crisis in Central America’s Northern Triangle, however, is not just about children but about adults and families as well who, experiencing the same violence and insecurity have fled their countries to seek safe haven elsewhere. In recent months, 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. In response to the increasing numbers of families arriving on our border, United States has prioritized rapidly deporting these family units from the Northern Triangle, subjecting newly arrived women and children to a process called “expedited removal,” effectively cutting off access to legal representation in the courts for many families. Further impeding the access these families have to due process is the U.S. decision to expand the use of family detention, a model abandoned in 2009 after general agreement that the practice was inhumane and unnecessary after reports of abuse and mismanagement of family detention centers.²

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/alertwarnings/honduras-travel-warning.html>

² *Locking Up Family Values*, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2007 <http://iirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/RPTLOCKINGUPFAMILYVALUES2007.pdf>