



Resources and Links on the Central American Humanitarian Crisis

- According to [U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#) (CBP), 52,193 unaccompanied children were apprehended at the southwest border between October 1, 2013, and June 15, 2014. The largest percentage increases came primarily from three Central American countries: Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador (known as the Northern Triangle). From fiscal year 2011 to fiscal year 2103, the number of children from these countries increased by:
 - Honduras: 606 percent increase,
 - Guatemala: 413 percent increase, and
 - El Salvador: 328 percent increase.
- During the same period (FY 2011 to FY 2013), the numbers of Mexican unaccompanied children being apprehended only increased slightly (by 44 percent). This [represents a significant shift](#) in the makeup of unaccompanied children coming to the border—prior to 2012, more than 75 percent of these children were from Mexico (now that number is closer to 25 percent). Additionally, in the same time period the total number of all entries from Mexico (children and adults) [decreased](#) significantly.

Push Factors

The conditions pushing children to flee Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador include violence, high homicide rates, gangs, and the inability of their home states to protect them.

- Between 2008 and 2013 [UNHCR documented](#) a 712% increase in the number of asylum applications from citizens of these three countries in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize, combined. In 2012 alone, the number of requests for asylum increased by 432% in these countries.
- The many compelling narratives gathered in the [UNHCR Children on the Run report](#) “demonstrate unequivocally that many of these displaced children face grave danger and hardship in their countries of origin. There are significant gaps in the existing protection mechanisms currently in place for these displaced children.”
- [UNHCR concluded](#) that no less than 58% of 404 children it interviewed were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harms that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection. Only 4 children in total expressed a reason for coming that related to some knowledge of the U.S. immigration system.
- [The Women’s Refugee Commission asked](#) unaccompanied children who had come to the United States from Central American if they would risk the dangerous journey north through Mexico all over again now that they had direct knowledge of its risks, most replied that they would. They said that staying in their country would guarantee death, and that making the dangerous journey would at least give them a chance to survive. Many of them expressed a longing for their homelands, stating that they would not have left but for fear for their lives.

Violence, not economic factors, is main driver of increase in children fleeing.

- [Other countries in the region](#), such as Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama had a total of just [1,881 murders](#), at a rate of only 13 per 100,000. Nicaragua is particularly useful as an example: It is the [second-poorest country](#) in the region—behind only Haiti—and yet, with far lower rates of

violence than the three main sending countries, it [has not seen an uptick](#) in unaccompanied children leaving.

- More than half of the top 50 Central American cities from which children are leaving for the United States are in Honduras. [Virtually none](#) of the children have come from Nicaragua, a bordering country that has staggering poverty, but not a pervasive gang culture or a record-breaking murder rate.

Northern Triangle homicide rates are the highest in the world.

- A recent report by the [Assessment Capacities Project](#) (ACAPS), citing 2012 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) data, highlighted that Honduras had a homicide rate of 90.4 per 100,000 people. El Salvador and Guatemala had homicide rates of 41.2 and 39.9, respectively. In comparison, the war-torn country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from which nearly [half a million refugees have fled](#), has a homicide rate of 28.3 per 100,000 people. The United States homicide rate is 4.8 people per 100,000.
- According to [Pew Research analysis](#) of [DHS Statistics](#) Pedro Sula in Honduras is the world's murder capital, with a homicide rate of [187 homicides per 100,000](#) inhabitants in 2013 driven by a surge in gang and drug trafficking violence. For the entire country [Honduras's murder rate](#) was 90 per 100,000 in 2012, the highest in the world.
- In 2011, [El Salvador was not far behind](#), at 70 per 100,000, ranking second in terms of homicides in Latin America then. Even with a significant drop in the murder rate from 70 in 2011 to 41 in 2012, El Salvador is only surpassed by Honduras, Venezuela and Belize in the entire world.
- Honduran children are [increasingly on the front lines](#) of gang violence. In June, 32 children were murdered in Honduras, bringing the number of youths under 18 killed since January of last year to 409, according to data compiled by Covenant House, a youth shelter in Tegucigalpa, the capital.
- In Honduras, the [National Observatory of Violence reported](#) that violent deaths of women increased by 246 percent between 2005 and 2012. The national observatory recorded 323 homicides of women as of June.

In these Northern Triangle countries violence and gangs dominate society and states are unable to protect their citizens.

- Guatemala's police (and military) [were so thoroughly infiltrated](#) by organized crime that in 2006 the United Nations had to set up a special agency, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (which goes by its Spanish acronym, [CICIG](#)), to help fight the pervasive abuses committed by "clandestine groups." CICIG has enjoyed some recent successes, but nearly three in four killings committed in Guatemala still go unpunished.
- [According to United Nations Office of Drug and Crime](#) (UNODC), in 2012, there were an estimated 20,000 gang members in El Salvador, 12,000 in Honduras, and 22,000 in Guatemala.
- [The major gangs operating in Central America](#) are the 18th Street gang (also known as Barrio 18) and their main rival, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13.) These two particular gangs, or "Maras," have been prevalent in Honduras and El Salvador for years and, until recently, were loosely structured and largely operated at the local street level. In recent years both of these gangs have expanded geographically (moving into some areas of Guatemala in addition to intensified presence in El Salvador and Honduras) and have become more organized and sophisticated both in terms of operation (from low-level robberies and extortions to becoming guards and transporters for large lucrative narcotics shipments) and execution.
- The [Center for Gender and Refugee Studies found](#) that in 2011 El Salvador had the highest rate of "femicide," or gender-motivated killing of women, in the world. In 2012 alone, groups report 731

Guatemalan women and girls were murdered, and only two percent of those murdered were investigated. Violence against women rose 17 percent in 2013, suggesting that such problems are escalating.

Faith Groups React

[Conference of Catholic Bishops, Press Statement](#) (7/7/14)

- “Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, auxiliary bishop of Seattle and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Committee on Migration, called upon the Obama Administration, July 2, to reconsider their proposed request to Congress for “fast track” authority to expedite the removal of unaccompanied children fleeing violence in Central America. Current law permits children from non-contiguous countries to remain in the country until their request for asylum or immigration relief is considered by an immigration judge.”
- “As a nation which has traditionally offered safe haven to those who are persecuted, this proposed policy undercuts our values as a nation,” Bishop Elizondo said. “The prospect of the United States sending vulnerable children back into the hands of violent criminals in their countries raises troubling questions about our moral character.”

[Presbyterian Church \(USA\) Response to Unaccompanied Children Crisis](#) (7/7/14)

- “I know that God went with the children on their journey. Though subjected to harm and often in the hands of smugglers, these children are alive and in the U.S. because of the prayers of parents and friends and persons like you and I, who read about them and knew they were coming though we did not know their names.”
- “In the Presbyterian tradition, the congregation as a whole covenants with a family to nurture their children in the faith. We look after one another’s children. We corporately tend to their safety and growth. The children arriving at our borders are no less in need of nurturance and no less bearing the likeness of God.”

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA): [“ELCA advocates for unaccompanied children entering the United States.”](#) (6/10/14)

- “We are committed to helping the thousands of unaccompanied children coming to the United States to escape violence and difficult situations in their home countries. To address this crisis, ELCA members are working through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help find foster care for these children.”
- “As people of faith, we are reminded that among the children who had to flee across borders because of threat of life was our very own Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When children flee across two international borders alone, the community of Jesus – the church – must accompany them,” said the Rev. Stephen Bouman, executive director, ELCA congregational and synodical mission.

National Association of Evangelicals: [“Humanitarian Aid, Pastoral Care for Unaccompanied Minors Needed”](#) (letter to DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson). (6/24/14)

- “Moreover, as Christian leaders we have a Biblical and moral imperative to provide a pastoral and compassionate response even while we seek long-term solutions to the root causes of this crisis. Our churches, parishes, and relief agencies have a long history of compassionate service and ministry during the most challenging times. Moreover, we have historically been at the forefront of ministry to

children from juvenile detention centers to refugee camps. We request that we be able to provide the same type of aid in the case of these unaccompanied minors.”

- “Our Christian commitment to provide a faithful response during natural disasters, prolonged famines, or civil unrest is what now compels us to advocate for the Department of Homeland Security to allow us to provide humanitarian assistance to these children being detained at the Southwest border and elsewhere.”

Advocacy Organization Response

[National Sign-on Letter from 200+ Organizations](#) (7/3/14)

- “The administration’s recent statements have placed far greater emphasis on deterrence of migration than on the importance of protection of children seeking safety. At a time when the region is confronted with a major humanitarian crisis, our nation cannot compromise on fundamental principles of compassion, fairness, and due process, nor on our international refugee protection obligations.”
- “We are deeply concerned that the administration will circumvent the protections of the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008 and remove the children apprehended at the border through a non-judicial process. Instead of affording these children proper screening for trafficking and persecution, as well as the opportunity to receive fair and full consideration of their legal claims before an immigration judge, the administration appears to propose to quickly deport them, without access to legal counsel, following cursory screenings that have already proven entirely inadequate to identify genuine refugee claims among Mexican children.”

[AILA](#) (7/8/14)

- “This supplemental appropriations request is a critical part of addressing the humanitarian crisis. However, AILA continues to be deeply concerned at reported Administration plans to ‘fast track’ the deportations of these unaccompanied children. At no point should the supplemental request be used to authorize new authority that waters down the legal protections for children. That could result in children being rushed back into danger where the potential for violence is incredibly high. AILA will continue to sound that alarm as the Administration and Congress hopefully work together to address this crisis in ways that reflect our country’s values.”

[Human Rights First](#) (7/10/14)

- “As President Obama and Congress try to address this crisis, they should do so in ways that address the conditions prompting flight, strengthen the integrity of the immigration and asylum systems, reflect American ideals, and uphold our nation’s obligation to protect refugees,” said Human Rights First’s Eleanor Acer. While the administration’s proposal includes provisions to increase resources for agencies handling the influx, additional resources are needed for the immigration courts, legal orientation and counsel, and to address the violence in Central America. The Obama Administration’s proposal could also do serious damage by further increasing detention for children, families, and asylum seekers. There are far better and less expensive alternatives that address the multiple needs of these families and the government’s need to assure appearance for court and deportation.”

[Women’s Refugee Commission](#) (7/9/14)

- “We urge Congress to approve funding that provides more support to the Executive Office of Immigration Review to ensure timely and fair proceedings that includes legal representation for all children and families, and allocate funds to address root causes of the crisis through promoting the rule of law, education, protection, and youth development abroad in addition to long term reintegration programs. The Administration’s enforcement and deterrence approach may only succeed in driving children fleeing violence further into the hands of traffickers and smugglers as they seek protection. We urge Congress to remember that we can manage the flow of migrants while also complying with current US and international laws and ensuring the support, care and custody of those children, who have already been through so much, while their proceedings take place.”

Protecting Children

- The 1997 [Flores v. Reno settlement agreement](#) required the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to set out, for the first time, a nationwide policy governing the children’s detention, release, and treatment. The Flores agreement is premised on the notion that the government must treat children in its custody with “dignity, respect, and special concern for their vulnerability as minors.” It required the INS to release children without “unnecessary delay” and lays out in order of preference categories of relatives, unrelated adults, and licensed child care settings to which children are to be released.
- The [Trafficking Victims and Protection Act of 2008](#) (TVPA) outlines two sets of legal protections afforded to “unaccompanied alien children,” whether from contiguous countries (Mexico or Canada) or non-contiguous countries. The law includes protections such as the facilitation of counsel and the appointment of child advocates that help ensure that unaccompanied children from non-contiguous countries receive proper care and that their requests for asylum and other legal relief are processed fairly and in a way that is consistent with their age and development.
- The United States [has entered into numerous treaties](#) with other countries to ensure the protection and safe passage of refugees. Among the most important are the 1952 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. Under these treaties, the United States may not return an individual to a country where he or she faces persecution from a government or a group the government is unable or unwilling to control based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. A separate treaty, known as the Convention Against Torture, prohibits the return of people to a country where there are substantial grounds to believe they may be tortured.
- For more legal analysis, see the following resources:
 - AILA: [Recommendations on Legal Standards and Protections for Unaccompanied Children](#)
 - ACLU: [The Rights of Children in the Immigration Process](#)
 - Letter sent by 113 law professors regarding [Fair Treatment for Unaccompanied Children](#)

Resources

[“Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central American and Mexico and the Need for International Protection,”](#) a report from UNHCR. (3/2014)

[“Dramatic Surge in the Arrival of Unaccompanied Children Has Deep Roots and No Simple Solutions,”](#) a report from the Migration Policy Institute. (7/2014)

[“The awful reason tens of thousands of children are seeking refuge in the United States,”](#) from Vox.

[“Children in Danger: A Guide to the Humanitarian Challenge at the Border,”](#) a report from the American Immigration Council.

[“Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States”](#) a report from the Conference of Catholic bishops.

[“A Treacherous Journey: Child Migrants Navigating the U.S. Immigration System,”](#) a report from Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) and the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies.

[“Forced From Home: The Lost Boys and Girls of Central America,”](#) a report from the Women’s Refugee Commission.

[“Prison Guard or Parent? INS Treatment of Unaccompanied Refugee Children,”](#) a resource guide on the Flores v. Reno settlement from the Women’s Refugee Commission (5/2002).

[Pew Research report based on DHS Statistics](#)

[“Statistical Analysis Shows that Violence, Not Deferred Action, Is Behind the Surge of Unaccompanied Children Crossing the Border,”](#) a report from the Center for American Progress.

NY Times article, [“Fleeing Gangs, Children Head to U.S. Border.”](#)