

# Meeting the Needs of Unaccompanied Child Refugees

BY SARAH PIERCE

More than 102,000 unaccompanied children from Central America and Mexico were apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection at the U.S.-Mexico border from October 2013 to August 2015.<sup>1</sup> While most of the Mexican children are quickly returned to Mexico, children from noncontiguous countries, under U.S. law, are transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to be processed and simultaneously placed in removal proceedings. The vast majority of these children are released by ORR into the custody of a parent, relative, or friend in the United States while they wait for their cases to progress through the immigration court system.<sup>2</sup>

Most unaccompanied children are likely to remain in unauthorized status in the United States for a long time, and many will experience substantial economic hardship.<sup>3</sup> The costs associated with the specific service needs of unaccompanied children are borne by local counties and school districts.

Yet the needs of unaccompanied child migrants are extensive. Many have little formal education, are not proficient in English, and have suffered socioeconomic hardship and trauma. Upon arriving in the country, they experience the challenges of living in an unfamiliar culture and reuniting with relatives they have not lived with in years, if ever, or, in a smaller number of cases, they enter the U.S. foster care system. Many find themselves amid unfamiliar faces; even those reuniting with parents and family members do so after long periods of separation.<sup>4</sup>

As these cases make their way through the courts, the children become further ingrained in communities and school

districts across the country. Communities and school districts largely continue to face challenges in meeting the needs of these children and have responded in disparate ways to their arrival.

For example, Montgomery County (Maryland), with one of the largest concentrations of unaccompanied child migrants in the country,<sup>5</sup> has tapped into a number of programs, including a specialized program of instructional and emotional support for students with limited schooling and English skills, a bilingual parent volunteer program to help families navigate the school system, an entry-level job skills program for Spanish-speaking students who will not receive a diploma by the time they are 21, professional development courses and resources for educators in meeting the needs of undocumented students, and working groups to review the school district response to the needs of unaccompanied minors.<sup>6</sup> These programs are in conjunction with initiatives from the broader county government, including a mental health support program in the most affected schools, a cross-sector committee to coordinate the county's response to undocumented children, and an agreement with local colleges to support certain at-risk students.<sup>7</sup> The county's Care for Kids program provides affordable healthcare for children from low-income families who are not eligible for other state or federal health insurance programs.<sup>8</sup>

Some localities have created or use existing transitional programs or "newcomer academies" to ease the transition process. In San Francisco, the Mission Education Center serves newly arrived Spanish-speaking elementary school students<sup>9</sup> and provides one- and two-year programs to help students transfer into mainstream classes. And in Sussex County (Delaware), which already had in place a large Guatemalan population and supportive bilingual programs for students, teachers quickly put together a newcomer program for high school students, which enrolled 46 students in fall 2014.<sup>10</sup>

The Office of Refugee Resettlement also offers some short-term services.



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Before child migrants are released to sponsors, they are housed in ORR-funded shelters where they receive classroom education, mental and medical health services, help in case management, and access to social opportunities and recreational facilities.<sup>11</sup> They also receive family reunification services to facilitate their safe and timely release to family members or other sponsors. In less than 5 percent of cases, and generally for children who are victims of trafficking or have disabilities,<sup>12</sup> ORR funds a home study (which includes background checks and interviews) to make sure the potential sponsor is able to ensure the child's safety and well-being.<sup>13</sup> However, most sponsors receive little screening.

Unaccompanied child migrants have been entering the United States for years, but the recent spike in their arrivals has made the issue more pressing. Though the unaccompanied child population has been characterized as temporary in nature, it is likely that a large number of these children will live in the United States for a long period, perhaps even permanently. As the primary institution that unaccompanied minors are entitled to access under U.S. law, schools offer a venue for providing needed services to these children. They bear this responsibility with very little federal support. Communities, service providers, and local schools need to know more about their arrival and stay, in order to allocate resources appropriately to best meet their needs.

(Endnotes on page 44)

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## Unaccompanied Children

(Continued from page 41)

### Endnotes

1. "Central America" here refers to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the three countries in Central America that have significant migration flows to the United States.
2. William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-457, 122 Stat. 5044 (2008). Removal and removal proceedings refer to the administrative processes used to determine whether an individual is eligible for removal or deportation under U.S. immigration law. Individuals who are removable may apply during these proceedings for relief from removal, or for eligibility to stay in the United States.
3. Of the general unauthorized population in the United States, 32 percent live at or below the federal poverty level and 65 percent live below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. See "Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States," Migration Policy Institute, accessed May 27, 2015, [www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US).
4. Elzbieta M. Gozdzik, *What Kind of Welcome? Integration of Central American Unaccompanied Children into Local Communities* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Institute for the Study of International Migration, 2015), 12–13.
5. Memorandum by Larry A. Bowers, interim superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools, "Unaccompanied Youth—Children Fleeing Violence," March 10, 2015; and "At a Glance: School Year 2014–2015," Montgomery County Public Schools, accessed March 24, 2016, [www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/about/20141208AtAGlance.pdf](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/about/20141208AtAGlance.pdf).
6. Bowers memorandum.
7. Bowers memorandum.
8. Sarah Polk, Kathleen Page, and Lisa Ross DeCamp, "Unaccompanied Immigrant Children Need Access to Mental Health Professionals," *Baltimore Sun*, September 26, 2014.
9. "Mission Education Center Elementary School," San Francisco Unified School District, accessed March 24, 2016, [www.sfusd.edu/en/schools/school-information/mission-education-center.html](http://www.sfusd.edu/en/schools/school-information/mission-education-center.html).
10. "Eager Unaccompanied Minors Head to School with Barriers Stacking Up," Fox News Latino, September 24, 2014, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2014/09/24/eager-unaccompanied-minors-head-to-school-with-barriers-stacking-up>.
11. Office of Refugee Resettlement, "Children Entering the United States Unaccompanied: Section 3; Services," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 20, 2015, last reviewed February 29, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/children-entering-the-united-states-unaccompanied-section-3](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/children-entering-the-united-states-unaccompanied-section-3).
12. Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "Young Immigrants Placed in Sponsor Homes Are at Risk of Abuse, Experts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2015.
13. Office of Refugee Resettlement, "Children Entering the United States Unaccompanied: Guide to Terms," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 21, 2016, last reviewed March 21, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/children-entering-the-united-states-unaccompanied-guide-to-terms](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/children-entering-the-united-states-unaccompanied-guide-to-terms).