

## Frequently Asked Questions: The Exodus of Children from Central America

### **Who are these “unaccompanied immigrant children”? How do they end up in the United States alone?**

Unaccompanied immigrant children are minors under the age of 18 who cross the U.S. borders alone, without their parents or caregivers. They come to the United States from all corners of the world, but the most recent influx of children has primarily been from Central America — Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. They travel by foot over the border or as stowaways on freight trains. Sometimes they are victims of human trafficking, sometimes they must pay to get to safety, and sometimes they just travel alone. The number of children making this perilous journey has grown astronomically.

### **Why are they fleeing their home countries?**

There are several main push factors: faltering economies, large youth population, and rising crime and gang activity. There are also pull factors: the desire for family reunification and changing operations of smuggling networks.

### **How old are these children?**

They are usually in their early teens, but can be as young as three. They are both boys and girls.

### **What happens to children once they get here?**

If a child migrant enters the U.S. as a national of Mexico he/she is eligible for voluntary return as long as this person is not a victim of trafficking. Children from Central American countries are transferred by the Border Patrol into the custody of the [Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\)](#), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

After the initial steps of checking the children’s health, making sure they are safe, and understanding who they are and the situation they have fled, some are reunited and released into the custody of a relative or family friend who live here in the United States. Some may be returned to the country they came from, and others are placed in foster care while their needs for protection are determined by an immigration court.

Currently, the average wait in ORR custody is about 30 days. With existing children’s shelters at capacity, military installations are housing many of these children during this wait. The U.S. government has opened four new large shelters for these children so far: Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas; Fort Brown in Brownsville, Texas; Port Hueneme Naval Base in Ventura County, California; and Fort Sill in Oklahoma. These facilities are operated by the Department of Defense and have been authorized to stay open for 120 days. There is also a facility in Nogales, Arizona that is operated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and was established to expedite the processing of these children.

### **Are these kids and their family members being given permission to the stay in the United States permanently?**

Currently, there is no legal status being offered to these children or their family members. All the children who cross into the United States are still required to abide by U.S. law and must present themselves for immigration court proceedings to determine if they are eligible to remain in the United States. Some children may be eligible

for options such as a T-visa, if they can prove they were a victim of human trafficking, a U-visa, if they can prove they were a victim of crime in the United States, asylum, if they can prove they have been persecuted in their home country, or Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, if they can prove that they were abandoned, abused or neglected by their parents.

### **Do the children need clothing, toys, or other stuff?**

The kids have a variety of needs, and the most urgent items are being provided for them. Because these are minors in federal custody, there is not yet a means for material goods to be donated to them. As soon as there is a system for this type of assistance, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance will post it on their website.

### **What are Presbyterians doing to help these children?**

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) is working with congregations and mid councils along the border that are especially impacted by this situation in addressing needs. We are also collaborating with our ecumenical and interfaith partners who have experience in working with refugees and immigrant and are who are also responding to the growing crisis along the southern U.S. border.

### **What can Presbyterians and others do to help?**

**Give.** Share your financial blessings to help provide humanitarian relief for children arriving in the United States alone; to support Presbyterian congregations and mid councils as they minister to these children; and to help with advocacy issues related to this crisis.

DR000095—Refugee Emergencies

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/donate/make-a-gift/gift-info/DR000095/>

#### **Act.**

- Like us on Facebook to stay informed of additional information - <https://www.facebook.com/PDACARES>
- Advocate through the Office of Public Witness - <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/washington/>

**Pray.** That the grace and love of Christ will cover the frightened children being held in detention facilities or makeshift holding centers, that they will be treated with dignity and respect, and that their safety and protection be ensured.

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Information for this FAQ was adapted from a document prepared by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS)