



**Op-Ed**  
**By Kathleen Kavanagh, Law Intern**  
**July 3, 2014**

## **Unaccompanied Alien Children**

Shocking statistics and heartbreaking images of children packed into Border Patrol holding cells have fueled a recent burst of media attention to the flood of unaccompanied minors that is overwhelming our southern border and spilling into the interior. While the last few months have indeed seen an unprecedented jump in child arrivals, mostly from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the surge actually began in late 2011 – and the root causes reach decades earlier.

Official Border Patrol statistics show that over 47,000 unaccompanied minors have already been apprehended in the first eight months of fiscal year 2014. DHS projections put the number at 90,000 by the end of the fiscal year on September 30. According to the Migration Policy Institute, an independent, nonpartisan think tank, prior to October 2011, the average hovered around just 8,000 unaccompanied minors apprehended per year.

The surge of unaccompanied minors, along with media coverage of the resulting “urgent humanitarian situation,” as the White House has called it, is stirring up emotions across the country and leading to much finger-pointing, but not enough concrete action to deal with the crisis and its long-term causes and repercussions. Politicizing the situation is doing nothing to resolve it, and even less to help the scores of children arriving at our border in search of refuge.

Some have jumped to blame the surge of unaccompanied minors on the Obama administration. Immigration enforcement policies, they argue, have fueled rumors south of the border that anyone who reaches the U.S. – especially women or children – will receive a de facto amnesty. The White House has acknowledged that misinformation about U.S. immigration policy has indeed played a role in the influx, but 90,000 children are not leaving their homes based on rumors alone.

Longstanding, complex problems in their home countries – like deeply entrenched economic inequality, systemic state corruption, and the growing prominence of violent street gangs – are at the root of most children’s migration north. Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala alone account for 74% of unaccompanied minors detained at the border. Another 25% come from Mexico. It is the desperate conditions in these countries that make children and adults alike so vulnerable to the hope that any rumor of American lenience towards migrants might spark.

In 2012, the Women’s Refugee Commission reported that over 77% of unaccompanied minors interviewed said that violence was the main reason why more children were fleeing their countries than ever before. The children interviewed for that report also relayed harrowing stories of gang recruitment and violence, police abuse of youth, and gender-based violence, including the gang rape of girls as young as nine.

Pointing fingers at the parents of unaccompanied minors is another over-simplified and futile exercise in blame-shifting. American parents do not love their children more than Honduran parents love theirs. Most American parents, however, are not forced to raise their children in circumstances like those that are rampant in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, nor do they face the kind of heart wrenching decisions that are commonplace in those countries: whether to leave a daughter behind in order to seek work in the United States, or whether to send a son on a dangerous journey north rather than leave him vulnerable to gang recruitment and police abuse at home.

The recent announcement of \$255 million in new U.S. aid to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, to support repatriation programs for deportees, fight criminal gangs, and create more opportunities for youth, is a welcome sign that the administration is recognizing the role social and economic conditions in those countries play in the flood of child (and adult) migrants. Also earlier this month, the Department of Justice announced the launch of an AmeriCorps program that will provide lawyers to a handful of unaccompanied minors, who would normally be left to navigate deportation proceedings alone. With only 100 attorneys and paralegals, though, the program will hardly make a dent if the rates of unaccompanied minor arrivals continue to grow as expected. Programs like these are certainly steps in the right direction, but we are all fooling ourselves if we think that mere band-aids will stem the hemorrhaging of children from Central America.

Politicians on both sides of the aisle – as well as those blaming the parents of unaccompanied minors – need to accept that no single administration, policy, or country is to blame for the enormous surge of unaccompanied minors. We should focus instead on how to ensure that the tens of thousands of children arriving at our doorstep, asking for our help, receive the protection and due process we owe them.

### **About the Immigrant Legal Resource Center**

The **Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC)** is a national nonprofit resource center that provides legal trainings, educational materials, and advocacy to advance immigrant rights. The mission of the ILRC is to work with and educate immigrants, community organizations, and the legal sector to continue to build a democratic society that values diversity and the rights of all people.