

Backgrounders

The U.S. Child Migrant Influx

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Introduction

An estimated sixty-three thousand unaccompanied minors, most coming from Central America, crossed the United States' southern border between October 1, 2013 and July 31, 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has reported. The spike, representing nearly twice the number of child migrants who came during the same period the previous year, has revived a rancorous national debate on immigration policy, riled critics of President Barack Obama's proposed immigration reforms, and stretched social and legal services that receive the migrants. The phenomenon comes at a time when overall detentions of undocumented immigrants at the southern border are near historic lows.

Called a humanitarian crisis by some and a threat to national security by others, the influx has been caused by a combination of so-called "push" and "pull" factors: violence and poverty in sending countries have driven young people from their homes, while hopes of family reunification and rumors—often spread by human smugglers—of lenient immigration laws in the United States have lured young people north.

Who are the migrants and where do they come from?

The child migrants are predominantly boys (estimates range from 60 to 75 percent) in their teens, but Pew Research Center has found that children under twelve—often sent with older siblings or smugglers—represent a [growing proportion](#) of unaccompanied minors. Three-quarters of unaccompanied minors are from the Central American Northern Triangle—Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala; as recently as 2009, [82 percent of apprehended minors](#) came from Mexico. Among the Central Americans, Hondurans represent the largest group, making up [28.6 percent](#) of the total.

What's driving the numbers of young migrants from Central America?

Experts say violence and poverty in sending countries and a desire to reunite with family members already in the United States, as well as a growing number of human smuggling networks, are the primary drivers of the migration. The "push" factors compelling children to leave and "pull" factors include:

Violence: Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala suffer the world's first, fourth, and fifth highest homicide rates, respectively, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). While violence has been endemic to the region since the 1980s, crime has spiked in recent years due to fragile institutions, weak or corrupt law enforcement, and prevalent gang activity, particularly in Honduras and El Salvador. Extortion is rampant in many communities, and gangs, known as maras, target teenage boys for recruitment and as their victims.

Honduras' institutions are particularly troubled, in part as a result of the country's 2009 military coup. Large swathes of the country fall out of the rule of law, making it—and its neighbors—prime territory for drug trafficking. However, as the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Eric Olson said in congressional testimony, the relationship between transnational drug trafficking and the violence affecting youth "is indirect and much **more complex than we imagine.**" He added that drug trafficking organizations are primarily interested in moving narcotics from the Andes to their markets in the United States, and that "they are not interested in extreme violence and community-level criminal activity in Central America that represent costly and wasteful delays. The violence in Central America is predominately related to local criminal markets."

Poverty: The Northern Triangle countries suffer some of the region's highest rates of poverty. In Honduras, 52 percent of the population lives on less than \$4 per day. In Guatemala and El Salvador, **those figures are 53.5 percent and 42.7 percent**, respectively.

While economic opportunity has long motivated migration north, a 2013 UN refugee agency survey found that more migrants leave due to threats of violence than lack of economic opportunities. Of four hundred unaccompanied migrants interviewed, researchers found **58 percent cited violence** as their primary reason for leaving their countries of origin. Nicaragua, where nearly 70 percent of the population lives on less than \$4 per day, but where violence is considerably lower than its neighbors, has actually been receiving migrants from the Northern Triangle. **Fewer than two hundred** of the Central American migrants detained by U.S. Border Patrol between October 2013 and July 2014 were from Nicaragua, leading many experts to believe that this phenomenon is more rooted in violence than poverty.

Family reunification, human smuggling, and U.S. immigration policy: An **estimated 2.5 million Central Americans** were living in the United States by mid-2014, and 60 percent were either undocumented or living under temporary protected status, with no legal option to send for relatives in their home country.

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Desire to be reunited with their children, concerns about violence in their home countries, and the means to pay for their children's transport has led many immigrants to hire human smugglers, or coyotes, to bring their children to the United States. The smuggling business has seen a boom in recent years despite reports of extortion, abandonment, and even violence against those they are paid to protect and transport.

Smugglers are believed to be spreading misinformation about U.S. immigration policies. Indeed, unlike previous immigration waves, many of these migrants actively seek out U.S. authorities, **believing that the United States grants temporary permits** to remain in the country. CFR's Edward Alden argues that families, "know exactly what will happen to their kids—they will be taken into custody, turned over to HHS, and then put into very slow deportation proceedings that could take many years to resolve." Some children, he says, will win asylum status, and others may remain hidden from authorities. "Any of these is preferable to the threat of violence and death at home."

Many Republican lawmakers have said policies like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

(DACA), a 2012 executive order that allows some individuals who arrived illegally to the United States as children to remain there and work legally, have encouraged this wave of child migrants. At a July hearing in McAllen, Texas, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas), the chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, **blamed** "a series of executive actions by the administration to grant immigration benefits to children outside the purview of the law, a relaxed enforcement posture, along with talk of comprehensive immigration reform."

What happens once migrants are apprehended?

Under the **William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008**, the United States treats immigrants from noncontiguous countries differently than it does those from Canada and Mexico. When Mexican minors are apprehended at the border, U.S. authorities may deport them immediately without legal proceedings—so long as he or she does not express fear of returning home. Unaccompanied minors from Central America, on the other hand, have a legal right to a deportation hearing (but not necessarily counsel). They must be turned over to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) within seventy-two hours of being taken into custody.

As of August 2014, there was a dearth of lawyers available to process deportation hearings, producing a serious backlog in both legal and social services. While some migrants have stayed in HHS shelters, mostly along the U.S.-Mexico border, many more have been put in the care of family members while they await their hearings. While awaiting deportation hearings, minors have the right to attend public schools and receive vaccinations.

How have U.S. lawmakers responded to the crisis?

In July, Obama asked Congress for \$3.7 billion for border surveillance, detention facilities, and law enforcement personnel, including judges to oversee deportation hearings. House Republicans countered by passing a bill to appropriate just \$694 million, expedite deportations, and increase security at the border. Another bill passed by House Republicans called for the repeal of the DACA executive order.

The influx of unaccompanied migrants has strained already tight budgets. U.S. Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, both under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), have expressed concerns about running out of funds by September and August, respectively. HHS is also struggling to cope with the influx.

Obama has, for his part, said that he prioritizes deterring future arrivals, increasing the capacity of immigration courts to speed deportation hearings, and giving DHS "**additional authority to exercise discretion** in processing the return and removal of unaccompanied minor children," a stance that has drawn concern from **human rights groups**.

Texas governor Rick Perry, whose state has received the vast majority of migrants, **deployed** four hundred National Guard troops to the Rio Grande Valley in July, with the total of guardsmen expected to reach one thousand. Arizona governor Jan Brewer, a Republican who has clashed with the president on immigration issues, has blamed the Obama administration for "failing to send a message" that the U.S. border was closed to illegal immigration.

Are the U.S. and Central American governments working together to resolve the crisis?

The United States, Mexico, and Central American countries have all discussed the need for a concerted, cooperative effort among security forces to confront human smuggling networks. The United States **announced in July** it would begin a ninety-day surge to confront human smugglers in

Texas' Rio Grande Valley; a sixty-person investigative team dispatched to the area a month before yielded nearly two hundred arrests and the seizure of \$625,000 used for smuggling. The U.S. Department of Justice has said it is working with Mexican authorities to investigate and prosecute human smugglers, and that it is working with the U.S. Department of State to "address the root causes of migration" in sending countries.

In July 2014 Obama met with the presidents of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala at the White House to discuss their "shared responsibility" to stem the flow of migrants to the United States. The four leaders pledged to "address the underlying causes of migration by reducing criminal activity and promoting greater social and economic opportunity." The Central American presidents said that the United States bore some responsibility for the crisis, due to its market for illicit substances that pass through the region, and its "ambiguity" on immigration reform. All three countries have launched media campaigns to discourage illegal outward migration.

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Luis Alberto Moreno, president of the Inter-American Development Bank, has [proposed a large-scale aid package](#) for the Northern Triangle similar to [Plan Colombia](#), a U.S. aid program enacted 1999 that he says helped Colombia reduce violence and spur its economy. He argues that the money should go toward strengthening Central American institutions and rule of law, and combating crime.

What are the U.S. policy options?

Obama and House Republicans agree steps should be taken to prevent further migration. DHS has begun a public information campaign to discourage parents from sending their children with coyotes. Many critics of immigration reform have said that a repeal of programs like the 2008 Wilberforce Act and DACA would further deter child migrants. Obama and many of his critics also agree that deportation hearings should take place in a timely manner—although there is some discord over whether the migrants should have a right to those hearings in the first place, and concerns from human rights advocates that speed may take precedence over fairness.

The Obama administration has said that it is considering establishing a program in Honduras in which applicants would apply in-country for U.S. refugee visas. (The administration has not specified the size of the program, but has said that if successful in Honduras, it could expand to El Salvador and Guatemala.) Arizona's Republican senators, John McCain and Jeff Flake, [have proposed](#) allowing up to five thousand refugee visas for each country each year for the next two years. Proponents of such a program say it would prevent many would-be refugees from making the journey north, while its detractors say it overlooks the urgency of those who are currently fleeing violence in their communities.

Reform advocates have argued that greater steps toward legal family reunification would also help to stem the flow of unaccompanied minors. Currently, the 262,000 Salvadorans and Hondurans in the United States legally under TPS cannot petition for their children to be permitted into the country.

The migration crisis became the center of partisan rancor in the hours leading to Congress' five-week break in August. Obama failed to secure funding he had requested from Congress, called Congress' legislation "the most extreme and unworkable versions of a bill that they already know is going nowhere," and vowed to "act alone" to reallocate funding to address the current situation.

Additional Resources

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [interviewed 404 unaccompanied child migrants](#) on leaving Central America and Mexico and advocates for their international protection.

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Eric Olson discusses the [root causes of child migration](#) from Central America in testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

In a CFR report, Edward Alden, Bryan Roberts, and John Whitley recommend [better data and analysis](#) to help U.S. lawmakers better understand how illegal immigration can be managed through enforcement.

[Julia Preston](#), from the *New York Times*, and [Dara Lind](#), from Vox, have both written extensively about the Central American migrant influx and U.S. policy responses.

More on this topic from CFR

[Protect Undocumented Children: Preserve the Wilberforce Law](#)

Authors: Mark P. Lagon, and [Patrick McCormick](#), Research Associate, Studies

[Immigration Reform Is Dead, Precisely When We Need It Most](#)

Author: Shannon K. O'Neil

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