



Unaccompanied Children

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?

Often, these heroic children are leaving their home countries due to extreme poverty, human trafficking, drug cartels, political upheaval, child labor, or abusive homes. In other cases, the children come to the United States to reunite with family members who have preceded them here. Some children are trafficked into the United States, transported by hired smugglers; others make the journey on their own.

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?

When these children come to the attention of the U.S. government at the border, they are first held at U.S. Customs and Border Protection stations. These stations are not good places for vulnerable children. In a number of days, they are moved to one of a number of facilities around the country and they remain in U.S. government custody through the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Because the number of children has increased so dramatically, 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. Combined, these four shelters have space for 3,000 beds. 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.

Of course, 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, warehousing traumatized children on military bases is not a good long-term solution. Some of these kids are reunited with family members

who live here in the United States, some may be returned to the country they came from, and others need a better solution like foster care while their needs for protection are determined by an immigration court.

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.

What are Lutherans doing to help these children?

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) is playing a national advocacy role as well as a service role during this emergency. LIRS provides services to unaccompanied migrant children that uphold their best interests and recognize their vulnerabilities to exploitation and abuse. The services include providing short-term transitional foster care while children are assessed for their next safe destination. Destinations may include: being reunited with family in the United States, being returned to their home country, or being placed in long-term foster care while they pursue legal relief. Through our network of partners, LIRS also assists the families who are trying to be reunited with their children.

Additionally, LIRS and our network of partners assist a small percentage of families after they are reunited to ensure safety, integration, and the child's wellbeing in the home. Finally, for those children who have no family in the United States, can't return home, and have an opportunity for legal relief, LIRS's partners provide safe foster homes for them to get the care, love, and the support they need to recover and become strong members of society. LIRS provides these services through highly respected Lutheran social service partners and community-based agencies that have expertise in serving immigrant communities and can provide professional child and family services.

LIRS places children who do not have caregivers with foster families, arranges for volunteer attorneys to help them with their immigration cases, and enrolls them in school and other community-based programs. For children with family here in the United States, LIRS also ensures their safe release to appropriate, safe, and secure home environments by conducting home assessments.

What can Lutherans and others do to help?

- Join the #ActOfLove advocacy campaign. www.lirs.org/actoflove
- Consider becoming a foster parent through our **Give the Gift of Family** campaign or promoting it at your church or in your community. www.lirs.org/fostercare
- Turn an unused parsonage or other property into a **House of Welcome** for migrant families in need. www.lirs.org/housesofwelcome
- Support the work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service: www.lirs.org/donate

For more information, contact Matt Herzberg mherzberg@lirs.org or call 877-291-1061

LIRS.org