



IN THE NEWS

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Children at the Border

Introduction

The U.S./Mexican border is no place for young children, yet in recent months the U. S. Border Patrol has apprehended tens of thousands of children—many of them unaccompanied by parents or guardians—as they have crossed the border heading north. Some of the children come from Mexico, but a growing number are arriving from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and now that they are in the United States, no one really knows what to do with them. Some Americans want the kids deported immediately, some want to welcome the children unconditionally, and still others favor a legal vetting process that could take years—and so as politicians come to a decision about their fate, the children live in detention centers, often in overcrowded, unsanitary, and demeaning conditions, waiting for an uncertain future to unfold.

It is likely that some of the children will remain in the United States, but many—if not most—will be sent back to the countries from whence they have traveled. They come on foot, on buses, or by rail—hopping freight trains hobo style—for a long journey north into the chaotic lawlessness that marks the border region, where violent drug cartels control areas to the south and the north is dominated by the U.S. Border Patrol, an agency whose record on human rights abuses is spotty at best.¹

The Children Arrive

The border is a mess, and the rate at which unaccompanied children are arriving at the border is

alarming. Until recently, the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended, on average, between 7,000 and 8,000 unaccompanied minors each year. Then, starting in 2012, the number of unaccompanied minors caught crossing the border started to surge. There were more than 20,000 children who ended up in the custody of the U.S. Border Patrol in the 2012 fiscal year. In 2013 the number rose to nearly 25,000. Halfway through the 2014 fiscal year the Border Patrol had already picked up more than 50,000 unaccompanied children, and many experts predict the number of unaccompanied children crossing the U.S./Mexican border will reach 90,000 by September, the end of the 2014 fiscal year.² In the 2013 fiscal year, the United States Customs and Border Protection apprehended 420,789 undocumented migrants. If adult migration remains constant, about 20 percent of all migrants apprehended in 2014 will be unaccompanied children.³

Where Will the Children Go?

It's not easy to accommodate 90,000 children a year, which is exactly what the U.S. Customs and Border Protection has had to do, but even allowing for the logistical nightmare of the task, the Customs and Border Protection has frequently failed in its task to provide a safe and healthy environment for the unaccompanied immigrant children whom they have caught trying to cross the border. Not being organized or trained as a child welfare agency, the Customs and Border Protection has dealt with these children as they

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deal with all migrants: incarceration. These children have been put in detention facilities that are almost entirely indistinguishable from jails.

Reports and photos from inside the detention centers show kids, some appearing to be less than a year old, sleeping in chain-link cells or wherever they can find a spot on cement floors. Because bathrooms are insufficient for the sheer number of children, the Customs and Border Protection agents have provided port-a-potties for the children in already overcrowded facilities.⁴

In the Border Patrol's defense, the agency has tried to find better places for the children to stay while in custody, but suitable facilities are hard to find. Anti-immigration activists in Southern California and Virginia thwarted efforts to move children in detention to smaller, presumably safer

along the border to more child-friendly living situations—have taken place in dozens of towns all across the United States.⁸

Conditions Back Home

While many of the unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S./Mexican border are from Mexico, the recent surge comes largely as a result of increased migration from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, where crime is rampant and where violence has reached epidemic proportions. In June 2014, for example, the U.S. State Department warned Americans not to visit Honduras, which is plagued by official corruption and has had the world's highest murder rate for four consecutive years.⁹ Guatemala is the country with the world's highest number of femicides—women

and girls being killed because they are female—and El Salvador has the world's highest rate of femicides per capita.¹⁰ All three countries suffer from law enforcement agencies unable to address the criminal activities of the

transnational gangs, such as Mara Salvatrucha¹¹ and Barrio 18,¹² that terrorize local communities.

In a study of the phenomenon of unaccompanied children crossing the U.S./Mexican border, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found that nearly half of the unaccompanied children caught trying to cross the U.S./Mexican border had been personally affected by the violence in the region perpetrated by organized armed criminal actors, including drug cartels and gangs, or by actors of the state. Twenty-one percent of the children confided that they had survived abuse and violence in their homes by their caretakers. And only children from Mexico were affected by a third category of harm giving rise to the potential need for international protection: recruitment into and exploitation by the criminal industry of

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and cleaner facilities in their communities. In Escondido, California, more than five hundred residents showed up at a planning commission meeting to oppose a proposal to house roughly a hundred children in a shuttered old-folks home. The protesters prevailed: the planning committee rejected the conversion of the unused facility by a vote of seven to zero.⁵ In nearby Murrieta, protesters, waving American flags and chanting "USA! USA!" blocked three busloads of women and children bound for an immigration processing facility.⁶ In Lawrenceville, Virginia, local residents balked at the suggestion that apprehended undocumented teens might be housed in the vacant St. Paul's University.⁷ Similar protests—aimed at blocking the transfer of unaccompanied migrant children from prison-like conditions

human smuggling (i.e., working to assist others as they try to cross into the United States illegally). Thirty-eight percent of the children from Mexico fell into this category. Eleven percent of the children reported having suffered or being in fear of both violence in society and abuse in the home.¹³

Fifty-eight percent of the children interviewed by the UNHCR would likely qualify for protection under international law.¹⁴

A Faithful Response

Right now children are fleeing violence in Mexico and Central America, ending up in overcrowded, unsanitary detention centers that are, for all intents and purposes, jails. Self-proclaimed American “patriots” protest the resettlement of these children—many of whom, under international law, are legal refugees—with angry placards and words that speak of the children as criminal invaders. How should a thoughtful Christian respond?

First, we should remember the biblical injunction to care for unaccompanied children and sojourners. While the Bible is silent on many of the issues that cause division among modern Christians in the United States (e.g., Obamacare, reproductive rights, and the freedom to carry a loaded assault rifle in public spaces), the Bible is unambiguous in its exhortations to care for orphans and to treat sojourners with dignity and respect. This does not necessarily mean that Christians must blindly support all immigration policies. It does mean that our concern for the well-being of unaccompanied minor children must inform and guide our thinking on the subject, regardless of the policies we end up supporting.

Second, we should avoid reducing the plight of unaccompanied migrant children to a political debate that seeks partisan advantage. In Washington, the corridors of power are reverberating with partisan invective: fingers are pointing and politicians are grandstanding. Many Republicans blame the Obama administration for

promoting immigration policies that make the journey north from Central America seem attractive. Democrats counter that it was George Bush and not Barack Obama who signed into law policies that grant non-Mexican immigrant children the right to a hearing before they are deported. Republicans further deride the Obama administration for not taking action, all the while refusing to fund any action the administration might take. As political theater it might be entertaining, but so far partisan wrangling in Washington hasn’t done anything to help the children. Ultimately, the plight of the unaccompanied, undocumented migrant children will need a political solution, and along the way there will no doubt be political fallout, but those who see the surge in immigrant children as an opportunity to make partisan hay are doing a disservice to the serious nature of the issue.

A third way to respond to the recent influx of unaccompanied minor migrants is to think of the current surge as an international crisis involving refugees rather than a national emergency involving immigrants. As noted above, many of the children fleeing violence in Mexico and Central America qualify as refugees under international law, and the United States is not the only country to which unaccompanied migrant refugee children are fleeing. Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua have seen applications for asylum from unaccompanied children increase sevenfold since the current crisis began.¹⁵ If Washington finds itself unequal to the task of addressing the surge of unaccompanied migrant children from Mexico and Central America, it may be because the government is not addressing the phenomenon as a regional international problem.

Fourth, we should remember that migrant children—whether refugees or undocumented immigrants—are not criminals. Though pundits and talking heads across the political spectrum (but particularly on the right) have at times referred to the migrant children as “illegal”¹⁶ and speak of the

surge of migrants as an “invasion,”¹⁷ neither term is accurate or helpful. Many of the children in question are too young to be prosecuted or detained for breaking the law, and those old enough to be prosecuted in juvenile courts would need first to be given a hearing to determine whether or not they are, indeed, refugees rather than illegal immigrants.

Finally, we should stay informed on the issues that surround the current surge of unaccompanied children leaving their homes in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in search of safety in Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, and the United States. To that end the following resources come highly recommended:

1. *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This resource is available as a PDF online at http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/1_UAC_Children%20On%20the%20Run_Executive%20Summary.pdf. It is concise, and it frames the issues in ways that take the reader outside the political polarization found in most U.S. writings on the subject.
2. Most denominations have resources to help members think through issues involving immigration. Resources for members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) can be found at <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/>; Lutheran resources can be found at <http://lirs.org/>; and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' website on immigration issues is located at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/>. If you are

not Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Catholic, do a web search using the name of your denomination and the words “immigration issues.” In most cases you will find excellent resources.

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3. There are many helpful books that cover the broader issues of this subject. Ben Daniel, *Neighbor: Christian Encounters with “Illegal” Immigration* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); M. Daniel Carroll R. et al, *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009); and Daniel G. Groody and Gioachino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land, a Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Immigration* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008) are all excellent resources. These books predate the current crisis, but they provide a solid theological and spiritual background for those who wish to learn more.

Endnotes

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. With the exception of Native Americans, everyone living in the United States is either an immigrant or is descended from immigrants. Where did your family come from? Did any of your ancestors (or did you) come as children? Were any of your immigrant ancestors (or were you, yourself) fleeing violence in their (or your) home country? How were your ancestors (or you) welcomed into America?
2. This study discusses American cities (Escondido and Murrieta in California, Lawrenceville in Virginia) that have refused to allow immigrant children to be housed in their communities. How would your neighbors respond to a proposal for placing immigrant children in a facility in your town? How would you respond?
3. What role can churches play in caring for unaccompanied minor migrants and refugees?
4. How does your faith inform your opinions about the plight of the children who are entering the United States from Mexico and Central America? What biblical passages inspire you? What hymns, liturgies, and traditions prompt you to respond?