



WHAT KIND OF WELCOME?

INTEGRATION OF CENTRAL AMERICAN UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN INTO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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KEY OBSERVATIONS

- ◆ **Child migrants have been coming to America alone since Ellis Island.** American society has been favorably disposed to prior waves of youth migration.
- ◆ **The arrival of large numbers of migrant youth from Central America and Mexico is also not new.** But the recent migration from the south has some distinct characteristics:
 - The majority of Mexican youth are sent back immediately or do not make it to the border.
 - Mostly Central American children and youth are reporting to immigration authorities or being apprehended at the border.
 - More young women are migrating, often with small children of their own.
 - The vast majority of the young migrants are seeking to unite with family in the U.S.
- ◆ Despite occasional anti-immigrant sentiment, **local reception has been generally positive.** Some local governments have provided additional funding to facilitate the integration of the youth and support legal services to help them pursue their claims to remain in the United States. Others have offered to host reception centers for migrants awaiting placement with family and sponsors. In addition, philanthropy has stepped up in several locales to provide additional resources, primarily legal in nature, but also for general services and mental health support. Overall, local communities are generally able to absorb the relatively small numbers of children and youth released to family or community members.
- ◆ **The Central American migrant youth face many of the same challenges as other young migrants** with poor English language skills and lack of documented status. Strong models of intervention exist that should be extended to assist these newly arrived migrants as well.
- ◆ Community groups and school districts have considerable experience supporting Latino migrants. However, they do **require additional resources to address the effects of psychological trauma and disrupted schooling** that many recent child migrants experienced.
- ◆ **Family reunification is a positive outcome of the migration.** However, this reunification must be managed to ensure a healthy transition to life in the U.S. for the migrants.
- ◆ **Further research is needed.** Especially important is comparative research examining the social, cultural, and legal well-being of three distinct groups of newly arrived Central American youth:
 - Those who have been apprehended, detained in U.S. immigration custody, and released to family or community with post-release services; and
 - Those who have been detained and released from U.S. immigration custody without post-release services; and
 - Those who were not apprehended when entering the U.S. without authorization and have not had contact with local, state or federal law enforcement or social services.

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INTRODUCTION

Child Migrants Make Headlines

Unaccompanied child migrants from Central America and Mexico arriving at the U.S. southern border became national news in the summer of 2014. A multitude of front-page stories about the influx of unaccompanied children and youth travelling to the United States to seek refuge from horrific violence--rape, gang recruitment, and murder--in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico followed.¹ Advocacy groups and UN agencies produced reports urging international protection for the children on the move.² Migration policy advisors and congressional researchers also chimed in.³

Journalists wrote about anti-immigrant sentiments reaching fever pitch over the arrival of these youngsters.⁴ CNN reported that in places such as Murrieta, California, and Oracle, Arizona, the message was clear: immigrant children fleeing Central America are unwelcome in Small Town USA.⁵ Child advocates countered these attitudes with calls for protecting the children and ensuring due process in immigration proceedings. The attention overwhelmingly centered on the push factors driving the arrival of unaccompanied children and youth to the U.S. and their treatment while in government custody. Fewer advocates focused on how the young migrants fared once released from detention centers to family and community. Mark Greenberg, Acting Assistant Secretary in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), testified that in FY 2014, “approximately 95% of children released [from the Department of Health and Human Services custody] were released to a parent, relative, or non-relative sponsor.”⁶ Most unaccompanied children spend, on average, 35 days in HHS custody,⁷ but wait 578 days for a court date to appear in front of an immigration judge.⁸

Five hundred seventy eight days is a long time, a little over a year and a half. It is difficult to predict how many of the young migrants will remain after their immigration hearing. However, whether they will be allowed to stay or will be eventually deported, they are here now. What will happen to them in the intervening months and years? How will they fare in the families and communities to whom they have been released? Will their relatives embrace them? How will anti-immigrant sentiments affect their daily lives? Will they be integrated into American schools or even go to school? Who will support them? These are some of the issues that this report addresses.

Child Migrants Have Been Coming to America Alone Since Ellis Island

The press portrays the Central American children and youth who are arriving at our southern border as a migration phenomenon without precedence. Nothing can be further from the truth says Barry Moreno, a librarian at the Ellis Island Museum and author of the book “Children of Ellis Island.” Annie Moore, a 15-year-old girl from Cork County, Ireland and her two younger brothers were the first persons in line on January 1, 1892, the opening day of the new immigration station at Ellis Island.⁹

The Immigration Act of 1907 did not permit unaccompanied children under the age of 16 to enter the United States in the same fashion as adults. But it did not send them packing, either. The Act set up a system of detention centers where the children, many of whom were orphans, awaited their immigration hearings. At these hearings, local faith-based organizations, immigrant aid societies, and private citizens would often step in and provide guardianship for these youngsters.¹⁰

Several waves of unaccompanied children have entered the United States since. From 1960 to 1962, Operation Pedro Pan (Peter Pan) resulted in the airlift from Cuba of what historians say were 14,000 unaccompanied children. It was one of the largest migrations of unaccompanied children into the U.S. from a single country. In 1975, Operation Baby Lift involved a mass evacuation of about 3,000 orphans from South Vietnam. Since 1980, almost 13,000 children and youth under the age of 18 have entered the unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) program, funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and administered by the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). At its peak in 1985, ORR provided protection to 3,828 children. In 1982, Congress passed the Amerasian Homecoming Immigration Act, giving preferential immigration status to Vietnamese children born to U.S. servicemen. About 23,000 Amerasians and 67,000 of their relatives entered the United States under this Act.¹¹

American society was favorably disposed to these youngsters and there was no picketing when they arrived on our shores. Will the Central American children and teens arriving today be as welcomed in local communities?

In 1988, large numbers of unaccompanied youth and adults from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala arrived in South Texas. Many were teenagers fleeing wars in those countries. Tens of thousands would eventually come, and many received temporary protected status (TPS) or asylum. In January 2010, Haitian children orphaned by a devastating earthquake began adoption journeys into the U.S. More than 1,000 orphans were adopted, aided by passage of the Help Haiti Act of 2010. Many children were given “humanitarian parole,” an immigration program used sparingly that some suggest applies to the Central American youth arriving today.¹²

While some of these programs initially met with controversy, in the end the evaluation of integration outcomes was quite positive among the general public. The 19th century immigrant wave, in particular, is held up as the group that successfully integrated into the American social fabric within just one generation—learned English, entered the labor force, and participated in civic organizations. These immigrants set a high bar for integration. Many of the young people resettled in the United States as part of Operation Pedro Pan recalled painful separations from their parents, but at the same time emphasized how well they have done in this country.¹³

Refugee children from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos resettled in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s have often been called the Asian “model minority” and their achievements, especially educational attainment, are held in high regard by the news media and the general public despite more complex pictures emerging from empirical research.¹⁴

The fact remains: American society was favorably disposed to previous waves of youth migration and there was no picketing when they arrived on our shores. Will the Central American children and teens arriving today also be welcomed in local communities?

THE CURRENT MIGRATION OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Central American Youth Migration is Not New

The arrival of significant numbers of young migrants at our southern border is not a new phenomenon. According to a study by the National Autonomous University of Mexico, an estimated 150,000 young people under the age of 18 attempt to cross the U.S. border annually from Mexico. Approximately 60,000 are returned; apprehended unaccompanied children are a subset of this population.¹⁵

Why aren't the Mexican children causing the same agitation as the Central American youngsters?

In FY 2011 the number of Mexicans under the age of 18 apprehended at the U.S. border was 13,000, rising to 15,709 in FY 2012, and reaching 18,754 in FY 2013. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehended 11,577 Mexican unaccompanied children and youth in the first eight months of FY2014.¹⁶

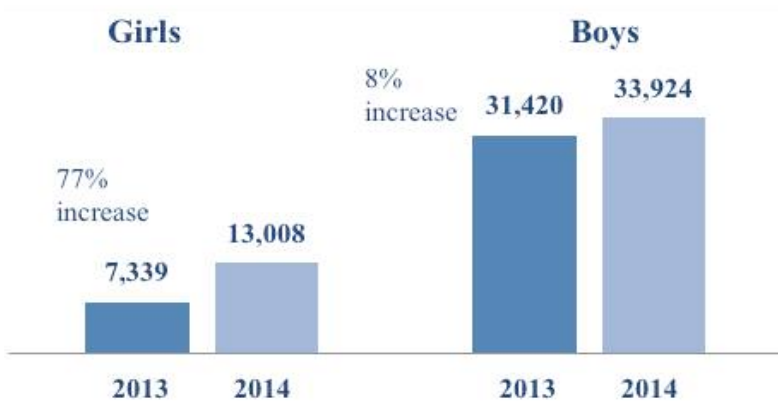
These numbers suggest that Mexican children and youth have far outpaced the number of youngsters from any one country in Central America. Why aren't the Mexican children causing the same agitation on the part of the American public that is caused by the arrival of Central American youngsters?

The answer is simple: Unlike unaccompanied children arriving from Central America, most of the Mexican children and youth are promptly returned to Mexico after no more than a couple of days in the custody of U.S. authorities.¹⁷ The return happens largely because of political agreements between the U.S. and Mexican governments.¹⁸ Child advocates, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), argue that under the provisions of the Trafficking Victims Protection and Reauthorization Act (TVPA) of 2008, all unaccompanied children and youth under the age of 18—including Mexican children—should be screened and their protection needs identified, despite the existence of any bilateral agreements.¹⁹ Legal provisions notwithstanding most apprehended Mexican underage migrants are speedily returned to Mexico. Of the 11,577 Mexican youngsters apprehended at the border in the first seven months of FY 2014, only 494 were placed in ORR custody, the rest were sent back to Mexico. The Congressional Research Service estimates that some 43,000 children, including 35,000 children from neighboring countries of Mexico and Canada, are immediately returned each year.²⁰ As a result, these young migrants are out of sight and out of mind of the American public. They do not cause the same furor as the recent arrivals from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador perceived to be arriving in unprecedented numbers.

The Data are Difficult to Unpack

Are the recent numbers as noteworthy as the press would like us to believe? Many statistics from different sources are cited to draw the public's attention to this cohort of children and adolescents. They can be confusing to interpret and compare. Some reports include both Mexican and Central American youngsters, while some focus solely on Central Americans. The Pew Research Center, citing data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) from government sources, points out that the number of unaccompanied children arriving between October 2013 and June 2014 reached 57,000, compared with nearly 39,000 in the previous fiscal year (FY 2012). However, the data cited by the Pew Research Center include both Central American (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala) and Mexican children.²¹ According to a recent UNHCR report, *Children on the Run*,²² since 2009 UNHCR has registered an increased number of asylum-seekers, both children and adults, from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala lodging claims in the Americas. Citing U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) sources, the report indicates that the total number of apprehensions of unaccompanied and separated children and youth arriving in the United States from these three countries jumped from 4,059 in FY 2011 to 10,443 in FY 2012 to 21,537 in FY 2013.

FIGURE 1: Apprehension of unaccompanied children on the U.S.-Mexico border, by gender



Note: Fiscal Year 2013 is Oct. 1, 2012-Sept. 30, 2013. Fiscal Year 2014 data is Oct. 1 2013 -May 31, 2014. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Enforcement Integrated Database Records

Figure 1 shows apprehensions calculated by the Pew Research Center on the basis of data provided also by the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP). These numbers indicate significant growth. It is, however, worth mentioning that in recent years children and adolescents fleeing violence in Central America turn themselves in at the southern border, while previously they tried to cross without being noticed by border patrol. It is difficult to ascertain the number of young migrants arriving across the southern border clandestinely prior to the recent influx. Perhaps the numbers were equally large but a smaller percentage of the youngsters was apprehended.

The Mexican Autonomous University indicates that as many as 90,000 Mexicans under the age of 18 cross the U.S.-Mexico border annually without inspection and remain in the country without authorization. There is limited information on how these youngsters fare in local communities.

It is also important to bear in mind that undocumented migration from Central America and Mexico follows a cyclical pattern with periodic decreases and increases of arrivals over time. According to the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) at the American University, the number of unaccompanied children under the age of 18 apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border dropped to 3,141 in August 2014, a 70 percent decrease from the peak of 10,622 in June. Apprehensions of families—mainly women with one or two small children—also declined, falling from 16,329 at the height of the arrival to 3,295 in August.²³ This sudden downturn, write the authors of the report, is consistent with seasonal changes in undocumented migration when the desert heat makes the journey north all the more daunting. These changes are also related to the involvement of children and youth in agricultural labor in the region. The role of the Mexican government is

also a factor. Advocates emphasize that many migrants from Central America—perhaps as many as 70,000—are interdicted in Mexico and deported to Central America before they can cross the border.²⁴

There are Some New Gender and Nationality Trends

When the press first started reporting large numbers of unaccompanied children and youth from Central America and Mexico, many experts—especially those following patterns of labor migration²⁵ from the region—wondered to what extent this population is similar to or different from the labor migrants from Mexico and Central America that have always included large numbers of young men, adolescents and young adults. Available data indeed suggests that the majority of unaccompanied children in ORR care for the past few years have been above 14 years of age (86 percent in FY 2012 and 83 percent in FY 2011) and that the vast majority of them have been male (77 percent in FY 2012 and FY 2011, and 71 percent in FY 2010).²⁶

But there are some significant changes in the gender patterns worth noting (See Figure 1). The Pew Research Center points out that the number of unaccompanied females under the age of 18 apprehended at the border has increased significantly in recent years. In FY 2013, 7,339 females under the age of 18 were apprehended at the border, compared to 13,008 caught between October 1, 2013 and May 31, 2014. Four-in-ten of all unaccompanied children and youth apprehended in 2014 from Honduras (40%) and El Salvador (39%) are female, higher than the share among Guatemalans (24%). The vast majority of the unaccompanied females are teenagers between 13 and 17 years of age.²⁷ According to interviews with advocates at the border, many of these teens are young mothers. Chronologically—at least by Western standards—they are children, but in terms of self-identity they are mothers with adult responsibilities. This is very important to remember when assessing service needs and providing assistance to these ‘children.’ Advocates argue that some of these young mothers have long histories of sex abuse, are not pregnant by choice, and therefore need support and protection, including prenatal care and parenting support.²⁸ Indeed their service needs are arguably different from those of young children.

The American University report stresses that the number of children and youth crossing the southern border is just one part of the story. The other is the nationality of the migrants. Of the more than 68,000 unaccompanied children apprehended in FY 2014, 51,705 (or 75 percent) are from the “Northern Triangle” countries of Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The number of unaccompanied children from these countries has increased 15-fold over the past five years. Figure 2 shows the nationality of unaccompanied children apprehended in FY 2011 and FY 2014.

Figure 2: Nationality of UAC Border Apprehensions, FY 2011 and FY 2014

Nationality	FY 2011	FY 2014
Mexico	73%	23%
Honduras	6%	27%
Guatemala	10%	25%
El Salvador	9%	24%
Other	2%	1%

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children”²⁹

Some service providers believe that the label “unaccompanied children” is misleading. While the majority of the children and youth arriving from Central America cross the border unaccompanied—without a parent or a legal guardian—many are fairly quickly reunited with family (parents, uncles/aunts, adult siblings) or community members. Calling them unaccompanied post-release may not accurately describe their situation.³⁰ Indeed, ORR has indicated that they had released 53,518 unaccompanied children and youth to family and community members between October 1, 2013 and September 30, 2014 (FY2014) and an additional 3,310 in FY 2015 (October 1, 2014-January 22, 2015). Figure 3 shows the top 10 states with the highest number of young migrants released to family and community members.

Figure 3: Unaccompanied children released to families and communities

State	FY 2014 (Oct-Sept)	FY 2015 (Oct-Jan)
Texas	7,404	421
New York	5,955	322
California	5,831	437
Florida	5,445	292
Virginia	3,887	186
Maryland	3,884	202
New Jersey	2,680	186
North Carolina	2,064	96
Georgia	2,047	111
Louisiana	1,755	49

Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement³¹

The capacity of families and community sponsors to provide appropriate support to facilitate the integration of the released children and youth into local communities is discussed in the next section.

RECEPTION IN COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

The Welcome Mat is Out In Many Communities, But Will it Last?

While the media often focuses on dramatic stories portraying heightened anti-immigrant sentiments, research presents a more nuanced picture. According to a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in the summer of 2014, most Americans say the undocumented children and youth fleeing Central America are refugees and should not be deported immediately. Democrats (80 percent), Independents (69 percent), and Republicans (57 percent) favor offering support to unaccompanied children while a process to review their cases gets underway. The survey indicates that while attitudes towards immigrants are hardening, 69 percent of those polled said the unaccompanied migrants should be treated as refugees and allowed to remain in the U.S. if the authorities determine that it is unsafe for them to return home. Only 39 percent of those surveyed would allow the children to stay for good, while 59 percent do not want them here long-term because it “will encourage others to ignore our laws and increase illegal immigration.”³²

69% of surveyed Americans said unaccompanied migrants should be treated as refugees and allowed to remain in the U.S. if authorities determine it is unsafe to return home.

These anti-immigrant sentiments notwithstanding, members of many receiving communities are stepping up to welcome the young migrants. Mayors of several large cities--Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, St. Louis, and Atlanta, among others—signed letters welcoming the unaccompanied immigrant children and teens arriving across the southwest border.³³ Some cities also offer ID-cards to residents regardless of immigration status, a move that will ease life for arriving children and their parents. For undocumented residents, the inability to provide proof of identity impacts nearly every aspect of their lives from being able to borrow books from a library to being able to pick up children at school.³⁴

Community-based organizations and community members in many localities have volunteered their time and expertise to ensure appropriate reception of the Central American children and youth. In one example, volunteers in Dallas County, Texas gathered in July to assist the federal government and child advocates in finding appropriate housing for the incoming youngsters. The Grand Prairie Independent School District in Dallas County organized a community meeting to discuss the adaptation of abandoned schools to house the children that have no families in the area. County Judge Clay Jenkins said he has heard strong opposition for offering to bring the immigrant children to Dallas County, but he considered the criticism an opportunity to share faith. “We value these children just like we value our own children and they’re not a burden to us,” Jenkins said.³⁵ Many of these proactive efforts are part of a growing grass-roots movement led by *Welcoming America*, which promotes mutual respect and cooperation between immigrants and U.S.-born Americans in order to create a welcoming environment more conducive to integration into their adopted hometowns.

“We value these children just like we value our own children and they’re not a burden to us.”

The arrival of Central American youngsters requires financial support, both public and private, to ensure their successful integration locally. As of October 2014, the federal government had allocated approximately 11 million dollars—the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provided nine million and the Department of Justice (DOJ) two million—to fund legal services for the unaccompanied children and youth. [Note: This is separate from the funding for the border and for detention.] The ‘cromnibus’ (i.e. the combination of a long-term omnibus spending bill and a shorter-term continuing resolution) contained \$14 million for the Department of Education to offset the impact of the newly arrived Central Americans on the educational systems. It is unclear how the money would filter down to localities. States have also provided additional resources. California allocated three million dollars for non-profit organizations working with the newly arriving Central American children and youth. “Helping these young people navigate our legal system is the decent thing to do and it’s consistent with the progressive spirit of California,” said Governor Brown.³⁶ New York State offers generous health benefits to children regardless of status and is considering some targeted education support. Several cities, such as Los Angeles and New York City, have also stepped up their support. The New York City Council, the Robin Hood Foundation, and New York Community Trust announced the *Unaccompanied Minor Children Initiative* in 2014, a \$1.9 million public-private partnership that will provide key funding to legal organizations to support a coordinated response to the need for high quality, free legal representation and access to social, mental health, and medical services for more than a thousand unaccompanied minor children appearing on the Juvenile and Surge Dockets at the New York Immigration Court.³⁷

The philanthropic sector has also responded. Some foundations, especially in states and cities with high numbers of new arrivals, like California, Texas, and New York, are funding a range of programs and studies.³⁸ In order to facilitate greater philanthropic response, the affinity group Grantsmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees has identified opportunities that a range of foundations—from those funding immigration matters to those addressing health and human services or supporting children, youth, and families—might consider in shaping rapid response and longer-term funding strategies.³⁹

However, these signs of welcome need to be approached with cautious optimism. There is a need to identify ways to sustain high levels of hospitality when the novelty wears off and the mundane sets in. It is not enough to organize vigils in front of the White House or at the border as many of those concerned with the well-being of the Central American children and youth have been doing. Integration is not a one-way street. It is not even a two-way street, but a highway with many intersections and smaller roads.

There is a need to identify ways to sustain high levels of hospitality when the novelty wears off.

There is a need for the host communities to adjust to the growing diversity of the American society. There is also a need to facilitate integration between and among different groups of immigrants, youths and adults alike. The efforts of *Welcoming America* and similar initiatives need to go beyond bridging the divides between U.S.-born residents and newcomers. Ethnic communities are too often romanticized as the networks that will embrace newcomers by virtue of sharing the same language or having similar experiences. The diversity of immigrant communities—even those that do have much in common—is frequently forgotten. Time and again, friction, animosities, and discrimination can arise within immigrant groups, especially when the groups include minorities. Teachers and school administrators have reported incidents of Latino students discriminating against Mayan students from Guatemala and showing disdain for Afro-Latinos from the Dominican Republic.⁴⁰ Efforts need to be mounted to bring about understanding and mutual respect among and between different immigrant groups. What is needed is a realistic assessment of the youngsters' needs and an appropriate response by the local community, both the host and the immigrant communities that have come before the recent arrivals.

What Happens After the Honeymoon is Over?

Initially, families are thrilled to reunite with their children. However, when reality sets in the honeymoon period often ends and the dynamics of family reunification become quite complicated. The outcomes are often dependent on the age of the children who are joining their parents. A recent study, *Dreams Deferred*, by the Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM) on undocumented Latino adolescents in the Washington DC metropolitan area found that becoming a family after years of separation is not easy.⁴¹ In many instances the children and teens that reunited with their parents found that the families included US-born children and stepparents. This new dynamic complicates family relationships. Stepparents in particular are not always eager to support the newly arrived teens financially. The expectations vis-à-vis younger children are obviously different. They are not pressured to repay parents, at least not when they are quite young. The adolescents, however, are expected to pay back the smuggling fees the parents incurred to bring them to the United States. These are not insignificant amounts. United States officials estimate the majority (75-80%) of unaccompanied children and youth (or rather their parents) hire smugglers.⁴² According to the American University report, Central Americans routinely pay between \$4,000 and \$10,000 to be brought to the United States.⁴³

Many of the young people interviewed by ISIM felt abandoned by their families. Cesar remarked: “I don’t know why, but my mom abandoned me twice: first when she came to the States and left me with my *abuela*, and later when I came here. She told me she paid for the *coyote* [smuggler] to take me across the border, but now I have to go to work to repay her. I wish I never came.”⁷⁴⁴ It is difficult to estimate how many adolescents are in Cesar’s situation, but interviews suggest that their numbers are not insignificant.

Parents can find parenting children whom they had not seen for a long time quite challenging. In the study *Dreams Deferred* referenced above, parents often thought of the adolescents as the babies they left behind. However, they had in front of them teenagers who rebelled against curfews, and resented being asked to baby-sit siblings they didn’t realize they had. The reality for parents did not conform to the romanticized imaginings of family reunions that spurred them to take on that extra job to put money aside to bring their son or daughter to the United States. Service providers are concerned about these intergenerational conflicts. Several social workers indicated that local gangs used these family issues to recruit newly arrived immigrant youth saying: “Your family does not want you. We can be your *familia*.”⁷⁴⁵

Research has uncovered another troubling family dynamic. Initially, mothers welcomed their teen daughters with open arms and showered them with gifts—pretty clothing and make-up—but when the girls became a financial burden on the family, they sought to marry their daughters off quickly so they could become someone else’s responsibility. One social worker said: “They parade these girls in front of the community whenever they get a chance to attract the attention of the men in the neighborhood. They pawn them onto the first man that expresses interest and the men are interested, but not in marriage. The girl gets pregnant and becomes a single teen mom! This obviously does not solve any problems, just creates more.”⁷⁴⁶ Service providers in Langley Park, Maryland, Alexandria, Virginia, and in Washington, DC, for example, have established programs aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and supporting teen parents who want to remain in school. However, more is needed: programs need to focus on the whole family, not just the teens.

Programs need to focus on the whole family, not just the teens.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Burdens or Future Assets?

Whenever large numbers of immigrants or refugees, children or adults, arrive in any particular locality, the discussion immediately pivots to the burdens these newcomers may place on different systems, especially on schools and healthcare facilities. Will the children and youth become community assets? How long will it take for these young people to contribute to the local community? What needs to happen to facilitate their integration and meaningful participation in the wider community at the local level? What challenges will these youngsters face and how can they be overcome? Let’s examine some of these integration issues in a more systematic way, beginning with schools and education to determine whether the alleged burdens are real or exaggerated.

Are Newly Arriving Immigrant Children Stressing the Public School System?

The U.S. Supreme Court in its seminal decision in 1982, *Plyler v. Doe*, held that children in the United States, irrespective of their immigration status, have a constitutional right to free public elementary and secondary education.

The Court recognized the importance of access to education by noting “it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education” and acknowledged that education is a child’s only path to becoming a “self-reliant and self-sufficient participant in society.”⁴⁷ The Supreme Court’s decision applies to the newly arrived Central American children and youth as well. They not only have the right to public education, but an obligation to attend school if they are of school age.

Although required by law to attend school, in some jurisdictions the newly arrived immigrant students have faced challenges enrolling in public schools. Approximately 2,500 children were released in 2014 to families residing on Long Island in New York. Suffolk and Nassau Counties rank third and fifth, respectively, in the United States--after counties in Houston and Los Angeles--in the number of unaccompanied children they have absorbed. Nevertheless, there were attempts to bar some of these children from enrolling in Long Island public schools because their families could not gather the requisite documents proving that they were residents of the district or had guardianship of the children. These obstacles contravened legal guidance on enrollment procedures issued by the New York State Education Department. Concern over similar deterrents across the country led Attorney General Eric Holder and Education Secretary Arne Duncan to chide districts for “raising barriers for undocumented children,” in violation of the 1982 Supreme Court decision that guarantees their right to an education. Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents, Merryl Tisch, took a strong stand, noting that, “New York has long been a beacon for immigrants fleeing violence and poverty and in search of a better life. For centuries our public schools have been the equalizer that have helped assimilate new arrivals and prepare them to achieve the American Dream.”⁴⁸

Fortunately, the situation improved once light was shed on the problem. A growing number of municipal authorities and local advocates are educating schools on the undocumented children’s right to enroll in school and working with parents and community members to guide them through the enrollment process. In New York City, for example, the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs and the Department of Education have stationed representatives at the federal immigration court to directly address the education needs of unaccompanied children and youth in deportation proceedings. New York City Schools Chancellor, Carmen Fariña, said: “We are united across City agencies to support the unique needs of these students so they can thrive both in the classroom and beyond.”⁴⁹ There is a need to ensure that similar initiatives are promoted in all localities where undocumented children reside.

Placing newly arrived youth in American schools needs to be done with care and consider factors other than age.

Beyond enrollment, some fear that the newly arriving Central American children are draining the resources of the U.S. public education system. Undeniably, non-native English speaking students have been the fastest growing population in many public school districts, but that growth is not a recent phenomenon. It dates back to the 1990s when the foreign-born population in the United States grew by 11 million people, or 58 percent.⁵⁰ These high levels of immigration resulted in increased numbers of school-age children, both immigrant children and children of immigrants. In 2000, there

were 11 million limited English proficient (LEP) children enrolled in pre-K through 12th grade out of 58 million school children. By the 2010 Census, the foreign-born constituted 13 percent of the total U.S. population, but the foreign-born under the age of 18 accounted for less than one percent of the total U.S. population.⁵¹

Given the growth of the foreign-born population, the addition of Central American students, while significant in some locations, was manageable, but not without impact on public school systems. The Los Angeles Uni-

fied School District experienced a 24 percent increase in Salvadorans and a 21 percent increase in Guatemalans in the 2013/14 school year. The Houston Independent School District reported a 49 percent increase over the past two years in recently arrived children from Central America. Last year, the district enrolled 910 new students from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and it expects hundreds more this year.⁵² Montgomery County in Maryland reported 19,000 limited English proficient students enrolled in school in the 2013/2014 school years. The school authorities indicated that newly arriving Central American children added 800 students. The Fairfax school system in Virginia has enrolled 6,000 foreign-born students since 2011. Approximately 1,100 unaccompanied children and youth have been placed in Fairfax County, but there are no official statistics on how many of them have enrolled in school. Officials from both jurisdictions emphasized that dealing with students with no or limited English is not new to them and they are prepared to deal with this issue pedagogically as they have experienced English as Second Language (ESL) teachers and subject matter teachers familiar with foreign-born students and their educational needs.

Culturally and linguistically sensitive pedagogical approaches, however, while extremely important, are not the only issues schools serving newly arrived immigrant children are facing. School administrators interviewed for this report indicated that for some underfunded public schools, the increased number of students wanting to enroll in school poses a challenge. With all hands on deck, schools are barely able to register new students, but without extra resources—financial and human—they can do little in terms of ensuring appropriate placement of school age children arriving from Central America.

“One of my high schools placed two teenagers from Central America,” said Patty Reed, who represents the Providence District on the Fairfax County School Board. “They spoke no English and they had been to no school in over eight years.”⁵³ Placing newly arrived Central American youth in an American school setting needs to be done with care and must consider factors other than age. The assessment should, at minimum, take into consideration the students’ levels of literacy and numeracy in their native language, the number of years they spent in school, and the length of time since they participated in a formal educational program. Without this information newly arrived immigrant students might not receive the necessary supports to address their academic needs. Inappropriate placement—in classrooms with no peers or classrooms without sufficient challenge or support—may limit immigrant students’ educational achievements in a U.S. school or worse, increase drop-out rates or discourage them from attending school in the first place.

Interviews with staff of the *Internationals Network for Public Schools*, a network of schools catering exclusively to recently arrived foreign-born students, stressed the importance of doing things right from the beginning and tailoring the educational approach to the newly arrived immigrant students’ prior experience with formal schooling, English language ability, and social and emotional needs. Several teachers interviewed for this report have emphasized the importance of a holistic assessment and placement in a learning environment commensurate with the students’ educational and social needs. Some public schools districts—e.g. the Oakland Unified School District and San Francisco Unified School District--have indeed recognized the necessity to approach the newly arrived students holistically and instituted a case management model to provide for their educational and psychosocial needs.

Research shows that English Language Learners (ELLs) who “arrived” at school when they were ages 12-15 had the “greatest difficulty and were projected to require as many as six to eight years to reach grade-level norms in academic achievement when taught entirely in the second language.”⁵⁴ These kinds of findings lead to immigrant students being placed in ESL classes instead of mainstream classrooms. As a result, these students may spend years in a “linguistic ghetto” with little access to classes that prepare them for graduation. This may also limit their interaction with a more linguistically, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse

body of students.⁵⁵ To counter this silo approach, the *Internationals Network* promotes heterogeneous and collaborative groupings of students with respect to English proficiency level, academic background, native language, and literacy levels. Grouping students heterogeneously benefits all students by enabling them to teach one another as well as learn from each other. If students are not organized into collaborative groupings and not working on projects that require joint effort, there is little opportunity for them to benefit from the diversity their classmates bring, argue the program staff.

Undoubtedly, this kind of deliberate, tailored approach requires highly qualified educators and financial resources, especially in schools with sizable numbers of newly arrived students from Central America, such as schools on Long Island and in South Bronx where unaccompanied children can constitute up to 15 percent of the student body. Communities and school districts need to take the long view and assess the long-term benefits of investing in the newly arrived children and adolescents.

Enhancing English Language Proficiency of Newly Arrived Students

Researchers studying immigrant children and children of immigrants assert that “(...) the future of the West in economic, cultural, and social terms—this is not too bold a formulation—will depend on how well-immigrant origin youth have been prepared to replace aging natives.”⁵⁶ These findings suggest that investment in immigrant youth is imperative for their success, starting with investments in English language learning.

Knowledge of the English language is a critical measure of and prerequisite for successful integration. Fluency in English correlates with upward mobility and attainment of economic, social, and cultural capital. Immigrants who are not able to communicate in English cannot represent themselves or benefit from a dialogue without the help of an interpreter. Communication barriers, in turn, often lead to tensions between newcomers and established residents. Participation in U.S. institutions and meaningful interaction with the mainstream community also requires language skills.

Schools will help the unaccompanied children gain fluency in spoken English. However, proficiency in reading and writing in English will very much depend on the quality of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and the quality of the overall academic program, as well as on the literacy levels of their family and community members. In a recent study on undocumented children and children of undocumented parents,⁵⁷ it became apparent that many Latino children had not experienced the pleasures of going to the library for story hour or curling up with a book on a rainy afternoon. “She goes to church right across the street from a public library, but she has never visited [the library],” said a volunteer tutor about her tutee. Lack of reading skills is a big problem among undocumented children. Another tutor praised the sixth grader he was working with: “He is a smart kid, good at math, except word problems. He is in sixth grade but he reads at a second grade level. He is embarrassed by his poor reading skills, so he refuses to read, which is making it harder for him to improve.” Programs focusing on teaching the incoming children English must integrate classroom instruction with activities aimed at improving family and community literacy and building on the assets of family members.

Older teens may have to, or decide to, enter the labor force immediately in order to repay the money their parents paid smugglers. Adolescent males are pressured especially hard to find a job as soon as possible to repay the debt and to contribute to the family’s income. Both older boys and girls may be encouraged to choose work over school. Forgoing formal education in favor of wage employment will most certainly slow down their linguistic integration and upward mobility. While it is possible to find work without English-language ability, language skills affect immigrants’ capacity to earn sufficient wages to raise household income above poverty

level. English language training is available in many local communities. A wide variety of ESL training programs can be found in virtually every community college and many public libraries also offer English language and family literacy programs for immigrants. Those charged with facilitating integration of the newly arrived Central American children and youth do not have to reinvent the wheel. Good referral mechanisms can link the newcomers to appropriate programs, be it public school or public library-based ones, family literacy activities offered by ethnic community centers, or alternative high schools.

The Role of Teachers and School Administrators

Education officials around the country mostly have struck a welcoming tone. “We have both a legal and moral obligation to teach these kids,” said Alberto Carvalho, superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools. There are numerous examples of teachers and school administrators extending a warm welcome to the newly arrived Central American children. The *Internationals Network for Public Schools*, mentioned above, works closely with local education departments and community based organizations to support immigrant students’ integration into the American schools. The program currently supports 19 International High Schools and Small Learning Communities in New York City, California’s Bay Area, Alexandria, Virginia, and Washington, DC. It is also in partnership with CASA de Maryland and Prince George’s County Public Schools to open two schools there in 2015.

Access to K-12 education does not mean that Latino children have access to the resources needed to succeed in school.

Efforts to improve reception and community engagement are laudable and should be supported. However, access to a free public education and persistence in school among undocumented Latino children are far from straightforward. Even though foreign-born children have a constitutional right to free public education from kindergarten through high school graduation, access to K-12 education does not mean that Latino children have access to the resources and support needed to succeed and persevere in school.

Nationally, 40 percent of unauthorized young adults, ages 18 to 24, have not completed high school. Unauthorized children who arrive in the United States before the age of 14 fare slightly better—72 percent finish high school.⁵⁸ On average, in the DC-Arlington-Alexandria Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) for example, 25 percent of all high school students, native and foreign-born, do not graduate. Graduation rates differ dramatically among schools: at Bell Multicultural High School, 90 percent of Latino students graduate, while at Cardozo Senior High School only 53 percent finish high school.

Community leaders attribute the high graduation rates at Bell Multicultural to a unique partnership the school has with the Multicultural Career Intern Program (MCIP), a non-profit organization housed within the walls of the Columbia Heights Educational Campus, which provides a wide range of services such as teen pregnancy prevention and support, parenting classes, youth development, summer enrichment programs, and pre-college counseling. Compounding the low high school graduation rates, only 5 to 10 percent of undocumented students who graduate with a high school diploma nationwide attend some form of higher education.⁵⁹ Most cannot afford to pursue higher education, even in states that provide undocumented students with in-state tuition or access to financial aid, and many struggle with hopelessness given limited opportunity to work legally.

Yet, the sobering statistics above do not consider teen migrants that never “drop-in.” Indeed, the literature on immigrant children and youth is chock-full of studies on school dropouts as well as students who do well in school, often against all odds, but fewer scholars⁶⁰ focus on immigrants who arrive in this country as adoles-

cents and immediately take up waged employment. The teenagers that never “drop-in” constitute a hidden population. They are difficult to identify outside specialized programs catering to this particular group of young people who must put work ahead of formal schooling. Isabel Martínez suggests: “these youth experience life stages of childhood and adolescence that differ from mainstream characterizations and thus adopt older age-graded identities that do not coincide with full-time schooling in the United States.”⁶¹ Indeed, some migrant youth pointed to cultural definitions of childhood and adulthood and suggested that they might not even be in school at their age.

The teenagers that never “drop-in” are hidden.

What are the factors that contribute to dropping out of school or never dropping-in? In addition to legal vulnerability, many other issues plague children and youth in unauthorized households. Parental engagement with their children’s school—a positive predictor of academic achievement, higher self-esteem, and higher rates of high school completion and college enrollment—is often a challenge for immigrant families. While many of the interviewed immigrant parents had high educational aspirations for their children—some expressed that the very reason they came to the United States was so their children had better educational and employment opportunities—few had the resources to realize these goals due to a variety of factors including work schedules and cultural norms. Many had very limited education themselves and as a result were only semi-literate in Spanish and illiterate in English. They were unable to help children with homework.

Employment pressures—many parents worked more than one job or worked graveyard shifts—also contributed to parents’ inability to actively engage with their children’s education, a trend that worsened as children aged. Participant observation at parenting programs organized by the Washington, DC Mayor’s Office of Latino Affairs (OLA) at several primary schools in Columbia Heights suggests that Latino parents of small children are eager for their children to succeed in school and meet developmental and educational milestones. However, with few exceptions, parents of high school students do not demonstrate interest in their children’s achievements or problems at school in traditional ways. Parents with limited education aspire for better education for their children but they may deem completion of primary or middle school sufficient. Little is known about attitudes towards education expressed by other caregivers. Approximately 40 percent of the newly arrived young migrants have been released to relatives and family friends;⁶² many might not be in a position to support their educational aspirations. This reality needs to be taken into account when local communities talk about educating newly arrived Central American youths.

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Given the fact that most of the recently apprehended youth are over 14 years of age and that the majority of them are male, many of the older teens will not attend traditional public schools. They will need to be referred to schools that allow students to combine work with GED and ESL training or provide paid on-the-job vocational and ESL training. Some communities have already established such programs.

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The Next Step Public Charter School in the Columbia Heights neighborhood in the District of Columbia offers bilingual GED and ESL training with flexible class schedules that allow students to work and go to school. Horizonte Instruction and Training Center in Salt Lake City is an example of an alternative school that provides intensive, survival and pre-employment English training and is very responsive to the special needs of young parents and pregnant teens. Its open-entry/open-exit policy corresponds well with the young immigrants’ changing employment and educational needs.

Local communities need to be flexible in thinking about the educational needs of the new arrivals. There is a need to identify a wide range of educational opportunities, including traditional public schools with experience serving foreign-born students and less orthodox educational programs that will meet the needs of older teens who need to combine work with school. More emphasis is needed on vocational training, including on-the-job training programs, if the arriving Central American youths are to have a chance at upward mobility. The community college system has been the central institution for training young adults who will not attend a traditional four-year university. But dropout rates at community colleges are high and those who do remain are often stuck in remedial classes that will never allow them to reap the educational rewards.⁶³ Social service organizations and non-profits often step in to fill the need for training in viable job skills. These programs should be identified and assessed regarding suitability for the incoming young migrants.

Additional support is also needed for those immigrant students who do have educational aspirations. Such support must come both from within the family and community and from the schools and host communities. *Edu Futuro*, a nonprofit founded in 1998 by a group of parents from Bolivia who wanted to provide a support network for the educational needs of Latino students and families in northern Virginia is but one example of partnerships between families and community leaders. One of *Edu Futuro*'s most successful programs is the Emerging Leaders program, which pairs high school students with mentors in a wide range of professions to provide guidance and support. The students also participate in public speaking workshops, volunteer to clean up the grounds at local schools and go on college visits. Although started by Bolivian parents, the organization works with Mexican, Cuban, and Salvadoran students.

Stepping Into the Murky and Dangerous Waters of Illegal Employment

As already discussed, the need to repay smuggling fees and to contribute to the family's finances often means that young people are not in school, but rather in the labor market where the competition for jobs is stiff and the risk of being found and deported for working illegally is high. For many young people from immigrant families, poverty and financial hardship are facts of life.⁶⁴ The labor contribution of children and youth is often crucial for the family's survival in the United States, just as in their country of origin.⁶⁵

Teen migrants who do not have the support of their families have no other option but to seek employment.

Yet unauthorized youth face many barriers entering the labor market due to their inability to work legally. Most feel the frustration of being forced into low-wage jobs or having to work informally alongside their parents.⁶⁶ Some find waged employment where they are paid in cash, while others obtain forged documents in order to work, a process they often do not fully understand. Those who do work for cash may do so for seemingly benevolent employers, but some may also face exploitation. Working with false documentation clearly involves undertaking serious legal risks. Suárez-Orozco

and colleagues describe this process as crossing a threshold from a passive and innocent childhood into an adulthood that requires sudden criminality: "Once they dip their toes into the underground waters of false driver's licenses and Social Security numbers, they are at risk of getting caught in the undertow of a vast and unforgiving ocean of complex legal currents."⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the teen migrants who do not have the support of their families have no other option but to seek employment. Many unauthorized youth, unable to find steady work due to their immigration status, find small side jobs that are insufficient to generate the income they need. One interviewee, Alejandro, obtained his GED but reported that he was unable to find steady employment because everywhere he looked required

a Social Security number. He made a small amount of money babysitting and doing other odd jobs but was frustrated by his inability to contribute to his family's income. Rafael also reported that it was difficult to find an employer without a Social Security number. Employment difficulties had already forced his family to move to Texas where his uncle had jobs lined up for most of them. These stories are more the rule than the exception for unauthorized youth.⁶⁸

Some community and advocacy organizations have found creative ways to compensate undocumented youth for on-the-job training. One organization in Washington DC secured a grant from the DC Council to place immigrant youth as counselors at a summer camp for at-risk youth. These youngsters worked alongside other youth counselors who were employed through the DC Summer Youth Employment program, but were given educational stipends as opposed to wages. The youngsters and their families were very appreciative of the opportunity to participate in this creative program.⁶⁹

Several service providers, community advocates, and local employers have suggested that the economic crisis has adversely affected immigrant youth as they compete for jobs with adult immigrants. One interviewee who arrived in the U.S. in 2007 reported seeing the effects of the economic crisis in drastically reduced employment opportunities soon after he arrived. Rather than finding the American dream, he has found life here much more challenging. A couple of employers in retail stores indicated that they prefer U.S.-born college students to fill seasonal positions during the winter holiday season. Their preference for college students may stem from preconceived notions about Latino youth.

These stories remind us that the need for legal representation and immigration relief cannot be overstated. Discussions with immigrant youth who fought for the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act and applied for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) underscore the importance of securing legal status. Youth with legal status are more likely to stay in school, find employment, and access healthcare. Failure to obtain status adversely affects immigrant children's lives. Children without legal status are not able to stand up for their rights, are at risk for discrimination and exploitation, and are more likely to get involved in gangs and to abuse alcohol and drugs. This situation is not good for them nor for the communities in which they reside.

BEYOND EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Meeting Psychosocial Needs

According to the previously mentioned UNHCR study of the recent wave of Central American children seeking refuge in the United States,⁷⁰ a large proportion cite violence as the pivotal factor that led to outmigration. Sixty-six percent of Salvadorans named violence by organized armed criminal actors as a primary motivation to leave. Similarly, 44 percent of Hondurans were either threatened with or were victims of violence by organized criminal networks. Thirty-two percent of Mexican and 20 percent of Guatemalan young migrants spoke of violence as the reason for leaving. In 2012, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador were in the top-five of the most murderous countries in the world. Honduras led the list with an astounding rate of 90.4 homicides per 100,000; El Salvador was fourth and Guatemala fifth.⁷¹ It is this climate of generalized violence that is driving the recent youth and family migration from the Northern Triangle.

However, organized crime and violence in the community are not the only abuse these youngsters face. Salvadoran (21 percent), Guatemalan (20 percent), Honduran (24 percent), and Mexican (17 percent) youth also

spoke about violence in the home. There have been reports that girls were raped en route to the U.S. and that many were abused by family members back home, but these assertions need to be verified. The UNHCR study does not break out the abuse and violence statistics by gender.

Integration efforts need to address the effects of violence.

If violence is one of the major push factors propelling Central American youth to leave their homelands, integration efforts need to consider the effects of witnessing violence, being a victim of violence, and perpetrating violence on the well-being of the children and youth and devise means to address those effects.

Many local programs are eager to dispatch mental health professionals to assist with the psychological scars resulting from abuse by gangs, smugglers, and family members. Service providers at Mary's Center in Washington, DC, for example, believe that the large number of newly arrived Central American children in local schools is straining the system's capacity for counseling and mental health therapy.⁷²

Pediatrician Alan Shapiro, co-founder of Terra Firma, an innovative medical-legal partnership at the South Bronx Health Center in New York City designed to meet the complex medical, psychosocial, and legal needs of unaccompanied children and youth, remarks: "Their life experience is marked by multiple traumas in their home countries, on their journey north and here in the U.S. As a society, it is our responsibility to heal them, not to compound the trauma."⁷³ Terra Firma started a holistic support program for the newly arrived unaccompanied children from Central America, which includes group therapy to deal with the effects of violence, and psychosocial and sports activities to limit social isolation and provide recreational opportunities. The program served about 50 unaccompanied children in 2014. With newly secured funding, it plans to serve 200 in 2015. The principles that underlie Terra Firma's approach are spreading. In Los Angeles, which received 2,474 unaccompanied children from January through September of 2014, St. John's Well Child and Family Center psychologists are asked to provide psychological assessments for use in immigration hearings and the clinic is working with the children to prepare them to testify in court.⁷⁴

There is no doubt that some of these young people might benefit from individual and group counseling. However, other approaches may be effective to supplement traditional mental health counseling. There is a growing body of literature critiquing the use of Western mental health approaches to alleviate the suffering of refugees, including children affected by armed conflict and violence.⁷⁵ Recreational activities, for example, can be beneficial. In another study conducted with Latino youth in Washington, DC, boys mentioned that they deal with stress, domestic and gang violence by playing soccer. Sadly, girls in the same study indicated that they did not have similar outlets: joining a gym was not only financially prohibitive but also culturally alien.⁷⁶

There is a need to assess the suitability and effectiveness of programs such as *Soccer Without Borders* or *Fugees Family* for the newly arrived Central American youth, both boys and girls. *Soccer without Borders*, an academic and athletic program established in 2006, has been a great resource for immigrant and refugee boys and girls who have suffered trauma in six cities in the United States: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Greely, New York City, and Oakland. The program helps youth bond across cultural divides and blossom as leaders in and out of the classroom. In 2014, some 40 unaccompanied minor students from Honduras and El Salvador joined the soccer team in Oakland. *Fugees Family* is an organization in Clarkston, Georgia, cofounded by Luma Mufleh and Tracy Edigar, devoted to working with child survivors of war. The *Fugees* program works with 86 refugee boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 18 who attend twice-weekly soccer practices, play games on weekends, and participate in tournaments. *Fugees Family* has an after-school tutoring program, a 57-student middle school called Fugees Academy, and ongoing community events like car washes and group meals.

The Fugees hail from over 24 war-torn countries around the world, such as Burma, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Congo, and Eritrea.⁷⁷ These recreational activities, combined with academic tutoring and mentoring, go a long way towards alleviating the traumatic experiences of the immigrant and refugee children and youth and facilitating integration among and between different youth groups in local communities.

There are also other culturally appropriate programs that might be beneficial for the newly arrived Central American youth. Developed in 1996, the Joven Noble rites of passage and character development program, is a youth development, support, and leadership enhancement program for ages 10–24. The program incorporates an approach and curriculum that is based on the philosophy that youth need other men and women, their family, and community to care for, assist, heal, guide, and successfully prepare them for true manhood and womanhood.⁷⁸ Many Latin American communities have long histories of providing support to immigrant youth and there is no need to re-invent the wheel.⁷⁹

Many advocates and service providers focus on ‘exit trauma’—i.e. the violence these young people experienced in the country of origin and *en route* to the United States. They may not focus sufficiently on preventing exposure of these same children to gang and domestic violence once they settle in local communities. If the prevalence rates of domestic violence in the home country hover around 20–25 percent, will the same be true of the families and communities these children join in the United States? According to the Latin@ Network, a national institute on domestic violence in Latino communities, 20–25 percent of Latinas experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime.⁸⁰ Data obtained from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect show that 22 percent of children in Latino immigrant families experience physical abuse and 24 percent are sexually abused. Risk factors include alcohol and drug abuse in the family, domestic violence, use of excessive discipline, lack of social support, high family stress, and difficulty meeting basic needs.⁸¹ These risks should be mitigated and protective factors—such as good parenting skills, conflict resolution skills, family and community support—promoted to ensure the violence-free integration of the newcomer youth.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

The integration of immigrants—children and adults, authorized and undocumented—takes place at the community level where local relationships determine the immigrant experience. Experiences at the local level shape not only the host society’s attitudes towards newly arrived migrant children and youth and the young migrants’ attitudes towards their new neighbors, but also the cohesiveness of the neighborhoods, towns, and cities they adopt as their new homes.

The dynamics of integration, of course, cannot be reduced to a negotiation between two groups. A categorization of two camps such as “established residents” and “newcomers” classifies individuals according only to when they arrived and does not account for infinite social divisions along ethnic, racial and religious lines. The American host society itself is composed of different waves of newcomers, some more empathetic than others to the newest arrivals. While the newly arrived children and youth come from the same region and speak a common language, they too have diverse experiences and backgrounds. They are also arriving in communities that host other waves of immigrant youth, hailing from different continents and having different immigration statuses.

Some integration challenges can be remedied with more effective policies at the local and national levels, but many derive from cultural rifts that require changes in the perceptions that established residents, including earlier immigrants and newcomers, have of each other. Bridging the gaps that separate these different groups

of immigrant youth would strengthen communities, mitigate divisive social tensions, and, of course, position the young immigrants to participate more effectively in the wider society.

The news media significantly influence the popular perception of immigrants, children and adults alike, reinforcing stereotypes in some cases while empathizing with the immigrants' experiences in others. As already mentioned, the arrival of the Central American children and youth has attracted substantial news coverage, which focuses greater attention and scrutiny on their presence. Regrettably, coverage of immigrant issues frequently concentrates on moments of conflict between natives and newcomers. It is imperative that local media promote positive images of the newly arrived youth. Human-interest stories focusing on their resiliency and potential contributions to the local community will go a long way towards eliciting acceptance and assistance.

Successful integration programs generally help established residents acknowledge that immigrants—no matter how young or old—bring something of value to their community. But successful integration also depends on the empowerment of immigrant youth. One of the largest obstacles to this goal is that mediating institutions such as schools, hospitals, and local governments often overlook the newcomer voice, especially if it is a voice of a child or youth. Links of incorporation within newcomer groups and with the broader society will remedy this condition over time, but young immigrants can improve their own prospects in integration by asserting themselves with one voice and by establishing partnerships with other immigrant and refugee youth.

RESOURCES

The following organizations have created resource pages on unaccompanied minors that aggregate programs and research:

“Family & Child Welfare Affiliates” *National Council of La Raza*
<http://www.nclr.org/index.php/nclr_affiliates/browse/family_child_welfare/>.

“Local Leaders Welcoming Immigrant Children” *Welcoming America*
<<http://www.welcomingamerica.org/news/press/media-coverage-supporting-unaccompanied-children/>>.

“Resources on Unaccompanied Children” *Welcoming America*
<<http://www.welcomingamerica.org/resources/resources-on-unaccompanied-children/>>.

“Unaccompanied Children Migrating to the United States: Resources for Philanthropy” *Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees*
<https://www.gcir.org/programs/2014/07/unaccompanied_children/materials#OtherResourcePages>.

ENDNOTES

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