



# HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

## UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN—FACT SHEET

An unaccompanied child is an immigrant child under 18 years of age who has traveled to the United States without a parent or guardian. Many unaccompanied children make the journey to the United States to escape violence, including domestic violence, exploitation or persecution in their home countries.

### KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE

Without the supervision of a responsible adult, unaccompanied children are highly vulnerable to being misled or exploited. Many unaccompanied children are also dealing with the experience of significant trauma - often their reason for fleeing - including witnessing or being a victim of violence perpetrated by gangs, drug cartels, the government, or their own family members. Because of this vulnerability to abuse and human trafficking - including labor and sexual exploitation - and the need for child-friendly services, the separate system of shelter care was established for unaccompanied children in the United States, rather than placing youth in adult detention facilities.

### NAVIGATING THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Unaccompanied children face many challenges, including navigating the immigration system alone. They do not have an automatic right to court-appointed counsel and unless they can afford attorneys or secure pro bono counsel, they appear in court without legal representation - regardless of their age.

### ABOUT HEARTLAND ALLIANCE



We believe in Equity and Opportunity for ALL.

Building on decades of experience, Heartland Alliance provides safe shelter and care for unaccompanied children who are seeking refuge from violence and persecution in their home countries - including children who have been recently separated from their families at the border.

We operate nine shelters in the Chicagoland area, and our first priority is the safety and welfare of the children in our care. We provide a stable, nurturing environment. Our staff speak the languages of the children in their care. They focus on the children's well-being and help them to heal from trauma, and work to reunify the children with their families as soon as possible.

## SEEKING REFUGE

Children set out on the journey to the United States. Many travel by bus or on foot - some will cover thousands of miles before reaching the U.S. border.



Most unaccompanied children are immediately taken into custody by immigration officials upon entering the U.S.



Unaccompanied children must stay in shelter care until they are released to an approved sponsor, such as a relative or family friend. The average stay in shelter care is 41 days.



From this point, unaccompanied children await the resolution of their immigration cases - many times doing so without legal representation. Cases may result in deportation, asylum, or other forms of legal relief.



When they arrive at the U.S. border, many children have only the name or phone number of a relative to contact written on a belt or concealed in plastic bag to avoid damage by the elements.



Once they are apprehended by immigration officials, unaccompanied children are cared for through a network of state-licensed providers funded by the U.S. Department of Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement.



Home studies are sometimes conducted to ensure safety prior to releasing an unaccompanied child from shelter care to a sponsor. Follow-up services are provided for at-risk children after their release.



### KEY TERMS TO KNOW

**Shelter**- A state-licensed residential facility that provides housing, food, classroom education, mental and medical health services, case management, and recreational activities to unaccompanied children.

**Sponsor** - Family member or guardian that assumes responsibility to care for an unaccompanied child.

**Family Reunification** - Efforts to reunite children with parents, relatives, or other approved sponsors residing in the United States, or facilitating the return of a child to their home country if there are no safety concerns.

### BY THE NUMBERS

**40,810**

unaccompanied children entered the U.S. in 2017

**41**

days average stay in shelter or foster care

### WHO ARE UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN?

In 2017, 69% of unaccompanied children who entered the U.S. were 15-17 years old, with an additional 13% of children aged 13-14 years, and 17% aged 0-12 years. 68% of unaccompanied children were male, and 32% were female.

### WHAT COUNTRIES ARE THEY LEAVING?

95% of unaccompanied children entering the United States in 2017 came from three Central American countries known as the Northern Triangle - Honduras (23%), Guatemala (45%), and El Salvador (27%). The remaining unaccompanied children arrived from Mexico (<3%) and all other countries (3%).



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To make a donation that will support Heartland Alliance's work, visit [heartlandalliance.org/donate](http://heartlandalliance.org/donate).

*The information in this document is not legal advice. Individuals seeking information about their own legal rights and options should contact licensed immigration lawyers. For updates regarding immigration laws and policies, please visit Heartland Alliance's National Immigrant Justice Center at [immigrantjustice.org](http://immigrantjustice.org).*

Sources: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Office of Refugee Resettlement, & Heartland Alliance's National Immigrant Justice Center. All statistical data represents the Office of Refugee Resettlement's official numbers for FY2017 (October 1 – September 30).