



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.

BY THE NUMBERS

40,810 unaccompanied children entered the US in 2017

41 days average stay in shelter or foster care

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.

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%).

WHY ARE THEY COMING TO THE U.S.? Many unaccompanied children make the journey to the United States to escape violence, including domestic violence, exploitation or persecution in their home countries.



WHY NOW? *The countries comprising the Northern Triangle are experiencing very high levels of violence, including homicide and coercion by gangs and drug cartels. In 2015, El Salvador reached the top of the list of most violent countries in the world not at war. Fear of violence combined with poverty and a lack of hope drive many to leave their homes in search of safety and opportunity.*

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.

June 2018

A CHILD'S JOURNEY

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 34 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.



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.

VULNERABLE CHILDREN

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.



ABOUT HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

We believe that everyone in society benefits when people who experience disparities in safety, health, housing, education, economic opportunity, and justice are able to exit poverty, heal from trauma, and achieve stability; secure their rights; and shape policies that respond to their needs.



Building on decades of experience, Heartland Alliance's goal is to provide unaccompanied children with access to safety and justice. This includes a focus on culturally competent, trauma-informed care and legal services.

To make a donation that will support Heartland Alliance's work, visit heartlandalliance.org/donate.

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Heartland Alliance | 208 South LaSalle Street | Suite 1300
Chicago, IL 60604 | 312.660.1300 | communications@heartlandalliance.org
heartlandalliance.org