



America Can Welcome the Newly Arrived Central American Children

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Some 57,000 Central American migrant children who have been detained at the United States-Mexico border have captured the nation's attention this summer. Although the loudest debates center on how to shelter these children and then send most back to their original countries, there are also growing numbers of Americans who are trying to cast the country's response in humanitarian terms. In a recent poll, seven out of ten Americans said children should be treated as refugees and allowed to stay. Many local communities have been assisting the children, and a growing number of U.S. religious leaders are making the case that we should welcome them, rather than act as if we are repelling an invading force.

The current situation is not unprecedented. Unaccompanied immigrant children have been making the voyage to the United States for generations to reunite with family members or after losing their parents to war or famine. In many instances, the United States has used resources and marshaled compassion to integrate such young arrivals into our communities. When children began arriving at Ellis Island at the turn of the 20th century immigrant aid societies, churches, synagogues, and private citizens stepped in to provide care and guardianship. In the early 1960s over 14,000 Cuban children were brought to Miami and eventually placed in the care of relatives, friends, and concerned families willing to foster or adopt them. And among the Southeast Asian refugees who were settled across the United States were tens of thousands of unaccompanied children who had lost their parents to war or the treacherous journey to the U.S. These earlier waves of arriving children were ultimately absorbed into the fabric of American society and have made important contributions to their communities. If we make serious efforts to integrate the new arrivals from Central America, similar positive results can happen for all concerned.

To be sure, U.S. policymakers are currently debating much harsher ways of handling Central American young people. The U.S. Justice Department is pushing for immigration courts to prioritize cases involving unaccompanied minors, and members of Congress have outlined proposals to speed up their cases and clear the way for prompt removals. Such actions could dramatically undermine these children's rights to fair, individual hearings, especially if court dates are suddenly moved up and attorneys to help these children are not secured in time.

In addition to deciding how to respond to the thousands of recent youths and children arriving from Central America, American citizens and policymakers could see this latest influx as an important opportunity to start a broader conversation about immigrant children's rights and ways to support and welcome them in our communities.

Whatever policy decisions are made, many of these young people will live in U.S. communities for at least several months – and in many cases longer. Because of the current backlog in the immigration courts, on

average children wait nearly 600 days before an immigration hearing. While they wait for their hearings, these children are typically released to family members or sponsors. According to a recent report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 36 percent of all unaccompanied youth surveyed prior to 2014 had at least one parent already in the United States. When aunts, uncles, and cousins are considered, there are additional relatives who could also provide homes for these children, allowing up to 85 to 90 percent of them to be placed with a parent or close relative. Already by July 7, 2014 more than 30,000 unaccompanied immigrant youths had been released to sponsors living in every U.S. state.

As immigrant children live with sponsors for some time, communities can take active steps to welcome and help them. Above all else, the children require welcoming teachers, social workers, and administrators who can help them to adjust to their new schools and communities. Crucial steps include making sure that they are enrolled in school, given language-appropriate instruction, and connected to appropriate social services in the communities where they live.

Social fears can be quelled as children get appropriate care. In the classroom and the community, teachers and other professionals will be able to tell positive stories that separate immigrant young people from stigmatizing labels that may have preceded their arrival. Well-informed educational efforts can serve the academic and emotional needs of these children, addressing many of the traumas many experienced both in their native countries and on their journeys to the United States.

To make all of this happen, resources will be needed, of course, and governments and nonprofits will need to ensure they are available to communities that host immigrant children. In some cases, the welcome will be temporary, but in other cases, newcomers who win the right to stay will become part of U.S. communities for many years to come.

Integration of immigrants is never easy, and the challenges are bound to be even greater for children and young people who arrived unaccompanied by parents. But research has shown that, in the past, schools, churches, communities, and the nation as a whole can derive many benefits – including greater cohesion and social purpose – from taking a welcoming approach. Of course, established groups often find it challenging to absorb newcomers, and confusion, fears, and stereotypes can accompany the process. But the new arrival of Central American child immigrants is not a fundamentally different challenge from immigration challenges many American communities have successfully addressed over the decades. Success in supporting the newcomers and unleashing their contributions to American society is very possible, and it happens best and fastest when local leaders reach out and build cooperation between natives and newcomers.