



How to Help Unaccompanied Children from Central America—Ideas from the Washington, DC Area

Ernesto Castañeda, American University
Daniel Jenks, American University

Since 2015, nearly 250,000 unaccompanied minors have arrived in the United States and been placed across the country with sponsors, who may be their parents, other family members, or friends. Many of these young people—from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—are motivated to travel by increasing violence and economic and political instability in their home countries, as well as a desire for reunification with their parents.

Of these children, over 20,000 have moved to the Washington, D.C. region, where many face barriers to integration in their communities. Their difficulties include dealing with traumatic experiences, family separation, inconsistent or interrupted schooling, and language barriers in their new schools. As scholars and policymakers, we must rapidly respond to the needs of migrant children and find the best ways to support these young newcomers who now call our region home.

Our research with the Center on Latino and Latin American Studies at American University includes interviews with fifty-eight recently resettled youth, thirty-six sponsors, and seventeen social service providers and school staff in the District of Columbia, Fairfax County in Virginia, and Prince George's County and Montgomery County in Maryland. The stories from these youths, sponsors, and practitioners illuminate a cross-section of the experiences of resettled Central American minors—experiences that, we hope, can inform policy interventions at the county level that can help the unaccompanied minors thrive.

Violence, Family Separation, and Trauma

The traumas these young people have been through in their sending communities, during the journey north, and in Customs and Border Protection detention are hardly imaginable to those of us that have not experienced them. Although migrants from Central America are commonly believed to pose a violent threat to native-born Americans, we found that the youth we interviewed were often fleeing gang or state-sponsored violence. The United States was a place of freedom and safety for many of them. Carlos, age 13, mentioned he felt much safer and could perform better in school in the states. Gang activity in his country of birth made it hard for him to study, go to school or visit family around town, or take advantage of opportunities that many in America take for granted, like playing soccer with his friends. In DC, he was reunited with his father and could visualize both short- and long-term goals. In the short term, he wanted to join a soccer team; in the long term, he wanted to become a lawyer. These things had not been conceivable to him while living with the backdrop of gang violence, thousands of miles away from his father.

Parents often go north and leave behind very young children in order to pay for their schooling, housing, food, and clothes in their places of birth. This leaves many children to be raised by other relatives or friends. Young people in our study reported that after reuniting in the United States, getting used to the relationship with their parents or other sponsors was hard at first, but the situation sometimes improved. Samantha, age 15, described how she was very young when her mom left for the United States and had not seen her in years. Because of that, the first year in the states was challenging. She felt lonely and missed her grandmother and sister, who had felt more like mothers than anyone else while still living in Honduras. Other youth, including Melissa, age 14, David, age 13, and Sarah, age 18, also reported that one of the more challenging parts of coming to the states was leaving other relatives like their grandmothers.

Schools and Friendships

Immigrant minors are often enrolled in programming for students with interrupted formal education and in English classes for speakers of other languages. Our interviewees reported that being in school was hard at first, but their sense of belonging improved after some time, to the point that they were even excited to attend. Schools often have difficulty welcoming and accommodating these young adults due to language barriers, and the young migrants in our study reported that contending with English-language instruction hampered their performance and happiness in school. At the same time, by making friends and speaking in Spanish with other Latino students in the United States, they could feel more at home and part of their community. We conclude that opportunities to communicate with others in Spanish can be an essential determinant of school enjoyment.

Students also benefited from support services they could find through schools and in the companionship of their peers—a network comprising friends, bilingual counselors in schools, and social service organizations in the community that could also include their families. Melissa, age 14, reported that she felt welcome in her school and had a sound support system composed of free public school, language and integration support programs, and many students in situations like her own.

Addressing Trauma and Supporting Immigrant Communities through Our Institutions

Over time, schools can become welcoming and supportive institutions for minors and their families, but there are challenges. Schools need more language support, staff who speak Spanish, and more social workers. School systems should ensure that explicit training is provided to all school officials to work with Central American immigrants and those with a history of traumatic experiences.

Overall, the benefits of family reunification are worth the struggles. Our interviewees repeatedly reported that, while the experience could be incredibly challenging, they are now more comfortable in their day-to-day lives, like living in this country, and feel that they are working towards a better future. Family services for refugees, asylees, and immigrants can make considerable differences in the lives of immigrant families. For example, Arlington County could consider establishing its own family support programming or providing grants for community organizations to do so. This would give youths and their families more opportunities to process their pasts and consistently achieve health and happiness. Arlington County's unaccompanied youth population is relatively small, so a few targeted programs could have an enormous impact at a modest cost. This is likely to be the case for many counties around the country as the youth who entered the border recently get resettled with their family members.

Research and data for this brief are drawn from Ernesto Castañeda and Daniel Jenks' ongoing project with American University's [Immigration Lab](#).