



**ALL ALONE TO SAFELY HOME**

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All Alone to Safely Home: Unaccompanied Children, and  
“The Welcoming integration” through Faith.

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*Abstract: This paper will examine and reveal the global, national and faith perspectives of unaccompanied children migrating from Latin America to the United States. Reasons for migration and the United States system of care for unaccompanied minors will be explained. Successful ways faith-focused social workers and churches can help integrate migrant children and support the acculturation process for these children and families.*

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## Background

For over fifty years, the United States (US) has been a beacon of hope for refugees and migrants from all over the world, seeking shelter from persecution and a safe place to call home. Churches and faith-based communities were some of the first to offer open arms: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19 King James Version).

The process of welcoming strangers in need of protection changed when the US passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, formally allowing the US to accept displaced persons from World War II into the country (Refugee Council USA, 2014). Later the Refugee Act of 1980 standardized the criteria of refugees and the services they were eligible to receive (Refugee Council USA, 2014). Through all of this, faith-based organizations were at the forefront of welcoming these vulnerable groups and providing the foundation for successful integration into American society.

Refugees flee their home country to escape “persecution or fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013). However, prior to being determined a refugee and resettling to a new home country, there is a period of time spent in the country of asylum. Over the past decade, the US has seen people fleeing from countries in Latin America and arriving undocumented and in need of protection at the US border. In general, if these people were not apprehended by Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), they were allowed to remain in the US with undocumented status, but

could not receive services from either United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the US government.

### Unaccompanied Alien Children in the US

In the past three years the US has seen a distinct rise in the number of people arriving to the US, especially in the number of unaccompanied minors. From 2003-2011, there was an average of 6,775 children per year; since then, that number has steadily risen from 13,625 children in 2012 to an expected 60,000 children in 2014 (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2014). Because these children have not been recognized as refugees and are unable to access refugee benefits, there is a large need for churches and persons of faith to step forward and welcome these vulnerable children. Many of these children are religious themselves and turn to a local church community as a support system. For example, in a 2007 nationwide survey of Hondurans, CID-Gallup found that 47 percent of respondents identified as Roman Catholic and 36 percent as evangelical Protestant (U.S. Department of State, 2010).

There are many reasons for which these children choose to leave their homes and everything they know in search of a better life. The most common push factors include escaping violence, abuse, or persecution in their home or community and being brought here as victims of trafficking (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2014). Many citizens are afraid to help due to their immigration status, but Christians should see this as an opportunity to help where others are not willing. Faith-focused social workers and caseworkers can make a difference in a world where faith can be lost or forgotten when it comes to “documented or not”. Other frequent reasons for migration include the hopes of

reunifying with family members in the US or to gain work and education in the US for a better life for themselves and their children (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2014).

The majority of youth are arriving from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In Honduras, there are extreme rates of poverty, chronic unemployment and civil war, which has had an impact on the community member's interest and willingness to stay in their country. In the first quarter of 2014, there were 270 violent deaths of people under the age of 23 (Covenant House 2014). In 2012, Honduras had the highest murder rate in the entire world, which has not only spread fear but also ignited hope for a better life in the US.

In Guatemala, the rate of violence is increasing, due in part to the lack of law enforcement accountability within the law enforcement and judicial systems. In addition, these problems are influenced by increased trafficking of narcotics, the growing gang presence and activity, and the percentage (over 60%) of the population that carries firearms. These factors led to an average of 101 murders per week (OSACa, 2014).

While the murder rate in El Salvador has steadily decreased over the past two years since the major gangs came to a truce, the situation is still not safe for these young children. The gangs are still around with robberies and missing persons on the increase. Everyone – the wealthy, low-income, businesses, guarded facilities – are at risk of robbery which is leading to a life full of anxiety. Disappearances increased by 93% from 2013 to 2014 (OSACb, 2014)

As you can see from the aforementioned statistics, the current situation in these countries is not good. These children are extremely vulnerable and have gone through extensive and dangerous journeys to get to the US. We have a profound opportunity to open our hearts and help them. As we are all called to do, we have an obligation and responsibility to provide services from a place of faith, love and hope: “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost” (Romans 15:13 King James Version).

The journey to the US is traumatic for these young and lonely souls. Typically, children walk for weeks and have to navigate dangerous areas, unsure of who to trust and who to avoid for fear of exploitation. Unfortunately, it often doesn't stop at fear: many children are exploited in one way or another. Some children are captured and held for ransom; some are captured and forced into labor or sex trafficking; others are forced to smuggle drugs or other people across the border; and most are physically harmed along the route. These children are full of fear and searching for someone to open their arms and help. Many children need the assistance of *coyotes* so that they can safely arrive to the USA; however, this is expensive and often lends itself to more exploitation. Unfortunately, a multitude of children have reported having minimal food and water, having to sleep outside surrounded by bugs and rodents, and being verbally and physically abused.

Once children cross over to US soil, they are at risk of being apprehended by Customs and Border Patrol (CPB) agents due to their unlawful presence. Once a person is apprehended, if that person is under the age of 18, he/she is turned over to ORR within three days to ensure proper care is given to children. This includes a stay at a shelter with

a safe place to sleep, three meals a day, school, case management and medical care (Flores v. Meese, 2007). Although this care is mandated by the government, it aligns with God's teachings in that "For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in. Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me...." (Matthew 25: 35-36).

During their stay in the shelter, children work with the caseworker to develop a lasting and safe environment. Family members in the US are assessed to determine if they could feasibly and safely care for the child in their home. Sometimes, children are released to live with a family member, but the case manager feels there are some red flags signaling the family could use support. In these cases, the family is offered family reunification services which use a wraparound model to promote quality of life and value of family. This program offers a skilled social worker to assess the needs of the youth and the family as a whole and provides appropriate resources (from food pantries to legal assistance to help navigating the school system) and tools for the upward progress and growth of this family. This program provides an advocate that will encourage, empower and coach the sponsor in the responsibilities that come with parenting. The social worker will be of service to the family during family meetings and support services. And ultimately, the worker should bridge the gap for this family in receiving community services that will benefit the youth and family to be productive members of their community.

Historically, churches and faith-based communities have been at the forefront of welcoming these vulnerable groups and providing the foundation for successful integration into American society. Our duty as disciples of God says that we should help

others in need, and although the times have changed there is no shortage of help needed. There are currently a variety of ways in which help is welcomed. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 (NIV) says, "For the LORD your God [is] God of gods and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and awesome who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."

### Faith-Focused Social Work

The church has the duty and responsibility of standing in the gap for these children and families. Christians are all called to witness and carry out the love of Christ, not judge and set aside due to our differences. With the help of our churches these families could receive the connection that they have been searching for. Faith-focused social workers make an effort to connect the family to a local church and assist with their spiritual journey and regaining confidence in the Lord once they are in a safe place to live. In an effort to welcome these children and families to our community, remember the scripture: "And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" Leviticus 19: 33-34.

In putting God's work to action in your own work, and becoming an integrated social worker, you must remember that you are not greater than all things. You cannot and are not supposed to "fix it". It is our role to lean on HIM through all and know that there is something greater than our vision and outcomes. As a faith-focused social worker you must



first accept the fact that you are different from the population you are serving but you are the same as well. You thrive to be in His presence to walk in newness of life. You yearn to understand “why” and “what now”. And yet you continue to try to answer those questions instead of looking at the “why not” and the “have your way Lord” aspects of life.

Well these families and children are in the same place as you, they are struggling with the “why me” and not even understanding the concept of what now, they are looking at the “survive today”. It is the role of the social worker, the faith-focused and integrated social worker to serve as a bridge to understanding through action, word and deed. To empathize and yet pray for them to find peace.

Best Practices:

INTEGRATE who you are with who’s you are, don’t leave that at the door

FOCUS your purpose on the family and the overall purpose for them not you or society

VIEW your walk with the family as a partnership and not leading or following

FAITHFILLED in all that you do, paperwork, visits, meetings, outlook and planning together

KEEP GOD first in all that you endeavor to do with this family

ASPIRE to seek Him first and be a witness for them through this journey

MINISTER to the families through your work, your compassion and your belief in all things. Work together through CHRIST that strengths you

BE CONFIDENT in GOD and not allow circumstances to control you or your clients

BE AN OVERCOMER with the family through this journey, with JESUS you can win

How do you make an impact in your community?

Advocacy is needed on the state and national level to pass Comprehensive Immigration Reform, to increase funding to ORR who cares for these children upon apprehension, and on a variety of immigrant friendly legislations that are always changing. Citizens with compassion are needed just as much as agencies with lobbyists to

create change. Please call your senators, or testify in session to tell others how you feel. If you are unsure specifically which bills to lobby for, you can connect with an agency that provides this information to church bodies such as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) at [lirs.org/action](http://lirs.org/action). Advocating for policy is one way to become agents of change.

On a more personal level, these children are in need of our prayers. Prayers are welcome for the children that have arrived here to ensure they are treated with respect, are safe and cared for, and are embraced by faith, love and grace. Prayers are also welcome for the children currently on their journey to ensure safety. And lastly prayers are needed for the countries that these children are fleeing, in hopes of improving the conditions and violence so that children may stay and create a life in their home country rather than facing the lonely journey to the US.

Many agencies and churches are constantly collecting donations to buy basic school supplies, personal care items, etc. Please contact your local congregation to see if they can partner with a nonprofit providing services to these children, or if there are fellow parishioners in need of basic care items.

There is a network of foster care agencies that work with the children who come to the US, are apprehended, and then do not have a safe home or family member to return to. With the increase of children in the past year, there is an increased need for people of faith to step forward and offer to be Foster Parents, or mentors to these young people (<http://lirs.org/fostercare/>).

## Resources

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