

# World Refugee Day 2016: Unaccompanied Migrant Children Understood Through a Catholic Social Teaching Context

June 2016

## Background

The increase in the number of unaccompanied migrant children and migrant families who arrived along the southwest border of the United States in recent years precipitated a moment of crisis and a media frenzy by the summer of 2014. With an average of 6,800 children apprehended in each year from 2004 – 2011, the number jumped to over 13,000 children in Fiscal Year 2012 and over 24,000 in 2013. Over 50,000 were detained in FY 2014 and, although a decrease was evident the following year (28,387), the numbers again increased in the first quarter of FY2016 (18,558). Trends are similar for migrant families apprehended over this same stretch of time.

Recently, both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have provided reflections on the plight of unaccompanied migrant children. The [former](#) lamented that “these boys and girls often end up on the street abandoned to themselves and prey to unscrupulous exploiters who often transform them into the object of physical, moral and sexual violence.” It is the responsibility of humanitarian organizations, public institutions, and the Church to dedicate resources to protect these young migrants. Reflecting specifically on the situation confronting this population, who are arriving in masse from Central America, Pope Francis [referred to the influx](#) as a “humanitarian emergency,” and stressed that “as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected.”

While a mix of factors contribute to the uptick in this migration flow, a generalized violence on the state and local levels, and a corresponding breakdown of the rule of law has threatened citizen security and created a culture of fear and hopelessness that has functioned as the primary cause. Violence and coercion—including extortion, kidnapping, threats, and coercive and forcible recruitment of children into criminal activity—are perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations and gangs, and have become part of everyday life in all of these countries, exerting control over communities. Under such circumstances children and their parents face a stark choice: Stay at home and become a likely victim of the violence or make a dangerous journey to a place of possible safety.

The Department of Migration and Refugee Services at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops maintains that many of the children who are coming to the United States from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are fleeing persecution in their home countries and, as a consequence, are eligible for international protections. In other words, this is in large part a *refugee flow* and is deserving to be treated



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as such by policymakers and advocacy organizations alike.

## Scriptural and Catholic Social Teaching Foundations

The well-being of the world's poor and vulnerable hold a special place both in Scripture and in the Catholic moral tradition. Throughout his mission Jesus held children in particular in high regard, at one point rebuking the disciples for not allowing the children to come to him and declaring that we must all become like children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (MK 10:14). At another point in his ministry, Jesus issued a much sharper word of warning that it would be better that a millstone be tied around a person's neck, than for that person to cause a child to sin. We have a special obligation to ensure that children are given the protection and support due to them.

The Catholic moral tradition that has developed over the past several centuries also provides key insights into how we are to reach out in support of migrants and other vulnerable groups. The Catholic bishops of the United States have spoken explicitly about the need to protect vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers such as the women and children currently in immigrant detention facilities. Their pastoral letter [Strangers No Longer: Together on The Journey of Hope](#), states that “those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.” Other moral principles can provide a guide to our work:

- **Human Dignity:** The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. The Church has an abiding concern human life from conception until natural death; the lives of migrant children do not fall outside the Church's commitment to protect and nurture life at all its stages. Children who are fleeing violence and seeking safety should be given due process under the law and provided the necessary screenings to ensure that they will be given the help necessary to ensure their well-being.
- **Call to Family, Community, and Participation:** The person is not only sacred but also social. At the foundation of the social character of the person is the family—it is where we first learn how to interact with and engage the wider community. The violence and corruption present in the countries that many unaccompanied migrant children originate causes a great deal of stress on families that often lead to division and separation. Steps need to be taken to create the conditions so that families can remain in their homeland with one another, without having to constantly fear that violence will visit their doorstep and cause any one of them harm. Until that time, policies should be implemented to ensure that families are reunited here in the U.S. and provided some degree of protection for as long as it is too dangerous for them to return home.
- **Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable:** A basic moral test for any society is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment—“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me”—and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first (MT 25:35). If there ever was a vulnerable person, a migrant child who is traveling alone would certainly seem to fit that definition. To turn our back on these populations, to demonize them, and to treat them as outcasts and unwelcome directly contravenes our obligation to approach vulnerable populations with particular care.

To learn more how you can support the work of the Catholic bishops of the United States in this arena, please visit [www.usccb.org/mrs](http://www.usccb.org/mrs)