

**Unaccompanied Minors: Marginalized in the Education System**

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***Abstract***

The number of unaccompanied immigrant minors (UIMs) from Central America significantly increased in 2014. More than 213,000 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border by U.S. Customs and Border Protection from the start of fiscal year (FY) 2014 through January 31, 2019 (U.S. Border Patrol, 2014-2019). These children are then transferred to the care of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The ORR agency is

responsible for processing and sheltering unaccompanied children and youth under the age of 18 who are typically placed with a parent or other adult relative in the United States, a family friend, or in foster care. Unaccompanied minors wait months, even years, for their cases to be decided in immigration court. Legal representation heavily influences the ultimate decision of whether to allow informal relief or no proper legal status. Many children remain in the U.S. unauthorized. While unauthorized, they are not eligible for assistance programs, although the United States allows undocumented children a free K-12 education because of the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Plyler v Doe*. This research explores attitudes in U.S. media toward these youth and what is happening regarding the educational opportunities for these unaccompanied minors. What kind of educational programs do they have access to when they are in detention or post-detention? What are the challenges faced on their educational journey? Research literature has been largely silent on the unique needs of these children including their unique educational needs.

*Keywords:* unaccompanied immigrant minors, unaccompanied children, child immigrants, unauthorized minors, migrant youth

### **Method**

This project included a comprehensive review of academic literature related to unaccompanied immigrant youth, an analysis of federal data on unaccompanied minors, and analysis of news reports on unaccompanied children and parent-child separations. News articles from local border areas and non-border newspapers were analyzed for a period of ten months from June 2018 to March 26, 2019. The quotes selected show the position of the government, the plight of minors and separated families, and the responses of local border communities. We identify educational barriers faced by immigrant children and argue that stronger policies and greater

resources are needed to assure that unaccompanied children and youth receive the education they are entitled to under U.S. law.

## **Background**

### **Reasons for Migrating**

Many children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, “the Northern Triangle,” emigrate to the United States for survival. Those countries have some of the highest rates of inequality and poverty caused by economic stagnation, centuries of oligarchic rule, civil war mainly in El Salvador y Guatemala, and devastation caused by natural disasters. Additionally, high unemployment rates and low levels of education spike income disparity leaving large sectors of the population in these countries without the minimum income needed to sustain households (Stichcomb & Hershberg, 2014). Societal exclusion from labor markets and state services have been driving emigrants out of their countries, particularly from the most impoverished rural areas. Violence perpetrated by gangs, including sexual violence and violent forced membership in gangs, plagues neighborhoods and communities (Ciaccia & John, 2016). Violence in their home countries was cited as a primary reason for migration by 77 percent of 151 unaccompanied minors interviewed by the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) in 2012. A generalized climate of violence extends to all three Northern Triangle countries which in 2012 occupied the top five murderous countries in the world. The second largest city in Honduras, San Pedro Sula, was the second deadliest city in the world. While in El Salvador, police reports indicate that murders of children under age 17 increased 77 percent during the first half of 2014 compared to the previous year (*The New York Times*, July 9, 2014). Drug trafficking plays a huge role in migration since the Northern Triangle is located between the world’s largest drug producing countries in South America and the United States, the largest consumer of illicit drugs (Stichcomb & Hershberg, 2014). Other reasons for migration are work and

educational opportunities and for family reunification (Ciaccia & John, 2016). Many unaccompanied children and youth are attempting to reunite with their parents or, in the case of older youth, are seeking to earn money to help family members left behind in the country of origin.

### **Apprehensions of unaccompanied children and youth<sup>1</sup>**

Mexico has been the number one country exporting migrants to the U.S for the past 60 years. According to the Pew Research Center, about 229,000 Mexicans were apprehended by the Border Patrol in fiscal year 2014 which is a less significant number compared with fiscal year 2007 when Mexican apprehensions totaled 809,000 (PEW, 2014). Despite the decrease of Mexican immigrants, new changes in immigration patterns have arisen at the U.S.-Mexican border.

Migration to the U.S. has new faces, both unaccompanied minors and families from the Northern Triangle, who have tried to cross the border in recent years. According to the U.S. Custom Border Patrol data sites, in 2014, 67,339 unaccompanied children were apprehended at the U.S. southwest border (U.S Custom Border Patrol, 2014). This report noted that 15,634 of those apprehensions were Mexicans and the rest of the children migrated from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Recent data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security show that as of February 2019 over 210,000 minors from the Northern Triangle have been apprehended by the U.S. border patrol from FY 2014 to January 2019. This represents a total of 331,818 unaccompanied minors (See Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the U.S. government documents use the terms “unaccompanied alien children,” “family units,” or “removal proceedings” which are exclusionary and dehumanizing. These terms treat immigrant children and families as objects and data rather than people facing terrible circumstances. We have chosen to use the terms “unaccompanied children and youth,” “unaccompanied minors” (youth under age 18), and “families.”

Table 1. Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Children by Country of Origin

Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Children and Youth by Country of Origin and Year						
Country	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19TD JAN
Mexico	15,634	11,012	11,926	8,877	10,136	3,007
El Salvador	16,404	9,389	17,512	9,143	4,949	2,292
Honduras	18,244	5,409	10,468	7,784	10,913	4,833
Guatemala	17,057	13,589	18,913	14,827	22,327	9,522
<b>Total</b>	<b>67,339</b>	<b>39,399</b>	<b>58,819</b>	<b>40,631</b>	<b>48,325</b>	<b>19,654</b>

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection. (2019, February). U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019. Retrieved February 08, 2019, from <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stast/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

The number of children from Mexico remained about the same while the number of children from Guatemala has increased. Guatemala had the largest number of children apprehended in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 and in January 2019.

### Family apprehensions

During 2016 there were 70,407 family unit apprehensions from the Northern Triangle. A family unit is defined as children traveling with at least one parent or guardian. The number of family apprehensions peaked in January 2019 representing 95,648 family apprehensions, where the leading country was Guatemala with 50,593 families total (See Table 2).

Table 2. Family Apprehensions by Country of Origin and Year

<b>Family Apprehensions by Country of Origin and Year</b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>FY16</b>	<b>FY17</b>	<b>FY18</b>	<b>FY19TD JAN</b>
Mexico	3,481	2,271	2,261	<b>883</b>
El Salvador	27,114	24,122	13,669	<b>9,146</b>
Honduras	20,226	22,366	39,439	<b>36,009</b>
Guatemala	23,067	24,657	50,401	<b>50,593</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>73,888</b>	<b>73,416</b>	<b>105,770</b>	<b>96,631</b>

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection. (2019, February). U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019. Retrieved February 08, 2019, from <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stast/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

There were decreases in Mexican family apprehensions but large increases in Guatemalan and Honduran family apprehensions especially in 2018 and to date (TD)by January 2019.

### **Unaccompanied minors and family apprehensions by sector**

Border cities such as El Paso and San Diego are the urban areas with the largest numbers of unaccompanied minors and families. El Paso had the largest increase in population of unaccompanied minors showing increases of 249 percent from January 2018 to January 2019. The second largest increase in apprehensions of unaccompanied children occurred in San Diego where apprehensions increased 72 percent from January

of 2018 to January of 2019 (See Table 3). The ages for these children range from 0 (pregnancies) to 17 years old according to the reports of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency. Family apprehensions increased 1,588 percent in El Paso and 636 percent in San Diego in the same period (See Table 4).

Table 3. Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Children by Sector

Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Children by Sector and Percent Change			
Sector	FY18TD JAN	FY19TD JAN	% Change FY18TD JAN to FY19TD JAN
Big Bend	480	209	-56%
Laredo	862	790	-8%
Tucson	1,807	1,707	-6%
El Centro	877	980	12%
Yuma	1,696	2,078	23%
Rio Grande	6,491	8,685	34%
Del Rio	385	639	66%
San Diego	687	1,179	72%
El Paso	1,105	3,856	249%
USBP Southwest Border Total	14,390	20,123	40%

*Source:* U.S. Customs and Border Protection. (2019, February). U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019. Retrieved February 08, 2019, from <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stast/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

The sectors most impacted are El Paso, San Diego, and Del Rio. The El Paso area had the most apprehensions with a 249% increase in January 2019 compared with the

previous year. Such increases make it more difficult for El Paso to adequately take care of these children.

Table 4. Family Apprehensions by Sector

Family Apprehensions by Sector and Percent Change from 2018-2019			
Sector	FY18TD JAN	FY19TD JAN	% Change FY18TD JAN to FY19TD JAN
Big Bend	363	261	-28%
Laredo	171	317	85%
Rio Grande	15,572	43,588	180%
Yuma	4,461	13,127	194%
Tucson	1,195	3,897	226%
El Centro	789	3,516	346%
Del Rio	712	3,307	364%
San Diego	839	86,178	636%
El Paso	1,523	25,710	1,588%
USBP Southwest Border Total	25,625	99,901	290%

*Source:* U.S. Customs and Border Protection. (2019, February). U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2019. Retrieved February 08, 2019, from <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stast/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

All these cities have an increasing percent of family apprehensions except Big Bend. El Paso is the most affected with an increase of 1,588% in January 2019 compared to January 2018. USBP total family apprehensions increased 290% in January 2019 compared with previous year.



## **Unaccompanied minors in the United States**

Unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle are subject to distinct administrative processes when entering the United States. These administrative processes determine their rights under the U.S immigration law, the legal avenues through which they can request deportation relief, and their prospects for remaining in the country.

Once the U.S. Custom and Border Protection has confirmed that the child is an unaccompanied minor, the child should be transferred to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within 72 hours. Under the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) this transfer of custody happens regardless of if the child meets the credible fear standard or may be eligible for relief as a victim of trafficking or other qualifying crimes. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security initiates removal proceedings while the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement places the child in one of four detention settings: shelter care, staff-secure care, secure care, or short-term foster care. The Office of Refugee Resettlement determines if the child can be reunified with an adult sponsor in the United States while the removal case is pending.

### **Legal paths**

Based on the U.S. Congressional Research Service report of 2016, there are legal options available for unaccompanied immigrant children. Asylum is offered for those, regardless of age, who are unwilling to return to their country of origin due to well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. There is a special Immigrant Juvenile Status for children who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned by one or both parents. Limited nonimmigrant visas such as T and U visas are available for

victims of severe forms of trafficking including sex trafficking, forced labor, and non-migrant smuggling. The U.S. Congressional Research Service is very explicit on the matter of legal issues for unaccompanied minors, but it is silent on educational rights for these children. Existing research suggests that 90 percent of children appearing without an attorney were ordered to leave the United States, 77 percent through a removal order and 13 percent through a voluntary departure order (Stichcomb & Hershberg, 2014). Children without the ability to contact a family member or find a sponsor in the United States often move to long term foster care (LTFC) or group homes in the United States.

### **Media portrayals of unaccompanied minors and families<sup>2</sup>**

Sociological research that shows that context can affect the incorporation of different immigrant groups. The rhetoric used in public media helps shape public opinion regarding different groups. Negative terms or descriptions used in the media can associate stereotypes with characteristics and behaviors of immigrants and can become indexical measures by which the public may judge all immigrants. For example, when a person crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without authorization is referred to as a “criminal,” this can become a way of categorizing all immigrants as criminals. Thus, immigrants become marked or framed as problematic. The rhetoric regarding immigrants has been particularly hostile in the United States, and may have influenced the ways educational systems, social service agencies, and immigrant agencies have responded to unaccompanied minors.

A brief analysis of media news in Table 5 illustrates how negative labeling has framed perceptions of Central American families and unaccompanied minors. Community

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<sup>2</sup> This analysis of the speech used to refer to immigrants and immigrant children is based specifically on newspapers that have free access such as The New York Times (NYT), National Public Radio (NPR), Fox News, and El Paso Times. The authors reviewed approximately 50 articles and news reports over 10 months (June 2018- March 2019) during a period of heightened arrivals of children and families from Central America.

leaders from the southern border categorically reject the perception of the government in relation to the migrants and have shown support towards migrants’ families and children. Central American unaccompanied minors, youth, and families also speak for themselves showing how they are treated. The column on the far right of Table 5 includes quotes from different perspectives in the media. We identified rhetorical patterns in the texts as we read, reread, and coded different news articles and media reports about immigrant families and children. The middle column highlights the choice of words and terms used in reports about immigrants that we considered to reflect commonalities or themes represented in the media we reviewed. We attempted to review media from newspapers known as conservative and liberal, national and local reports, and perspectives of government officials, areas near the border, and immigrants themselves who were quoted in the media. The column at the far left of Table 5 reflects the categories that emerged from our narrative analyses. We accounted for the message content and meaning conveyed as well as the specific words or phrases present in the messages.

Table 5. Media Portrayal of Unaccompanied Minors and Families

Hidden symbolic power <sup>3</sup>	Terms categorizing immigrants and actions toward immigrants	Media Rhetoric
Criminalizing	“More drugs” “crossing the border illegally” “people with criminal records”	“More drugs, more people crossing the border illegally, more minors of exploitable age, more people from countries other than North and Central American ones, and more people with criminal records. The facts are the facts.” Brandon Judd is the

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Language and Symbolic Power* describes the way implicit language can be used as an instrument of domination and ways of constructing understanding of the world (See page 165 in *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu, (Edited and Introduced by John B. Thompson), 1991, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press).

		<p>president of the National Border Patrol Council (NBPC).</p> <p>Fox News, Brandon Judd, 03/06/19</p>
Stereotyping	<p>“Terrorists”</p> <p>“pouring into the U.S.”</p>	<p>“Terrorists are pouring into the U.S. from Mexico”</p> <p>U.S. President, Donald Trump</p> <p>TNYT, Simon Romero, 01/09/19</p>
Frightening	<p>“special interest aliens”</p> <p>“individuals with suspicious travel patterns”</p> <p>“potential national security risk”</p>	<p>“More than 3,000 ‘special-interest aliens’ individuals with suspicious travel patterns” posed a potential national security risk.”</p> <p>Kirstjen Nielsen, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security</p> <p>TNYT, Simon Romero, 01/09/19</p>
Threatening	<p>“zero tolerance”</p> <p>“[crossing] the border unlawfully”</p> <p>“we will prosecute you”</p> <p>“illegally aliens”</p>	<p>Under “zero tolerance” Sessions says: “If you cross this border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you. It’s that simple,” said Sessions. “If you smuggle illegal aliens across our border, then we will prosecute you.”</p> <p>Jeff Sessions, U.S. Attorney General</p> <p>NPR, Richard Gonzales, 05/07/18</p>
		Community Media Rhetoric
Empathizing	<p>“very small children”</p> <p>“crowded into small, inhuman cement cells”</p>	<p>“Some (families) carry very small children; all are being crowded into small, inhuman cements cell for days at a time.”</p> <p>TNYT, Veronica Escobar, 01/18/19</p>
Shaming	<p>“A moral disaster”</p> <p>“Mass shelters”</p>	<p>“This is a moral disaster: More than 14,000 migrant kids in mass shelters”</p>

		El Paso Times, Garance Burke and Martha Mendoza, 12/19/18
Accusing	“Separating children from their parents” “A heinous crime”	“Separating children from their parents is a heinous crime against humanity”  TNYT, Ada Alpert, 06/18/2018
Shocking	“Conditions... are truly shocking”	“The conditions in which these children are being held are truly shocking.” “It’s cold, and they are susceptible to influenza and dehydration.”  TNYT, Miriam Jordan, 01/25/19
		Unaccompanied minors and Families’ Rhetoric
Experiencing desperation	“No money to eat”	“We have nowhere to go, we don’t even have money to eat.”  The New York Times (TNYT), Simon Romero, 01/09/19
Suppression of opportunities	“I would have finished school” “I’ve learned English” “I’ve gotten a good job”	“If I hadn’t been detained, I would have finished school, learned English and gotten a good job.”  TNYT Magazine, Hannah Dreier, 01/06/19
Constructing reality	“Deep sadness since I learned of my daughter’s dead”	“I am living with a deep sadness since I learned of my daughter’s (Jakelin Caal) death,” she said in a Mayan language, Q’eqchi’, through an interpreter. “But there are no jobs, and this caused the decision to leave.”

		TNYT, Elisabeth Malkin, 12/18/2018
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*Note:* Conservative media usually support government policies related to unaccompanied minors and separation of families or tend to avoid or do not show unaccompanied minors and families' plight. A humanitarian perspective toward unaccompanied minors and families and their plight is frequently shown in more liberal media.

The narrative used in the media quotes presented in the table above associate stereotypes with the characteristics and actions of immigrants and become indexical measures by which to judge all immigrants. Thus, immigrant children and youth become marked and problematic. Distinct ideologies are reflected in the discourse illustrated in the chart which frames immigrant children and immigration in sympathetic or criminalizing ways. The categories used in the media are central to the structuring of symbolic power of the media. The terms used stablish and naturalize notions of difference and influence everyday life experiences for immigrant children in their neighborhood and institutional settings.

### **Unique needs of unaccompanied children in foster care**

In the United States, Crea, et al. (2017) found that among the unique needs of unaccompanied children are education, foster care placements, community connections, culturally appropriate responses and services, an understanding of U.S. culture, independent living skills, mental health, legal issues, language barriers, and safety.

Education becomes a significant challenge for unaccompanied minors, especially for those from Guatemala who only speak indigenous languages. Furthermore, unaccompanied minors often have only a few years of formal education in their home countries because of poverty, long distance walking to school, threats by gang members, and other reasons creating gaps in education. Crea, et al. (2017) found that in

many U.S. schools “no one knows what to do with these kids. They can’t be put in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom (because of their age), so they put them in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and pass them along.”

### **Lack of data regarding the education of unaccompanied children and youth**

There is very limited knowledge of the experiences of unaccompanied migrant youth in general as they interact with the United States education system. Research on unaccompanied migrant youth from Central America is at a nascent stage (Crea, Lopez, Taylor, & Underwood, 2016). Unaccompanied minors’ school enrollment data are unavailable, and it is not possible to map the policies that every school has put in place to deal with these child migrants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that school districts have had disparate reactions to the influx of new students and the associated costs of providing educational programs and services to immigrant children and youth. Some have created specialized programs to work with the newcomers, while others have come to different responses such as deciding whether to order that students should be enrolled in K-12 classes or adult education. Others have pushed back against their enrollment entirely (Pierce, 2015). Gaps in schooling often occur for child migrants, it is likely that retention in U.S. immigration detention facilities will exacerbated those gaps.

U.S. law guarantees education for all youth, regardless of immigration status. The 1982 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe* dictates that states cannot deny children access to public education based on their immigration status; unaccompanied minors must be included in educational programs. The Flores Settlement Agreement (Peck & Harrington, 2018) governs the treatment of unaccompanied minors in federal custody and mandates that their vulnerability as minors must be considered during the interment process. Unaccompanied minors must be placed in the least restrictive setting and be relocated to family, an adult, or guardian, or a government-approved facility as

soon as possible. It is mandatory that unaccompanied minors receive balanced nutrition, education, psychological counseling, medical services, and recreation (Noel, 2017). The *Plyler v. Doe* decision and The Flores Settlement Agreement attempted to address these needs. The essence of *Plyler v. Doe* case is that education is a fundamental value, and it is an injustice to deny education to immigrant children.

### **Educational Programs Available**

According to the Migration Policy Institute in New York there are a few counties that have new or existing programs supporting unaccompanied minors that include:

- A specialized program of instructional and emotional support for students with limited schooling and English skills
- Bilingual parent volunteers to help families navigate the school system
- Entry-level job skills programs for Spanish-speaking students who will not receive a diploma by the time they are 21
- Professional development courses and resources that train teachers and staff in skills specifically related to the needs of unaccompanied minors
- Working groups to review the school districts' responses to the needs of unaccompanied minors.

Research shows that San Francisco City and Whitfield County in Georgia have created Newcomer Academies to transition new students to mainstream schools. The Montgomery County government has included mental health programs in the most affected schools and an agreement with local colleges to support certain at-risk college students. Before the arrival of unaccompanied minors, Sussex County, Delaware had established several bilingual programs for students who spoke little English.

### **Educational barriers to overcome**



Although unaccompanied minors are entitled to free public elementary education and secondary schools, sponsors or family members navigating school enrollment report considerable challenges when specific documentation is unattainable or when local districts enact policies to prohibit undocumented students from participation in public school (American Immigration Council, 2016). Thus, although unauthorized youth are legally entitled to a free public education in the United States, they may encounter significant obstacles.

- Enrollment in local schools. Many counties and school districts have pushed back against the arrival of unaccompanied children. In New York's Nassau County, some schools attempted to bar children from enrolling for failure to present certain documents related to migration status (Pierce, 2015). Several counties in North Carolina also have resisted unaccompanied minors' arrivals in the face of rising school costs.
- Limited education and educational gaps. Many of these children had dropped out of schools before ninth grade because of gang harassment, school long distances from homes, or migration. When arriving in the United States, many unaccompanied minors show limited literacy or English language capabilities which creates further barriers to access secondary education. Additionally, schools are not designed to meet educational gaps, or the youth might not be academically strong (Crea et al., 2016). Guatemalan children tend to leave school with lower levels of education likely because many of these children must learn both Spanish and English after arriving in the United States.
- Unauthorized status. Lacking access to legal services and eventually legal status increases fears of deportation which have serious implications for young unaccompanied minors' academic achievement (Cardoso et al., 2017). Also, when families are in immediate danger in their home countries and need financial

support, unaccompanied children will not necessarily have interest in furthering their education (Crea et al., 2016). Pierce reported that even when unaccompanied children are finally heard, the immigration court system resolved the status for relatively few of them. A review of immigration court data shows that most children show up for their hearings and, of those who attended, 78 percent received some form of immigration relief. However, 97 percent of children who receive immigration relief do not receive a simultaneous grant of immigration status, meaning they remain in the U.S. unauthorized (Pierce, 2015). Fear of deportation may cause these children anxiety and hinder their ability to participate in educational opportunities.

- Marginalization and stigmatization. Crea et al., (2017) found that children feel stigmatized while attending specialized schools “full of immigrants and refugees with low education” which may contribute to children rushing to switch to public schools without being fully equipped to thrive there. Existing research suggests that perceived levels of discrimination felt by older unaccompanied minors are associated with failing to complete secondary school (Crea et al., 2017). Other forms of discrimination are perceived in the form of low level of teacher support, insensitivity to cultural differences, cultural misunderstandings, and negative exchanges with school staff and peers (Cardoso et al., 2017). Marginalization may cause immigrant youth to leave school prematurely.
- Lack of formal policies. Many schools and districts lack formal policies to address education placement for unaccompanied minors. They struggle with whether high schools in the K-12 system or adult education are the appropriate placement for these youth.
- Lack of funding from federal government. Cardoso et al. (2017) found that federal funds to districts with higher numbers of unaccompanied migrant youth continue to fall short, placing a considerable financial burden on local school

districts. Congressional appropriations for FY 2015 provided \$14 million for local educational agencies to provide services targeted specifically to unaccompanied minors in 35 states that received significant numbers of such arrivals. However, about 60,000 unaccompanied child migrants have been placed in U.S. schools since the start of FY 2014, thus this grant amounts to about \$233 per student (Pierce, 2015). This minimal additional funding cannot significantly improve the educational opportunities of these youth.

When attending local schools, unaccompanied children might face additional barriers such as unwelcoming and hostile school environments, school norms and teacher preferences that discriminate against them, and an overarching negative local, social, and political context (Cardoso et al., 2017). Such was the case at Huntington High School where Central American youth were mistaken as gang members and got arrested and suspended from school.

The National Bureau of Economic Research reported that local Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) partnerships reduced the number of Hispanic students by nearly 10 percent within 2 years. Also, The New York Time Magazine reported the plight of youth when ICE partners with local schools. One youth said, "If I hadn't been detained, I would have finished school, learned English and gotten a good job." In Central Slip High, an English as a second language professor reported that one day a security guard told her he thought it was suspicious that a lot of students were wearing the Salvadoran flag. The professor explained, "Thank God I was there, because I told him, 'Today is their Independence Day.' He had no clue."

Family separation plays a role in youths' academic struggles. Research found that children who have been separated during migration from their parents fell further behind academically compared to peers who migrated with their parents (Cardoso et al., 2017). Likewise, legal and citizen status affects children's educational outcomes.

Research done with children with unauthorized Mexican immigrant parents show that their children get less education than those whose parents migrate legally or manage to legalize. Also, these children typically do not graduate from high school. The most academically affected are those children whose parents, especially their mothers, remain unauthorized (Bean, Brown, Leach, & Van Hook, 2010). Providing an opportunity for parents to obtain a legal immigration status and a route to citizenship would enable these families to seek additional resources to help their children.

Other factors that shape eventual educational attainment are the parental contextual education attainment. For example, immigrants who completed secondary school within a context in which most individuals complete only primary schooling will provide to their children specific resources like a habitus, a set of dispositions and skills, that contribute to motivation to achieve higher levels of success in education in the United States (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). These children's patterns of achievement are often a result of parents' high expectations.

### **Foster care influence on educational outcomes**

A small number of unaccompanied minors are placed in the federally sponsored Unaccompanied Refugee Minors<sup>4</sup> (URM) program that helps unaccompanied refugee minors develop appropriate skills to enter adulthood and to achieve social self-sufficiency. A research study on unaccompanied refugee minors and unaccompanied minors placed in foster care found barriers that limited the children and youth's educational attainment. However, those who remained longer in foster care were associated with higher educational outcomes (Crea, Hasson, Evans, Berger Cardoso, &

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<sup>4</sup> Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) is defined as a person who has not attained 18 years of age and has entered the United States unaccompanied by a parent or a close nonparental adult relative who is willing and able to care for the minor, and a minor who has legal eligibility (ORR, 2018)

Underwood, 2018). Stability allowed youth to establish positive support systems of friends, teachers, and school staff.

## **Recommendations**

Although increasing globalization and patterns of transnational migration have resulted in a backlash of anti-immigrant policies and attitudes in the United States, professionals in child welfare must continue with their mandate to pursue safety, permanency, and well-being for unaccompanied and immigrant youth in care (Crea et al., 2017). Positive educational opportunities must also be a part of that mandate.

All adults working with unaccompanied minors such as teachers, immigration authorities, and all agencies' staff should be trained specifically to work with foreign-born youth. Training topics should include cultural sensitivity, especially understanding cultures and traditions of common populations, such as those of Central American countries. Crea et al. (2017) reported that it is also important to provide unaccompanied minors orientation and psychoeducation and an understanding of the value of unaccompanied minors' own culture and the U.S. culture, to enable them to embrace diversity regarding U.S. cultural norms and expectations.

Schools and districts must create specialized programs enabling unaccompanied children and youth to obtain English and Spanish skills. This is especially crucial for Guatemalan unaccompanied children, the majority of whom arrived in the United States only speaking indigenous languages. Often, they learn Spanish and English later which may introduce additional complications and educational setbacks (Crea et al., 2016).

It is important that educational services operate from a culturally competent environment providing instructors, staff, and others who work with unaccompanied minors with the skills to help engage unaccompanied children and families in navigating the complexities of the U.S. education system.

Policy makers need to develop transnational cultural competency, an understanding of discrimination against migrant children, and an understanding of children's vulnerabilities related to pre-migration, migration experiences, and post-migration. They also need to understand that negative rhetoric creates a hostile environment for these young people and detrimentally affects their educational experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Education for unaccompanied minors may serve as a protective factor by providing a higher level of mobilization across levels of social stratification (Crea et al., 2016). The issue of educational attainment for unaccompanied children deserves more attention in research, policy, and practice. Many unaccompanied children remain unauthorized in the United States and they struggle enrolling in public education because of lack of proper documentation. By not providing pathways to legalization, the United States not only risks creating an underclass, but also fails to develop a potentially valuable human resource. In addition, school enrollment policies should promote educating all youth regardless of background or legal documentation as required by the U.S. Supreme Court Decision *Plyler v Doe*. Future research should focus on the role of schools in supporting young people following release from detention, including how to make school relevant for unaccompanied migrant youth (Cardoso et al., 2017). A key argument in the *Plyler v Doe* decision emphasized that loss of educational opportunities in childhood and adolescence had profound consequences well into adulthood. Many of these unaccompanied youth will likely remain in the United States, at least for a period of time while the U.S. government determines their futures. This time should be used to provide these children and youth with the educational skills needed if they remain in the United States. These skills will also enable them to be productive citizens if they return to their home countries.

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