

# MOVING BEYOND TRAUMA: *Child Migrants and Refugees in the United States*

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**We face a global crisis of displaced families.** Worldwide, 65 million people were forcibly displaced, either within or outside of their home countries, as of 2015. The global number of refugees was at an all-time high of 21.3 million in 2015; 51 percent of these were children.

Child Trends reviewed government statistics on children entering or who have entered the United States, across categories of legal status: refugees and asylees, unauthorized child immigrants, and accompanied and unaccompanied children apprehended at the border. We paired these data with research findings on the impact on these children of the traumatic experiences many have faced, or will face. Though these groups differ in important ways, they have in common the threat of toxic stress, which can have damaging and lifelong effects on their development.

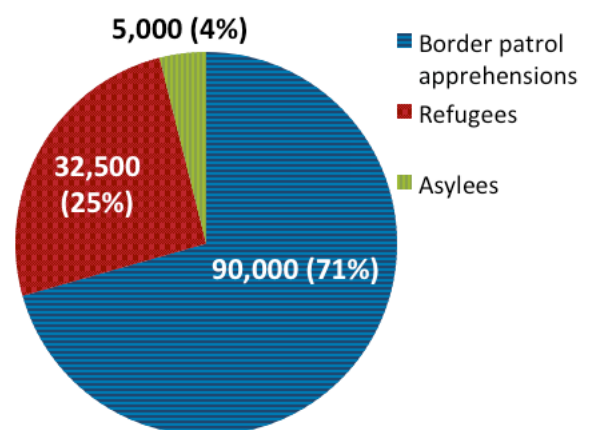
## HOW MANY ARE THERE, AND WHERE ARE THEY FROM?

We estimate more than 127,000 children will seek refuge in the United States in 2016:

- **About 37,500 of these will be designated as refugees or asylees**, with eligibility for citizenship after 5 years. From late 2014 to late 2015, there was a more than four-fold increase in the number of asylum applications pending for unaccompanied minors who had sought interim assistance under the provisions of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act.
- **About 90,000 will arrive to face possible detention** and a string of custody arrangements that too often put their well-being at risk. U.S. Border Patrol officials predict that 75,000 children will cross the U.S.-Mexico border by themselves, between October 2016 and March 2017. Most of these will have no legal representation. Thousands (most under 6) were being held in detention facilities, as of 2015.
- **An estimated 1 million children already living in the United States are unauthorized**, and have an unauthorized parent(s).

Though not the primary focus of this report, *there are more than 4 million U.S.-born children who live with a parent who is an unauthorized immigrant*. The threat they face is illustrated by the fact that more than 70,000 parents of U.S.-citizen children were deported in 2013.

**Figure 1:** International migrant children: Projected 2016 arrivals in the U.S.



Source: For asylees, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. For refugees, Mossaad, N. (2016). Refugees and asylees: 2014. Annual Flow Report. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics. For apprehensions, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, United States Border Patrol Southwest Family Unit Subject and Unaccompanied Alien Children apprehensions Fiscal Year 2016. We estimate conservatively that half of those apprehended in families are children.



## WHAT ARE PROSPECTS FOR THESE CHILDREN?

*Refugee and migrant children, regardless of their legal designation, share a common experience of trauma*—largely due to exposure to violence and separation from family members. Trauma, which can result in long-term, toxic stress, can impair children’s cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and contribute to risk for disease and early death.

*Trauma may continue beyond children’s arrival in the country*, as many experience discrimination and bullying, problems in school, and struggles with their own or family members’ acculturation. In particular, conditions in detention centers may contribute to long-term impairments in children’s development. Unaccompanied children may be released to sponsors, few of whom have been screened or monitored, and consequently may be subjected to further maltreatment and exploitation. Children whose parents have been deported may end up in foster care.

## WHAT SUPPORT DO THESE CHILDREN RECEIVE?

Refugees are eligible, upon arrival, for a range of services and supports. Unaccompanied children apprehended at the border are eligible for fewer supports, while unauthorized child immigrants are eligible only for WIC (Women, Infants, and Children—a supplemental nutrition program), Head Start, and k-12 education. Legal eligibility is no guarantee of services, though, and there is mounting evidence that many are denied, or otherwise fail to receive, services they may be eligible for.

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

Our recommendations, based on this research, are broadly applicable to all international migrant children and youth:

- Policies should take children’s urgent developmental needs into account. Children need stable, nurturing relationships, and health, education, and economic security.
- Law enforcement personnel should have specific training in understanding victims’ trauma experience.
- Communities should receive adequate resources to help them prepare for newcomer children. There are examples of promising movements to offer a welcoming environment to these children—such as the multi-municipality Welcoming Cities and Counties initiative.
- All children should be accorded physical safety and legal representation. They should not be subjected to additional trauma.
- Parents and children should not be separated, except under exceptional circumstances. To be successful, interventions for children should also address the needs of their parents, when possible.

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