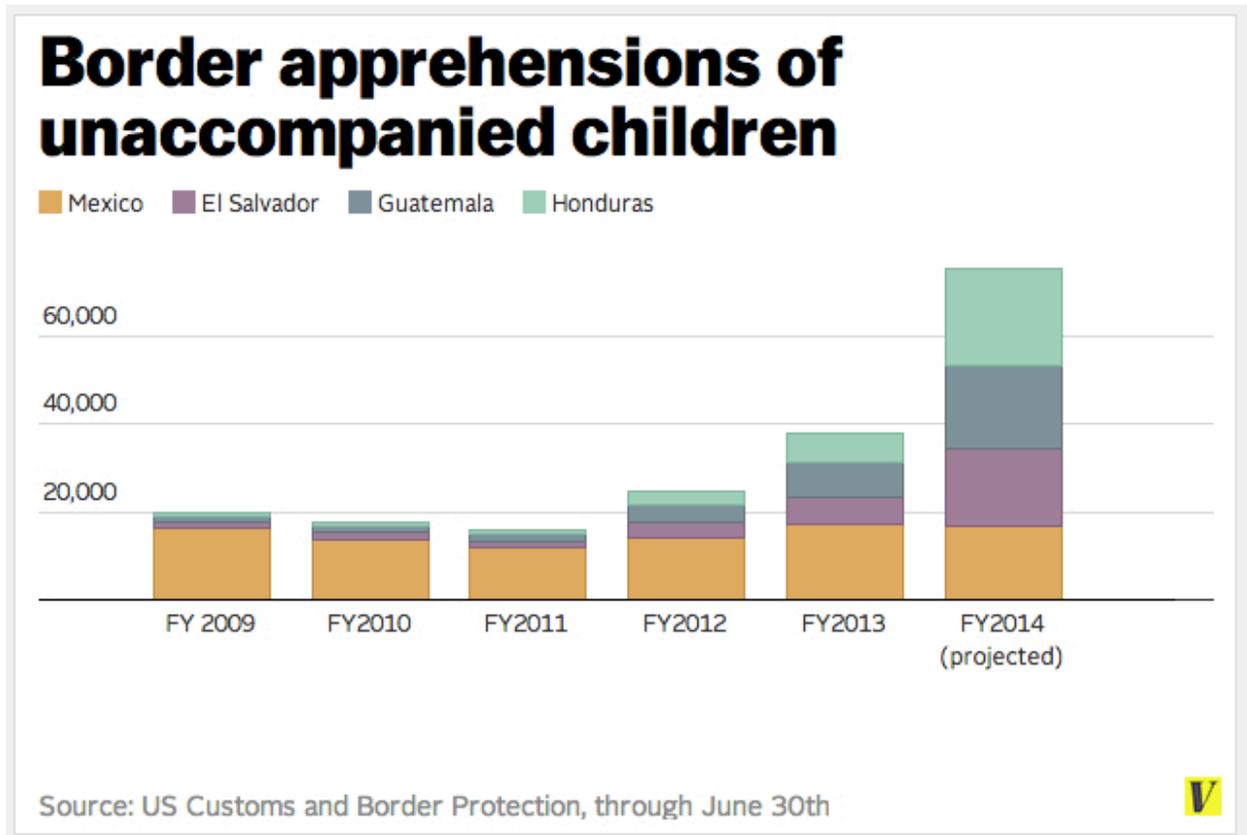


## Unaccompanied Child Refugees Coming into the U.S.

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For the first six months of 2014, the number of unaccompanied children detained at the US borders in Texas and other southwest states swelled to an all-time high of 57,525, compared to 27,884 for the comparable time period in 2013, an increase of 106%. Adolescent boys between 13-17 years are most commonly seen; however, U.S. Border Patrol reports an increase in the number of girls arriving. In 2014, for the first time ever, the majority of the children are coming from Central America; fewer children are coming from Mexico than from Guatemala, Honduras or El Salvador. The fastest growing group of unaccompanied children arriving at the border is under 12 years of age.



Gang violence in Central America, especially in Honduras and El Salvador, is driving a substantial exodus to other countries throughout the region. In particular, teenagers in these countries are being recruited to join gangs; if they refuse, the gang will often retaliate against them and their families. A MacArthur Foundation-funded study released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in early 2014 entitled “Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the

Need for International Protection” documents the high percentage of children from four countries, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, fleeing from violence or threats of violence. Additionally, a striking proportion of children from Mexico (38%) flee due to entrapment into human trafficking (Mexican children are frequently recruited by organized crime and other criminal actors to work as guides in the human smuggling industry).

Upon arrival into the U.S. the plight of the unaccompanied minors seeking asylum is not ideal. Many await hearings in front of a judge in overcrowded detention facilities that were not designed to house the “surge” of juveniles arriving on a daily basis. Anecdotal reports state that while they are in the detention facilities that are operated by the Office of Refugee Resettlement they do receive basic healthcare including immunizations. Once they have been “processed” and sent to various cities across the country, the access to health care is less clear. Pediatricians working at the border report high mental health needs among this population of children, including complicated post-traumatic stress disorder among victims of torture and violence. The children who are accepted into the U.S. because of family or other legal reasons often end up in schools and communities who are not prepared to address the needs of these children.

The combined health impact of these factors is considerable. Support from health and other sectors is essential for this vulnerable group in the population. In the US, asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to receive public services in the same way as other residents. Training for health care staff is also essential, and published resources are available to support this. Reports from the borders indicate that substantial numbers of these children are coming to Los Angeles and Southern California. Our local AAP chapter is interested in hearing from pediatricians who are seeing increased numbers of these children. The National AAP office has also asked for stories from pediatricians about the children they are caring for. We want to gather the necessary resources and give support to these pediatricians. Please contact Tomás Torices, AAP-CA Chapter 2 Executive Director, with any information that might help the AAP in its mission to provide health care for all children, particularly this population of unaccompanied child refugees.