

A Resurgence of Unaccompanied Alien Children?

May 20, 2016 (IN10493)

-|

Related Author

- [William A. Kandel](#)

-|

William A. Kandel, Analyst in Immigration Policy (wkandel@crs.loc.gov, 7-4703)

In the first six months of FY2016, apprehensions of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) at the U.S.-Mexico border have approached levels close to what they were in FY2014 when such migration flows reached what were characterized as "crisis" proportions.

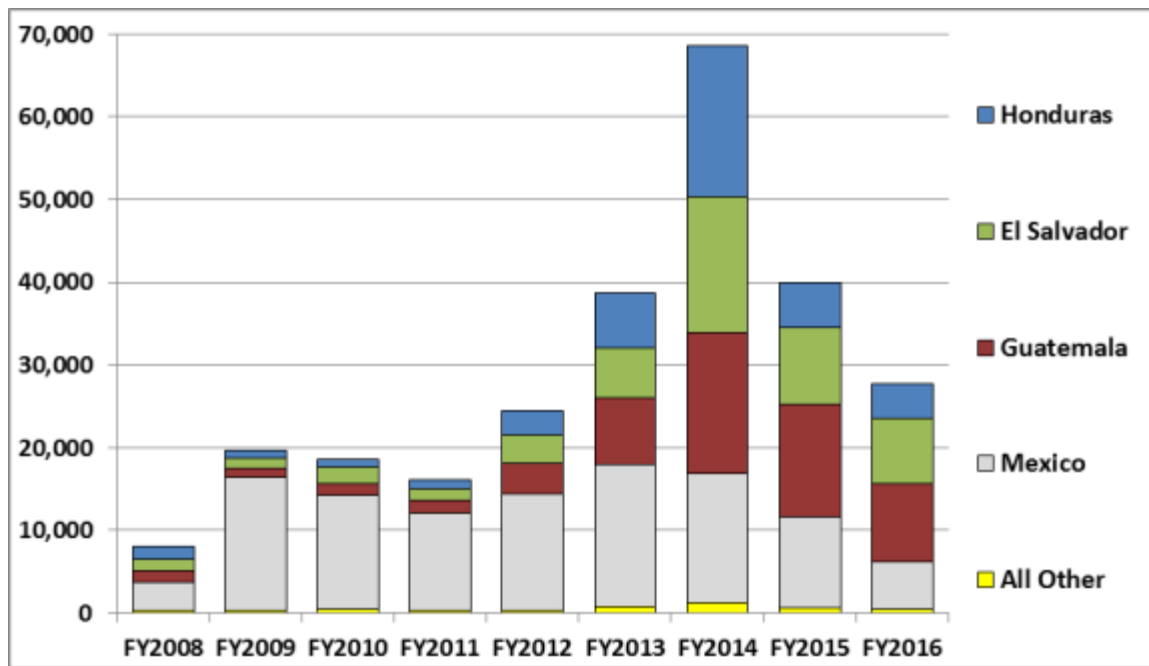
Unaccompanied alien children are statutorily defined as children who lack lawful immigration status in the United States, are under age 18, and lack a parent or legal guardian in the United States or a parent or legal guardian in the United States who is available to provide care and physical custody. They most often arrive at U.S. ports of entry or are apprehended along the U.S.-Mexico border. Less frequently, they are apprehended in the U.S. interior and determined to be juveniles and unaccompanied. UAC treatment and processing in the United States are governed by [several statutes and a legal settlement](#).

Between FY2011 and FY2014, apprehensions of unaccompanied alien children at the U.S.-Mexico border increased each year: from 16,067 in FY2011 to 24,481 in FY2012, 38,759 in FY2013, and 68,541 in FY2014 ([Figure 1](#)). At the close of FY2014, the Border Patrol had apprehended more UAC than in any of the previous six years and close to four times as many as in FY2011.

After reaching a peak in FY2014, total UAC apprehensions dropped to 39,970 (a 42% decline) in FY2015. Yet, in the first six months of FY2016 they numbered 27,754, a figure close to the amount (28,579) for the same period of FY2014. In comparison, UAC apprehensions numbered 15,616 during the first six months of FY2015.

Almost all apprehended unaccompanied children originate from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico ([Figure 1](#)). Flows of UAC from Mexico rose in FY2009 and have remained relatively steady. In contrast, the number of apprehended children from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador increased beginning in FY2012. In FY2009, for example, Mexican UAC accounted for 82% of all 19,668 UAC apprehensions, while the three other Central American countries accounted for 17% of the total. By the end of FY2014, those proportions had almost reversed, with Mexican children comprising 23% of total UAC apprehensions (68,541) for that fiscal year and children from the three other Central American countries comprising 75%. That trend has continued. For all of FY2015 and the first six months of FY2016, Mexican children comprised 28% and 21% of all UAC apprehensions, respectively.

Figure 1. UAC Apprehensions at the Southwest Border by Country of Origin, FY2008-



Sources: For FY2008-FY2013: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, United States Border Patrol, *Juvenile and Adult Apprehensions—Fiscal Year 2013*. For FY2014-FY2016, Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children," <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children>.

Notes: FY2016 figures represent six months, from October 1, 2015, through March 31, 2016.

The majority of UAC apprehensions have occurred within the Rio Grande and Tucson border sectors. The proportions of UAC who are female or under the age of 13 have also increased in recent years.

[Several federal agencies handle the apprehension, processing, and repatriation of UAC.](#) The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS's) Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehends, processes, and initially detains UAC arrested along U.S. borders. DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) transports UAC from CBP to the custody of HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS-ORR), which is responsible for detaining, sheltering, and placement of UAC as they await an immigration hearing. For UAC who apply for asylum, DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) adjudicates initial asylum petitions. The Department of Justice's (DOJ's) Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR) conducts immigration proceedings. ICE is responsible for returning UAC who are ordered removed from the United States.

HHS-ORR placements of UAC usually result in reunification with family members who reside in the United States. The number of unaccompanied children who will ultimately qualify for asylum or other forms of immigration relief that may allow them to remain in the United States remains unclear.

The FY2014 surge prompted the Administration to respond with [several initiatives](#) to unify efforts among federal agencies and to bolster programs geared toward unaccompanied children. Additionally, Congress [increased funding](#) for HHS and allowed DHS greater budget flexibility, among other actions taken. Since FY2014, the Administration has continued to request additional funding for programs geared toward unaccompanied children, and Congress has appropriated for some but not all such requests.