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**Violence Against Central American Unaccompanied Minors:
From Home to United States Border**

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Unaccompanied child migrants, or "UAC", are defined by United States legal code as: a child who—(A) has no lawful immigration status in the United States; (B) has not attained 18 years of age; and (C) with respect to whom – (i) there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States; or (ii) no parent or legal guardian in the United States is available to provide care and physical custody.¹

Since 2013, there has been a significant influx of UAC apprehensions by U.S. Border Patrol at the southwest border: an estimated 207,000 in the past four years. This demographic shift in the immigrant population from predominantly single adults or families to children migrating to the U.S. without the accompaniment of a parent or adult family member represents a new migration trend that requires investigation. The majority of the roughly 207,000 UAC apprehended since 2013 originate from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The purpose of this honors project was to research this migration trend in an attempt to identify, 1) why Central American children are migrating to the U.S. in such large numbers, 2) the dangers for migrants on the journey north, and 3) the dangers upon reaching the U.S.-Mexico border. The findings of the research reflect the significant danger children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras experience daily. While this research focuses on the unaccompanied child migrant population, the findings show the abuse and exploitation of Central American children as a whole. Gang-related criminal violence and extreme poverty create dangerous and deprived societies, which are pushing children to flee their homes in the hopes of better lives.

Abuse of children as they migrate north through Mexico is significant; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has stated that UACs are eligible for and in

¹ See 6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2); Retrieved from U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Portman, R., McCaskill, C. (Jan, 2016). *Protecting Unaccompanied Alien Children from Trafficking and Other Abuses: The Role of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.*

need of international protection.² Independent criminals, gangs, smuggling and trafficking organizations and others exploit migrants in numerous ways and at countless points throughout their journey. For these groups, migrants serve as useful targets to accrue capital and augment their traditional criminal activities, such as gun and drug smuggling. UACs are not the only migrant population that face extreme dangers during migration; criminals target migrants as a whole. Children are simply less protected than other migrant groups, such as families traveling together or male adults. Violence against migrants does not end once they reach the southwest border of the U.S. but is sustained by alien smuggling organizations and Mexican cartels that operate in both Mexico and the U.S.³

The results of this honors project raise serious questions about how to protect child migrants on their journey north. Although they enter the U.S. unlawfully, the present research shows that the vast majority of UACs from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have legitimate claims to asylum. It is unclear what the proper response should be to the injustices against not only Central American UACs, but also against the greater migrant population and Central Americans still living in their dangerous, poverty-stricken home countries. The findings of this research illuminate the abuse of UACs before and during migration, and upon arrival at their destination (the southwest border of the U.S.). More research must be done, however, to generate a comprehensive solution to these issues.

² UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (March, 2014). *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the need for International Protection*.

³ Texas Department of Public Safety (April 2014). *Assessing the Threat of Human Trafficking in Texas*.