

What is the situation for unaccompanied children at the southern border?

[Media](#) are reporting about a recent increase in asylum seekers, unaccompanied children (UCs), and immigrants crossing at the U.S.-Mexico border. [Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\) data](#) indicates that from Jan to Feb 2021, there was a 28% increase in apprehensions of UCs at the border. However historical data shows that these increases at the beginning of the year are not unusual, and track with [cyclical changes](#) in border crossing numbers due to seasonality. Border crossings tend to increase as winter ends and warm weather returns to the southwest. For reference, 2019 saw a 31% increase in apprehensions of UCs at the border over the same period. Yet even with the seasonal trends, it is true that the total number of UCs apprehended at the border have increased over 2019 (2020 crossings were much lower given the pandemic). In February 9,457 UCs were apprehended by CBP, compared to 7,243 during February of [2019](#).

How does this fit into the broader context?

The southern border region has always been a place of hope, welcome, and opportunity. Border communities know that the challenges they are experiencing at the border are NOT a *crisis* and are not new—they are the result of the hyper-militarization of the southern border [over the last two decades](#) that has criminalized, rather than humanized, immigrants. It is also the result of the near total closure of the border to people seeking protection, which is an abdication of our responsibility in the global community.

The United States has the capacity to protect people seeking safety at our borders, just as it has the capacity to undo the harmful effects of harsh enforcement policies at the border.

The current administration must not be deterred from moving toward equitable and responsible border governance, starting with a halt to the previous administration's misuse of Title 42 to block and expel asylum seekers, placing them in grave danger. We must employ a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to expeditiously welcome those arriving at our borders seeking protection and build welcoming centers and other infrastructure that expands public safety, upholds human rights and welcomes all people to our region in a safe, orderly and dignified way.

Why do UCs come to the United States?

Unaccompanied children are often fleeing desperation, life-threatening danger, gang recruitment and brutal violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Sometimes with loved ones, they have made the difficult choice to risk the dangerous journey to the United States on their own, trusting that they can find protection and safety. 75% of these minors are ages 15-17. More than 90% of these minors have family members already in the United States who they are planning to join upon arrival. We are also partly seeing the results of the pent-up demand for access to life-saving protection. The violence that drove them to the U.S. border has only worsened over the last year. Further, the Department of Homeland Security is deporting family units and deporting or detaining non-parent relatives arriving with a child, driving an increase in the number of designated-unaccompanied children. It is concerning that DHS is deporting or detaining the natural sponsor they arrive with and deflects blame to other agencies for taking time to find the next-best option.

What happens after these minors are apprehended by CBP?

The Biden administration inherited a dismantled immigration and asylum system, and is working to quickly rebuild the system in a safe, orderly, and humane way and to restore opportunities for people to seek protection. By law, CBP must transfer UCs to [Health and Human Services \(HHS\), Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\)](#) facilities within 72 hours, but the latest government data show they are spending 107 hours on average in bare-bones detention cells built for adults. The administration is coordinating a whole-of-government effort to identify additional personnel and safe shelters where children can be cared for appropriately and receive education, healthcare, and mental health services. While they wait to be placed with vetted family or sponsors. The average length of time a UC spends in an HHS facility before being released to a family member is 30 to 40 days, but the administration is [taking steps](#) to shorten this time frame.

What should we do now?

The goal is to make sure the arriving children are safe, housed, fed and cared for. The situation at the border isn't new, but our response can be. We have the resources, the capabilities, and most of all, the will to say yes to welcoming children and families with compassion and dignity. Children and families coming to the border are not a "surge"—they are people in need seeking safety and a better life. We need an all-of-government approach and mobilization of resources along with active collaboration with the groups that have been doing this for years to manage efficiently. Now is the time to be bold, to double down on our values of dignity and compassion, and to process these children immediately.

How can I help?

The best way to help is to support organizations and community-based services that are experienced and well equipped to support the health and safety needs of unaccompanied children. Traveling to the border should only be undertaken if it has been requested by and coordinated with a local service provider. Additionally, minors should only be housed by certified foster parents in coordination with licensed local agencies.

- **Learn:** CWS is ramping up community-based services for unaccompanied children, to learn more contact Christine Lemonda at clemonda@cwsglobal.org
 - **Volunteer:** Sign up to volunteer to assist community-based organizations, here: <https://www.volvy.org/> or through the American Red Cross.
 - **Advocate:** [Click here](#) to contact your members of Congress and urge the Biden administration to restore asylum protections and welcome all asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, and immigrants - and end immigrant detention and deportation.
 - **Donate:** Support the [CWS emergency appeal](#) to increase our capacity to respond to the needs of unaccompanied minors as the progress
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