

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/end-the-cycle-of-crises-for-unaccompanied-immigrant-children>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The United States must move away from crisis-based institutionalized custodial care and toward swift family reunification and zealous legal representation for all unaccompanied children.

For the past decade, conditions in northern Central America have propelled the migration of vulnerable and often traumatized children to the U.S. border. Many of them arrive seeking refuge as they flee targeted violence, pervasive corruption, and natural disasters. The U.S. governments failure to build a system for their adequate care and swiftly reunify them with family has resulted in an endless cycle of preventable crises that further traumatize young people as they seek safety.

The harms from this system of mass detention can be avoided if we adopt humane and commonsense practices. Children should not be [separated](#) from trusted relatives and placed in warehouse-like settings. Children should not be confined in [makeshift pens](#) by Customs and Border Protection, going days without being allowed outside to play or even shower. Children should not be [sleeping on the ground](#), wrapped in foil blankets, while an unprepared U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is forced to [appeal for help](#) across government agencies, including those with no expertise in child care or family reunification. Children should not be left to face [complicated immigration court proceedings alone](#).

This shameful treatment of children disgraces this country, and it must end. It is not enough for the Biden administration to simply cease the most heinous and gratuitously cruel practices of the previous administration. Nor can the Biden administration simply roll back those practices piecemeal without thoroughly evaluating and overhauling the entire system. Rather, the federal government must take systematic, proactive steps to improve the lives of children who arrive in the United States without a parent or guardian.

Vera has outlined [eight ways the federal government can build a system](#) that truly meets the needs of thousands of traumatized children who deserve safety, security, and respect. If implemented, these recommendations will ensure policymakers center the interests of unaccompanied children and adhere to best practices for child welfare.

Most urgently, the United States must move away from a model that relies on crisis-based institutionalized custodial care and toward one that prioritizes swift family reunification and zealous legal representation for all unaccompanied children.

The United States reportedly spends [\\$62 million](#) each week cobbling together makeshift housing and emergency care for thousands of unaccompanied children, many of whom spend long periods guarded by law enforcement officers who lack child welfare and trauma-informed training. These resources could be better spent stationing skilled social workers at the border where they can quickly assess family relationships, avoid unnecessary traumatic separations, and rapidly reunite children with relatives in the United States.

As it places children with safe adults who can care for them, the federal government must also ensure that all unaccompanied children have attorneys. Children cannot be expected to fend for themselves in complicated legal proceedings that can result in their deportation. This will require more legal talent in the field. The government should invest in programs to recruit and train attorneys to assist vulnerable children who arrive without their parents.

If circumstances in resource-poor countries south of the United States do not improve, we must prepare for the children who will inevitably arrive at our borders seeking safety and security. They deserve a system that values them: one that centers their humanity and adheres to best practices for the protection and care of vulnerable youth.

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