

“Understanding Unaccompanied Children”* by Colette Daiute, The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Children arriving to the United States alone are victims and deserve humane treatment. Many are orphans; most are displaced, lost, or betrayed by the traffickers their parents paid to bring them to family members or sponsors in the U.S. Most are teenage boys, coming from countries with extremely high rates of violence and poverty.

Returning these young people to their countries of origin will likely only victimize them further. In many cases their families and communities have been destroyed or displaced, which was often one of the reasons for their initial migration. They have few social support systems remaining, putting them at risk for being recruited or forced into violent gangs. Either led by adults or on their own, many embark on the dangerous migration north once again. The U.S. government’s attempts to increase the capacities of the governments where displaced children come from may lead to positive long-term outcomes, but these policies will not help children in desperate need of assistance today.

Research indicates that most young migrants who stay in the U.S. are eventually reunited with family members or other sponsors, but otherwise face bleak prospects. Displaced and undocumented, many say that they live in the shadows. The ever-present possibility of being apprehended, deported, or incarcerated makes many children and youth feel they should remain quiet and out of sight. They avoid participating in public life, may accept illegal employment, and forgo health services. Children fear not only for themselves but also for family members they want to protect.

Children and youth develop best when they are connected and accepted. Social supports—including family, sponsors, foster families, community organizations, sports teams, and cultural activities—are important foundations for human development. When asked to narrate their own experiences of growing up, young people typically highlight the importance of connecting with others, attending school, making a living, and ultimately contributing to their families and society.

Participating in social groups and purposeful activities is essential to development, but for undocumented children these experiences are often impossible. Growing up in situations where they feel they have to hide, these children learn that threats to their existence are ever-present. In our research, children tell us about obstacles to participation in family groups, education, and community organizations, and mention frustrations with bureaucratic procedures that thwart their efforts to connect with peers, teachers, and other organizations. Rather than attending dance classes or sports activities with peers, some children as

young as eight mention encounters with Homeland Security, DACA, HSS, INS, or other bureaucracies in the mazes that are their life stories.

Public policies can do much more to remove obstacles that lead to children and youth remaining in the shadows of our society. First, policies should eliminate provisions requiring increased border controls before advancing migrant children's rights to stay in the U.S. Second, officials should raise and professionalize the standards regarding who interviews child migrants caught at borders. This person plays a crucial role in deciding if children have the right to humanitarian status. Third, legislators could establish and fund high-quality programs to integrate immigrant youth, to monitor those programs, and to assess their effectiveness on an on-going basis. Government policies must continue to focus on finding safe and caring homes for immigrant children who cannot be united with family or sponsors.

Finally, we should all be sensitive to how our language can cause further harm. Immigrant children have reported that, for example, "American children at school say we are 'terrorists' and that our parents 'take American's jobs.'" Understanding that these children were forced to escape dire circumstances might lead us to cease passing along such pernicious myths that transform American dreams into American nightmares.

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