

JULY 18, 2014



HEARTLAND WORKERS CENTER



STATEMENT OF CONCERN about the HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN*



The Heartland Workers Center (HWC) and the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS), at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, wish to publically express their concern over: 1) the lack of understanding of the multidimensional and transnational causes precipitating the forced migration and refugee crisis of minors from Central America, and 2) the misguided, insufficient and unnecessarily politicized responses to this crisis as articulated by national and state government officials in the U.S. and across the border.

REGARDING THE CAUSES: No single cause can adequately explain the growing crisis of children from Central America fleeing through corridors of violence in the hope of reuniting with parents in the U.S., or otherwise finding that elusive place that will harbor them and protect their rights. While not the main culprit, [the United States is not exempt from responsibility](#) and has been deeply implicated in the decades-old root conditions precipitating this latest crisis of forced migration. **THIS IS INDEED OUR PROBLEM.** A lethal combination of the unaddressed ravages of wars, unsustainable development, a trans-border and increasingly violent drug economy, youth unemployment, rising numbers of female-headed households, poverty wages and the loss of governments' capacity to guarantee citizen security are only some of the [mutually-reinforcing drivers](#) behind the current crisis. The incapacity of the U.S. Congress to address, in a systemic and humane fashion, the long separation of children from their immigrant parents is a driver all of its own.

The fact that so many children are undertaking such a dangerous journey through these corridors of death and extortion should leave no doubt in anyone's mind, or among compassionate Americans, that we are confronting a phenomenon that is part [forced-migration crisis](#), part [refugee crisis](#), and overwhelmingly a [humanitarian crisis](#) of untold proportion.

REGARDING THE SOLUTIONS: We must be wary of proposals based on poorly understood causes as well as on simplistic characterizations of this growing flow of unaccompanied minors. Some children make the decision on their own, despite their parents' admonishments to the contrary. Some of the parents are on this side and others are in their

countries of origin. Many parents are simply absent or unable to care for their children as a result of the intertwined causes mentioned above. Solutions must be tailored to the unique circumstances of the children.

In the shorter term:

- ◆ Congressional representatives must raise their voices to combat nativist impulses threatening to divide the nation and our communities, and should work with local organizations to educate the public and enact well-informed and just laws.
- ◆ Congress must say NO to the [\(IN\) "HUMANE" Act](#) introduced by Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar (NM-28) and Texas Republican Senator John Cornyn. The bill would roll back key protections for children which were signed into law through the bipartisan [Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act \(TVPRA\)](#) of 2008—under President George W. Bush. Nebraska Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (District 1) was a principal cosponsor of the TVPRA.
- ◆ President Obama must not agree to a quid pro quo and sign the (IN) HUMANE Act in exchange for congressional approval of his \$3.7 billion emergency bill, most of which is earmarked to expedite the children's deportation, militarize the border and build detention centers. What is needed is a truly *humane* act to fund social and legal services for the children and their sponsors.
- ◆ The Obama administration must exercise decisive leadership at this [historic juncture of U.S.-Latin American relations](#) by engaging in serious dialogues and actions with its counterparts in Mexico and Central America in order to address these jointly-created crises with jointly-articulated solutions.
- ◆ The president must exercise the power of the pen, and make use of all the legal instruments at his disposal, to issue directives that ease family reunification and asylum procedures.
- ◆ Local organizations, public intellectuals and local elected officials in places of origin and destination must act swiftly to counteract the [xenophobic narratives](#) and draconian policies fueled by campaigns of misinformation. The demonization of the unaccompanied migrant children must stop. The level of public discourse is currently engaged in a race to

the bottom with more and more bigoted language emerging from our elected representatives which in turn fuels the levels of vitriol in the general public.

- ◆ Governments on both sides must be held accountable for the manner in which their discourses, actions or inactions place vulnerable children, families and communities at a greater risk of violence, discrimination and social exclusion. Registering to vote and voting in record numbers in the next U.S. elections will be decisive in the fight for responsible leadership, a sensible immigration reform and social equality.
- ◆ Mexico cannot be viewed as a bystander and its children as unaffected by this multi-dimensional crisis. Nor must its role be reduced to that of “southern-border-patrol agency” for the United States. [Mexican children are silently deported](#) everyday as a result of a binational agreement which must be reviewed. The culture of “protect and denounce” promoted among Mexican migrants under the “[Paisano](#)” program, must be extended to all migrants crossing its dangerous territory. The U.S. and Mexico must partner in these comprehensive endeavors. Special resources must be allocated to put an end to [sexual violence against minors and women](#) embarking on this dangerous journey.

In the medium- to long-term:

- ◆ The U.S. must sign the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).
- ◆ The U.S. government must do more to stop the [flow of guns](#) going across the border and flowing through a death-chain of black markets, corrupt police forces, gangs and children.
- ◆ It is time for the U.S. government to invest in, and support sustainable regional development practices along with its Latin American counterparts. Governments on both sides

must stop turning a blind eye to U.S. investments in economic ventures and un-regulated trade agreements which are destroying local economies and the environment and ultimately displacing thousands of people from their communities of origin.

- ◆ The U.S. must do more to address the drug economy fueled by domestic demand and by ill-advised economic policies, which have particularly destructive impacts on youth.
- ◆ Citizens of origin and destination countries must increase their capacity to [engage with neighbors and across borders](#) in order to find solutions that work for them and strategies that serve to hold local, national and foreign governments accountable for policies and practices affecting their quality of life.
- ◆ We, citizens and residents in the U.S. and in Nebraska in particular, must urge Congress to take immediate action to address this humanitarian crisis, as well as to continue to work toward a just and sensible immigration policy.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

All of the unaccompanied children, from Mexico, Central America or beyond, must be accorded the respect and dignity inherent in all human beings. They must not be referred to as theoretical constructs or numerical abstracts. In order to emphasize the humanitarian aspect of the aid and action required, the human element must also be emphasized. It is not a problem of X thousands of children at the border, but rather it is a problem of each individual child fleeing persecution, suffering, harm and famine. That problem should not be diminished or dealt with generically because of the multitude, but should instead be prioritized as the true exigency that it is and dealt with proactively and positively.

* Read this statement online, and check out the hyperlinks to read background information about the Statement of Concern.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Nebraska at Omaha or University of Nebraska Board of Regents.



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