



Child Migrants: The Facts

- The United Nations estimates that worldwide, 5 million children have migrated irregularly — with their families or unaccompanied.
- The US government predicts that 90,000 unaccompanied migrant children will cross the US-Mexico border in fiscal year 2014, more than 10 times the number who crossed in 2011. Thousands more children have crossed with a parent, also an increase from previous years.

The Law

- The United Nations stated in 2013 that children should never be detained for immigration reasons, and that immigration detention can never be considered in a child's "best interests."
- US law allows Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to detain children for a maximum of 72 hours. Prior to the current surge, children were held for only about 12 hours, but recent reports indicate that CBP is holding children for periods closer to 10 days or 2 weeks. The children are then transferred to the Office for Refugee Resettlement (ORR) where they again may be detained.
- Under current US policy, unaccompanied migrant children who may be refugees must undergo initial asylum screenings and some trafficking screenings by armed and uniformed CBP officers. By contrast, international standards say it is in unaccompanied children's best interests to be assessed in a friendly and safe atmosphere by qualified professionals who are trained in age- and gender-sensitive interviewing techniques.

Evolution of US Policy towards Irregular Migrants

- As early as 2007, hundreds of families picked up for violating US immigration law were being detained for as long as six months while they awaited deportation hearings. In the largest facility in Texas, families — including some with very young children — were clothed in prison garb, shut in locked cells and received inadequate food and medical care. Guards disciplined children harshly and, in some cases, threatened to separate them from their parents if they acted up.
- Only after intense advocacy by human rights groups, in 2009 the Obama administration announced that, instead of sending families to Texas, it would set some of them free (to be monitored with electronic ankle bracelets) and send others to a smaller, less prison-like facility (an 85-bed former nursing home in Pennsylvania).
- In June 2014, the Obama administration announced plans to open more family detention centers, starting with a 700-bed center in New Mexico, to tackle a surge in unauthorized migration across the southeastern US border.