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Long Island

Unaccompanied minors from Central America continue flight to LI

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Migrants walk along railroad tracks after getting off a train during their journey toward the U.S.-Mexico border in Ixtepec, Mexico, July 12, 2014. Minors fromtral

Minors from Central America who cross the border into the United States illegally and unaccompanied by an adult continue to come to Long Island in significant numbers, deep into the first year of Donald Trump's presidency.

Together, Nassau and Suffolk counties had received 1,700 of those young migrants from October to July, with two months remaining in the federal fiscal year, according to updated figures from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

The "unaccompanied minors," legally defined as such when they enter the country without adults before turning 18, hail mostly from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. They are housed in shelters contracted by the federal government before they're placed with relatives and sponsors, as mandated by law.

The resettlement figures so far this fiscal year — with 993 young migrants moving to Suffolk, 707 moving to Nassau and 653 ending up in New York City's Queens County — are trending below last year's levels but already surpass the total in each of those jurisdictions for the entire 2015 fiscal year.

Their continuing arrival points to “an enduring phenomenon” of Central American minors seeking harbor in the United States as they flee violence and poverty, said Doris Meissner, senior fellow and director of the U.S. immigration policy program at the Migration Policy Institute, a think tank in Washington, D.C.



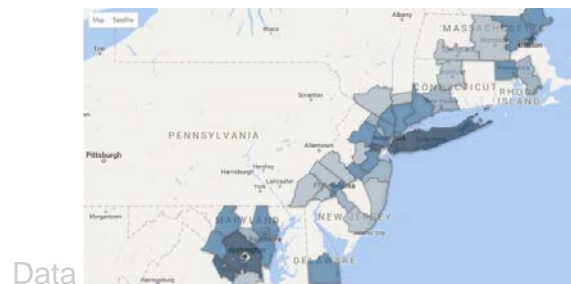
“It’s a trend line” that points to a steady migration, she said.

Immigrant advocates say those minors should be welcome and protected, while local officials have often called for more resources from the federal government to help them adjust.

But their influx has been cited by Trump and other officials as a factor in the local resurgence of the MS-13 Salvadoran gang and its acts of brutal violence, especially in Suffolk, where it is linked to 27 killings since 2013. Some unaccompanied minors were both among those accused of gang involvement and their victims, though police haven’t offered an official count.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and Rep. Peter King have expressed concerns about new arrivals being vulnerable to gang recruitment. U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, during an April visit to Central Islip, went as far as saying the gang sends people here. President Trump echoed that drumbeat of concern during a July 28 visit to Brentwood, placing blame on the previous administration.

“In the three years before I took office, more than 150,000 unaccompanied alien minors arrived at the border and were released all throughout our country into United States’ communities — at a tremendous monetary cost to local taxpayers and also a great cost to life and safety,” Trump said. “Nearly 4,000 from this wave were released into Suffolk County — congratulations — including seven who are now indicted for murder. You know about that.”



Nearly 38,900 minors have been placed in homes across the country this year, including the first six months of Trump’s presidency, with 3,650 arriving in New York. More than 172,000 minors have been resettled in U.S. cities and towns over the last four fiscal years.

Their migration is classified separately and treated differently from so-called “Dreamers,” young migrants from more countries in Latin America and around the world who were brought to the U.S. illegally as minors and had been shielded from deportation by a limited “deferred action” program known as DACA, authorized by former President Barack Obama. That program has been targeted for cancellation by the Trump administration, although there were reports this week of a potential bipartisan deal in Congress that could extend it.

In the case of unaccompanied minors fleeing desperate conditions in Central America, activists question the veracity of connections drawn between their migration and the gang and worry about resulting police tactics.

“These children and their families need a lot of support and assurances so they are not taken advantage of and are not victimized by the gangs,” said Walter Barrientos, Long Island organizer with the Brentwood office of Make the Road New York. “What we have seen now is that being an unaccompanied minor and being believed to be a gang member automatically puts these children in a path of criminalization and deportation.”

While Suffolk County Police Commissioner Timothy Sini said “the vast majority are law abiding residents . . . and there are many success stories regarding these children” he stated that “a disproportionate number of MS-13 gang members are UACs,” as unaccompanied minors are known in government bureaucratese.



Emigrants from Central America after turning themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents on December 8, 2015 near Rio Grande City, Texas. Photo Credit: Getty Images / John Moore

Localities are left alone to cope with that reality, he added.

“If the federal government continues to place children in our communities, they need to provide necessary resources,” he said. “They’ve failed Suffolk County . . . Essentially, the federal government is placing their children here and essentially wiping their hands clean of it and saying it’s a local problem. It’s outrageous.”

Officials with federal agencies overseeing various aspects of their resettlement and immigration process told Newsday that the arrival of those children continues to be unpredictable and that they are doing their best to comply with the law by sheltering, vetting and resettling them in a timely manner.

The government agencies are bound by requirements of court precedent and a 2008 Bush-era law that aims to keep vulnerable children safe and requires the government care for unaccompanied minors until they’re placed with relatives or sponsors, pending immigration proceedings.

Victoria Palmer, a spokeswoman with the Administration for Children and Families, which oversees the resettlement office, said the agency considers “the safety of American communities” as well as the children’s and that each migrant undergoes “a comprehensive evaluation that includes, if known, criminal history, prior acts of violence, and gang involvement.”

King, the Seaford Republican whose district includes areas of Brentwood and Central Islip where many of the children have settled, said he’s crafting a legislative proposal to bolster safeguards both for the children and the community at large.

His bill will require fingerprinting of families receiving unaccompanied minors; routinely sharing information with local police departments on their placement and requiring more follow-up on their well-being.

The purpose would be to avoid putting minors in situations where gangs can recruit them.

King said: "Let's assume that a kid is a totally innocent young man and he's placed with a family with an MS-13 connection. That is not just unfair to the school district and to the community, it's most unfair to the kid himself."

The various federal agencies charged with the adjudication of cases and the custody and care of unaccompanied minors said that they have established and continue to review vetting procedures.

David Lapan, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, said all the children "are subject to intensive background and security checks" that include interviews with highly trained officers of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services "with each refugee applicant to learn more about the applicant's claim for refugee status and admissibility."

Those who work with the migrants say the narrative linking them to gangs doesn't match what they see in most new arrivals.

Many children, they say, come here precisely because they fear gangs and need support to build productive lives.

"If we are talking about the danger of gangs, just imagine, what happens if you have a child who is now marginalized, who's left without a chance to get documentation — you're pushing that child to a life where there's more of a chance of engaging in bad behavior," said Elise Damas, of the Central American Refugee Center, a nonprofit in Hempstead and Brentwood.

"These children are really seeking refuge, they are seeking safety, a place to live, to go to school, to work, to not live in constant fear," said Theo Liebmann, a law professor who directs clinical programs at Hofstra University, including one assisting unaccompanied minors. "I feel like it's the fabric of America . . . to welcome those people and to make them feel at home here."

The cities and regions affected need to brace for the continued arrival of minors, said Meissner of the D.C.-based immigration think tank, as "the deep long-term issues of poverty and lack of opportunity and jobs" in Central America will not be fixed overnight.

"If you accept the fact that this is a longer-term situation," Meissner said, "it's also important to recognize that the answers should take some time" to address the causes of that migration while providing resources for minors in their new communities.

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