

C-U IMMIGRATION FORUM

www.cuimmigrationforum.org

Friends,

We've all been hearing quite a bit lately about the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the arrival of tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors coming here from Central America. As is so often the case with dramatic situations, the drama itself tends to become the focus of media attention and the actual stories of the people involved are all but lost in the clamor, leaving those not directly affected hard pressed to understand what's really going on.

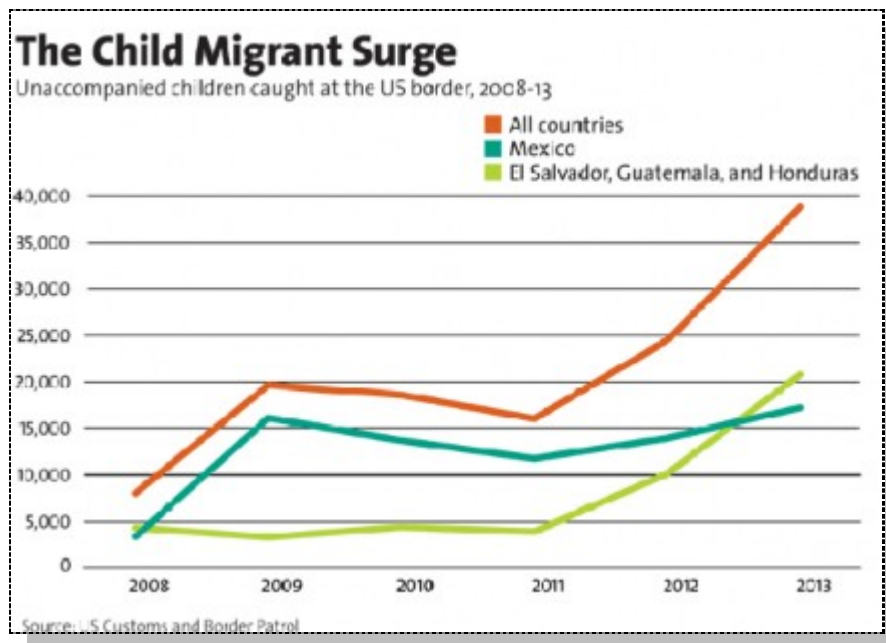
Adding to this problem is the fact that opportunistic politicians and partisan operatives take advantage of this confusion by introducing speculation and analysis calculated to sway public opinion in their direction. The media feels compelled in the name of objectivity to repeat these comments until they appear to be as legitimate a part of the story as any of the actual facts, thus muddying the waters even further and making it more difficult for an outside observer to disentangle the various threads.

So what is actually happening here?

Let me tell you what I know about the situation . . . for several years now, thousands of children have been fleeing increasingly unsafe conditions in their home countries and have been undertaking an extremely perilous journey North in hopes of finding some sort of refuge here in the United States. The number of children doing this has increased dramatically in the last few years, and problems with our broken immigration system -- exacerbated by the fact that we spend an inordinate amount of our available money on enforcement and the militarization of our Southern border -- are such that even though we are obligated by law, to say nothing of ethical duty, to feed, house, and process these children upon arrival, we are often only barely able to do so.

The specific law in question dates from 2008 when President Bush signed the [Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act](#) (TVPRA) which stated that unaccompanied minors from countries that do not share a border with the United States must be handed over to the Department of Health and Human Services and then go before an immigration court rather than face immediate deportation. Children from countries with contiguous borders, like Mexico, can attempt to persuade a border patrol agent that they will face persecution if sent back home too -- which would then require that they be treated in a similar manner -- but as such determinations are left to the discretion of the agent, and the children have no representation and are forced to make a case for themselves during a long and already stressful interview, very few of these appeals are successful and the majority are sent back right away. The existing law was primarily directed at children from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (who together account for 74 percent of the recent increase in child migrants as shown in the graph below), three countries which have the first, second, and

fifth highest murder rates in the world. Gang violence is rampant in these places and according to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report, well over half of the children interviewed 'suffered, been threatened, or fears serious harm' in their home countries. The following chart from [Mother Jones graphs](#) the figures:



These facts alone, if no other, go a long way towards explaining why children from these countries are desperate enough to attempt such an arduous and dangerous journey but regardless of why they are coming, the point that needs to be addressed is that many are already here and more are on their way, and there is an urgency for us to decide how we will respond.

President Obama recently asked Congress for \$1.4 billion to help deal with the situation and create a multiagency task force to coordinate a response. The House of Representatives countered by offering \$694 million and attempting to modify the TVPRA in order to make it easier to deport the children quickly. The also voted to defund DACA, President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program which would place another 560,000 young people who have spent most of their lives in this country in jeopardy of immediate deportation as well, so as we can see the various power centers in Washington are viewing the unaccompanied minor crisis through the same lens and as part and parcel with the larger question of immigration itself, and with predictable consequences.

I would argue, however, that this situation is a separate issue, at least in the sense that it requires a specific resolution of its own. Certainly comprehensive immigration reform, no matter what form it takes, could and should also deal with any future reoccurrence of this kind of situation, but regardless of how the larger question of immigration reform is answered, we have children who are in need right now, and who can't wait for the partisan politics and conflicting world views in Washington to be resolved if indeed those things ever can be.

Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa is quoted as having said *There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children* and I couldn't agree more. If we have any pretension to be a compassionate or civilized society, it is our obligation to nurture, love, and protect the children in our care, regardless of how they came to be in that position.

Someday, eventually, I do believe that wisdom will prevail and we'll resolve our current immigration debates and return to dealing with our mutual problems instead of trying to paint each other as the problem, but as things stand now that will take a long time and it will be the result of the work of many good people who have yet to stand up and be counted. Until that time there are immediate needs which must be addressed and the situation of the unaccompanied minors is one of those.

The *CU Immigration Forum* believes that on this issue at least, we should put ideology aside and that everything that can be done should be done to care for these children even as we would wish our own children to be cared for if the situation were reversed. We do not believe that nationality, ethnicity, religion, or reason for coming makes any child more, or less, worthy of our love and protection.

As such, we invite all members of the community to attend the dialogue on September 16th at 6:30 PM at the UU Church, on the corner of Birch and Green, Urbana.

I thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,
Thomas Garza
President, *CU Immigration Forum*

The *CU Immigration Forum* is a group of immigrants, students, clergy, service providers, labor union representatives, residents and community organizations concerned about the progress and plight of immigrants in the Champaign County community that works to:

- celebrate the diversity and culture that immigrants contribute to our community;
- educate the public about issues that affect local immigrant communities;
- advocate for the rights of immigrants and encourage their full participation in civic, cultural, social and political life in our community;
- promote permanent and positive changes that will improve the quality of life for immigrants in our community; and
- organize for policies that lead to just and humane treatment to all immigrants that are part of our community.