

# United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

## Written Hearing Testimony

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“Ensuring the Safety and Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children”

June 14, 2023

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham and members of the Committee,

It is an honor to testify before you today on ensuring the safety and well-being of unaccompanied children. My name is Anne Basham, and I am the CEO of Ascend Consulting, a human rights advocacy firm, and I am also the Founder and Chair of the Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking which is a consortium of Members of Parliament and Congress, government leaders, and lived-experience experts from around the world with the shared mission of combatting human trafficking through educating lawmakers and collaborating on policy solutions.

Today, in this hearing we have an opportunity to address one of the most important human rights issues facing our country right now, and that is the safety and well-being of unaccompanied children. In March alone of this year, more than 12,000 unaccompanied children crossed the U.S. border, and this number has remained relatively consistent month after month.<sup>1</sup> Many of these children were between the ages 11-15: the prime age targeted for sex trafficking. As a mother of two teenage girls in this age range, I am especially distraught at the thought of the physical and sexual violence, human degradation, hunger and thirst that these children often experience en route to the United States. Sadly, this is just a prelude to the violence that many experience once they are in the U.S., when promises of a better life are shattered and many are sold repeatedly for sex or as slave laborers.

To address the root, it is important to first understand who is crossing the Southern border. 47% of unaccompanied children apprehended in the United States come from Guatemala, while an additional 40% come from Honduras and El Salvador.<sup>2</sup> Last year I spoke at the Guatemalan Congress on the intersection between human trafficking and transnational crime. I have met Guatemala’s President Giammattei, and Guatemala’s Secretary Against Sexual Violence, Sandy Recinos, is a colleague and member of the international human trafficking taskforce I lead. In

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/uac-program-fact-sheet.pdf>

February of last year Guatemala passed a law which increased prison sentences for human smugglers from 2-5 years to 10-30 years. Guatemalan leadership clearly do not want their children to leave their country with smugglers, nor do they want their children to face the unspeakable violence that often awaits them on the journey to and after arrival in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to arriving in the United States, these children and their parents are frequently from remote regions of Central American countries which are often impoverished and somewhat isolated because of language barriers. For example, Guatemala alone has 24 different dialects<sup>4</sup>. This means that it is difficult to communicate with parents the incredible risks their children face if they leave in search of a better life. Coyotes often trick or coerce mothers into paying children's hefty smuggling fees, and the mothers do this because they believe that a better life awaits their children in the United States. Unfortunately, for many children, this is not true.

Human trafficking is big business, and unlike other human rights abuses it is a transnational organized crime and the second largest criminal enterprise in the world – only surpassed by drug trafficking. It generates more than \$150 billion annually and funds every nation and movement that is currently threatening the security of our world today. This is why there is a critical intersection between human trafficking and illicit finance networks. For example, the Taliban partially support their operations off the opium trade, and sex trafficking is a key component of their funding apparatus; unlike drugs or weapons, a person can be sold over and over again<sup>5</sup>.

MS-13, one of the most notorious gangs operating in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, operates similarly. In 2015, the U.S. Treasury found that “[m]oney generated by local MS-13 cliques” engaged in sex trafficking, drug trafficking, murder-for-hire, extortion, and money laundering was “consolidated and funneled to the group’s leadership in” Central America<sup>6</sup>. All of these factors contribute to a heightened risk of human trafficking for children especially.

Many of the Latin American children sent across the border alone or with smugglers have been taken by organized criminals in the cartels.<sup>7</sup> What frequently follows is child sex trafficking or labor exploitation. The problem exists not in border towns alone. It has spread deep within the United States — in big cities, suburban neighborhoods, and rural communities. Most of you have probably read the *New York Times* story on the labor exploitation of children as young as 13

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/guatemalan-congress-approves-tougher-sentence-human-traffickers-30-years-2022-02-02/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-guatemala#:~:text=There%20are%2025%20languages%20spoken,Indigenous%20languages%20%2D%20Gar%C3%ADfuna%20and%20Xinca.>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/sep/16/how-sex-trafficking-funds-the-taliban-and-terroris/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl10026>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nypost.com/2021/04/17/how-bidens-border-policy-will-increase-child-sex-trafficking-to-us/>

working throughout the night in meat-processing plants<sup>8</sup>. The Department of Homeland Security's HSI has been involved in the prosecution of sex trafficking cases involving children as young as 14 who were funneled along a "human pipeline" from Mexico to New York City.

Other unaccompanied children enter the U.S. foster care system. For children who have been raped, beaten, exploited, or starved on the long journey to the U.S., this can be a frightening but welcome transition: they are free from the coyotes and shuttled through a version of the "American life" they have seen on TV and social media, with clean clothes to wear, regular meals to eat, and beds to sleep in.

But the U.S. foster care system is no sure haven. Certainly, many U.S. families who open their homes to foster children do so with integrity and self-sacrifice. My parents were foster parents like this, and I was a foster sibling as a child. I applaud people like Venus Bradley here today who give vulnerable children loving homes. We need more of them. But we know that the U.S. foster care system is already overly burdened with the number of children in the system often outpacing the number of available families to provide a safe home<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, U.S.-born children in foster care are already the most vulnerable to trafficking. In fact, 60% of trafficking victims have been in the foster care system at one time.<sup>10</sup> Increased burdens on the foster care system put already vulnerable children more firmly in the crosshairs of traffickers and other abusers.

The reality is that it is difficult to reconnect unaccompanied minors with their families once they arrive in the United States, so many parents never know what their children have experienced, and they are unable to warn other parents of the dangers these children face. In 2014, President Obama made a statement to the people of Latin America saying, "Don't send your children unaccompanied...they might not make it."<sup>11</sup> If more Central American parents knew the truth of what their children would experience, many would think again before relinquishing them into the hands of violent criminals.

Our country is divided on many issues, but on this we can all agree – no child should be trafficked, and no child should be abused. Because of this I am hopeful that there are creative, compassionate, and comprehensive solutions that we can all agree on which will help unaccompanied children stay safe and with families who love them.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/business/child-labor-packers-sanitation.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.kxii.com/video/2022/06/01/children-experiencing-foster-care-outpacing-available-local-homes/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://nfyi.org/mission/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-warns-central-americans-send-children-borders/story?id=24320063>

Thank you again, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham and members of the Committee for your time and attention today. I am sincerely grateful for your focus on this issue and protecting children. I look forward to answering your questions.