

Central American Minors Program: Providing a Safe Alternative to a Dangerous Migration Journey

The Central American Minors (CAM) program helped prevent some children from having to make the dangerous journey to seek safety in the United States by allowing a limited number to apply for refugee protection or parole from their home country. Ended in 2017 by the Trump Administration, President Biden has promised to reinstate CAM. To be effective, the new program must expand its scope and eligibility criteria, ensure that children have legal assistance, and incorporate best interests standards in the processes.

Background: The Central American Minors Program 2014-2017

In response to the dramatic rise in migration in the summer of 2014, the Obama Administration created an alternative mechanism to reduce the need for children in danger to strike out on a dangerous journey to the United States alone and unprotected. From its inception in 2014, the CAM Refugee/Parole Program provided an important lifeline for many Central American children at risk of persecution or other violence, whose parents were lawfully present in the United States. The CAM program utilized the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to conduct “in-country” refugee processing, which allowed children to be interviewed for refugee status without leaving their home country. For those children that did not meet the criteria for refugee status, CAM allowed for parole into the United States when they were found to be in danger in their countries. Parole provides temporary safety but is not a means to permanent protection.

The CAM program offered a new model for refugee adjudications in Central America that had the potential to change the pattern of migration to the United States, especially for unaccompanied children. During its short duration, the program helped over 3,000 children safely resettle to the United States and avoid a perilous journey to be safe. However, the program could have helped many more.

The program was limited in both scope and resources and as a result, it excluded many children needing protection. For example, only children with a parent who was lawfully present in the United States were eligible; this did not include parents who were seeking lawful status, such as asylum. It also excluded close relatives and caregivers, for example, grandparents residing in the United States who could provide a safe and loving home.

Additionally, due in large part to a lack of legal services, many children were not granted permanent refugee status, but instead only temporary humanitarian parole. Without access to counsel in Central America, children have difficulty understanding complex refugee criteria and processes and making their case. For example, in asylum applications, a similarly complex and notoriously difficult area of law, children are five times more likely to prevail when they are represented by an attorney. Providing counsel to children during interviews would create a fairer process and lead to better outcomes.

In Honduras, 13-year-old “Omar” suffered extreme child abuse. His father had been forced to flee Honduras years earlier following threats on his life and came to the United States. Omar was left with relatives who abused him. As the abuse intensified, Omar did not have anywhere to turn for protection. When Omar’s father learned of the CAM program, he immediately applied with the help of a local U.S. resettlement agency and contacted KIND for assistance. KIND placed the case with a pro bono attorney in Honduras who began to meet with Omar and gain his trust. In light of the severity of the abuse, KIND requested expedited processing of the case. With the help of the KIND lawyer, Omar was interviewed by U.S. officials in Honduras and one month later, the U.S. government granted him refugee status. Seven months after filing the CAM application and three months after his refugee interview, Omar finally arrived in the United States and safely reunified with his father. Both were overjoyed, despite the long wait. The U.S. resettlement agency helped Omar’s father enroll Omar in school and line up counseling to address his trauma.

How did the CAM program work?

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The child's parents in the U.S. file an application with a U.S. Resettlement Agency.
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Child is contacted by a Resettlement Support Center in home country and they conduct a pre-screening interview.
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The child and the parents submit DNA testing to prove their relationship.
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The child is interviewed by a USCIS Officer in home country who determines if the child qualifies for refugee status or is eligible for parole.
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USCIS approves the child for refugee status (or could grant "parole").
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The child receives a medical exam, background check, and orientation program; the parents may undergo a home study.
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The child is assisted by the Resettlement Support Center to safely travel to the U.S. to reunite with their parents.

Restarting the Central American Minors Program

In 2021, President Biden announced a reopening of the CAM program as part of a comprehensive regional migration management strategy. The [first phase](#), started in March 2021, is focused on processing the thousands of eligible applications that were closed when the program ended in 2017, leaving children and their families in limbo.

A second phase will allow for new applications under updated guidance and eligibility criteria. KIND urges that the program be re-envisioned to reach more children, provide more robust, faster protection, and include additional resources to families.

New and expanded refugee processing mechanisms like CAM will provide life-saving protection to more children and safe alternatives to dangerous migration. However, these programs should not replace in any way children’s right to migrate or access the United States or Mexico. The United States and governments in the region must work together to guarantee the rights of migrant children and ensure they are protected throughout their journey.



How can CAM be Improved to Protect More Children?

In recognition of lessons learned from the first CAM program, an updated program for Central American children should be developed with the following considerations:

- Broader eligibility criteria to reach more children and families. New criteria should include not only children with a documented parent in the United States, but also children who have any adult relative in the United States who can safely care for them, regardless of status. Children without family members should also be eligible for resettlement as unaccompanied refugee minors.
- Targeted community outreach and training for civil society organizations that could provide referrals and assistance to family members applying from the United States.
- Legal assistance for children in Central America through the provision of qualified attorneys to accompany children throughout the process, including during their interviews.
- Guaranteed counsel for children granted humanitarian parole. Access to attorneys in the United States would help paroled children maintain lawful status and gain permanent protections when eligible.
- A child-sensitive process with a robust mechanism for best interests processes by child welfare experts. Considerations for the best interests of the child should drive outcomes, including the possibility of granting parole for children that do not qualify for refugee status.
- Funding for dedicated child protection specialists in each country to ensure a child protection lens throughout the process and to help address immediate protection needs.
- Accommodations for children in need of immediate protection through evacuation and temporary internal relocation, emergency transit centers in each country, and quickly processed humanitarian parole. Funding should be made available to civil society organizations throughout the region to provide emergency services, including safe shelter to children in need of internal relocation while waiting for processing.
- Expedient processing of claims so that qualifying children can gain safety as quickly as possible. Efforts should be made to ensure that security checks are expedited so they do not create unwarranted delays.
- Improved accessibility for particularly vulnerable children and those in rural and remote areas. Interviews and services should be adapted for children, gender-sensitive, and available outside of urban centers to reach more children and minimize vulnerable children's need to travel.

For more information, please read:

[Thwarted Potential: The Need to Revive and Expand the Central American Minors Program](#)

[Central American Minors \(CAM\) Program Infographic](#)

[KIND Blueprint: Concrete Steps to Protect Unaccompanied Children on the Move](#)

