

Recommendations for including migrant children in the U.S. government's Collaborative Migration Management Strategy

In recent years, children and families have comprised the majority of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. Children in particular are increasingly migrating alone across the Americas. In July 2021, the Biden Administration launched the [Collaborative Migration Management Strategy](#) (CMMS) with the goal of promoting safe, orderly, and humane migration in North and Central America. The U.S. government is implementing the strategy in collaboration with regional governments and other stakeholders and has provided [updates](#) on implementation under the eight lines of effort. As a uniquely vulnerable population, children and their needs must be included in each of the CMMS lines of effort.

As the nation's leading organization advocating for the rights of unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children, KIND serves thousands of unaccompanied immigrant children every year. KIND's offices in Mexico work to protect migrant children in transit and programs in Central America address the root causes of migration, enhance regional protections, and ensure that children can be safely returned and reintegrated into their home countries. Informed by our on-the-ground experience, KIND developed recommendations for the U.S. government on how to implement a migration management strategy that addresses the needs of children on the move.

Recommendations

Stabilize Populations with Acute Needs

- As the United States invests emergency humanitarian assistance to address immediate needs of Central Americans destabilized by natural disasters, food shortages, and the pandemic, programming should focus on the needs of women, children, and other vulnerable groups who are at greatest risk.
- The U.S. government should increase humanitarian assistance to Mexico and other governments to prevent and respond to violence against migrants in transit, particularly gender-based violence and violence against children. Assistance should be targeted to migrant communities and provided to ensure access to justice, protection, and specialized support services for survivors, including shelter and medical and mental health services for migrants who are victims of violence in Mexico.

Expand Access to International Protection

- **Improve the capacity of regional governments to assist and support those seeking asylum and other protection.** This is increasingly urgent as applications for protection are increasing in the region, particularly in Mexico. As the United States supports Mexico's refugee agency, Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR), it must prioritize children's cases, strengthen and expand COMAR's capacity to conduct timely and child-friendly adjudications of asylum claims, provide counsel to children, and include child protection authorities in the process.
- **Increase technical and financial assistance to Mexico's child protection entities,** including its national child protection system (SIPINNA), child welfare agency (DIF), and federal and local child protection authorities (*Procuradurías de Protección de Niñas, Niños, y Adolescentes*) to ensure that the rights of migrant children are protected and best interests determinations are carried out resulting in meaningful protection.

- **Ensure that Migrant Resource Centers have child protection specialists on staff** and that all children are screened for protection needs and other safety concerns by qualified specialists.
- **Increase support to asylum seekers and at-risk groups of individuals as they migrate and seek protection.** Urgent assistance is needed for asylum seeking and refugee children in Mexico. Most children lack basic shelter, food, or medical care, let alone accurate information, legal assistance, or any educational opportunities while they make a long, dangerous journey.

Expand Access to Protection in Countries of Origin

- **Build the capacity of local child protection systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** Taking steps to ensure that children and youth are safe and protected in their country of origin is essential to address the root causes of migration. Child welfare and child protection agencies should provide essential services to vulnerable children and their families so children in danger have alternatives to migration. However, these agencies are currently weak, poorly funded, too centralized, and unable to provide basic protection to children in need—especially for children living outside of major cities. The absence of effective child protection systems means that children experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect at home or in their communities have limited resources and no viable alternatives to migration. U.S. assistance is needed to build the capacity of these local systems to protect children so they can remain safely in their home countries and have meaningful alternatives to migration. Programs should support specialized training for child protection system personnel to work with child survivors of violence, as well as an increase in family-based shelter options for children in need of protection. National child protection agencies should also be strengthened.

Expand Third Country Labor Migration Programs While Improving Worker Protections

- All programs under this line of effort should consider the impacts on children and mitigate against exploitative child labor, family separation, and other harms that may result absent adequate safeguards.

Assist and Reintegrate Returned Persons

- **Guarantee safe, child-sensitive return of migrant children from the United States and assist regional governments to improve return procedures for vulnerable migrants.** It is critical for children to receive pre-departure services, including child friendly information regarding the repatriation process and what will happen once they arrive in their country of origin. Prior to repatriation, the needs and best interests of all children should be assessed, including the conditions to which they will return. Individualized plans for each child should be coordinated with case managers who will receive the child in their country of origin so that local officials can better anticipate children's individual needs prior to repatriation.
- **Dramatically expand comprehensive, long-term reintegration programs for migrant children returning from the United States, particularly to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.** As prior migration is a significant risk factor for future migration and other vulnerabilities, the U.S. government should increase assistance to guarantee the safe return and reception of children but also support new and expanded programs for the successful reintegration of those children back into their communities. Reintegration assistance should be long-term and include a range of services for children and their families, including educational assistance, job training and placement, case management, health and mental health services, as well as a gender component to address the unique needs of returning girls and survivors of gender-based violence. This effort should be led by organizations with expertise working with children and youth or migrant children and which understand the unique needs of this population. For more information, read KIND's [reintegration policy brief](#).



Foster Secure and Humane Management of Borders

- **End assistance that supports immigration enforcement and invest in enhancing protections for migrants.** U.S. assistance should not be used to interdict asylum seekers; prevent children from accessing borders, including the U.S.-Mexico border; or otherwise deter migrants from seeking protection in countries of destination.
- **Lead by example with a safe, orderly, humane system at the U.S.-Mexico border that upholds U.S. law and preserves the right to seek asylum.** A child-centered approach to humane border management would include: co-location of Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) specialists from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in border facilities along with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to help mitigate separation of children from their caregivers and expedite family reunification; licensed child welfare professionals at CBP facilities to oversee appropriate reception, screening, and care of migrant children, and full compliance with the standards of care outlined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization of 2008 and the Flores Settlement Agreement, including adequate screening of Mexican children for protection needs. For more information, read KIND's [border policy brief](#).
- **Enhance bilateral coordination between U.S. and Mexican officials to ensure safe transfer of unaccompanied children to the United States when it is in their best interests.** At times, Mexican child welfare authorities encounter migrant children who are in Mexico but wish to reunite with family members in the United States and apply for protection there, or who feel unsafe both in their country of origin and in Mexico and prefer to seek protection in the United States. When these authorities determine that it is in the child's best interest to do so, children should be safely transferred to the United States and reunified with U.S.-based family, when possible, where they can seek legal protection. The U.S. and Mexican governments must develop and implement formal mechanisms for the safe transfer of unaccompanied immigrant children in these circumstances.

Strengthen Regional Public Messaging on Migration

- In accordance with the goal to promote safe and orderly migration through effective regional messaging, the U.S. government must work to inform children, youth, and families about their rights while migrating and how to access and seek protection in the United States. Public messaging should be rights-based and include legal "know your rights" materials about migration and protection options.

Expand Access to Lawful Pathways for Protection and Opportunity in the United States

- **The restoration and expansion of the Central American Minors (CAM) program** is an important step in providing children with a safe option to reunify with family. Eligibility should be further expanded to reach more vulnerable children and counsel should be provided so that children do not have to navigate the refugee process on their own. For more information, read KIND's [CAM policy brief](#).
- **Dramatically scale up family-based programs like the Protection Transfer Agreement (PTA)**, which would keep families together and reduce the number of children who become separated, unaccompanied, or harmed during a dangerous migration journey. The United States should also support efforts to create new programs, such as regional refugee processing centers in other Central American countries.

Cross-Cutting Issues and Gaps to be Addressed

- **Center strategy implementation on the needs of children, families, and vulnerable populations.** In recent years, children and families comprised the majority of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. Acknowledging that many of the migrants arriving at the border are children is important because it allows policymakers to craft a solution that is not only child-centered but also more effective. Child-sensitive design requires the assistance of experts in child



welfare, child protection, and early child development; this expertise must be incorporated into strategy implementation and program design.

- **Prioritize investments in local civil society organizations (CSOs).** The best way to ensure that assistance is effective, sustainable, and protected from corruption is by targeting assistance to local civil society organizations, including implementation and capacity-building support.
- **Build in regular CSO consultations, especially with CSOs in the region.** The strategy must be implemented with the input and oversight of the people and communities it will impact. This requires an increase in the frequency and diversity of consultations in the region, which should continue throughout strategy implementation, as well as increased transparency regarding the programs that fall under the strategy.
- **Ensure programs are implemented through a “gender lens” that considers the specific needs of girls and women and integrates gender-based violence prevention and response in all programs.** Gender-sensitive design is essential to ensure that programs are proactively addressing the risk of gender-based violence and are not unintentionally contributing to increases in violence against women and children.

The Collaborative Migration Management Strategy was launched alongside a Root Causes Strategy to address the drivers of migration from Central America. To learn more about the root causes strategy and KIND’s recommendations, read KIND’s root causes [fact sheet](#) and [policy brief](#).

