

Safe Return for Migrant Children

A record number of unaccompanied children are seeking protection in the United States. But not all children will qualify for legal protection, and many will be returned to their home countries. The U.S. government must ensure that all unaccompanied children repatriated to their home countries are returned in safe, dignified, and child-sensitive ways. As the agency charged with carrying out these repatriations, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) must take concrete steps to ensure the safety of children during returns.

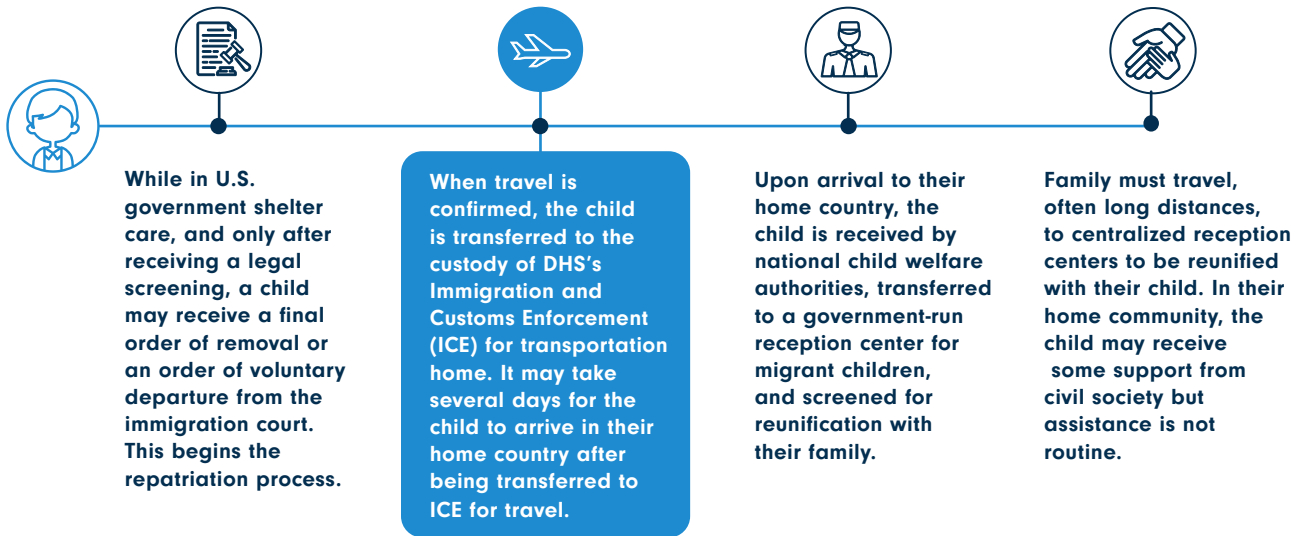
Ensure safeguarding of children's rights

- The U.S. government must ensure that children's full due process rights are honored prior to repatriation. This includes access to an attorney for a legal screening and full representation on claims for relief from removal, as well as any potential appeals.
- When a child cannot be returned safely or does not have an identified caregiver in their home country, DHS should consider alternatives to repatriation, such as deferral of removal.

Guarantee safe, child-sensitive returns

- Repatriation should be led by those in DHS with expertise in child protection and managed in collaboration with independent child advocates (appointed under the TVPRA) or reintegration case managers.
- Within DHS, dedicated staff with appropriate backgrounds in child protection should accompany and receive returning children and complete protection screening. Children should be accompanied by known adults who speak their language whenever possible.
- Appropriate government officials, or contracted reintegration case managers, should provide children and their caregivers with an orientation about the repatriation and reception process prior to repatriation. Children need age-appropriate information about what will happen during each step of their travel, who they will be traveling with, how their basic needs will be met while in transit, and when they will speak to and see their parents or caregivers.
- Children should always be returned with their personal belongings, all relevant documents from their time in the United States (e.g. school records), and a sufficient supply of any necessary prescription medications.
- All travel plans should be made in a child-sensitive way with age-appropriate accommodations, e.g. children should never be restrained; travel should be limited to within normal waking hours when possible; travel times should be minimized with direct flights where possible; children should be accompanied by known adults.
- DHS and HHS should work with consular networks and reintegration service providers to create child-friendly repatriation materials in multiple languages that explain the return process step-by-step. Materials, such as videos, should be provided or shown to all returning children.

THE RETURN PROCESS FOR UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT CHILDREN



Next steps: Invest in long-term reintegration services

The U.S. government should lead efforts to provide comprehensive reintegration services to all returning children. DHS, HHS, the State Department, and USAID should work together to develop and fund reintegration programs that provide long-term, culturally and child-appropriate services to returning children and their families. Programs should include pre-departure case management and encourage participation of receiving country governments and civil society organizations to provide local mental health and medical care, family counseling, case management, education and job skills training, and legal assistance when needed. For more information on reintegration services, read KIND's **policy brief** and **infographic**.

By providing greater stability, KIND's reintegration program helps children to remain in school, identify educational and employment goals and opportunities, and connect with other youth, and decreases the likelihood that they will attempt another dangerous journey to the United States.

KIND tracked children who received reintegration services from 2018–2020 for twelve months after their return; more than 90 percent remained in their homes and communities.



Photo by Asociación Pop No', Huehuetenango, Guatemala

