

Kids in Need of Defense's (KIND) Keeping Kids Safe campaign seeks to transform the systems for protecting child migrants. Too many of the world's children are at risk. War, poverty, disease, climate change, political upheaval, and corruption around the globe can place children in the crosshairs of danger. By the end of 2021, over 36 million children under the age of eighteen were counted as forcibly displaced from their homes; more than half of the world's registered refugees are children. Only a small number of those children seek the help of the United States; nonetheless, the number of children under 18 who migrate to the United States on their own has increased from 16,067 apprehensions in Fiscal Year 2011 to 152,057 apprehensions in Fiscal Year 2022.

U.S. laws and policies governing the treatment of migrant children are inflexible, outdated, and unable to adequately protect these most vulnerable of migrants. Children are forced to go alone through a rigid, adversarial immigration system designed largely with adults in mind that does not prioritize their best interests or consider their limited capacity to navigate complex procedures absent appropriate child-centered support. When denied immigration status, many children are returned to their countries of origin with no effort made to help them reintegrate safely. Even for those children who are permitted to remain in the United States, there are few resources and little capacity to assist them as they navigate the challenges of life in a new country.

It's time to turn the page. The United States has pledged to resume its leadership in the protection of human rights; we can begin by re-imagining the process for protecting unaccompanied children. We need to build a child immigration system that recognizes the unique needs of children rather than unrealistically demanding that they navigate laws and regulations that they cannot understand.

The following principles are at the heart of the Keeping Kids Safe campaign:



Unaccompanied immigrant children are children first.

Policies and practices designed for adults are largely inappropriate for unaccompanied children. The best interests of the child should center all decisions regarding reception at the border, care and custody determinations, and final outcomes of cases such as granting asylum or determining that a child must return to their home country. Supporting strong families and the reunification of unaccompanied or separated children when it is in their best interests is critical to supporting children's needs.



The global community should work together to protect children.

The responsibility for protecting child migrants is a shared responsibility in which a truly seamless safety net is achieved only when all countries do their part. The U.S. can lead by example by engaging in international cooperation and regional frameworks for child protection, to reduce forced migration and extend protection throughout the migration journey. This includes addressing the risk of harm from all forms of violence, including trafficking and gender violence.



U.S. immigration laws and policies should recognize and address the unique vulnerabilities of children.

Unlike domestic child welfare systems, immigration laws make few distinctions between adults and children, leading to legal outcomes that determine a child's future without taking age, developmental stages, trauma, or individual need into account. Nor are all migrant children guaranteed access to counsel, further limiting their ability to navigate the complex immigration system. Immigration laws and policies should have the maximum flexibility and discretion to address children's unique needs, while the procedures for adjudicating their cases before government agencies and courts align with recognized best practices and should include access to counsel and child-friendly surroundings to ensure the best possible outcome for each child.



Support for children at every step of their migration is essential for children to achieve safety and succeed in life.

Children who are permitted to remain in the United States should be supported and encouraged to become part of their communities, ensuring that they are able to transition to adulthood and citizenship with the tools and skills they need to fully contribute to their new country. Children who must return to their countries of origin should be able to access reintegration services that will ease their return. Children who are transiting through third countries should be protected against criminal elements that prey on them and provided quality information and support to help them make decisions about their migration decisions.



Federal, state, and local officials have a responsibility to work cooperatively to protect the interests of all children, regardless of race, religion, nationality, or immigration status.

Federal, state, and local governments share responsibility for protecting and caring for unaccompanied children. Their success depends upon harmonizing laws and policies that maximize a child's potential for a strong start in life. Collaboration among agencies responsible for serving migrant and refugee children will eliminate redundancies and obstacles to benefits and care. Policymakers should adopt tested strategies that stress coordination, continuity of care, evidence-based practices, and respect for a child's voice.



Reducing forced migration of children requires addressing the root causes that drive children from their homes.

Reducing or eradicating forced migration will never be accomplished through harsh deterrence policies that deny migrants access to asylum and other protections. Instead, the United States and the global community should commit to reducing the root causes of migration—such as poverty, violence, persecution, the absence of rule of law and political corruption—that prevent children from being safe and protected in their own countries.



Implementing humane, flexible, and creative solutions to establish an immigration process that best serves children is possible if we work together as a community.

We must tackle the challenges of child migration with respect for differing perspectives, adherence to evidence-based solutions, an openness to innovative ideas, and a shared commitment to caring for all children.

We urge national, state, and local leaders to join us in protecting all children and to support a new vision of protecting child migrants, one grounded in the best interests of the child and the highest values of our nation.