

Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Unaccompanied Migrant Children¹ (UMC) are children or adolescents who travel across country borders without a legal guardian and without legal immigration documents. As of 2014, there has been a recent increase in the number of UMC crossing the southern border of the US from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. UMC often embark on their journeys to improve their desperate life circumstances; despite the severe adversities encountered, many cope with these experiences in very resilient, healthy, and productive ways. However, they often present with challenges, such as a lack of trust in authority, fears about service systems, and adjustment issues. Once in the US, their disposition is partially determined by their country of origin. If apprehended by immigration authorities at the border, UMC from Mexico are deported within 24 hours. UMC from non-contiguous countries, e.g., from Central American countries, are held in holding facilities to determine their identity, receive basic medical and social care, and for placement with a sponsor in the US, foster care, or group homes, depending on their particular circumstances and needs.

What have Unaccompanied Migrant Children experienced?

Many UMC have been separated from their parents or caregivers for many years. Many report hardships related to neglect, abuse, community, and gang violence. While in their country of origin, UMC may have experienced traumatic events including the following:

- Lack of consistent caregivers
- Homelessness and lack of other basic needs, e.g., education and food
- Violence (as witnesses, victims, and/or perpetrators)
- Gang and drug-related violence or threats
- Physical injuries, infections, and diseases
- Forced labor
- Sexual assault
- Lack of medical care
- Loss of loved ones
- War
- Torture

¹Unaccompanied Migrant Children are officially referred to as “Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC)” by the Office of Refugee Resettlement

During migration, UMC often face the same types of traumatic events or hardships that they faced in their country of origin, as well as new experiences such as the following:

- Hazardous train rides
- Robbery, assaults, and intimidation by gangs and thieves
- Coercion or abuse by adults referred to as “coyotes”
- Kidnapping
- Sexual violence
- Exposure to the elements without proper supplies and gear
- Harassment and bribery by local authorities
- Hunger, thirst, and exhaustion
- Separation from family
- Loss of community
- Uncertainty about the future
- Detention

Upon entering the US, UMC may still experience trauma such as community violence, abuse or neglect, and/or lack of basic resources. In addition, they may face stress associated with reunification, foster placement, or entering the US school system.

During reunification with a sponsor, such as a parent or family member, UMC may face the following:

- Disruptions in attachment
- Lack of familiarity and connection with caregivers
- Caregivers with limited parenting experience or knowledge of child development
- Difficulty trusting caregivers
- Stress in caregiver-child relationship
- Limited resources
- Fear of deportation or legal involvement
- Discovery that parents may have a new family
- Caregivers unable to understand or relate to the UMC experience
- Expectations of the US and an idealistic image of a family that does not match their reality

During foster placement, UMC and their foster families may face the following:

- Cultural differences
- Challenges in understanding UMC experiences, including their trauma history
- Differences in cultural and family expectations
- Language and communication challenges
- Possible ongoing legal concerns and stress
- New expectations, such as daily school attendance

UMC may have experienced limited or no previous schooling, significant disruptions in schooling due to poverty, community violence or displacement, and/or limited access to school supplies. Therefore, UMC may face the following challenges when entering the US school system:

- Being unfamiliar with school routines and expectations
- Being placed in a classroom based on age that does not correspond to their skill or experience level
- “First” experiences, such as eating new foods at lunch and taking a school bus
- Discrimination, teasing, or bullying by other children at school due to their appearance, culture, religion, beliefs, or language
- Trauma-related mental health symptoms, which may be exacerbated in a setting with authority figures

For more information on UMC and schools please see Supporting Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Schools <http://brycs.org/webinars.cfm>

How does trauma impact children, including Unaccompanied Migrant Children?

While exposure to traumatic events can have a profound and lasting effect on the daily functioning of UMC, such exposure can cause the following general symptoms in youth of all ages:

- Hypervigilance and suspiciousness
- Difficulty engaging with caregivers due to emotional detachment and cynicism
- Disruption of attachment
- Stomachaches, headaches
- Pains in the body that don't appear to have a physical cause
- Crying a lot
- Hopelessness
- Fear or anxiety
- Nightmares
- Sadness or grumpiness
- Trouble paying attention
- Jumpiness
- Trouble falling asleep or sleeping too much
- Recurring and unwanted thoughts about the traumatic event(s)
- Getting upset when things happen that remind him/her of the traumatic event(s)
- Avoiding thinking or talking about anything that reminds him/her of the traumatic event(s)
- Lacking desire to play with others or take part in activities that he/she used to enjoy
- Acting as if the traumatic event(s) is happening right now (when it is something that occurred in the past)
- Trouble managing behavior or emotions

What are some of the complexities of providing treatment to Unaccompanied Migrant Children?

- UMC have traveled a long way and worked very hard to meet their goal. Despite difficulties and hardship, they often demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness that can be leveraged as strengths in the healing process.
- There is a lot at stake for these youth. Some know the dangers and uncertainty before they leave and choose to leave anyway; some make the journey multiple times despite having been deported previously.
- UMC are often in debt because they borrowed money to pay coyotes to help them travel to the US.
- UMC live every day with the possibility of deportation.
- UMC may lack resources including health insurance, transportation, education, and vocational training.
- Complex trauma may be present. UMC may have faced abandonment and neglect in addition to repeated exposure to and experience of traumatic events.

What are the cultural considerations when working with Unaccompanied Migrant Children?

Providing care for UMC is both challenging and rewarding. UMC may come from cultures that differ in fundamental ways from the US. Differences in cultural subgroups—related to gender, socioeconomic status, language/dialect, and ethnicity—may affect the following:

- Understanding of health, mental health, and healing
- Stigma of consulting with a mental health professional
- Beliefs about the best course of treatment
- Expectations of outcomes of treatment
- Trust of providers or service systems

How can providers enhance their cultural and clinical competence?

- Read basic information about the UMC's country and culture of origin.
- Acknowledge the difficulties that UMC and their families have experienced.
- Learn about the community where UMC live and develop relationships with community providers so you can provide a coordinated response.
- Understand their basic needs and help leverage resources in order to meet these needs.
- Provide culturally and linguistically sensitive services by using cultural brokers or interpreters when possible ([for more on using interpreters and cultural brokers link](#))
- Make efforts to learn and respect UMC understandings of symptoms and healing.
- Remember that UMC's situations are often tenuous due to their legal circumstances; be aware of how this might affect treatment goals and interventions.

Other resources

- [The Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\)](#) operates a [Parent Hotline](#) 7 days a week (800-203-7001) from 9am-9pm ET for parents seeking to locate their children in ORR care.
- [Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services \(LIRS\)](#)
- [Catholic Charities](#) and [Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)
- [Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services \(BRYCS\)](#)
- [KIND Kids in Need of Defense](#) is a national organization that provides legal counsel for unaccompanied refugee and immigrant children in the US
- [Life is Good Kids Foundation](#) trains child care professionals to use the power of play to build life-changing relationships with children in their care.