



**NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF LATIN AMERICAN & CARIBBEAN COMMUNITIES**  
**ALIANZA NACIONAL DE COMUNIDADES LATINO AMERICANAS Y CARIBEÑAS**

*A Transnational Vision, Rooted in Latin American and Caribbean Migrant Communities*  
*Una Visión Transnacional, con Raíces en la Comunidad Migrante Latinoamericana y Caribeña*

## **Immigrant Children– Urgent Crisis with Deep Roots**

### ***NALACC Calls for Immediate Response and Attention to Underlying Development and Policy Failures***

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The pictures of small children [hanging desperately onto moving trains](#) in Mexico or lying on the floor of overcrowded youth detention centers in Texas have shocked the world. Even the most hardened cynics cannot help but be moved by the faces of so many children in such desperate conditions.

With more than 60,000 children expected to try to cross the border over the course of the summer, this is clearly an urgent humanitarian crisis. Both public and private resources appear completely overwhelmed and unable to respond appropriately and humanely to the needs of these children.

Immediate measures must be taken to protect immigrant children right now, including releasing those in detention to the care of family members. Many of the children may well qualify for relief under existing law. We should seek new remedies to protect those who may not, in order to avoid deepening the suffering.

However, this crisis did not develop overnight, and the longer term solutions will require both political will and a hard look at the factors that lead so many children from Central America to cross these borders in the first place.

Officials have known that more and more children were crossing the southern border for at least three years. By mid-2012, the [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) in the Health and Human Services Department, which is responsible for providing care for so-called “unaccompanied alien children” had already requested additional resources from Congress on two separate occasions. That same year, the [New York Times reported](#) that pro bono resources for child migrants in Texas were already stretched past the breaking point in August of that year. The current numbers are much higher, but hardly the bolt from the blue being painted by ill-prepared public officials.

The most obvious proximate cause for the spike in children migrating without parents is violence and instability in home countries. Anecdotal reports and Border Patrol records suggest that many of the children are coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Many children report [fleeing violence, gang activity, and organized crime](#) related to the drug trade. On the issue of increased gang-related

violence, it is important to point out that our harsh deportation policies related to immigrants who became involved in gang activities in the US, has played a worsening factor. Central American countries are simply not prepared to handle in a healthy manner the reintegration of individuals deported from the US, who became involved in gangs while in the US, and who often no longer have any family ties in their countries of origin.

[Family reunification](#) is also a driver of child migration. The elusive promise of immigration reform seems at least as distant this year as in years past. At some point, parents face a heartbreaking dilemma—run the risk of sending for a child, or miss their childhood altogether. As any parent can imagine, the pain of being separated from one’s children can become impossible to bear. Sensible immigration policies that eliminate the inhumane backlogs currently forcing families to wait years or even decades in order to be together would certainly be an important step toward alleviating the crisis.

However, even immigration reforms will not address the development and policy failures that underpin this crisis. We should be asking ourselves why so many parents have felt obligated to leave their homes and children in search of work in the United States? Why are these countries experiencing such violence in the first place?

For that, we need to take a much harder look at US foreign policy, and our overall relationship with our neighbors to the south. It is well documented that the North American Free Trade Agreement signed in 1994 with Mexico resulted in a [wave of migration](#) to the United States, as both small farmers and small businesses found themselves squeezed out of local economies in Mexico.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), an agreement modeled on NAFTA, [hits its 10th anniversary this year](#), coinciding with the spike in desperate and risky migration from the region. It is worth examining whether the policies touted under the rubric of “free trade” may lie at the heart of this crisis. At a minimum, it would appear that the promise of economic growth leading to better opportunities and reduced pressure to migrate has not materialized.

We should also examine the impact of the “[war on drugs](#)” for violence and insecurity in the region. The set of policies that includes vastly increasing resources for drug apprehension in Mexico, as well as a host of other, less visible measures, such as elevating minor drug crimes to lengthy jail time and deportable offenses have combined to both ratchet up violence in Mexico and Central America, as well as create a prison and deportation pipeline for Latin American immigrants. The United States cannot escape its role in this dynamic. [Millions of dollars](#) have flowed into Mexico through the Merida Initiative, a U.S. policy that provides equipment and training aid to Mexico to fight the drug trafficking organizations.

Increased violence, in turn, creates a climate of fear that drives migration, as people flee insecurity in their communities. Drug trafficking organizations also create dangers for migrants throughout the journey, particularly as migrants cross through Mexican territory.

NALACC and its members call on the US government to take immediate action to protect migrant children. This is an urgent humanitarian crisis that cannot wait.

NALACC also calls for the following measures:

1. Immediately release all children currently in detention and provide them with humanitarian immigration relief in order for them to be able to stay with close relatives. There should be no more deportations of detained children who could well be considered asylum seekers under international law. The United States has both the opportunity and the obligation to be true to its values and keep families intact.
2. Immediately halt deportations through executive action of all immigrants currently in detention whose sole infraction to the law is to have been residing in the US without authorization. This is President Obama's chance to use "[the power of the pen](#)" to do what is morally right.
3. Break out of the gridlock in Washington and start taking concrete legislative steps toward fixing our broken immigration policy. One place to start would be eliminating backlogs for family petitions and reversing the policies that criminalize immigrants, including the 5 and 10 year re-entry bars.
4. Take a step back and re-think our approach to regional integration. Clearly CAFTA and NAFTA have had some damaging unintended consequences. Take this opportunity for the US to lead our Central American neighbors towards the adoption of regional integration policies that prioritize decent work, educational opportunities, and safe as well as healthy communities.
5. Stop the militarization of the border under the pretext of the "war on drugs". Violence feeds violence and the war on drugs has had more success in putting young men of color into prison than it has on curbing the drug trade.
6. Legitimate national security concerns related to land borders should be handled in the context of better and closer working relationships with our Northern and Southern neighbors, particularly Mexico, and Central American nations.

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