

More children coming to U.S. need help adjusting

By Stateline.org, adapted by Newsela staff
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Katheryn Varela, 13, (center) spends a moment with her thoughts while shopping for groceries with her sister Dayana, 9, (left) and mother Silvia Padilla (right) in Los Angeles, July 24, 2014. The sisters are hoping to receive political asylum in the U.S. after fleeing their home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, due to increased gang violence and crime. Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times/MCT

RICHMOND, Va. — It took Asein Ta three days to walk to safety. To escape an unsafe situation in his home country, he made a dangerous trip through mountains. He followed his uncle who made the trip by hobbling on one leg.

“He said there was good out there, something different,” Ta said.

The two left their native country of Myanmar, also known as Burma. It is located in Southeast Asia. The two were refugees. Like other refugees, they were leaving a dangerous situation at home to live somewhere else. They went to a refugee camp in Thailand. Ta was not even a teenager then.

Now he is 21. Ta’s mother sent him away to keep him safe. She died soon after he left.

Help Finding A New Home

Five years later, Ta was on a plane to Virginia. He was helped by a program called Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM). The U.S. government runs the program to help children. For 35 years it has helped them after they have escaped war and natural disasters, like earthquakes. It has helped children from all around the world.

The program lets refugee children stay in America. It places them with foster parents.

Ta was clearly a refugee. He was part of a minority group that was in danger.

There are questions about whether children coming to the United States from Central America are actually refugees.

Two Groups Disagree

Recently there has been a huge increase in Central American children traveling alone to the United States. They leave their countries and travel through Mexico. Then they cross the border to get into the U.S. In 2011, fewer than 4,000 children crossed the border. But in 2014, about 44,000 made the trip.

They are trying to escape crime and violence. Some people think URM should help them.

The United Nations says the Central American children are refugees. Some have been victims of kidnapping or other crimes. The United Nations believes they should be able to move to other countries for safety.

The U.S. government does not consider the children refugees. If they did, the children could use the URM program to stay in the United States.

How To Help Best

The URM's size is another problem. URM assisted 3,828 children in 1985. Today it only helps about 1,800. Even if they were considered to be refugees, it is not clear that the program could help many of the Central American kids.

Some argue that calling them refugees would be the best way to help. Kimberly Haynes is one of those people. She works for a charity that helps children through URM.

Haynes says that both the Central American children and past refugees from other parts of the world face the same problems. "The situations are pretty horrific," she said.

URM programs help refugees get legal aid, education, housing and health care. More children are using the program recently. In 2011 there were 1,409 children in the program. By 2013 there were 1,850.

What Is It Like At Home?

A 2012 report found that one-third of the children in the program were from Latin America. Many were from Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico.

The way to determine if someone is a refugee, and can use URM, is to study the situation of the children in their home countries. The government plans to do that more.

President Barack Obama said some Central American children are refugees. They might be able to apply in certain cases.

He warned that not everybody will make it. People cannot be refugees just because they live "in a bad neighborhood or poverty."