

SPOTLIGHT ON UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN



EAST BAY
SANCTUARY COVENANT

www.eastbaysanctuary.org

Since 2014, EBSC has provided legal and support services to nearly 750 unaccompanied children fleeing gang violence, human trafficking, and domestic abuse in their home countries.



128,000
unaccompanied children¹
entered the U.S.
government's shelter
system in 2022
- triple what it was
five years earlier.

Why do children flee to the U.S. for safety?

“**Cosme**” and “**Vicente**” are brothers from Guatemala, ages 16 and 18. They experienced brutal beatings from their grandmother. When Cosme was 12, he was kidnapped and beaten by a well-known gang. With the help of a fellow kidnap victim, Cosme escaped. Over the next few years, the boys experienced daily threats and beatings from gang members. They were deeply frightened and hardly ever left their house. Cosme and Vicente decided to make the dangerous journey to the U.S. in search of their mother whom they hadn't seen in eight years.

They are not alone

Political instability, economic crisis, climate-induced displacement, and organized crime continue to plague many countries, where the cost of not cooperating with a gang is often harassment, rape, or death. Children may also suffer abuse at the hands of their caretakers. On the long journey to the U.S., children face constant uncertainty and **additional dangers such as abduction and human trafficking**.

Moreover, **U.S. policies that separate families** at the border often leave parents or guardians with no other choice than to let children enter the U.S. alone.

A child living in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador is on average 10 times more likely to be murdered than a child in the United States. Kids aged 15 to 17 face the highest risk of death by homicide².



REUTERS/Jose de Jesus Cartes

Unaccompanied minors ride atop the wagon of a freight train, known as La Bestia (The Beast) in Ixtepec, Mexican

¹[acf.hhs.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data)

²theconversation.com/central-american-kids-come-to-the-us-fleeing-record-high-youth-murder-rates-at-home-99132



With our help, unaccompanied minors are often able to obtain asylum, reunify with their family members, and finally feel safe.

Cosme and **Vicente** were lucky—with EBSC’s help, they were granted asylum and are now permanent residents pursuing their education and working. Other unaccompanied children do not fare as well. For those who are apprehended at the border, about 40 percent are eligible for asylum or other legal status.

“If a gang member wants to date your daughter, he will give you 24 hours to hand her over. If you say no, they will threaten to kill you and your daughter.”

- EBSC Client

How does EBSC support unaccompanied minors?

We work individually with youth to apply for asylum or other legal status that will help them to stay in the U.S. legally. We offer interpretation in the young person’s native language and accompany them throughout the legal process. EBSC also mentors pro bono attorneys to provide these services.

What stands out is the **resilience of these youth**, many of whom have experienced trauma in their home country, on their journey to the U.S., during detention in immigration centers, or in the process of adjusting to a new culture, all while fighting for legal status. Some have experienced multiple layers of violence, discrimination and trauma due to being LGBT, Indigenous, or survivors of sexual violence.

EBSC collaborates with local mental health organizations to offer counseling, social connections and stability. We also offer arts-based storytelling workshops for youth as a way to jumpstart their healing process and share their story in a safe way.

Many unaccompanied children never meet with a lawyer and have no access to legal representation during court hearings. Youth without representation are far more likely to be deported.





Meet some of our **EBSC Team** working with unaccompanied minors

Jaime Ross, Staff Attorney



“We help unaccompanied children obtain asylum, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), or U-Visa. We always move **at the speed of trust**, using age-appropriate language, diagrams, and images. We hold multiple meetings to build a relationship of trust and make sure that children can make informed-decisions. For youth over 18, I spend a lot of time talking to them about careers opportunities and find a way together to pursue study while earning income to help their families back in the country. Clients report to me that they feel a lot **less isolated** and **more hopeful** about their future.”

Yuko Matsumoto, Paralegal



“As a paralegal, I first speak with unaccompanied children and youth at the intake interview stage. We listen to them and write down their story of why they left their country and what life was like back home. It’s difficult for most children to share stories with an adult they do not know. So, I listen with **empathy** and do my best to affirm their experiences. It’s **a long commitment** for both us and the children.”

Isabel León, Caseworker



“I talk to children one-on-one and help them overcome **many challenges they face beyond their legal cases**. This can range from navigating the educational system to accessing health care, family reunification, therapy, cash assistance, and more. A lot of the youth are experiencing **a sense of grief** because of the life they had to leave behind in their home country. I make frequent calls and texts to stay connected and make sure the child feels supported at all times. I also engage their trusted family members or guardians so children feel safe.”

