

SNAPSHOT

Every year, more than 100,000 migrant children arrive in the United States without their parents or a responsible adult. The federal [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) (ORR) provides for the everyday needs of these unaccompanied children while they are in US government custody, while working to reunite them with family members in the United States. The legal basis for this program derives from the [Homeland Security Act of 2002](#) and the [Trafficking Victims Reauthorization Act of 2008](#) (TVPRA), the latter of which extends protections for survivors of human trafficking to unaccompanied children.

Advocates have long expressed concern that federal immigration policies and ORR's institutional practices do not adequately meet the needs or protect the rights of unaccompanied children. In response, the Women's Refugee Commission undertook a year-long study to examine policies and practices for unaccompanied children as they are reunited with family in US communities. We paid specific attention to the barriers to children's safe and timely placement with sponsors and to the opportunities and challenges of providing effective services once children leave the care of ORR (post-release services).

Our key findings and recommendations

Informed by our research, our report [From Congregate to Community-Based Care: Strengthening Reunification and Support of Unaccompanied Children](#) breaks down our findings and recommendations into three sections. It suggests a pathway for ORR to move away from congregate care and toward community-based programs and family-like placements that benefit children and families.

1. ORR should move toward 100% small-scale care facilities.

Findings:

ORR increasingly relies on large congregate care facilities, that is, group homes and larger institutions that care for children away from families. Many facilities house 50 or more children. Experts concur that congregate care is harmful to the health and well-being of unaccompanied children, and that, independent of facility size, children will be better served by less time in care when safeguards are maintained.

Recommendations:

- » Congress should direct ORR to create a public plan to transition to 100 percent small-scale programs.
- » The Administration for Children and Families (ORR's parent agency) and the Department of Health and Human Services should recruit small-scale providers and provide technical assistance in federal funding applications to reduce ORR's overuse of congregate care.

2. ORR should focus on safe and timely reunification of unaccompanied children with families.

Findings:

We identified systemic barriers that needlessly delay unaccompanied children's reunifications and share recommendations for their safe and timely release from federal custody. We also identified key concerns in quality of care that should be rectified, as lower quality of care may lengthen children's time away from families.

Recommendations:

- » ORR should conduct regular external audits of its procedures and practices to ensure alignment with established child-welfare best practices.
- » ORR should address workforce shortages, staff burnout, and training problems in its facilities that care for unaccompanied children
- » ORR should rectify issues with language access and interpretation in care, as well as systematic home-study biases, that can lead to delayed reunification with families

Strengthening post-release services for unaccompanied children.

Findings:

The need for services to support children following release is critical and growing. We identify culturally sensitive, evidence-based, and trauma-informed approaches to working with young people following release.

Recommendations:

- » Congress should continue to invest in post-release support for unaccompanied children and newcomer youth.
- » ORR and post-release service providers should diversify service-delivery models and strengthen community connections.
- » Federal, state, and local actors should expand and integrate post-release services within a broader safety net.

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Women's Refugee Commission

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, youth, and other people who are often overlooked, undervalued, and underserved in humanitarian responses to crises and displacement. We work in partnership with displaced communities to research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for gender-transformative and sustained improvement in humanitarian, development, and displacement policy and practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them. womensrefugeecommission.org.

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October 2024