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# Supporting Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Schools



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# Learning Objectives

- Participants will develop or enhance understanding of the background and scope of unaccompanied migrant children in the U.S..
- Identify the unique challenges immigrant children face (e.g., trauma, reunification issues, parenting, new family dynamics, etc.).
- Participants will be equipped with knowledge and skills to implement a trauma- informed approach to education.





# USCCB/MRS

- Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) is an arm of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Our mission is to serve and advocate for refugees, asylees, and other forced migrants, immigrants, and other people on the move.
- Special concern is given to the most vulnerable among these populations, including unaccompanied youth.







# Unaccompanied Migrant Children: Overview





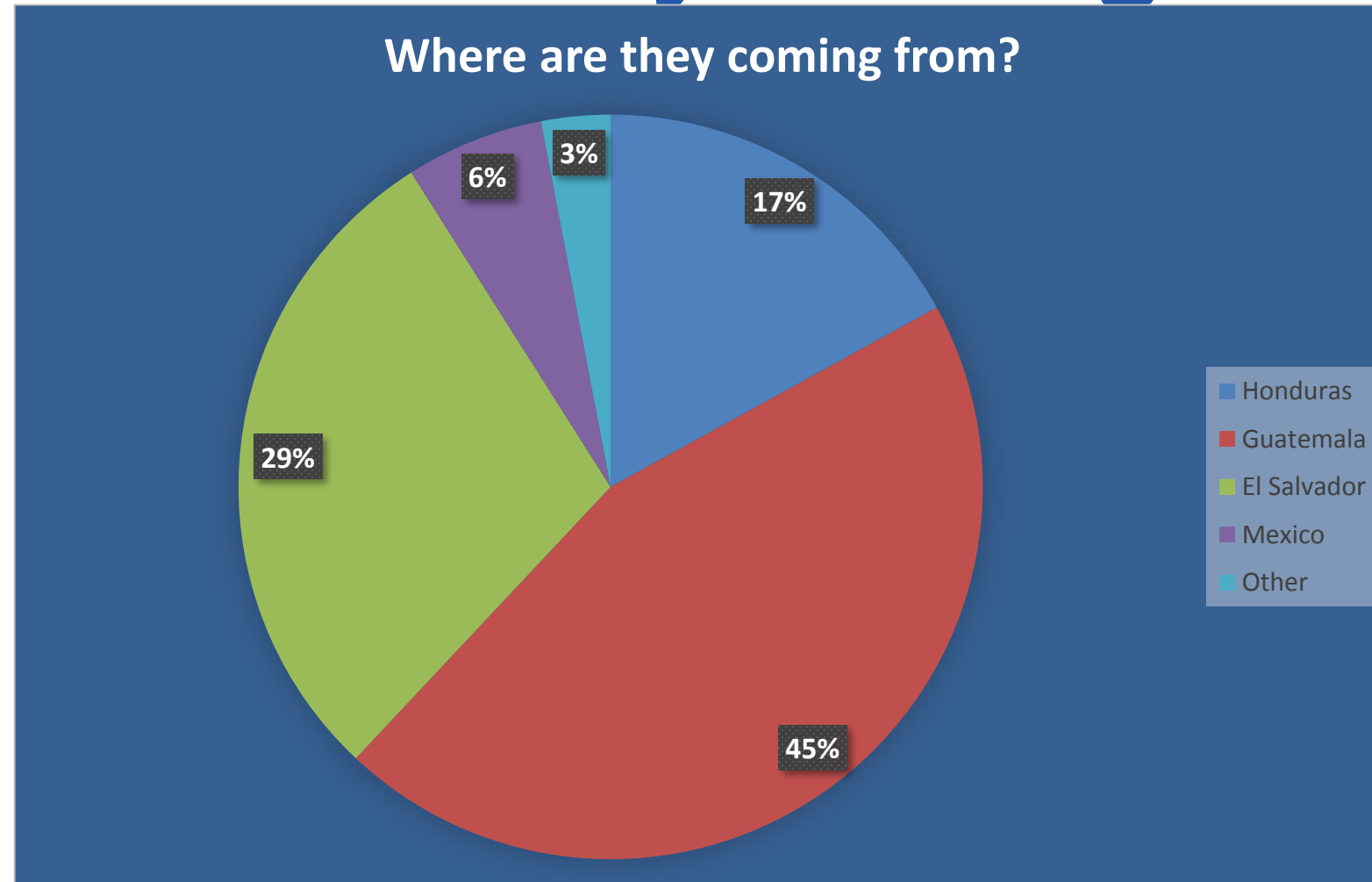
# What is an Unaccompanied Child (UC)?

The U.S. government defines an Unaccompanied Child (UC) as a child who lacks immigration status, is under 18, and who is present without a parent or legal guardian.\*

Fiscal Year	# of UC Apprehended in the US
FY2013	24,668
FY2014	57,478
FY2015	33,726
FY2016	43,309 (as of June 30)



# Where are they coming from?







# How do they get to the U.S.?

- Smuggler (50%)
- Alone
- Human Trafficking
- Labor Exploitation







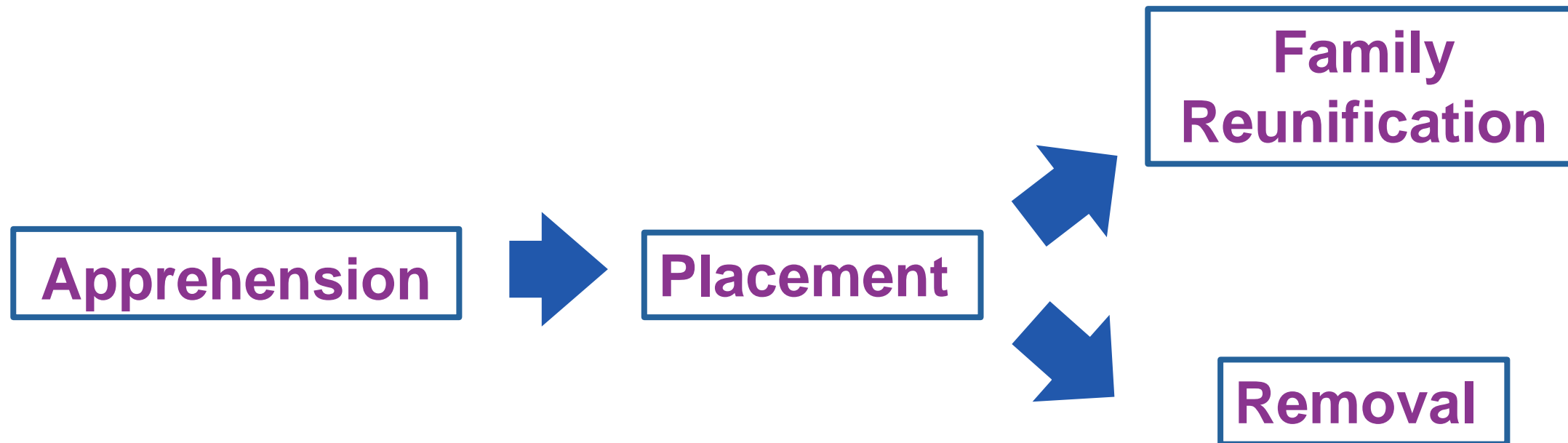
# Reasons for Migration

- Flee community violence
- Escape poverty and hunger
- Reunify with family in the U.S.
- Seek educational and employment opportunities
- Escape situations of family breakdown, abuse, abandonment, and/or neglect





# What happens after they arrive in the U.S.?





# What happens after they arrive in the U.S.?

- The Office of Refugee Resettlement – Division of Children's Services (ORR/DCS)
- Family Reunification
- Home Study and Post-Release services for some children
- Notice to Appear in the U.S. Immigration Court





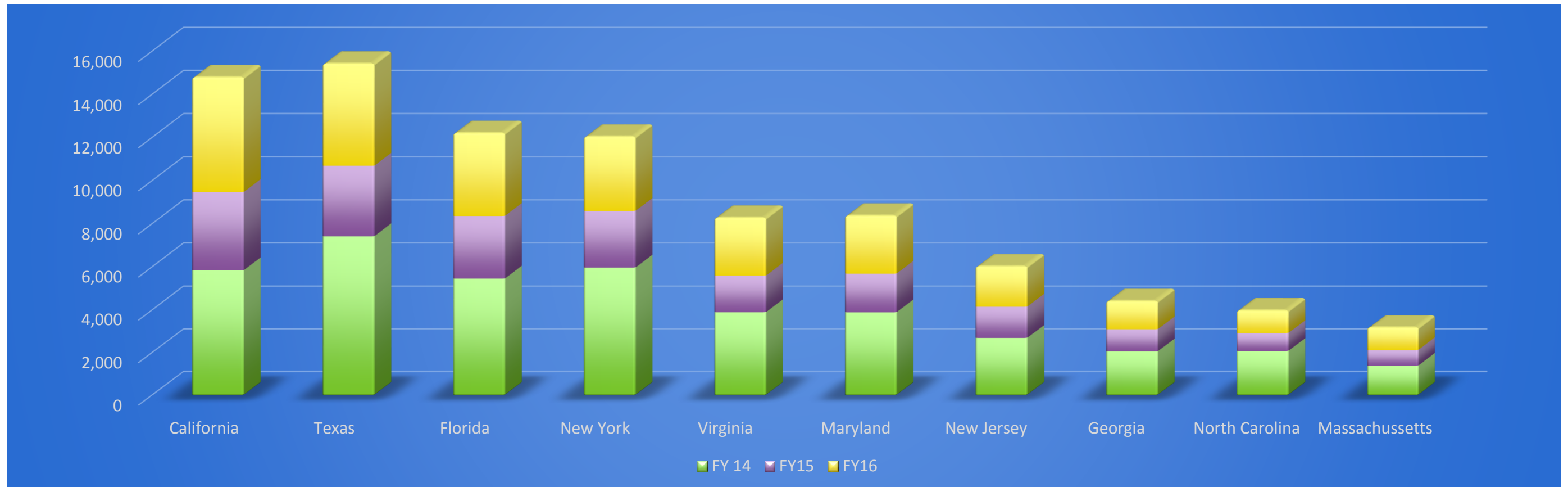
# Where are these children going?



- Children reunify with sponsors across the U.S.
- US states with highest number of children release from ORR/DCS: CA, TX, FL, NY, VA, MD, NJ, GA, NC, MA\*
- Metropolitan and rural areas



# Where are these children going?





# Local Statistics

- The Washington, DC Metropolitan area is one of the highest UC release/reunification locations in the United States:
  - DC – 321
  - Maryland – 2,692
  - Virginia – 2, 694
- Fairfax County, Virginia – 640
- Prince George's County – 1,004







# Impact of Family Separation

- Feelings of abandonment
- Accepting parental authority
- Externalize the emotional trauma
- Reconciling child's current developmental stage with the stage the child was in when parent left



# Special Considerations

- All UC's are victims of some form of trauma
  - Abuse by past caretakers
  - Witnessing violence in the community
  - Witnessing violence during the journey to the U.S.
- Placement with the sponsor may not be permanent
  - Children may need to return to their country of origin due to immigration proceedings
  - Sponsor may be detained or deported





# Examples of Service Needs

- Assistance with school enrollment
- Pro-bono immigration legal services
- Low-cost medical care
- Mental health services
- Understanding the Immigration Court
- Assistance navigating community resources
- Filing COA/COV
- Post-18 Planning
- Independent Living Skills
- Legal Guardianship



# Impact of Trauma

- A student's ability to attach
- A student's social emotional development
  - Communication and Connectedness
  - Empathy, Compassion & Respect
- Emotional regulation
  - Hopeless, inability to impact world
  - Unsure of needs or how to get them met
- Cognition and language
  - Survival trumps exploration and growth (i.e. learning)
  - Lack of executive functioning





# Impact of Trauma

Persistent trauma or adversity can cause the brain to be underdeveloped or damaged.



A damaged or undeveloped brain often causes a child to react differently to a stressful situation than a child without those constrictions.



Therefore, a child who is more reflexive than reflective may have a biological reason for behaving the way they did which is beyond their control.



# Trauma Can Impair Learning

- Single exposure to trauma can lead to...
  - Jumpiness
  - Intrusive thoughts
  - Interrupted sleep & nightmares
  - Anger & moodiness
  - Social withdrawal
- Interfere with concentration and memory







# Trauma Can Impair Learning

- Chronic exposure to traumatic events , especially during the early years, can:
  - Adversely affect attention, memory & cognition
  - Reduce child's ability to focus, organize, & process information
  - Interfere with effective problem solving and/or planning
- Results in overwhelming feelings of frustration and anxiety





# Trauma Can Impact School Performance

- Lower GPA
- Behavior problems
- Higher school absences
- Increased vulnerability to dropping out
- More suspension & expulsions
- Decreased reading ability





# Symptoms of Physical & Emotional Distress

- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches
- Poor control of emotions
- Inconsistent academic performance
- Unpredictable and/or impulsive behavior
- Over or under-reacting to bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens, lighting, sudden movements
- Intense reminders of their traumatic events
  - Thinking others are violating their personal space
  - Blowing when corrected or told what to do
  - Fighting when criticized or teased by others
  - Resisting transition or change
  - Results in overwhelming feelings of frustration and anxiety



# Things to Remember



- Traumatic affect = Tip of the iceberg
- Be conscious, aware and sensitive to this...and to remember the power of fostering resilience!



# Compassionate Schools

- Support students who have experienced adversity or live in crisis
- A place where staff are trained to practice thoughtful and intentional kindness
- A place where students move from trauma to resilience





# Compassionate Schools

- Geared toward students who have been impacted by trauma – but all students benefit from a compassionate climate and culture
- Provide on-going professional development for ALL school staff
- Introduce strategies that promote student/staff wellness
- Encourage self-care for staff
- Adopt a school culture and climate infrastructure that meets the diversity and needs of the students/school
- Finding ways to meaningfully partner with communities and families.
- Address the mental health needs of students





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# Why it is important to build safe relationships?

- “Self-defense” mode
- Unable to shift from defensive reactions
- History of relational danger
- Repeated experiences of rejection or failed connection confirm negative beliefs about others and/or self
- Safe relationship with an adult is the most consistent predictor of resilient outcome



# Understanding the Role of Attachment

- Attachment system: the biological, emotional, and relational connection between children and their earliest caregivers.
- What does attachment do in normative development?
  - Allows children safety to explore their world (agency)
  - Provides healthy model of self and others (trust)
  - Teaches child how to communicate, and how to read others' communication
  - Teaches children how to understand, tolerate and cope with emotional experience
  - Provides structure and limits







# Additional Resources

- Emotional Intelligence: <http://www.ei-schools.com/>
- Post Traumatic Growth: <http://www.psych.uncc.edu/kilmer.htm>
- Anger management: <http://kap.samhsa.gov/products/manuals/pdfs/anger2.pdf>, adapted copy [robert.hull@pgcps.org](mailto:robert.hull@pgcps.org)
- Perry and Scholastic: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/>
- Oxford University Press 2012: <http://global.oup.com/academic/search?q=supporting+and+educating+traumatized+students&cc=us&lang=en>
- Fairfax County Public Schools/Immigrant Family Reunification Program: <http://www.fcps.edu/is/fam/reunification.shtml>
- BRYCS (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services) [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)





# Questions?







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