

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-362](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2012, there has been a rapid increase in the number of UAC apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border. According to DHS's Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the number of UAC from any country apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border climbed from more than 24,000 in fiscal year 2012 to nearly 39,000 in fiscal year 2013, and to nearly 69,000 in fiscal year 2014. Prior to fiscal year 2012, the majority of UAC apprehended at the border were Mexican nationals. However, more than half of the UAC apprehended at the border in fiscal year 2013, and 75 percent apprehended in fiscal year 2014 were nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, according to DHS/CBP. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face various socio-economic challenges, which the United States is seeking to address through assistance efforts.

GAO was asked to review issues related to U.S. assistance to Central America addressing the rapid increase in migration of UAC from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States. This report identifies U.S. mission-level efforts to (1) identify causes of the rapid increase in migration of unaccompanied children and (2) address the causes identified.

GAO developed a set of questions to obtain written responses from State, USAID, and DHS officials responsible for programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. GAO reviewed, analyzed, and tabulated these agency officials' responses.

View [GAO-15-362](#). For more information, contact David Gootnick at (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov

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CENTRAL AMERICA

Information on Migration of Unaccompanied Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

What GAO Found

Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials stationed in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras most commonly identified crime and violence and economic concerns as causes primarily responsible for the recent rapid increase in migration to the United States by unaccompanied alien children (UAC). These causes were followed by educational concerns, the desire for family reunification, and the role of smuggling networks, among others. Agency officials' responses to a GAO set of questions showed little variance in attributing causes of UAC migration by country. The officials reported drawing on various sources of information to identify these causes, including conducting first-hand interviews with migrants and their families; meeting with host government and non-governmental agencies; and analyzing various data, reports, and other information sources. For example, the State and USAID officials' responses for Honduras noted that the agencies had identified causes through a combination of surveys, discussions with government agencies and civil society organizations, anecdotal reports, and others.

The officials reported that agencies had developed new programs and modified existing programs to address the rapid increase in UAC migration in each of the three countries. They noted that most of these programs are specifically targeted to address identified causes of migration, such as crime and violence, lack of economic opportunities, and criminal networks that smuggle unaccompanied children. For example, DHS officials reported that the department had implemented Operation Coyote, an initiative active in all three countries to combat criminal organizations involved in UAC smuggling. According to agency officials, new and modified programs ranged in location from specific communities or cities to border areas to nation-wide or region-wide initiatives. State and USAID officials also noted that some of their efforts and strategic objectives that had been in place prior to the rapid increase in UAC migration focused on related issues such as economic development and crime reduction. Officials reported that they have undertaken various efforts to plan their responses to the increase in migration, including coordinating among U.S. agencies and with host governments. For example, agency officials from all three countries reported participating in UAC interagency working groups at each embassy. In addition, State and USAID officials said they have used DHS data on the location of origins of UAC to inform their efforts.