CENTRAL AMERICA

Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Unaccompanied Child Migration

Why GAO Did This Study
According to DHS, the number of UAC apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border climbed from nearly 28,000 in fiscal year 2012 to more than 73,000 in fiscal year 2014, with nearly three-fourths of those apprehended nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Children from these three countries face a host of challenges, such as extreme violence and persistent poverty. Those who migrate can encounter even more dangers, such as robbery and abuse.

GAO was asked to review issues related to UAC migration. In February 2015, GAO reported on U.S. assistance to Central America addressing the rapid increase in UAC migration. This report reviews (1) U.S. assistance in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras addressing agency-identified causes of UAC migration; (2) how agencies have determined where to locate these assistance efforts; and (3) the extent to which agencies have developed processes to assess the effectiveness of programs seeking to address UAC migration. GAO reviewed agency documents and interviewed officials in Washington, D.C., and in Central America.

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends that DHS and State take steps to integrate evaluations into their planning for, and implementation of, future information campaigns intended to deter migration. GAO also recommends that DHS establish performance targets for its investigative units. DHS concurred with both recommendations, and State concurred with the one recommendation directed to it.

What GAO Found
U.S. agencies have sought to address causes of unaccompanied alien child (UAC) migration through recent programs, such as information campaigns to deter migration, developed in response to the migration increase and other long-standing efforts. The recent migration increase was likely triggered, according to U.S. officials, by several emergent factors such as the increased presence and sophistication of human smugglers (known as coyotes) and confusion over U.S. immigration policy. Officials also noted that certain persistent conditions such as violence and poverty have worsened in certain countries. In addition to long-standing efforts, such as U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) antipoverty programs, agencies have taken new actions. For example, Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-led investigative units have increasingly sought to disrupt human smuggling operations.

U.S. agencies have located programs based on various factors, including long-term priorities such as targeting high-poverty and -crime areas, but have adjusted to locate more programs in high-migration communities. For example, Department of State (State) officials in Guatemala said they moved programs enhancing police anticrime capabilities into such communities, and USAID officials in El Salvador said they expanded to UAC-migration-affected locations.

Most agencies have developed processes to assess the effectiveness of programs seeking to address UAC migration, but weaknesses exist in these processes for some antismuggling programs. For example, DHS has established performance measures, such as arrests, for units combating UAC smuggling, but has not established numeric or other types of targets for these measures, which would enable DHS to measure the units’ progress. In addition, DHS and State have not always evaluated information campaigns intended to combat coyote misinformation. DHS launched its 2013 campaign in April, but launched its 2014 campaign in late June after migration levels peaked. Neither agency evaluated its 2014 campaign. Collecting performance information on media campaigns can have value in informing future campaign efforts to reduce child migration.

Timing of Department of Homeland Security Public Information Campaigns and Monthly Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Alien Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Number of unaccompanied alien child apprehensions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal year (FY) 2012</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 2013</td>
<td>4,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY 2014</td>
<td>6,000</td>
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