

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-506T](#), a testimony before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

ORR is responsible for coordinating and implementing the care and placement of unaccompanied children—that is, children who enter the United States with no lawful immigration status. The number of these children taken into custody by DHS and placed in ORR's care rose from about 6,600 in fiscal year 2011 to nearly 57,500 in fiscal year 2014, many coming from Central America. Though declining somewhat, the number has remained well above historical levels. In fiscal year 2017, DHS referred 40,810 such children to ORR.

This testimony discusses efforts by DHS and HHS to improve the placement and care of unaccompanied children in four key areas: (1) the process by which unaccompanied children are transferred from DHS to ORR custody; (2) how ORR monitors the care of unaccompanied children in its custody; (3) how ORR identifies and screens sponsors before children are transferred to their care; and (4) what is known about services these children receive after they leave ORR custody.

This testimony is based primarily on the findings from two prior GAO reports: a 2015 report on actions needed to ensure unaccompanied children receive required care in DHS custody; and a 2016 report on further actions HHS could take to monitor their care. This testimony also includes updated information on the progress agencies have made in implementing GAO's recommendations, and more recent statistics from publicly available sources.

View [GAO-18-506T](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov).

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## UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

### DHS and HHS Have Taken Steps to Improve Transfers and Monitoring of Care, but Actions Still Needed

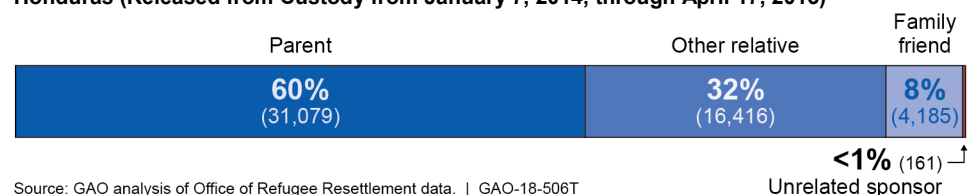
#### What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have agreed to establish a joint collaborative process for the referral and placement of unaccompanied children, but the process has not yet been implemented. In 2015, GAO reported that the interagency process for referring unaccompanied children from DHS to HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) shelters was inefficient and vulnerable to error, and that each agency's role and responsibilities were unclear. GAO recommended that DHS and HHS jointly develop and implement an interagency process with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, as well as procedures to disseminate placement decisions, for all agencies involved. In February 2018, HHS officials told GAO that the agency was reviewing a draft of the DHS-HHS joint concept of operations.

ORR has reported taking steps to improve monitoring of grantees that provided services to unaccompanied children. In 2016, GAO reported that ORR relied on grantees to document and annually report on the care they provide for unaccompanied children, such as housing and educational, medical, and therapeutic services, but documents were often missing and ORR was not able to complete all of its planned visits. GAO recommended that ORR review its monitoring program to ensure that onsite visits are conducted in a timely manner, that case files are systematically reviewed, and that grantees properly document the services they provide. Since 2016, ORR has reported that its grantee monitoring has improved, with more timely completion of on-site monitoring of all its grantees.

ORR relies on grantees to identify and screen sponsors before placing children with them. In 2016, GAO reported that most unaccompanied children from certain Central American countries were released to a parent or other relative, in accordance with ORR policy (see figure).

#### Sponsors' Relationship to Unaccompanied Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Released from Custody from January 7, 2014, through April 17, 2015)



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Refugee Resettlement data. | GAO-18-506T  
Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

In 2016, GAO reported that limited information was available on the services provided to children after they leave ORR care, and recommended that HHS develop processes to ensure its post-release activities provide reliable and useful summary data. Subsequent data from ORR indicate that the percentage of children receiving these services has increased, from about 10 percent in fiscal year 2014, to about 32 percent in fiscal year 2017. Also, in August 2017, ORR officials said that new case reporting requirements had been added to ORR's policy guide; however, further steps are needed to ensure the systematic collection of these data to provide useful information on post-release services across agencies, as GAO recommended.