

USCRI

Supporting Unaccompanied Immigrant Children

Best Practices for Child Protection, Prevention, and Child Welfare Professionals

USCRI Children Services: Home Study and Post Release Services
Community Outreach and Education Team

July 2026

USCRI Programs



**Note: USCRI is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)*

- Policy and Advocacy
- Humanitarian Legal Services
- Anti-Trafficking Services
- Refugee Services
- International Programs
- Children's Services

Objectives



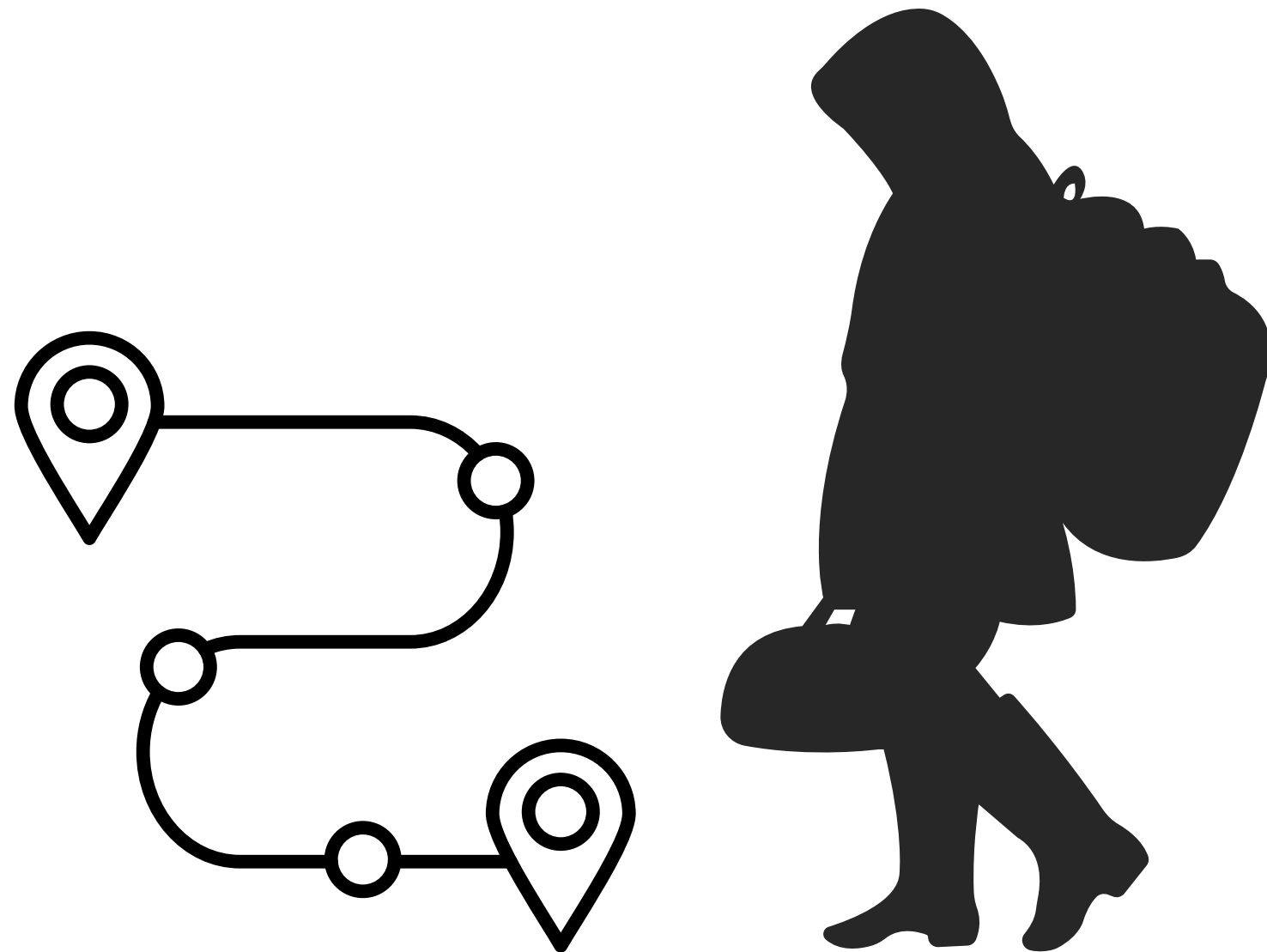
- Increase understanding of unaccompanied children migrating to the U.S. and build familiarity with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) family reunification process and Post-Release Services (PRS)
- Identify how complex trauma, disruption in attachment, and placement instability affect unaccompanied children's well-being, and recognize common maltreatment concerns
- Apply trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches to engagement, including trust-building, interviewing strategies, and cross-system collaboration
- Evaluate child welfare case scenarios involving unaccompanied children to determine appropriate investigative actions, safety considerations, and service referrals

PART I

Understanding Unaccompanied Children and Their Migration Journey

[UC Resource Center: About Unaccompanied Children](#)

Who are Unaccompanied Immigrant Children?



A child under 18 who is apprehended by the Dept. of Homeland Security either within the U.S. or upon entering the U.S. and who is:

- ✓ Without a parent or legal guardian
- ✓ Without lawful immigration status

The majority of unaccompanied children are reunited with a parent or other caregiver (sponsor) after release from Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody.

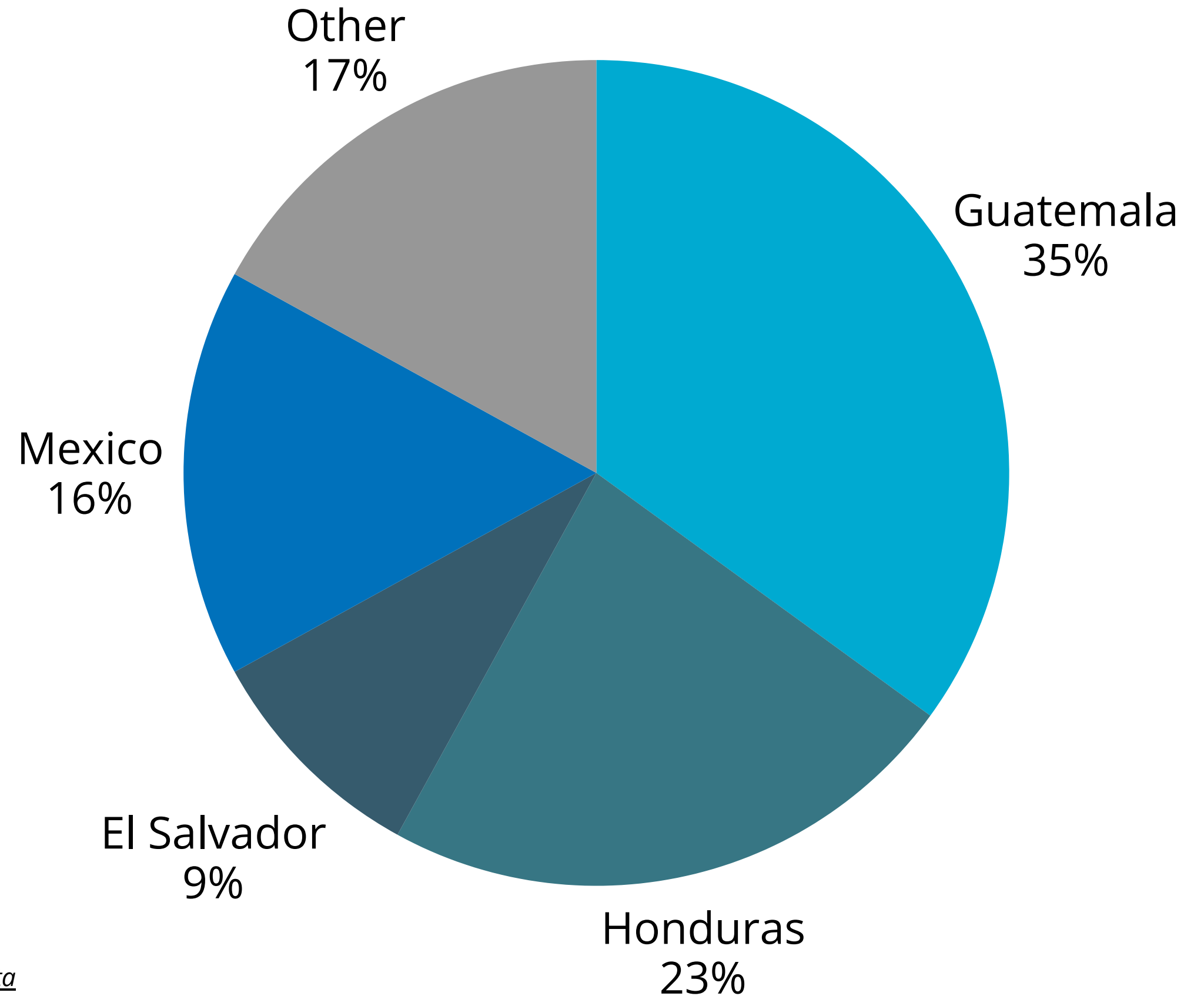
Why are children from Central America and other countries migrating alone?

- ▶▶ Forced recruitment into gangs or organized crime
- ▶▶ To reunite with parents or family members who migrated before them
- ▶▶ Lack of economic and educational opportunities
- ▶▶ Fleeing abuse and/or community violence
- ▶▶ Extreme poverty and climate change
- ▶▶ Political unrest
- ▶▶ Death or loss of a primary caretaker
- ▶▶ Seeking safety



Unaccompanied Children Placed into ORR Custody

FY 2025



Source: [Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\) Fact Sheets and Data](#)

ORR Custody, Release, and Reunification



Children are placed in ORR custody within 72 hours of their apprehension by the Dept. of Homeland Security



Once in custody, the ORR case manager works with the child and their family to identify a sponsor in the U.S.



Sponsor vetting process begins, including a home study



If approved, the child is released from ORR care and reunified with their sponsor



After discharge, children qualify for ORR-funded Post Release Services (PRS) to support their transition to their new environment

Sponsor Vetting

Child and family
are interviewed
to identify a
potential
sponsor

Sponsor proof of
identity
obtained, family
relationships
verified

Sponsor
screened for
safety concerns

Background
checks
performed for
sponsor and
adult household
members

A home study is
completed

Home Study Goals



Assess the safety
and appropriateness
of the proposed
placement



Assess the sponsor's
ability to care for the
child and meet the
child's needs



Educate and prepare the
sponsor and family for
the responsibilities of
sponsorship

ORR Sponsor Care Agreement



Provide for the physical and mental well-being of the child, including but not limited to food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and education



Make efforts to obtain legal guardianship



Report the child missing if they run away



Report child abuse/neglect



Notify ORR if no longer able and willing to care for the child and identify an alternate caregiver



Notify the Immigration Court and DHS of any change of address



Notify DHS if any knowledge of criminal activity



Ensure the child attends all court hearings

Sponsorship vs. Guardianship



Sponsorship

- Agreeing to care for an unaccompanied child
- Result of an ORR vetting and approval process
- A sponsor signs the Sponsor Care Agreement, but is not legally bound to care for the child

Guardianship

- Obtaining certain legal rights regarding the care of a child
- Assigned by a court, often a family court

Being approved by ORR as a child's sponsor does not confer legal guardianship. Obtaining legal guardianship is a separate process that the sponsor would need to seek out on their own with an attorney.

Proof of Sponsorship*

"Letter of Designation of Care" or
"Carta Poder" from child's parent(s)
in home country

CARTA PODER

PRESENTE

En este acto otorgo a _____ un poder especial, pero tan amplio como en derecho proceda, para que en mi nombre y representación lleve a cabo todos los actos y trámites necesarios para _____, incluyendo presentar, entregar y recibir cualquier tipo de documento que se requiera para dichos fines.

El poder especial otorgado mediante la presente faculta al apoderado a realizar los actos y trámites mencionados ante _____.

Ratifico expresamente desde ahora todos y cada uno de los actos que realice el apoderado en el ejercicio del presente mandato.

Por su propio derecho

Acepto el poder: _____

Firma: _____

TESTIGOS

Child's ORR Verification of Release (VOR) form or card

OMB Control No: 0970-0552
Expiration Date: 03/31/2022

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (HHS)
OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT (ORR)
DIVISION OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN OPERATIONS (DUCO)
VERIFICATION OF RELEASE**

VERIFICATION OF RELEASE

Name of Minor:	NOMBRE DEL MENOR	Aliases (if any):	
Minor's Date of Birth:	FECHA DE NACIMIENTO	Minor's A#:	NUMERO A

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has released the above named minor from Federal custody pursuant to section 462 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and section 235 of the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 to the care of:

FOTO DEL MENOR	Name of Sponsor:	NOMBRE DEL PATROCINADOR		
	Aliases (if any):			
	Address:	DIRECCION		
	City:	CIUDAD		
	State:	ESTADO	Zip Code:	
	Telephone#:	NUMERO DE TELEFONO		
Relationship to Child:		RELACION AL MENOR		

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE SPONSOR CARE AGREEMENT

The above named sponsor has agreed to the provisions set forth in the Sponsor Care Agreement, pertaining to the minor's care, safety, and well-being, and the sponsor's responsibility for ensuring the minor's presence at all future proceedings before the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice/Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR).

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY

Name ORR care provider Facility	NOMBRE DEL ALBERGUE
Date	FECHA QUE SALIO DEL ALBERGUE

THE PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT OF 1995 (Pub. L. 104.13) Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average .10/hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and reviewing the collection of information. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Refugee Resettlement**

VERIFICATION OF RELEASE

Surname: **CAVALLARO-RODRIGUEZ**
Given Name: **MARIA LUCIA**
A# **000-000-000**
Date of Birth: **10/21/2007**
Issued: **11/15/2023** Eye Color: **BRO**
Primary Language: **Spanish**
Country of Birth: **Honduras**
Address: **1628 Cabrini Boulevard, Apt. 205
New York, NY 10007**

If found, please contact the ORR National Call Center [see back] for instructions on returning this card to HHS.

Issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)

Call/text/WhatsApp the ORR National Call Center (NCC) at 1-800-203-7001 or: **9-1-1**
- anyone is denying you access to food, shelter, school, medicine, doctors, interpretation, or other services;
- you need help finding paperwork;
- anyone abuses you, takes advantage of you, or forces you to work or do anything harmful or inappropriate at home, school, work, or anywhere else.

Llama/textea/WhatsApp el Centro Nacional de Atención de Llamadas de ORR al 1-800-203-7001 o: **9-8-8**
- alguien te impide ir a la escuela o te niega alimento, hospedaje, medicamentos, médicos, servicios de interpretación u otros servicios;
- necesitas ayuda para encontrar documentos;
- alguien abusa o se aprovecha de ti, te obliga a trabajar o a hacer algo dañino o inapropiado en la casa, la escuela, el trabajo, o cualquier otro lugar.

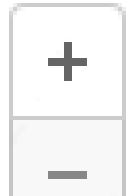
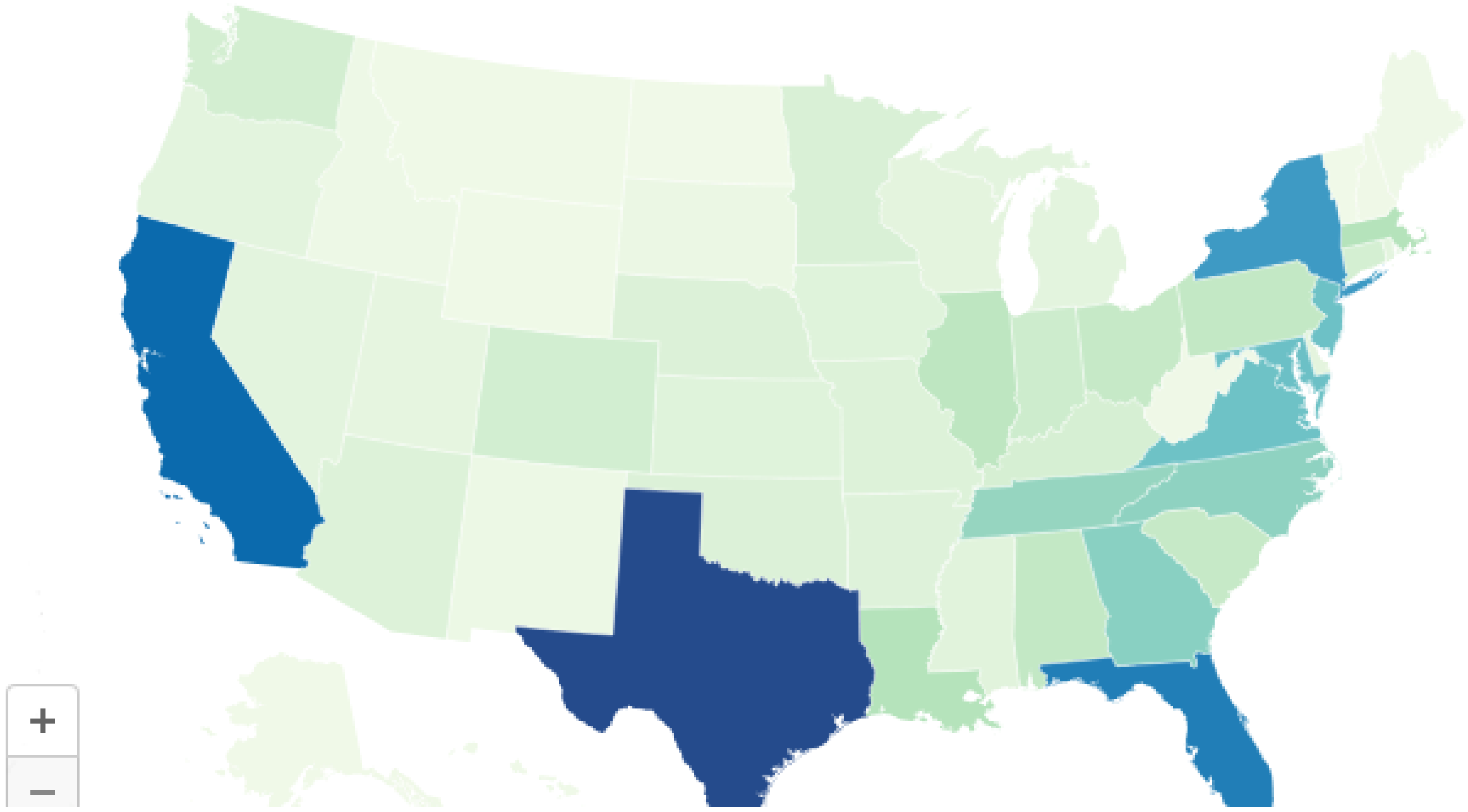
If you are in immediate danger, call or text: **9-1-1**
Si estás en peligro inmediato, llama o textea: **9-1-1**

If you are having a mental health crisis, call or text: **9-8-8**
Si tienes una crisis emocional o nerviosa, llama o textea: **9-8-8**

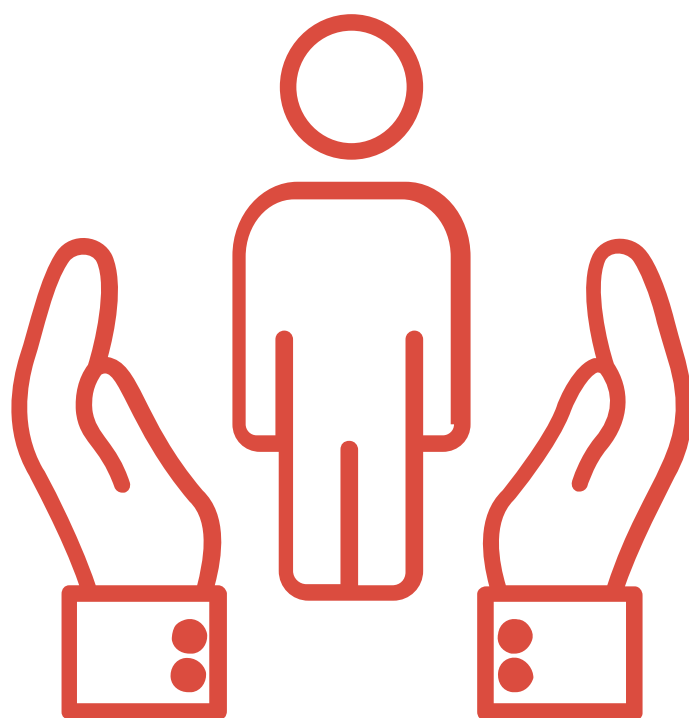
This card was generated using ORR's Verification of Release document and verifies that the individual identified herein has been processed through ORR care and custody pursuant to Section 462 of the Homeland Security Act and Section 235 of the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. If found, please contact the NCC to return the card.

Primary areas where UCs are released to sponsors

Unaccompanied Children Release Data by State FY15 - FY25*



* as of April 2025



PRS are case management services provided to UCs and their sponsors after the child is released from ORR care.

The PRS worker supports in the areas of:

- Placement/Family Stability & Child Safety
- Education
- Medical Care
- Legal & Immigration
- Mental & Behavioral Health
- Integration & Independence
- Child Trafficking

Myths and Facts About UCs



Myth: Sponsors are not vetted.



Fact: ORR conducts multiple levels of screening and verification.



Myth: UCs are unlawfully present in the U.S.



Fact: UCs have the right to remain in the U.S. while their immigration case is in process.



Myth: UCs without a caregiver can always just return to ORR custody.



Fact: Once released from federal custody to a sponsor, the safety and well-being of UCs fall under the jurisdiction of local CPS/child welfare systems.



Myth: UCs are placed with sponsors they do not know.



Fact: Unaccompanied children are reunified with extensively vetted parents, close relatives, or other trusted adults.



Myth: UCs are trafficked or exploited by their sponsors in most cases.



Fact: The majority of UCs are in safe placements with safe and caring adults. A relatively small number of UCs experience abuse, trafficking, or exploitation by their sponsors after release from ORR care.

Placement Disruptions

- Once released from federal custody to sponsors, the safety and well-being of UCs fall under the jurisdiction of local CPS/child welfare systems
- ORR is generally not involved in placement changes or decisions after a UC has been released from ORR care
- PRS workers do not have the authority to remove a child, approve a new placement, or transfer a child to a new placement



PART II

Trauma & Cultural Considerations When Working with
Unaccompanied Children

Triple Trauma Paradigm



Refers to the trauma experienced by immigrants and refugees during the three stages of migration (pre-, during, and post-migration)

In Country of Origin:

- Poverty
- Gang violence
- Food shortages
- Abuse or neglect
- Domestic violence
- Threats or experiences of community violence
- Corruption

En Route to the U.S:

- Unaccompanied
- Relying on/trusting their coyote/smuggler
- Witnessing violence due to cartels, turf, etc.
- Witnessing death or injury of others
- Assault, exploitation
- Dangerous conditions of journey

Post ORR Release:

- Family separation
- Adapting to new language/culture
- Living with a new caregiver
- Experiencing discrimination, racism, and/or xenophobia
- Abuse or neglect
- Lacking ability to make choices/take control

Impacts of Trauma



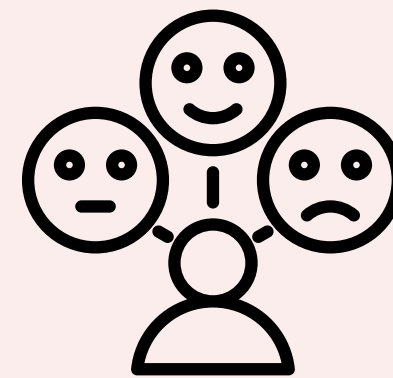
Physical

- Excessive alertness, easily startled
- Changes in appetite or eating habits



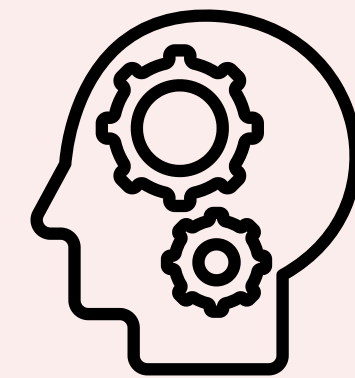
Behavioral

- Acting withdrawn, numb
- Risk taking behaviors



Emotional

- Anger or irritability, anxiety or panic
- Guilt or regret, hopelessness



Cognitive

- Loss of faith, shift in worldview
- Preoccupation with family separation

Impacts on Newcomer Families and Caregivers Within the Child Welfare System

Families may experience additional strain as they try to navigate multiple systems:



Fear or
uncertainty about
system
involvement



Confusion about
requirements
across agencies



Stress related to
economic or
immigration-
related insecurity



Pressure to
maintain
household
stability while
meeting external
expectations



Difficulty
attending
appointments
due to work,
transportation, or
scheduling

Cultural Considerations for Working with Unaccompanied Children



Family Dynamics and Roles



- Roles may not be immediately clear and may shift after reunification
- Children may assume adult responsibilities
- Gender norms affect emotional expression
- Differences in discipline practices
- Changes in relationship dynamics

Education



- Interrupted schooling is common
- Families may be unfamiliar with U.S. school systems (e.g., compulsory school attendance and truancy laws)
- Adjustment challenges for children and caregivers

Engagement in Services

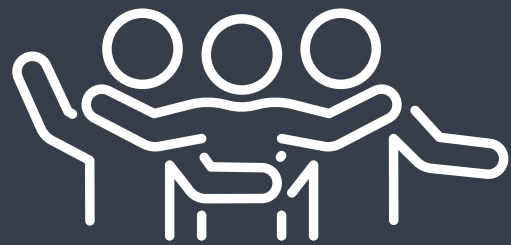


- Culture shock and identity adjustment
- Fear may reduce disclosure or result in mistrust of institutions
- Prior experiences may influence engagement
- Language barriers
- Family and cultural strengths as protective factors

Cultural Considerations: Protective Factors



Strengths, relationships, and resources that help children cope with challenges, reduce the impact of trauma, and support healthy development.



Social support



Cultural resilience
and identity



Education and supportive
school environments



Immigration relief



Goal setting



Spirituality

PART III

**Best Practices for Interviewing and Assessment in Child Welfare Cases
Involving Unaccompanied Children**

Responding to CPS Reports of Child Abuse, Neglect, and Safety Concerns in UC Cases



- ▶▶ Inadequate supervision / lack of caregiving oversight
- ▶▶ Physical abuse or harsh disciplinary practices
- ▶▶ Sexual abuse
- ▶▶ Sex trafficking
- ▶▶ Labor exploitation / labor trafficking concerns
- ▶▶ Runaway or missing youth
- ▶▶ School attendance (truancy)
- ▶▶ Placement instability

Child Welfare Best Practices



Build Trust First: Core Interviewing Principles



Be mindful of body language, pacing, and perceived power differences



Allow the child to guide pace of the interview before moving into sensitive topics



Ask one question at a time and allow pauses



Use calm, respectful, and conversational language- respect for culture & experiences



Avoid judgmental reactions and remain calm when they are not in trouble for sharing

Best Practices: Ensuring Language Access

①

Always assess for preferred language.

For many indigenous languages, it may be necessary to assess for both language (e.g., Mam) and regional variation (e.g., Mam - San Marcos).

②

Always use trained interpreters and avoid having friends, family members, or children interpret.

③

Check with your supervisor to determine the process for requesting an interpreter and allocate appropriate time for meetings with interpretation.

④

Speak directly to the person you are engaging with, not to the interpreter.

⑤

Consider low literacy and check for understanding.

Interview Environment

Create a Safe Space



Choose a **safe, neutral, and private location**



Ensure **basic needs** are met (water, snack)



Avoid interviewing in the environment where alleged harm occurred



Ensure privacy- be aware of who else is present and may be within earshot



Let them know they can **speak freely** without consequences



Coordinate timing to reduce stress (avoid rushed or chaotic setting)

Interview Environment



Clearly Explain Your Role



Introduce yourself in simple, transparent language



“My name is XX, I am with the Department of Children and Families. I am not a part of immigration enforcement. I’m here to understand how things are going and make sure you are safe.”

“I have law enforcement with me in case there are immediate safety concerns...”



Be transparent about the limits of your role (what you can and cannot control)



Clarify your role and purpose early to reduce fear and confusion

Interviewing Practices to Avoid

- ✗ Labeling the child (e.g., “trafficking victim”)
- ✗ Assuming facts before gathering full context
- ✗ Interviewing near potential perpetrators
- ✗ Rushing into sensitive questions without rapport
- ✗ Promising outcomes (reunification, immigration relief)
- ✗ Dismissing or minimizing inconsistent disclosures

Importance of a Trauma-Informed Approach



Improves the accuracy
of safety and risk assessments



Reduces the likelihood
of children recanting or withholding disclosures



Supports the child's emotional safety
during the process



Strengthens trust
in systems over time



Leads to more informed,
culturally responsive decision-making



Why Children May Not Disclose or Recant Abuse, Neglect, or Safety Concerns



- Fear of separation or placement change
- Fear of disrupting the household or family
- Dependence on caregiver for basic needs
- Concern about consequences for caregivers
- Past experiences of not being believed
- Shame, guilt, or self-blame
- Cultural, language, or immigration related fears
- Uncertainty about how the system will respond
- Fear of retaliation or further harm



Case Documentation: Language Matters

Avoid:



"Mother was uncooperative and evasive."



"The child was manipulative."



"The father was hostile."



"The family is not following through."

Try:



"Mother declined to answer questions regarding housing and stated she was concerned that sharing information could affect her immigration status."



"The child provided different responses at different points during the conversation."



"The father spoke in a raised voice, stated he was upset about CPS involvement, and requested that the conversation end."



"The caregiver missed two scheduled appointments and reported difficulty arranging transportation."

Ask yourself:



Am I documenting facts, observations, and statements?
Am I separating what I know from what I assume?
Have I included context, barriers, and strengths?

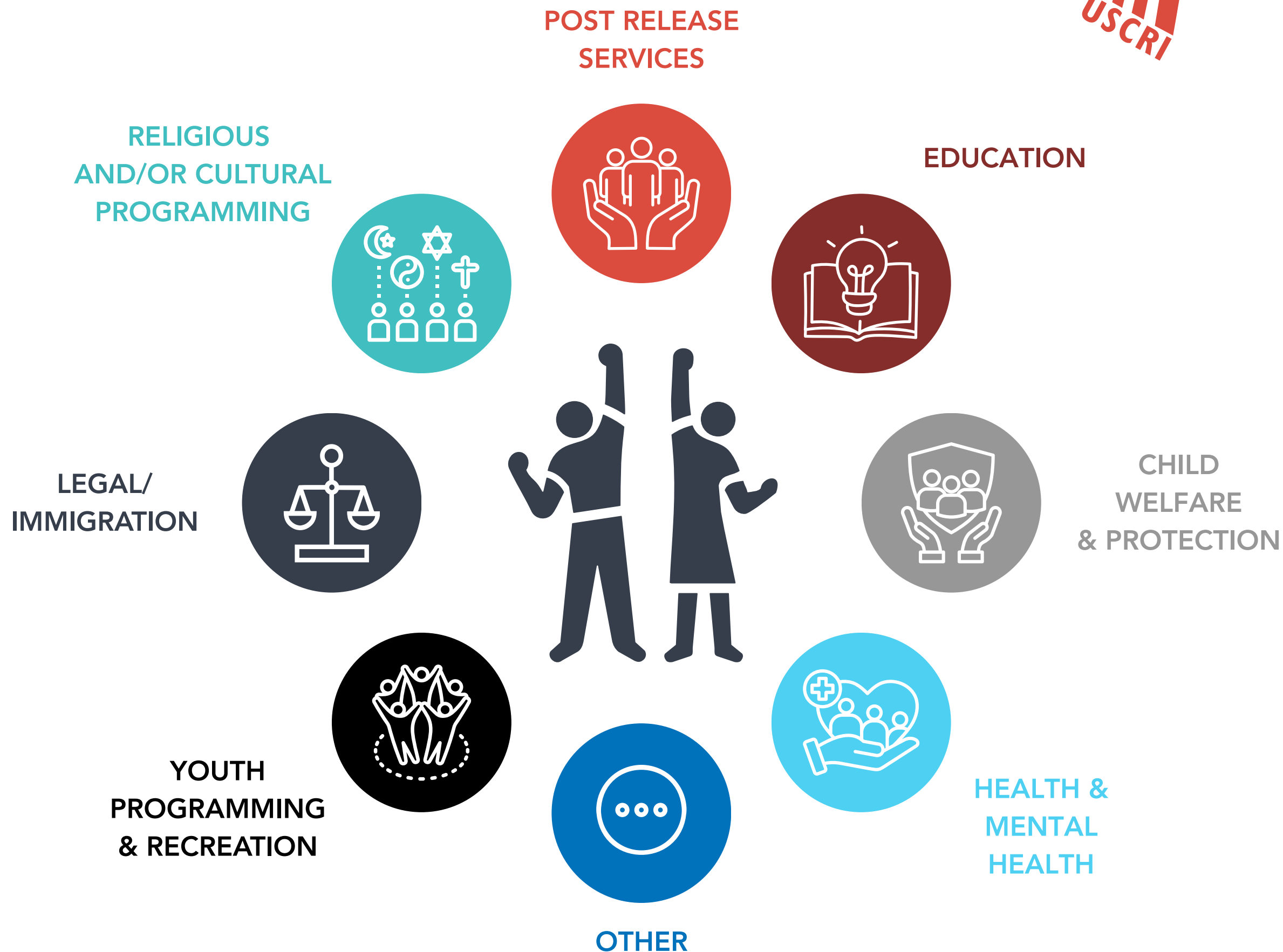


PART IV

Collaboration Across Systems and Resources for Providers and Families



SYSTEMS OF CARE FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN



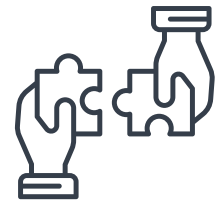


Cross-System Collaboration Strategies to Support Unaccompanied Children

- **Strengthen case staff coordination** through case management, service planning, and multidisciplinary case staffings.
- **Clarify roles and strengthen partnerships** among PRS, child welfare, schools, healthcare, legal services, and community-based organizations.
- **Improve information sharing** through standardized referral, documentation, and confidentiality protocols.
- **Build cross-system capacity** through joint training and a shared understanding of each system's roles and responsibilities.
- **Prioritize child-centered care** by focusing on safety, well-being, permanency, and supportive services
- **Strengthen prevention and family supports** by connecting UCs and sponsors to community resources early and promoting family preservation and reunification when appropriate.



HOW PARTNERSHIPS CAN HELP IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT CHILDREN



Coordinated partnerships can help:

- ✓ Keep youth **safe** through enhanced prevention services
- ✓ Increase a sense of **support and stability** for children and families
- ✓ Increase families' **awareness of important systems, services, resources, and rights**
- ✓ Ensure support for children comes with **cultural and linguistic sensitivity and expertise**
- ✓ Increase access to **quality education**
- ✓ Strengthen **social networks and supports**
- ✓ **Decrease fear** of institutions
- ✓ Improve **referral pathways and warm handoffs** between providers

Supports Available for Unaccompanied Children



ORR National Call Center

Contact ORR to request:

- Case-specific information
- Post Release Services for an unaccompanied child
- ORR documentation



800- 203-7001

Victims of Trafficking

OTIP

- TVPA of 2000 requires all federal, state, and local officials to report potential trafficking concerns on behalf of foreign national minors to HHS within 24 hours.
- Child welfare workers and other providers can report trafficking to OTIP using the ONLINE SHEPHERD SYSTEM.

TVAP

- Trafficking-specific case management services for youth 18 and over
- Contact: **tvap@refugees.org**

ASPIRE

- Trafficking-specific services for children who are not already receiving PRS or other federally funded case management services
- Contact: **aspire@refugees.org** or **800-307-4712**

ORR-Eligible Unaccompanied Children



Certain UCs are eligible for additional benefits and services through Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funded programs:

- Preferred Communities (intensive case management)
- Employment
- Youth Mentoring
- Refugee School Impact

These include UCs who:

- Have been identified as **victims of trafficking**
- Have been **granted asylum**
- Are **Haitian or Cuban children** (through the Cuban/Haitian Entrant program)

*Find services here: <https://acf.gov/orr/map/find-resources-and-contacts-your-state>

*Learn more about ORR-eligible populations here: <https://acf.gov/orr/programs/refugees/factsheets>

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NÚMEROS DE CRISIS Y APOYO | CRISIS AND SUPPORT HELPLINES



UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN RESOURCE CENTER

CENTRO DE RECURSOS PARA JÓVENES INMIGRANTES



INFORMACIÓN
PARA JÓVENES Y
FAMILIAS

TALLERES PARA
JÓVENES Y
FAMILIAS



INFORMATION FOR
PROVIDERS

TRAINING &
TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE



Key Takeaways



- Increased knowledge of unaccompanied children's experiences, the ORR family reunification process, and Post-Release Services (PRS).
- Strengthened approaches to child welfare investigations involving unaccompanied children through case application, safety assessment, and cross-system collaboration.
- Applied child welfare best practices through case scenarios and identified resources to support unaccompanied children and their families.