Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

“I feel compelled to draw attention to the reality of child migrants, especially the ones who are alone. I ask everyone to take care of the young, who in a threefold way are defenseless: they are children, they are foreigners, and they have no means to protect themselves.”

-Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Migrants and Refugees Message, January 15, 2017

**Who Are Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM)?**

Unaccompanied refugee minors are refugee children who do not have a parent or relative available to providing for their long-term care. These children are unable to return to their home countries due to past persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.¹ They are identified overseas as refugees and are eligible for resettlement. Most URM range in age from 15 to 17 years old at the time of referral.² The URM program has evolved to meet the needs of certain other vulnerable minors arriving to the United States with no family to care for them, such as “unaccompanied alien children,”³ victims of human trafficking, victims of certain crimes in the U.S., or recipients of Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.⁴

**The Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program**

The URM program provides culturally and linguistically appropriate foster care to unaccompanied refugee children and youth. Through the program, unaccompanied refugees receive care, educational support, and case management to help them thrive and achieve self-sufficiency. The United States fulfills a vital global child protection leadership role through the URM program, as it is the only country providing such care. Since its inception in the 1980s, the program has received approximately 13,000 children from countries all over the world.⁵ In FY 2016, the program resettled 203 children – less than one quarter of one percent of all refugees resettled in the U.S. that year. While the total number of children resettled through the URM program is relatively small, the program has a tremendous impact on the children served.

Nau, an orphan, fled Burma with her cousins and brother to escape religious persecution. She was eventually able to find safety and stability through resettlement. Nau arrive in Phoenix at the age of 12 through the URM program. After working hard to learn English, Nau graduated her 8th grade class as Valedictorian. She then graduated her high school with high academic marks and was accepted to Georgetown University with a full scholarship.
Where are URM arriving from?

Currently, the four countries with the largest number of unaccompanied and separated children are: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Burma. As noted above, unaccompanied and separated children from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador who are arriving to the United States seeking protection are vulnerable populations who also may become eligible for the URM program.6

When do children “age out”7 of URM foster care?

Youth must designate to enter the URM program prior to their 18th birthday. However, once they are in the URM program, they may remain in the foster care placement up until the age of 23, depending on the state’s specific child welfare guidelines.

What is USCCB’s role in the URM Program?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) is one of two resettlement agencies designated to receive unaccompanied refugee minors. USCCB/MRS helps to determine and secure appropriate placements for URM-eligible children among our network of providers, and provides trainings and technical assistance for URM services. In FY 2016, USCCB/MRS served 166 children through the URM program.

Why Does the Catholic Church Assist URM?

The Catholic Church’s work in assisting unaccompanied migrant children stems from the belief that every person is created in God’s image. In their pastoral letter Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, the Mexican and U.S. bishops noted that “vulnerable immigrant populations, including unaccompanied children and refugees, should be afforded protection. Unaccompanied children, due to their heightened vulnerability, require special consideration and care.”8

Is it possible to adopt an URM?

Unaccompanied refugee children are generally not eligible for adoption.8 Although unaccompanied minors are generally put in long-term foster care placements, programs continue to make attempts to trace family wherever possible. Similar to children in domestic foster care, family reunification is always a primary goal when in the child’s best interest.

How can I help assist and protect URM?


- Become a URM foster parent! The URM programs follow the same state laws
and regulations that govern domestic foster care. In addition, URM programs provide trauma-informed services specific to the needs of a foreign-born child who has encountered a forced migration experience. Potential foster families must undergo background checks, are carefully screened through an extensive home study process, and receive comprehensive training before they are approved to care for a child in their home.

If you live in or near Phoenix, AZ; San Jose, CA; Miami, FL; Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo, MI; Jackson, MS; Rochester and Syracuse, NY; Ft. Worth and Houston, TX; Salt Lake City, UT; Richmond and Roanoke, VA; and Tacoma, WA and are interested in becoming a foster parent, contact foster@usccb.org for more information.

If you reside in Colorado Springs, CO, Denver, CO, Fargo, ND, Fullerton, CA, Lansing, MI, Newton, PA, Philadelphia, PA, Seattle, WA, Washington, DC, Worcester, MA please contact Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services at fosterparentinfo@lirs.org.

4. SIJ status is designed for non-U.S. citizen children in the United States who do not have permanent residence and have been abused, neglected or abandoned by one or both parents. 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27)(J). (Si)
6. Id.
7. “Age out” refers to the point at which a youth is no longer eligible for services under the URM program.
9. In order to adopt, there needs to be proof that the child’s parents are deceased or that they have terminated their parental rights. Cases of adoption after resettlement to the U.S. are very rare.