



# Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

Photo: CNS/Andrew McConnell, CRS

*"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, World Day of Migrants and Refugees Message, 2017<sup>1</sup>

## Who Are Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM)?

Unaccompanied refugee minors are refugee children alone in the world who do not have a parent or relative available to provide 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.<sup>2</sup> They are identified and carefully screened overseas as refugees and are eligible for resettlement. Most URM range in age from 15 to 17 years old at the time of referral.<sup>3</sup> 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,"<sup>4</sup> who are victims of human trafficking, victims of certain crimes in the U.S., recipients of U.S. asylum, or recipients of Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.<sup>5</sup>

## 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.<sup>6</sup> 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's Story

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: Eritrea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma, and Afghanistan. As noted above, some of the unaccompanied and separated children from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador who are coming to the United States seeking protection have vulnerabilities that may also make them eligible for the URM program.<sup>7</sup>

## When do children "age out"<sup>8</sup> of URM foster care?

Youth must be designated 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.

## Is it possible to adopt an unaccompanied refugee minor?

Unaccompanied refugee children are generally not eligible for adoption.<sup>9</sup> 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 as long as it is in the child's best interest.

## 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 national 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 12 local Catholic Charities and other childcare providers and provides trainings and technical assistance for such URM services. USCCB/MRS helped to serve 161 URM in FY2015, 105 in FY2016, 123 in FY2017, 50 in FY2018, 84 URM in 2019, and 47 URM in 2020.

## What is the current status of the URM Program?

The United States continues to be the only nation that provides resettlement of unaccompanied refugee minors. During the Trump Administration, the URM program has severely declined, as demonstrated by the lower number of children resettled between 2015 and 2020 by the USCCB network and in general. The number of URM resettled by USCCB/MRS and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) in FY2015 was 294 while the number resettled in FY2019 was 147, only half FY2015's total. Raising further concern, the Trump Administration made no explicit mention of the URM program in its Report to Congress in FY2020 or FY2021, and it is greatly restricting UNHCR referrals to the U.S. of URM. In FY2020 due to COVID-19, URM arrivals were delayed when the global and U.S. resettlement programs were shut down for several months. Operations are now resumed with 4 URM arriving since March.

## What can be done to strengthen the URM program?

- Include explicit mention of URM in the new Presidential Determination to be issued by President-elect Biden.
- Ensure that UNHCR can resume referrals to the U.S. Resettlement Admissions Program.
- Allocate at least 1% of the annual refugee slots for URM.
- Expedite URM who are near aging out.
- Use safe, innovative screening mechanisms, such as remote interviewing, for locations where an in-person circuit ride may not be safe or viable due to COVID-19.

## Why Does the Catholic Church Assist and Advocate for URM?

The Catholic Church's work in assisting and advocating for programs for unaccompanied migrant children stems from the belief that everyone is a child of God, 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."<sup>10</sup>

## How can I help assist and protect URM?

- **Learn more about the URM program.** Download a copy of our e-book, [The U.S. Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program: Guiding Principles and Promising Practices](#), to educate yourself and your fellow community members about the URM program.
- **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; Dallas, Ft. Worth and Houston, TX; Salt Lake City, UT; Richmond, VA; and Tacoma and Vancouver, WA and are interested in becoming a foster parent, contact [foster@usccb.org](mailto:foster@usccb.org) for more information. USCCB/MRS also operates foster care programs in Orlando FL, Indianapolis IN, Nashville TN, Philadelphia PA. 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](mailto:fosterparentinfo@lirs.org).
- **Advocate for URM with your lawmaker.** USCCB has been involved in direct advocacy to help protect the URM program. Interested in making your voice of support to URM heard? Contact [afeasley@usccb.org](mailto:afeasley@usccb.org) to learn more.

## Endnotes

1. Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, January 1, 2017, available at [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160908\\_world-migrants-day-2017.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20160908_world-migrants-day-2017.html).
2. 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42).
3. USCCB/MRS, *The United States Unaccompanied Minor Program Guiding Principles and Promising Practices* (2013).
4. 6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2) (defining "unaccompanied alien children").
5. SIJ status is 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).
6. Office of Refugee Resettlement, "About Unaccompanied Refugee Minors," <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ort/programs/urm/about> (last visited July 17, 2017).
7. *Id.*
8. "Age out" refers to the point at which a youth is no longer eligible for services under the URM program.
9. *Strangers No Longer Together on The Journey of Hope*, Pastoral Statement Concerning Migration from the U.S. and Mexican Catholic Bishops, (2003).
10. 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.

