

Sixteen for '16 - Number 15: Care for Child Refugees

By [Salvatore Babones](#), Truthout | Op-Ed

In the 11 months from October 2013 to August 2014, there were 66,127 recorded arrivals of "Unaccompanied Alien Children from Central America" (as the Department of Homeland Security calls them) on the United States' southern border. Totals for fiscal years 2013 and 2014 together run to over 100,000. (1)

These are not migrants. They are refugees. And most Americans understand this - a recent survey suggests as many as 69 percent. (2)

A refugee is any person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (3)

In international law a person who migrates to find a better life is not a refugee. Nor is someone who is fleeing personal troubles, for example, someone who is afraid of street crime, no matter how severe. Such people may have very good reasons for migrating, and may deserve our sympathy and assistance, but technically speaking, they are not refugees.

Most of the current wave of refugees from Central America are neither economic migrants nor even migrants from crime, but are fleeing persecution on the basis of "membership of a particular social group." They are almost all indigenous people in countries where indigenous peoples face severe persecution bordering on genocide.

What the United States did to its indigenous people - the Native American tribes - more than 100 years ago, the governments and drug gangs of Central America are doing to their indigenous peoples today.

Persecution based on indigeneity has gone largely unreported in media accounts of the child refugee crisis, and even the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (4) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (5) make only passing mention of it in their reports on the crisis. Both reports identify as indigenous only children who actually speak indigenous languages.

But just as most Native American children in the United States now speak English only, most indigenous people in Central America now speak Spanish only. That doesn't make them any less indigenous. It certainly doesn't make them any less persecuted on the basis of their membership of this particular social group.

Turkey has accepted more than 1 million refugees from the civil war in Syria, including refugees from Islamic State attacks throughout the region. Lebanon has accepted more than a million and Jordan more than half a million. (6)

These millions have been greeted, if not exactly with open arms, at least with food, schools and sympathy. Virtually none of them applied for admission before arriving at the border. They just showed up.

Meanwhile the United States - with more than three times the population and 10 times the wealth of these countries combined - has been confronted with some 100,000 to 200,000 child refugees from civil unrest in Mexico and Central America. Many of them have been greeted with protests and jeers on their way to immigration detention centers. (7)

If charity begins at home, the "Unaccompanied Alien Children from Central America" are here, in our homes, literally crying for charity. The progressive thing to do is the human thing to do: to care for them as we would our own children.

The vilification of refugee children is a cheap way to win cheap votes. But deep down, Americans really are charitable; Americans really are generous - and Americans really are eager to do good in the world and have good done on their behalf.

A progressive presidential candidate should recognize this, and help lead us toward our better selves. Helping children is a vote-winner, not just another thankless responsibility of leadership. But either way, it is a responsibility of leadership and progressives should take the lead in 2016, on this issue of all issues.

## Footnotes

1. US Customs and Border Protection, Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children, undated but covering the period October 1, 2013 - August 31, 2014.
  2. Public Religion Research Institute, Nearly 7-in-10 Americans See Unaccompanied Children at Border as Refugees, Not Illegal Immigrants, July 29, 2014.
  3. UNHCR, About Refugees, quoting the 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and associated protocols.
  4. UNHCR Regional Office for the United States and the Caribbean, Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection, 2014, page 34.
  5. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Mission to Central America: The Flight of Unaccompanied Children to the United States, November 2013, page 11.
  6. UNHCR, Syrian Refugees: Inter-Agency Regional Update, September 18, 2014; figures for Turkey also include more than 150,000 migrants from Islamic State persecution in the last two weeks of September, 2014.
- Michael Martinez and Holly Yan, Showdown: California Town Turns Away Buses of Detained Immigrants, CNN