UNHCR Recommendations

To date, the UNHCR recommendations have not been taken into consideration within U.S. policy. Unaccompanied and accompanied children from Central America and Mexico have been treated as undocumented immigrants without the protection of or recourse to international human rights or refugee law. For instance, unaccompanied and accompanied children have been detained and deported without due process. In 2014, approximately 3,800 beds were housing mothers and their children in detention centers, a more than 4,000 percent increase from 85 beds in 2013.*  

A privately-run, for-profit detention facility in Dilley, Texas is the largest family residential detention center, able to hold upwards of 2,400 mothers and children, with most detainees fleeing extreme violence from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** A 2015 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services report found that nearly 80% of detainees could be granted asylum under the conditions of credible fear of persecution.*** Taken together, a large majority of the individuals and families detained are fleeing violence from Central America and Mexico and should be considered for actual or potential international protection, which would grant many the status of refugee or asylee.

Implications for U.S. Policy and Health Equity:

U.S. policymakers could refer to the UNHCR’s report “Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection” in determining refugee and asylee status, which would:

--Reduce the number of children and families detained in U.S. detention centers;
--Provide access to health care coverage for children and families who have experienced extreme forms of violence; and
--Improve access to social programs for children and their families.

Addressing Policies, Practices, and Structures Impacting the Health and Care Access of Refugee Children

An Issue Brief on Refugee/Asylee Status

Through a collaborative project among the University of Texas Medical Branch, Texas Children’s Hospital, Baylor College of Medicine, and University of Houston Clear Lake, and supported by the Texas Medical Center, the research team uncovers government policies, agency practices, and environmental factors associated with the health of children refugees from Central America and Mexico and their ability to receive adequate healthcare in the U.S.

To that end, the Center to Eliminate Health Disparities (CEHD) has assessed current laws and regulations as they relate to refugee/asylee status in the U.S. This brief describes the need for Central American and Mexican children to have refugee/asylee status, the potential benefits of refugee/asylee status, and UNHCR recommendations for developing policy alternatives that are consistent with human rights standards.

UTMB Center to Eliminate Health Disparities

Issue Brief #1603

July 2016

Citation Recommendation:

Guillot-Wright, S; Serag, H; Smith, KD (2016). “Addressing Policies, Practices, and Structures Impacting the Health and Care Access of Refugee Children: An Issue Brief on Refugee/Asylee Status.” Center to Eliminate Health Disparities at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas: www.utmb.edu/cehd

Art by Tess Dennis

** Black Box: “Welcome to Dilley,” dilleythisisblackbox.com