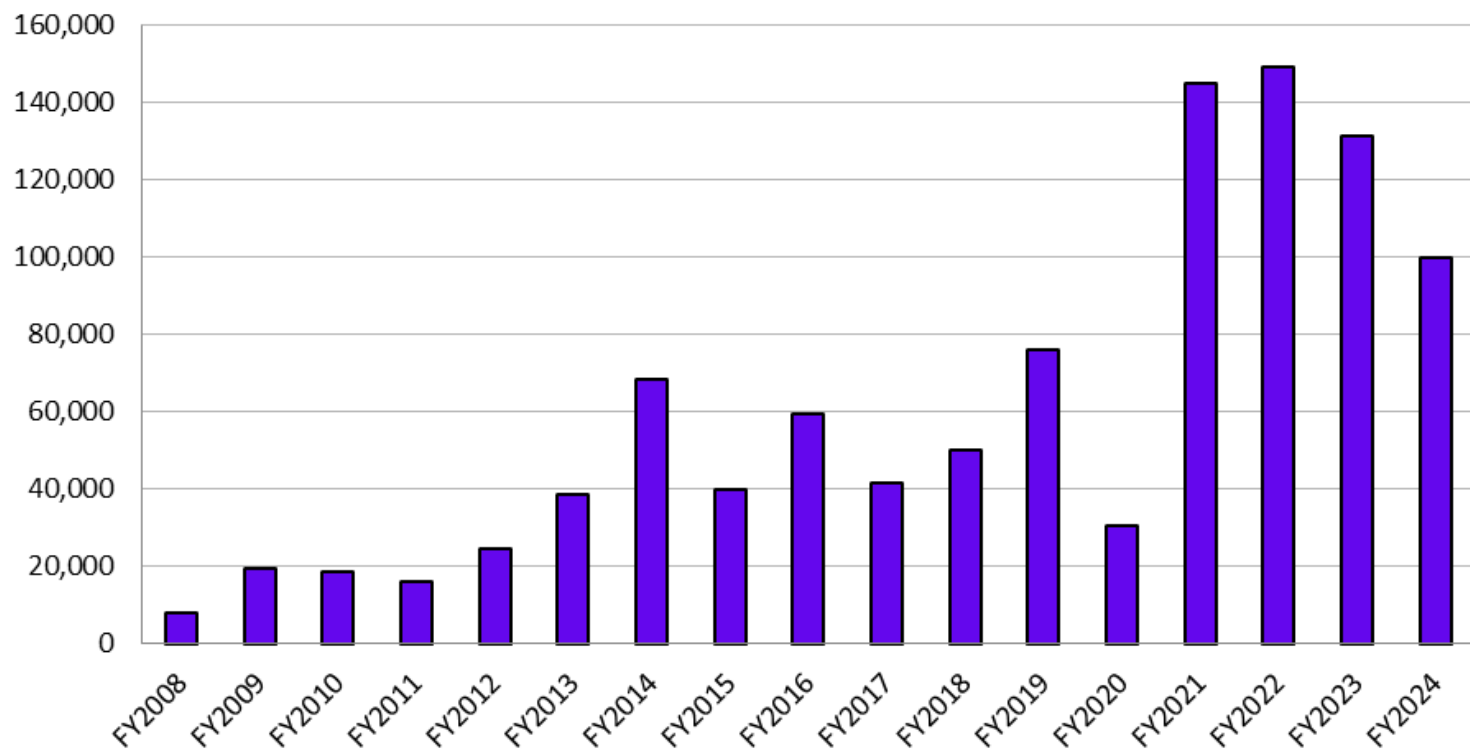


# Unaccompanied migrant and refugee children: integration of forced migrants

Katharine M. Donato and Natalia Lopez

## Total Unaccompanied Children Apprehended by USBP at the Southwest Border, FY2008-FY2024



Unaccompanied children =  
UMC (Unaccompanied migrant children) +  
URC (Unaccompanied refugee children)



# How to find and recruit a diverse sample of UMC & URC?

UMC/URC -- not a durable visible status

How to find potential respondents?

# Sampling and Recruitment

- Strategic convenience sampling
- Outreach to primary and secondary stakeholders (~300 organizations/actors working with UMC/URC), and policy and advocacy organizations/actors
- Differences between DC&MI
  - More in-person recruitment in DC than MI
  - Most MI respondents connected to 1 of 2 orgs vs DC respondents connected to wider variety
- After interview, we asked respondents if they knew others – many referrals
- All potential respondents screened for eligibility
- Zoom interviews Dec 2020 – June 2022, ranging from 2 – 5 hours across 2 days
- Respondents received \$100

In-person recruitment began in Fall 2021 – led to respondents who were NOT detected by federal agencies (many undocumented but not all), and others from different national origins and age groups

Created trust, established repertoire, especially with those who fear talking about legal status with organizations

Targeted convenience sample and localized in-person recruitment accelerated diversity of sample

Country of Origin	
Africa	20 / 18.2%
Sudan	10 / 9.1
Democratic Republic of the Congo	3/ 2.7
Ghana	2/ 1.8
Togo	2/ 1.8
Central African Republic	1/ 0.9
Ethiopia	1/ 0.9
Tanzania	1/ 0.9
Asia	11 / 10%
Vietnam	3/ 2.7
Afghanistan	2/ 1.8
Myanmar	2/ 1.8
China	1/ 0.9
India	1/ 0.9
Iran	1/ 0.9
Pakistan	1/ 0.9
Europe	2 / 1.8%
Albania	1/ 0.9
Germany	1/ 0.9
Latin America	77 / 70%
El Salvador	45/ 40.9
Honduras	12/ 10.9
Guatemala	9/ 8.2
Mexico	6/ 5.5
Peru	2/ 1.8
Colombia	1/ 0.9
Ecuador	1/ 0.9
Venezuela	1/ 0.9
Gender	
Female	68 / 61.8
Male	42 / 38.2

Age at Arrival in the United States	
Younger than 11 years	12 / 10.9
11-14 years	31 / 28.2
15-17 years	63 / 57.3
Older than 18 years**	4 / 3.6
Age at Interview	
18-20 years	22 / 20
21-23 years	33 / 30
24-30 years	18 / 16.4
31-39 years	23 / 20.9
40+ years	14 / 12.7
Current Area of Residence	
DMV (Washington D.C., Maryland, Virginia)	70 / 63.6
Illinois***	4 / 3.6
Massachusetts***	2 / 1.8
Michigan	34 / 30.9
Years in the United States	
Less than 3 years	7 / 6.4
3 – 6 years	23 / 20.9
7 – 9 years	22 / 20
10 – 20 years	33 / 30
More than 20 years	25 / 22.7

**Interviewed 120 respondents**  
**Final Sample 110 respondents**

# Estimated Legal Status: Sample Respondents

Type of Legal Status (N=110*)	N / %
<b>Permanent Legal Status</b>	56 (50.9%)
Naturalized Citizens	26 (23.6%)
Permanent Residents	17 (15.5%)
Refugee Status/ Asylum	4 (3.6%)
Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJ)	3 (2.7%)
U Visa	3 (2.7%)
Unknown Permanent Status****	3 (2.7%)
<b>Temporary Legal Status</b>	18 (16.4%)
DACA	7 (6.4%)
Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	2 (1.8%)
Student Visa	1 (0.9%)
Work-Based Visa	1 (0.9%)
Unknown Temporary Status****	7 (6.4%)
<b>Undocumented Respondents</b>	29 (26.4%)
<b>Unknown Status****</b>	7 (6.4%)
<b>Total</b>	110

# Guided conversations capture dynamics

No support to collect data from respondents over time

Instead, questions across migration life cycle (origin communities, journeys to US, and experiences after arrival)

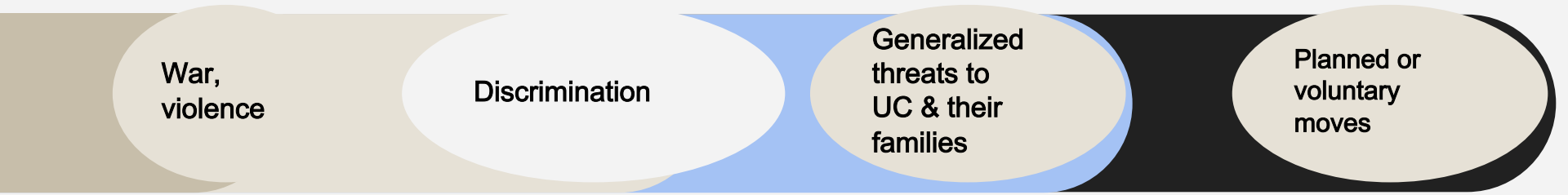
Collected residential, educational and employment histories

Asked about community and political engagement, health and religion

Integrated questions allowing pauses and reflection: what it means to be American; what they would tell people thinking of migrating to the US; and what institutions, people, law, policies were helpful to facilitate their integration (some asked in both days of interview)



# UC: forced vs. voluntary migration



War,  
violence

Discrimination

Generalized  
threats to  
UC & their  
families

Planned or  
voluntary  
moves

## Narratives suggest most UC are forced migrants

“with the war, you have to run away, you have to leave”  
(R92MI, M, Sudan, AOE16, YUS 21)

We left our home, went to several cities but everyone  
“held same beliefs about albinism,” I wanted life  
without discrimination, so we moved to Kakuma  
refugee camp” (R61MI, M, DRC, AOE 17, YUS 4)

“In my country the situation got worse, people killed as  
members of the LGTBQ community. I was one, worked  
for a LGBTQ organization. I got a visa to go to a  
conference in Miami, 10 days before my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
It was an opportunity to change my life, to be safe ”  
(R29DC, F, Honduras, AOE17, YUS25)

“I had a problem with my dad, that’s why I’m here. My  
dad is a strict Muslim, he believes a woman must marry  
and can’t leave the house. I wanted to study. I rebelled  
but he had power over me and the police b/c he had  
money. He beat my mom and controlled her. Then I  
went to boarding school and they divorced. He tried to  
marry me off but I said no. He didn’t want me to be  
single, then I was 16 when I tried to kill myself, a friend  
helped me get a visa after I was hospitalized(R60MI, F,  
Tanzania, AOE16, YUS19)

“...I grew up with brother, grandmother & father, after  
grandmother died father could not take care of kids, so we  
were sent to the US to work” (R45DC, F, El Salvador, AOE14,  
YUS4)

“I was 11 when I left Burma for Malaysia after my cousin was  
threatened, I left with him, my aunt and brother. We lived in  
Malaysia for 2 yrs, registered with UNHCR, and finally came  
to US without my aunt” (R008DC, F, Burma, AOE13, YUS8)

“First my brother was threatened by gangs, and after my  
father sent him to the US, they started coming for me,  
everything happened so fast. After I left, they came to our  
house with guns and my father then also sent my brother to  
US” (R033, M, El Salvador, AOE16, YUS15)

“I had high goals, I didn’t want to do what others around me  
were doing...my brother living in US proposed coming, since  
he was already there” (R38DC, F, Guatemala, AOE 17, YUS 6)

“At age 14, I wasn’t studying and went to work. But there  
was very little work, so I came to the US to work, to help my  
parents (R004DC, M, MX, Mexico AOE15, YUS30)

# Another Narrative

“there was a warrant out for my arrest...I fought with officials who took my parent’s land away because they wanted to build a highway. My parents were farmers and then they had nothing. I got angry...so when I was 14 I left for a different province and worked at a construction site to send money home to bail my brother out of jail (they arrested him instead of me). So when my job ended, my parents contacted my uncle in the US. He paid a lot of money to the snakehead to smuggle me out and I went to the Dominican Republic. There was no job there and I didn’t speak the language. Then my uncle paid a smuggler to get me to Puerto Rico by boat It took me 8 tries, and when the boat was 100 yards out it hit a rock, so I swam to shore saving another person who didn’t know how to swim. The police came, I was in there for 8 days but with good food and in a better condition than I have ever lived. Then Bethany Christian Services arrived, and the next day they flew me to Grand Rapids” (R74MI, M, China, AOE15, YUS32)

# UC as agentic

- UC are active participants, who both affect and are affected by world around them
- Expressed agency for migrating, in varying degrees
- R12DC, M, El Salvador, AOE14, YUS4: “The gangs started to bother me, asking if I would join but I didn’t want to..so I told my mother and together we decided that I needed to leave right away”
- R76MI, M, Vietnam, AOE15, YUS38: “I thought I was too young to leave, but my father said because he was targeted, I had to go”
- R48DC, M, Guatemala, AOE15, YUS6: “My parents had nothing to do with my decision, I made it alone”
- R51, F, India, AOE11, YUS22: “I grew up in India, we were poor and didn’t have much food, then my mother died and my sister needed medicine when I was 9. My father said I didn’t have a choice, I had to go with people who gave him money in exchange. We went to Delhi, and then I don’t remember what happened. But a few years later I was locked in a room with other girls and ran away. The police helped me and I went to live in Michigan.”

# Many questions to consider...

- How to evaluate motivations when/if children are told what to do by parents / guardians? Or when/if children are too young to know what migration is? Recalled motivations for migration may not always line up with reality
- UC may not always be forced to migrate but many times they are
- And what about trafficking? Where does it fall on the forced vs planned continuum? Especially in cases when parents sell their children? We have 7 cases from around the world...
- Are there differences between UMC & URC in agency and its relevance?

# Michigan vs. DC metro

- **Local organizations** : offer protective resources in form of localized programming from organizations offering UC protection and expertise to resolve obstacles. Often secure pro bono legal services that promote good environment for UC, but also localized programming that offer UC specific resources – and they are accessible to UC
- In **Michigan** , ORR state office and two key nonprofits: Bethany Christian Services and Samaritas– services concentrated across the state
- In **DC area**, 2 states + DC with many different organizational actors – complex organizational space

# Preliminary Findings

- Analysis of textual and metric data
- Longer to meet educational markers – On average UC take 1-2 years longer to graduate from high school, trade school/community college, and college/universities than US born children
- MI UC more likely to graduate high school and college than UC in DC metro
- BOTH legal status and community resources correlate with upward integration

# Preliminary Findings

- Obstacles especially at older AOE (unsupportive foster homes / family sponsors, pressure to make and send money home, transitions into young adulthood)
- Wage distributions for full-time workers reveal upward positive trajectories
- Most with stable livelihoods and lifestyles
- Examining differences between those:
  - In foster homes vs. living with families
  - Recent vs less recent arrivals
  - MI vs DC





Book manuscript underway

# Thank you

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