

**Another Surge of Illegal Immigrants Along the Southwest Border:
Is This the Obama Administration's New Normal?**

**U.S. House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security**

February 4, 2016

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Thank you, Chairman Gowdy and Ranking Member Lofgren, for the opportunity to testify on the problems created by the continuing illegal surge across the southwest border of families and minors. The Obama administration's handling of this phenomenon has been a colossal disaster. Instead of following the existing mass migration response plan, the administration has simply suspended enforcement of the law in favor of a charade of "immigration proceedings" that are routinely manipulated, ignored and defied by the new arrivals and their advocates. As a result, American communities have had to absorb about 240,000 new illegal immigrants from Central America since 2012, straining budgets and overwhelming school systems and welfare agencies. Even worse, the administration's "see no evil" approach to this problem resulted in shockingly negligent policies on the placement of unaccompanied minors, and delivered an unknown number of kids into the hands of traffickers, abusers, and other criminals. Violent transnational gangs such as MS-13 have taken full advantage of the Obama administration's welcome mat to swell their ranks here, contributing to a noticeable spike in gang violence in certain localities – with tragic results. The answer is not to just get used to this surge in illegal immigration as a "new normal," as one Obama official suggested, but to reverse the controversial policies and interpretations of the law that end up rewarding the illegal crossers.

New Arrivals Spike in 2016. According to Border Patrol statistics,¹ since 2012 agents have apprehended 125,306 Central American unaccompanied minors (UACs). Since 2013, agents have taken 112,237 Central American family units into custody. Together, these add up to 237,543 new illegal arrivals from Central America over the southern land border. Roughly half of these arrived in FY2014. Nearly all were released into the country under the Obama administration's controversial interpretation of sections of the immigration law that are intended to protect victims of trafficking and persecution.² After slowing down in 2015, the number of new family and minor arrivals has ticked upward in recent months, with 21,469 new family members and 17,370 new minors arriving during the first three months of FY2016. The number of illegal minor arrivals has increased 117% over last year, and the number of new illegal family arrivals has increased 187% over last year.

In addition, there is a large new flow of illegal Cuban migrants into Texas. That influx will start growing this week, when planeloads of hundreds of Cubans who traveled first to Costa Rica will be flown to El Salvador, bussed north to Mexico and then make their way to the U.S. border to seek permanent residency, as per an agreement brokered by diplomats in the region. So far, there are 8,000 Cubans who will arrive via this route.³ We can expect that the Obama administration will choose to admit these illegal arrivals under its parole authority, even though there is no legal reason to do so.⁴

For years, criminal smuggling organizations have been bringing in people from other countries to take advantage of the administration's policy of releasing anyone who claims a fear of return home.⁵

Migrants Are Motivated By Expectation That They Can Stay in the United States. While some have characterized the surge of new illegal arrivals from Central America as a "refugee flow" or "humanitarian crisis," in fact most of the migrants say that their primary reason for coming is because they expect that they will be allowed to stay.

According to information released by this committee based on interviews of recent illegal family arrivals that were conducted by border agents,⁶ nearly 70 percent of the migrants said that they heard that they would be

¹ <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>.

² Jon Feere, "2008 Trafficking Law Largely Inapplicable to Current Border Crisis," Center for Immigration Studies, July 2014, <http://cis.org/2008-trafficking-law-inapplicable-current-border-crisis>.

³ Kausha Luna, "Central America and Mexico Agree to Continue to Transfer Cubans to the U.S.," Center for Immigration Studies, January 26, 2016, <http://cis.org/luna/central-america-and-mexico-agree-continue-transfer-cubans-us>.

⁴ Dan Cadman, "Don't Reward Illegal Cuban Arrivals With the Benefit of Adjustment," Center for Immigration Studies, January 4, 2016, <http://cis.org/cadman/refusing-reward-illegal-cuban-arrivals-benefit-adjustment>.

⁵ Daniel Gonzalez, "Arizona sees surge of asylum seekers from India," Arizona Republic, September 8, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/08/ariz-sees-surge-of-asylum-seekers-from-india/2781025/>.

released and/or receive an immigration benefit when they got here. In addition, nearly 60 percent aid that U.S. immigration policies influenced their decision to come.

Federal Authorities Lose Track of Most New Arrivals. No single government agency is in charge of keeping track of the new arrivals; this responsibility is shared by Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Homeland Security, (DHS), and the immigration courts, which are part of the Department of Justice. Family arrivals typically are released to live on their own. Most minors are turned over to their parents (who paid smuggling rings to bring them), but some are released to the custody of another relative or unrelated sponsor; still others are placed in foster care or a group home run by a government contractor.

A scathing report released this week by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations revealed a litany of serious defects in HHS policies for placing newly arrived minors.⁷ These policy shortcomings have drastically compromised the agency's ability to protect the minors or to detect human trafficking, debt labor, and other abusive situations. The main focus of the Senate investigation was a case in which a group of farm labor contractors ran a smuggling ring for Guatemalan minors who were then put to work in harsh conditions at an Ohio egg farm. Among the shocking findings revealed in the report and at the oversight hearing:

- HHS does not verify the identity or relationship claims made by individuals who volunteer to sponsor UACs. The agency has placed minors with traffickers and other “sponsors for hire.”
- HHS failed to detect when sponsors obtained custody of multiple unrelated children, or when multiple minors were sent to the same address.
- The background check process for sponsors is woefully inadequate. Most adults who sponsor minors are not vetted at all, nor are other adults who live in the household or who are designated as back-up sponsors. This policy was tightened slightly just over a week ago, which is more than six months after the egg farm trafficking case had made the news.
- Even if the agency did a background check, the HHS policy is that sponsors are not disqualified due to criminal convictions, no matter how serious. HHS has no idea how many minors have been placed with felons or other criminals.
- HHS does not require pre-placement home studies, as is standard practice in other foster care placements. Home studies were conducted in only four percent of cases in the last three years.
- HHS makes no effort to determine if a sponsor has adequate income to support the minor.
- Once a child is released to a sponsor, HHS allows sponsors to refuse post-release services for the child, and to refuse HHS contact with the minor to follow up or check on their welfare.
- In tens of thousands of placements, including many horrifically inappropriate placements, HHS has never terminated a sponsorship agreement.

Investigators uncovered documents showing that senior HHS officials knew and discussed that the screening procedures for sponsors were inadequate, but failed to implement improvements. Even today, the vast majority of placements are made without verifying the identity of sponsors, criminal histories, or incomes. For example, reportedly, the people claiming to be parents or other family members are not required to prove the relationship with verifiable documents. Essentially, the placements of minors are done through the honor system.

⁶ U.S. House Judiciary Committee, “Goodlatte Statement on Administration’s Policies Endangering Unaccompanied Minors,” January 25, 2016.

⁷ U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Protecting Unaccompanied Alien Children from Trafficking and Other Abuses: The Role of the Office of Refugee Resettlement,” Staff Report, January, 2015, <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/investigations/hearings/adequacy-of-the-department-of-health-and-human-services-efforts-to-protect-unaccompanied-alien-children-from-human-trafficking>.

Senators at the hearing noted that the screening deficiencies were not the result of a lack of resources. The agency has maintained a surplus of \$350 million in unspent funds over the last two years.

According to news media accounts, some newly arrived illegal minors have run away from the temporary shelters or group homes. In October, 2015 four Honduran teenagers escaped from a shelter in Tucson, leading local officials to complain about the lack of transparency and oversight. Last year, two Guatemalan teenagers fled a shelter in Illinois and committed a carjacking in California that led to their re-capture.

Now that arrivals have spiked again to crisis proportions, the administration is considering placing the unaccompanied minors on active duty military bases. This plan is absurd, especially given the administration's record of mismanagement and negligence. Placing hundreds of minors, some unknown number of whom are almost certainly violent gang members, in the midst of secure, active duty military bases, living among military families, is not a solution and should be blocked by Congress.

On October 1, 2015, the Office of Refugee Resettlement began having contractors try to telephone the minors they had placed in order to determine how they are faring. But the resettlement contractors who work with ORR on post-placement services are skeptical that many will be reached. One staffer from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) has noted that, in her organization's experience, the teenagers will not be interested in further contact, and that many are not living with their original sponsor anyway, even if it was a parent, due to "family breakdown".

The LIRS representative also said that only 35 percent of the minors have bothered to attend their legal orientation program. This suggests that few have been truly interested in seeking legal status and understand that they can get along fine without it. New statistics from the immigration courts show that about half (48 percent) of the UACs have skipped out on their hearings, as detailed in the table below. In total, 60 percent of those whose cases are completed have been ordered deported, but only a small number have actually been deported, probably fewer than 4,000 (the exact figure has never been disclosed and may not be known).

Outcome of UAC Immigration Proceedings: October 1, 2013 - August 31, 2015

Total Cases Filed	84,820
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Cases Completed	29,307
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Ordered Removed

<i>In Person</i>	3,360
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<i>In Absentia</i>	14,024
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Permitted to Stay

<i>Granted Status</i>	313
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<i>Admin. Closed/ Terminated*</i>	11,610
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Cases Still Pending	55,513
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* These are primarily cases in which the UAC has applied for or has been approved for asylum or Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. It has been reported that approximately two-thirds have applied for asylum and one-third have applied for SIJS.

Most Family Arrivals Skip Hearings, Ignore Removal Orders. Immigration court statistics show that very few of the illegal family arrivals are cooperating with the generous due process that they have been allowed. Only a small number are qualifying for asylum. Most concerning, it is now clear that very few of the illegal arrivals will ever be repatriated, even if they fail in their request for asylum or other status, and that the administration's repeated assurances that they would be sent back were insincere.

Court records indicate that fewer than 10 percent of the family units were ever detained, and none of the minors are. According to a report of cases filed over an 11-month period in 2014-15, 84 percent of the aliens failed to appear for their immigration court hearings. Immigration judges found that only two percent of the family applicants whose cases were completed had qualified for relief. Ninety-two percent of those who have completed their hearings have been ordered removed.⁸ Most of these removal orders are not being enforced; out of the thousands of people who have been issued final orders of removal, only 77 have been removed so far. Most are still living here in defiance of those orders.

Policy of Resettlement Costly for Local Communities. Because the Obama administration has declined to use accelerated forms of due process and instead chosen to allow most new arrivals to stay to await or abscond from leisurely-paced immigration hearings, these illegal aliens are here to stay for an extended period of time, and the local communities in which they settle are greatly affected. Typically these are places that already have established Central American communities. Often these communities are already struggling with high unemployment, scarce funding for schools, and other fiscal difficulties, not to mention an existing population that needs health and welfare services.

The top states of resettlement are California (mainly Los Angeles County), Florida (mainly Miami-Dade County), Maryland (mainly the DC suburbs), New York (mainly Long Island), Texas (mainly the Houston area) and Virginia (mainly Fairfax and neighboring counties).

Education is the Most Significant Cost. School districts around the country have had to scramble to make room for this unprecedented new influx of young Central Americans who had arrived illegally as part of the surge, either as UACs or as part of family units. The problem is not just the numbers, but also that typically many of the new arrivals have had only a few years of schooling in their home country, have not learned to read nor acquired other basic skills fundamental to education beyond elementary school, or speak an indigenous languages (not Spanish). These kids are more likely to require individualized educational plans and tutoring support due to emotional trauma, learning disabilities, or other special needs.

One Massachusetts school committee chair told me that the surge arrivals have been a “shock to the system” because there were so many who came at once, and because most were older than the typical new immigrant children, who are more likely to enter elementary or middle school, not high school.

Massachusetts has had to assemble a state-wide working group of educators to design a new curriculum, known as the Students With Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) program, especially for the UAC arrivals, who numbered 1,400 in 2014. Some districts have had to create unique “newcomers” educational programs. However, the districts must be careful not to run afoul of federal oversight on “mainstreaming” special needs children. The city of Lynn, Massachusetts was threatened with litigation by the U.S. Department of Justice when it attempted to launch a night school program designed to better meet the needs and interests of the large percentage of male UAC arrivals who wanted to drop out and work rather than attend a traditional day school program.

⁸ Jessica Vaughan, “Here to Stay,” Center for Immigration Studies, June 26, 2015, <http://cis.org/vaughan/here-stay>.

Everyone agrees that these students need support to succeed, but the problem is how to pay for it, and how to anticipate the flows so that plans can be made. Says Lynn, Mass. Mayor Judy Kennedy: “We have gotten enough new students to build a school, but unfortunately we don’t have the money to build a school.” In the 2013-14 school year, Lynn received about 250 new students from Guatemala and Honduras. Of these, 129 were assigned to the 9th grade.

Last year, as a result of the influx, the city of Lynn had to find an additional \$8 million to cover increased school expenditures (without a corresponding increase in tax revenue to cover it). As a result, the city had to cut other agency budgets by two percent across the board. City staff salaries were frozen; the community policing program was ended; an order for a new hook-and-ladder fire truck was cancelled, among other belt-tightening measures.

This story has been repeated all over the country. At a parent-teacher association meeting in Loudoun County, Virginia this past November, it was announced that due to the influx of unaccompanied minors, the school’s counseling resources were severely stretched, and that all of the year’s resources for parent liaison services were used up by September.

Louisiana’s Jefferson Parish, which received more than 500 UACs, said it needed to hire 27 new ESL teachers, 20 new ESL para-educators, 19 regular teachers, and three special education teachers to accommodate the influx. The total cost was estimated to be \$4.8 million, split between the state and the parish. The state was not expecting any additional support from the federal government for the Limited English Proficiency students, because most of them arrived at the last minute.⁹

New arrivals that occur late in the calendar year, such as the 17,000 who arrived in the last three months of 2015, are especially problematic, because the schools typically get no extra funding from their state governments after a certain point: “If they come after Sept. 30 and enroll in school, we still have to serve them but we get no funding,” said one rural Delaware school administrator. This high school absorbed about 70 new arrivals in one year, costing more than \$500,000, not including special education costs.¹⁰

Other states report the following outlays per UAC student:

- Texas -- \$9,500 (source: Texas Legislative Budget Board)
- Florida -- \$8,900 per child + \$1,900 per UAC for special needs (source: Florida Department of Education) for a total cost of \$30-40 million per year.
- Fairfax County, Virginia -- \$14,755 per English Language Learner, for a total estimated cost per year for UACs of \$14 million. (source: Fairfax County Supervisor).
- National Average: \$11,153 to 12,608 (source: National Center on Educational Statistics).
- Total Cost Nationwide: \$580 million to \$670 million for the FY2014 UAC cohort per year (not counting children who arrived as part of family units).

Health Care Costs. Less has been reported on the health care costs for UACs, but inevitably they will present a major burden for state and local governments. “I think the biggest issue for us is the big handoff to local governments in terms of service costs and wraparound for these families and children. There’s no getting around that,” said Uma Ahluwalia, director of the Montgomery County, Maryland, Department of Health and Human

⁹ Julia O’Donoghue, “Unaccompanied immigrant children will cost \$4.8 million to educate in Jefferson Parish,” New Orleans Times Picayune, September 15, 2014,

http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/09/unaccompanied_immigrant_childr.html.

¹⁰ Glenn Rolf, “Flood of unaccompanied minors translates to major impact,” Sussex Post, July 25, 2014,

<http://delaware.newszap.com/southerndelaware/133817-70/flood-of-unaccompanied-minors-translates-to-major-impact>.

Services. “In the meantime, the children are going to be attending local schools, they’re going to have health and mental health needs . . . I think it will definitely strain our capacities.”¹¹

The Washington, DC-based Mary’s Center, which provides health services to DC-area immigrants, reported costs of \$400,000 for services for UACs in 2014. The services to UACs cost more than double what routine services cost for most immigrants, because many of the newly arrived Central American youths had been injured or sexually molested on the journey.¹²

One big ticket item in Lynn, Mass. was the cost of immunizations for the UAC arrivals, which had to be done before the kids could be admitted to school. In Massachusetts, there is a delay of one or two months before the students can be enrolled in the state health insurance program for the needy, so the city had to set up special clinics and hire extra nurses on its own dime in order to get the kids into school promptly. (Of course taxpayers pay for the students’ health care, regardless of whether the local or the state agency is covering the costs.)

Mental health care for these individuals may be a long-term challenge. According to numerous studies, UACs are more likely to need counseling and other forms of care as a result of physical or emotional trauma suffered in their home countries, on the journey with smugglers, or after arrival in the United States. According to one report:

Unaccompanied alien children's migration likely compounds significant levels of preflight trauma. The 2000-plus-mile journey to the United States traces routes controlled by drug cartels who beat, drown, drug, maim, murder, rob, molest, and starve undocumented migrants, with some UAC targeted for forced recruitment. Likewise, *coyotes* (guides [actually smugglers]) may offer UAC drugs or alcohol to stem their hunger or proposition them for hard labor or sex in return for survival. Combined, the high level of potential trauma before and during migration may lead to some of the highest levels of mental illness among children in the United States.¹³

Typically this care will need to be provided through publicly-funded state, local or federal social service programs for children rather than private insurance, since most of the family members who are assuming custody of the youths are also in the country illegally and thus more likely to lack insurance (and are not required to carry it under federal rules).

Public Safety Problems. The administration’s careless “catch and release” policies have been exploited by ordinary Central Americans seeking opportunity and family members joining prior illegal arrivals, but also by transnational criminal organizations seeking to expand their numbers, their illegal activity, and their dominance in the criminal world. Established gangs have been able to transfer an unknown number of experienced foot soldiers from Central America to help colonize new criminal territory in the United States. And, the tide of new young people, many of whom have already been exposed or involved in street gangs at home, has provided a huge pool of new recruits for the gangs here. Gangs such as MS-13 and 18th Street are enjoying a brutal revival in certain parts of the country and are establishing themselves in new places.

This is taking a toll on the quality of life in certain communities. Since absorbing about 265 illegal unaccompanied Central American minors since 2014, Frederick County, Maryland has experienced a significant

¹¹ Quoted in the International City/County Management Association newsletter, August 15, 2014: http://icma.org/en/Article/104850/Preparing_for_Costs_of_Unaccompanied_Children_Influx?pub=108&issue=8.19.2014.

¹² Tina Reed, “This is what it’s costing one DC health center to treat “influx of ‘unaccompanied minors’ from Central America,” *Washington Business Journal*, August 15, 2014: <http://www.bizjournals.com/washington/blog/2014/08/this-is-how-much-it-s-costing-one-d-c-health.html>.

¹³ Elizabeth G. Kennedy, “Unnecessary Suffering: Potential Unmet Mental Health Needs of Unaccompanied Alien Children,” *JAMA Pediatrics*, April 2013: <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1569275>.

uptick in violent, gang-related crime. School resource officers at the two public high schools that most of the new arrivals attend report that gang fights occur several times a week, as gang members cross into each other's territory within the school building. In just the last several weeks, six teenagers who arrived within the last couple of years as unaccompanied minors have been arrested and jailed for violent crimes, including attempted murder, assault, armed robbery, weapons charges, an unprovoked vicious assault on a deputy, and more. All are documented MS-13 members. Gang investigators believe that they were recruited from El Salvador by two older illegal alien MS-13 shot callers who have been residing in the area for a longer period of time. One of these older gang members was approved for the President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). One was employed as a custodian in a middle school.

Just last week, federal and local law enforcement agencies in the Boston area conducted a sweep to take three dozen MS-13 gang members off the streets. In all, 56 gang members were indicted on racketeering, murder, drug trafficking, weapons, document fraud, and other charges. Reportedly several of the gang members and/or associates had originally arrived as unaccompanied minors. MS-13 gang members are believed to be responsible for the murder of at least three teenagers aged fifteen and sixteen in East Boston since September. The younger aspiring gang members who have been charged with the murders were allegedly completing a kind of initiation rite, trying to prove themselves worthy of full membership. Another teen gang member, Osmin Antonio Murcia, a citizen of El Salvador who arrived as an unaccompanied minor in 2014, now a high school drop-out and MS-13 member, is currently in custody after arrest for the armed assault with intent to murder of an Everett teen on Halloween. He slashed the victim wide open after a random encounter on the street. The police report says he was suspected of other stabbings at the high school before he dropped out.

Several murders in the Washington, DC area have been attributed to MS-13 gang members, including Honduran citizen Rigoberto Gutierrez Cruz, whose body was found in Rock Creek Park, and who reportedly was targeted because he had dared to report an earlier assault to authorities. The FBI Special Agent in Charge of the Washington, DC field office has said, "We've seen a reemergence or reconstitution of MS-13 ver the last year and a half. With that has come an increase in violence...They are being more organized in what they do, how they do it and what they do it for."¹⁴

Three unaccompanied minors who arrived in Loudoun County, Virginia in 2013 have been indicted for the gang-related murder of 17-year-old Danny Centeno Miranda, also an unaccompanied minor living with his uncle. Miranda was killed while walking near his school bus stop one morning. Two of the suspects are citizens of El Salvador and believed to be involved with MS-13, and the shooter, a juvenile, is a citizen of Mexico. Reportedly, all three suspects skipped out on their August 2015 immigration court hearings.

Released UACs Shield Family Members From Deportation. Under current DHS policies, those illegal aliens who have a family member with some kind of lawful or quasi-lawful status – such as a UAC who is “in proceedings” -- are considered off-limits for enforcement, even if they may have criminal infractions or multiple prior deportations. This policy, together with the administration’s decision to release all minors (and those who claim to be minors) regardless of whether they truly meet the legal standards for special due process protections as UACs, creates a huge incentive for Central American illegal aliens who have children in their home countries to pay smugglers to bring them to the United States.

The case of Moises Herrera, an illegal alien from El Salvador, illustrates how this plays out. Herrera crossed illegally in 2005 and was caught by the Border Patrol and released pending an immigration court hearing. He failed to appear at his hearing because he feared deportation and settled in Everett, Massachusetts, working as a house painter and in a bakery. Herrera left behind a stepson and two daughters and eventually married again here. He was jailed and deported after a traffic stop in 2011 (driving without a license is a criminal offense in

¹⁴ Michael La Susa, “Salvador Gang MS-13 Increasing in U.S.,” Insight Crime, November 201, 2015, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/salvador-gang-ms13-increasing-activity-in-us>.

Mass.), returned illegally, and was arrested again in October 2014 for running a stoplight, unlicensed driving, and providing a false identity to police. These charges were dismissed, but he was arrested by ICE. ICE apparently declined to prosecute him for the felony charge of illegal re-entry after deportation, but was pursuing deportation since he is an egregious immigration violator. But Herrera was released and has received a one-year stay of deportation, in part because his 17-year-old daughter arrived illegally over the summer as part of the surge of UACs. As mentioned above, sponsors of UACs are allowed to remain in the United States, supposedly to ensure that the UAC will comply with deportation proceedings. Herrera also has a new-born U.S. citizen child, which may enable him to qualify for the recently announced executive deferred action amnesty.

There can be no question that the President's plan to allow millions of illegal aliens to receive work permits and to allow millions more to be exempt from enforcement will inspire more illegal immigration to American communities already burdened from prior influxes.

Conclusion. The most effective way to alleviate the strain on communities caused by the influx of new illegal arrivals is for Congress to force a change in policy. One step could be to clarify in the statute that only those juveniles who are victims of exploitative human trafficking and who are without family members in the United States should receive special due process protections. Those illegal alien minors who were smuggled or transported into the United States illegally in order to be reunited with illegally-resident family members, and who lack a legitimate claim for relief, should be prioritized for deportation along with their family members. In addition, the family members who contracted with criminal smuggling organizations should be held accountable for that criminal offense and removed from the United States if amenable. Rather than releasing new illegal arrivals into the country to take advantage of a dysfunctional immigration court system, DHS should implement a policy that more closely resembles its existing mass migration plan, and that sets out how to keep these arrivals in custody near the border so that those who do not qualify for admission can be promptly repatriated. Regarding those minors who are deemed eligible for protection as victims of trafficking, the agencies must implement tighter vetting of sponsors and more effective tracking of the minors' welfare. Congress should not allow the Obama administration to incentivize illegal immigration and human smuggling by rewarding those who participate – especially when this act involves children.

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