

Informe de Políticas

# Enhancing support for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents: Public policy recommendations based on a qualitative study in Mexico

Mejorar el apoyo a las infancias migrantes no acompañadas:  
recomendaciones de políticas públicas basadas en un estudio  
cualitativo en México

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**Resumen:** Este estudio cualitativo examina las experiencias de trabajadores de instituciones no gubernamentales que asisten a niñas, niños y adolescentes migrantes no acompañados, en tránsito en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México, resaltando la necesidad de cambios en políticas públicas y de mayor apoyo. A través de entrevistas semiestructuradas con ocho profesionales, se utiliza el análisis temático reflexivo para explorar los desafíos psicológicos que enfrentan. Se identificaron estrés psicológico, servicios con recursos insuficientes y brechas en políticas que afectan el bienestar de los migrantes. La pandemia de COVID-19 ha resaltado la necesidad de contar con refugios mejor financiados, procedimientos legales simplificados y formación integral. Se recomienda apoyo gubernamental para las organizaciones de ayuda, agilización del procesamiento de migrantes, asistencia psicológica continua y cooperación interinstitucional. Este estudio surge de la falta de información en México sobre los profesionales de ayuda y su perspectiva al trabajar con migrantes no acompañados.

**Palabras clave:** menores no acompañados, informe de políticas, frontera Estados Unidos-México, trabajadores de ayuda.

**Abstract:** *This qualitative study examines the experiences of aid workers from different non-governmental institutions working with unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents, in transit at the U.S.–Mexico border, highlighting the need for systemic policy change and increased support. Through semi-structured interviews with eight professionals, we used reflexive thematic analysis to explore the psychological challenges faced by aid workers. The research identified psychological stress among aid workers, underresourced services, and policy gaps that adversely affect the well-being of migrant children and adolescents. The additional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have further emphasised the need for better-funded shelters, simplified legal procedures, and comprehensive training for aid workers. This study recommends governmental support for aid organisations, streamlined migrant processing, ongoing psychological support for workers, children and adolescents, and inter-agency cooperation to address*

*humanitarian crises. The need for this study was due to the lack of information in Mexico about aid professionals, who work with unaccompanied minors.*

**Keywords:** unaccompanied children, policy brief, U.S.-Mexico border, aid workers.

## Executive Summary

The present migration crisis at the U.S.–Mexico border poses a significant humanitarian challenge, characterised by a worrying increase in the number of unaccompanied minors. This study is a qualitative analysis, drawing on semi-structured interviews with three men and five women aged between 30 and 45 years who are aid professionals working directly with unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in Mexico. We used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's framework to analyse the text and explore the coping strategies and deep psychological stress experienced by eight aid professionals (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021). This type of analysis allowed participants to convey their experiences and the meanings they assign to their reality in a clear and structured way (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021). The questions focused on the challenges they face daily in their work with this population, their different perceptions of the migration phenomenon, and identified areas of opportunity to improve the psychological, legal and health care provided to them in non-governmental institutions.

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, which began in May 2021. Initially, participants received an email outlining the research project and inviting their participation. Upon receiving a positive response, an interview date was scheduled. Before the interview began, participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the session at any time without any repercussions. The participants consented, and the interviews were conducted respectfully and cordially. This study was conducted as part of a doctoral project.

## Background

Migration has historically been an integral part of human existence, driven by economic reasons, war, violence, natural disasters, new job opportunities, or the desire for new experiences. In all these cases, the primary motivation is the pursuit of a better quality of life. However, a study conducted by Plan International (2023) with 267 migrant adolescents aged 15 to 19 from the Northern Triangle reported that physical and sexual violence at home are the main factors compelling them to leave their countries.

According to the Monthly Bulletin of Migratory Statistics from the Mexican Ministry of Government, 54,957 unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents from various countries entered Mexico irregularly from 2019 to March 2024 (Secretaría de Gobernación [SEGOB], 2019-2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the situation, with strict regulations such as Title

42 imposed by the U.S. and Mexico, allowing the immediate expulsion of individuals deemed health risks. This increased the demand for legal and interpretative aid during the asylum process (Gramlich, 2022).

Additionally, the Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos [CNDH] (2018) recognises the lack of support for aid professionals in training on migrant rights, child welfare, and mental health issues, as well as the need for psychological support for these workers. These conditions underscore the urgent need for humanitarian policies that safeguard the well-being and rights of unaccompanied children, adolescents, and aid workers.

## Key Findings

### Stress and Psychological Strain on Aid Workers

Aid workers frequently experience significant emotional and psychological stress due to the complexity of their work, as shown in previous studies (Apostolidou, 2016; Davey, 2011; Greene-Cramer et al., 2021; Lusk & Terrazas, 2015; Rondon-Pari, 2022; Sultanić, 2021; Tessitore et al., 2023; Wirth et al., 2019). The emotional toll of hearing stories of violence and abuse against children can negatively impact their well-being. Moreover, aid workers often display symptoms of secondary traumatic stress, which can result from prolonged exposure to the suffering of others. Aid workers reported difficulties maintaining professional boundaries while practising empathy with the minors they assisted. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

...it hit me emotionally a lot first to see so many painful stories...they hit me emotionally. But we must overcome these emotional blows to be able to attend to them, not bond with them but accompany them. For me, these children are very brave.

*...me golpeó mucho emocionalmente primero el ver tantas historias dolorosas...me golpearon emocionalmente, pero debemos superar esos golpes emocionales para poder atenderlos, no vincularnos sino acompañarlos. Para mí estos niños son muy valientes.*

**Figure 1**

*Quote from Participant 7, a 37-year-old Mexican male lawyer.*

## Under-resourced and Overwhelmed Services

NGOs and CSOs providing aid to migrants often struggle with inadequate funding, as voiced by participants. Insufficient government support results in limited resources. A mobile officer and project coordinator highlighted the government's responsibility to provide support and livelihoods for children and adolescents. Due to their lack of sufficient funding, they frequently turn to NGOs for support, even when these organisations themselves lack the necessary resources.

Despite Article 1, Section I of the General Law on the Rights of Girls, Boys, and Adolescents (LGDNNA) recognising children and adolescents as subjects of law according to the principles of universality, interdependence, and progressivity as outlined in Article 1 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, and Article 6 of the Migration Law (LM) guaranteeing their rights and freedoms in accordance with the Constitution, treaties, and international agreements, these protections are not always upheld in practice. This discrepancy was highlighted by one of the participants.

Sometimes they have arrived to us in terrible conditions, for example, it is horrible to see a truck arrive with 43 people who enter the shelter with their heads down, without pain, with fear! They are not prisoners, they are not people in prison, if people already come in a difficult context, they arrive in much worse conditions.

*A veces nos han llegado en condiciones terribles, por ejemplo, es horrible ver llegar un camión con 43 personas que entran al albergue con la cabeza hacia abajo, sin agujetas, con un miedo! No son reos, no son personas en condición de cárcel, si las personas ya vienen en un contexto difícil, llegan en condiciones mucho peores.*

### Figure 2

Quote from Participant 2, a 34-year-old Mexican woman and coordinator of the integration and liaison area.

## Figure 2

### Lack of Institutional Support and Policy Gaps

The interviews highlighted a lack of interaction between the government and migrants, leading to policies that harm unaccompanied minors. Legal reforms aimed at protecting minors from detention have placed a burden on civil society organisations that are unable to adequately support them. Immigration procedures are hindered by bureaucracy, delays, and red tape, which impede timely and effective assistance.

For me, the main challenge is that the government that should take charge, does not take charge.

*Para mí, el desafío principal es que el gobierno que debería hacerse cargo, no se hace cargo.*

**Figure 3**

*Quote from Participant 1, a 42-year-old Mexican woman and project coordinator*

### Physical and Emotional Well-being of Minors

Aid providers emphasise the lack of support for migrant children, including inadequate shelter and psychosocial help. They stress the need for a comprehensive strategy to address their well-being, focusing on both immediate physical needs and long-term emotional health.

### Visions for Improvement

The participants suggested improvements, including first-responder training, improved shelter infrastructure, compassionate asylum processes, and reduced bureaucratic barriers.

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

A qualitative study of aid workers' experiences with unaccompanied children highlighted significant challenges, necessitating actionable policy recommendations that address systemic gaps and improve outcomes for both children and care professionals. The policy implications and recommendations are as follows.

- Comprehensive training programs are necessary for aid workers, particularly those who initially interact with migrants, to enhance their ability to offer sensitive and knowledgeable assistance.

- Shelters for unaccompanied children must be improved by allocating adequate funding for essential services such as internet access, water, electricity, gas, and supplies to enhance their quality of life and service delivery.
- Thus, enhancing government backing is crucial. The Mexican government must provide financial and operational support to aid organisations, minimising reliance on NGO resources and individual contributions from workers.
- Streamlining the legal processes is crucial. Simplifying and expediting legal procedures for migrants, such as asylum requests, minimises bureaucracy and alleviates emotional distress for employees and children.
- Offering continuous and specialised psychological support for both unaccompanied children and aid workers is necessary for addressing the trauma and stress experienced during migration and aid work.
- Promoting cooperation among government agencies, NGOs, and civil society organisations to create joint strategies and shared responsibilities to aid migrants.
- Ensuring adequate and fair remuneration for professionals working with migrants to attract and retain skilled personnel committed to providing quality services.
- Introducing regular, unbiased supervision by external psychologists or psychiatrists to oversee cases and support aid workers, ensuring their well-being and quality of care.
- Advocating policy reforms that prioritise family reunification over detention and improve training on basic legal issues related to migrants.
- Developing long-term strategies that address the socioeconomic factors driving child migration and promote regional stability and safety.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study casts light on the challenges faced by unaccompanied children at the U.S.–Mexico border alongside the essential role of aid workers and articulates the urgency for systemic reforms and robust support mechanisms. It delves into the complex socioeconomic and political challenges underpinning this humanitarian issue, drawing from the first-hand accounts of aid professionals. The study advocates for a multi-faceted supportive environment that enhances shelter conditions, streamlines legal pathways, and promotes inter-agency cooperation while prioritising the psychological well-being of children. Strategic policy revisions and partnerships are imperative to safeguard children's dignity and welfare, uphold justice, and foster a compassionate response to

migration crises, ensuring that the voices of both children and aid workers are heard and validated.



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