



Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

CNS/Andrew McConnell CRS

“I feel compelled to draw attention to the reality of child migrants, especially the ones who are alone. I ask everyone to take care of the young, who in a threefold way are defenseless: they are children, they are foreigners, and they have no means to protect themselves.”

- Pope Francis, 2017 World Day of Migrants and Refugees Message, January 15, 2017

Who Are Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM)?

Unaccompanied refugee minors are refugee children who do not have a parent or relative available to provide for their long-term care. As refugees, URMs are unable to return to their home countries due to past persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.¹ These children are identified overseas as refugees and are accordingly eligible for resettlement.² Most URM range in age from 15 to 17 years old at the time of referral to the U.S. government because of their refugee status.³

The Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program

The URM program provides culturally and linguistically appropriate foster care to unaccompanied refugee children and youth. Through the program, unaccompanied refugees receive care, educational support, and case management to help the children thrive and achieve self-sufficiency. The United States fulfills a vital global child protection leadership role through the URM program. Since its inception in the 1980s, the program has received approximately **13,000 children** from countries all over the world.⁴ While the total number of children resettled through the URM program is relatively small, the program has a tremendous impact on the children served.

Where are URM arriving from?

Currently, the four countries with the largest number of URM arrivals are: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Burma, and Guinea.⁵

When do children “age out”⁶ of URM foster care?

Children must be designated to enter the URM program prior to their 18th birthday. However, once they are enrolled in the URM program, they may remain in the foster care placement until the age set by the individual state’s specific child welfare guidelines (often between ages 20 to 23).

What is USCCB’s role in the URM Program?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) is one of two resettlement agencies designated to receive URM. USCCB/MRS helps to determine and secure appropriate placements for URM-eligible children among our network of providers and provides trainings and technical assistance for URM services. During FY 2018, USCCB/MRS served 54 URM children.

Nau’s Story

Nau, an orphan girl, fled Burma with her cousins and brother to escape religious persecution. She was eventually able to find safety and stability through resettlement. Nau arrived in Phoenix at the age of 12 through the URM program. After working hard to learn English, Nau graduated her 8th grade class as Valedictorian. She has since graduated high school with high academic marks and was accepted to Georgetown University with a full scholarship.

Why Does the Catholic Church Assist URM?

The Catholic Church’s work in assisting unaccompanied refugee children stems from the belief that every person is created in God’s image. In their pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, the Mexican and U.S. bishops noted that “vulnerable immigrant populations, including unaccompanied children and refugees, should be afforded protection. Unaccompanied children, due to their heightened vulnerability, require special consideration and care.”⁷

Is it possible to adopt an URM?

Unaccompanied refugee children are generally not eligible for adoption.⁸ Although unaccompanied minors are generally put in long-term foster care placements, programs continue to make attempts to trace and reunite with a child’s family wherever possible. Similar to children in domestic foster care, family reunification is always a primary goal when possible and in the child’s best interest.

How can I help assist and protect URM?

- **Learn more about the URM program.** Download a copy of our e-book, [The U.S. Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program: Guiding Principles and Promising Practices](#), to educate yourself and your fellow community members about the URM program.
- **Become a URM foster parent!** The URM programs follow the same state laws and regulations that govern domestic foster care. In addition, URM programs provide trauma-informed services specific to the needs of a

foreign-born child who has encountered a forced migration experience. Potential foster families must undergo background checks, are carefully screened through an extensive home study process, and receive comprehensive training before they are approved to care for a child in their home. If you live in or near Phoenix, AZ; San Jose, CA; Miami, FL; Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo, MI; Jackson, MS; Rochester and Syracuse, NY; Ft. Worth and Houston, TX; Salt Lake City, UT; Richmond and Roanoke, VA; or Tacoma and Vancouver, WA and are interested in becoming a foster parent, contact foster@usccb.org for more information. If you reside in Colorado Springs, CO; Denver, CO; Fargo, ND; Fullerton, CA; Lansing, MI; Newton, PA; Philadelphia, PA; Seattle, WA; Washington, DC; or Worcester, MA please contact Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services at fosterparentinfo@lirs.org. If there are no USSCB or LIRS programs in your area, please direct your to DCS_ProjectOfficers@acf.hhs.gov.

ENDNOTES

1. 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42).
2. “The URM program has also evolved to meet the needs of certain other vulnerable minors arriving to the United States with no family to care for them, such as children who are victims of human trafficking.”
3. USCCB/MRS, *The United States Unaccompanied Minor Program Guiding Principles and Promising Practices* (2013).
4. Office of Refugee Resettlement, “About Unaccompanied Refugee Minors” (Sept. 4, 2018) <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/urm/about>.
5. Derived from USCCB URM data for FY 2018.
6. “Age out” refers to the point at which a youth is no longer eligible for services under the URM program because they have reached an age of majority.
7. *Strangers No Longer Together on The Journey of Hope*, Pastoral Statement Concerning Migration from the U.S. and Mexican Catholic Bishops, (2003), available at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm>.
8. In order to adopt, there needs to be proof that the child’s parents are deceased or that they have terminated their parental rights. Cases of adoption after resettlement to the U.S. are very rare.

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