

**Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights Statement for the House Oversight
Committee, Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs**

**"Oversight of the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Unaccompanied Alien Children
Program"**

April 18, 2023

When children arrive at our border seeking safety, they have traveled thousands of miles. Children migrate to escape violence and persecution, such as persecution due to gender identity or their family's political affiliation. Children also migrate to flee abuse, extreme poverty, or trafficking. A child is considered "unaccompanied" when they arrive at the border without a parent or legal guardian. These children are transferred to the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement where they wait to be reunified with family. For nearly 20 years, the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights has stood with unaccompanied children seeking safety in the U.S. Every day, we bear witness to their experiences in federal detention, their fight to reunify with family, and their need for stability in the community while they wait for the government to hear their requests for protection and permanency.

Children arrive with big hopes and dreams for their future, and they face major obstacles—including the need to prove their right to remain in the United States, against a government attorney and without the guarantee of their own attorney, independent Child Advocate, or services that would support their healthy development. Because the deck is otherwise stacked against children seeking protection in the United States, we should do everything to ensure that they are safe, reunited with their families, and have a fair and child-centered process to find safe haven.

Recent and devastating media reports have documented the horrific experiences of some unaccompanied youth who face labor exploitation by American companies who hire children for dangerous work. Let us be clear: exploitative child labor is not new, and this is not the first time children who fled their home countries have been subjected to new violence upon arriving in the United States. However, nationwide trends of increasing child labor violations, weakening child labor protections in several states, and tighter immigration restrictions reflect multi-system failures, and highlight the need to prioritize changes in policy and practice that will keep all children safe.

Congress must embrace policies that strengthen protections for unaccompanied children, such as by ensuring they have a right to counsel and that Child Advocates are available as needed. For two decades, bipartisan Congresses have passed laws to ensure foundational protections for unaccompanied and separated children. Lawmakers must now rise to this critical moment by rejecting anti-child, anti-immigrant rhetoric that targets vulnerable children and families and choosing instead laws and policies that recognize the humanity and dignity of immigrant children. Congress must support what all children need and deserve: safety, family unity, and resources and protections to grow and thrive.