

# Assessing Need and Utilization of Community Services Among Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Released Without Follow-Up Services



Lutheran Immigration  
and Refugee Service

**Background and Purpose:** Unaccompanied immigrant and refugee youth, often referred to as “Unaccompanied Alien Children” (UACs), enter the United States daily to escape violence, political oppression, and extreme poverty, or as the result of chronic instability in their native countries, or as victims of human trafficking. U.S. legal authorities place UACs in shelter care until a sponsor/caregiver is identified. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) contracts with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) Children’s Services to provide in-shelter and follow-up services to UACs. These follow-up services utilize a typical case management structure coordinated by community providers, including referrals for legal assistance, mental health and substance abuse treatment, educational programs, and medical care.

Although these services are considered an integral component of UACs integration into the community, it is estimated that only approximately 10% of youth released from shelters are considered ‘high risk’ and receive such services. Other ‘lower risk’ youth are reunified without services to support or monitor them after release. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these youth suffer similar difficulties as their higher risk peers who receive services and that family breakdown and crises often emerge after the initial six months ‘honeymoon’ phase of reunification. The research reported in this paper sought to assess the needs of children released from shelter care with no follow-up services. The research also aimed to understand how families access and utilize community services in the first year of integration into a new community in the United States.

**Methods:** Beginning in July 2013, a member of the research team telephoned sponsors of the first UACs released from shelter care with no follow-up services 14 days after release. Sponsors who agreed to participate were contacted by a member of the research team again at 3, 6, 9, and 12 month intervals post-shelter release, the typical LIRS follow-up home visit services schedule, for a total of five contacts. At each interval, a researcher gathered qualitative and quantitative data regarding the family’s challenges and successes in accessing educational, legal, health and mental health services, and social networks in the community without case management support.

**Participants:** Two different samples were included in the research. The first sample included 100 sponsors of UACs released from LIRS-network shelters without follow-up services beginning

in July 2013. One hundred sponsors agreed to participate by October 2013, and were followed for one year, so contact ended in October 2014. Of these, 86% were under age 14 (See Table 1). Because of anecdotal evidence suggesting that UACs over age 14 may have different outcomes from those under age 14, in April 2014 the researchers added a second sample of 100 UAC sponsors comprised only of youth released from LIRS-network shelters with no follow up services who were over age 14 at the time of release. Recruitment ended in January 2015 with only 66 participants, thus contact with researchers ended in January 2016. The age range of participants in the second sample can be seen in Table 2. All of the youth in both samples were Latin American. Interestingly, while over 40% of the younger youth were female, there were no females among the older youth. In addition, as seen in Tables 1 and 2, a much larger proportion of sponsors of younger youth are parents, the number of youth who have been separated from sponsors for over 10 years is double among the older youth, and there is a longer mean separation from sponsors among older youth.

Upon initial contact at the 14-day call, 22 of the sponsors in the first sample were unreachable and one declined to participate. However, 76 of the 100 sponsors continued to participate in the research through the 12-month call. In contrast, 41 sponsors of the second group were unreachable or declined to participate at the 14-day call, citing lack of time, concern about participating in research, and belief that the research was being carried out by the government. It is also interesting to note that almost double the amount of sponsors were parents among the younger children compared to the older children—which may have impacted their decision to take the time to participate in the research. Due to the slow pace of releases from shelters in the summer and fall of 2014, and a high rate of sponsors refusing to participate in the research, the research team ended recruitment of the second sample at the end of January 2015, with 66 sponsors participating in the research. An additional 31 sponsors dropped out of the research at varying points—16 sponsors who agreed at 14 days became unreachable or declined to participate at 3 months; another 11 dropped at the 9-month call; and 4 more sponsors dropped out at the 9-month contact. Thus, the final sample for the second group of youth is 35 sponsors completing the 12-month call. Two 12-month surveys are scheduled to be completed in December 2015 and January 2016. The two who have not completed the survey are not included in this report.

## FOLLOW-UP SERVICES REPORT JULY 2016

**Table 1: Participant Demographics—First 100 Sponsors (N=100, at 14-Day Contact)**

<b>Country of Origin</b>	44% Honduras; 35% El Salvador; 18% Guatemala; 3% Mexico
<b>Gender</b>	58% Male; 42% Female
<b>Age</b>	86% Under 14 ("Tender Age"); 14% 14 and Older
<b>Sponsor Location By State (Top 5)</b>	28% TX; 15% CA; 11% NY; 10% MD; 7% VA
<b>Sponsor Relationship</b>	92% Parent; 8% Other Family
<b>Length of Separation from Sponsor (N=91)</b>	Ranged from 1-15 years; Mean 6.72 years; About 15% of kids had been separated over 10 years

**Table 2: Participant Demographics—Second Group of Sponsors (N=66, at 14-Day Contact)**

<b>Country of Origin</b>	37.5% El Salvador; 29.7% Honduras; 29.7% Guatemala; 1.6% Mexico; 1.6% Ecuador
<b>Gender</b>	100% Male
<b>Age</b>	Ranged from 14-18; 50% 17 or older; 25% 18 or older
<b>Sponsor Location By State (Top 5)</b>	14.1% CA; 12.5% TX; 9.4% VA; 7.8% MD; 7.8% FL
<b>Sponsor Relationship</b>	56% Parent; 36% Other Family; 8% Other (Friends)
<b>Length of Stay in Shelter</b>	Ranged from 5-61 days; Mean 20.7 days
<b>Length of Separation from Sponsor (N=49)</b>	Ranged from 3-14 years; Mean 8.56; About 30% of kids had been separated over 10 years

**Results (for research on the first 100 Sponsors):** As seen in Table 3, data indicates that many families are accessing and utilizing community-based services independently, when needed, in the initial three months of having the child at home. At three months, 97% of youth were enrolled in school, 85% were calling the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) hotline, and 48% had accessed medical care, often to obtain necessary vaccinations in order to enroll in school. However, researchers also found that sponsors had difficulty resolving certain problems on their own, the most common of which was the ability to understand legal processes and access legal assistance. By six months, only 26% of the respondents had obtained legal aid. Additionally, at 14 days, only 44% of the respondents had accessed the EOIR hotline to gather case status information; some were not even familiar with it. However, after being contacted by the researchers, who shared the EOIR contact information with families and walked them through how to use it, 97% of the respondents had accessed the hotline at the six month call. Similarly, at the 14-day call, only 39% of sponsors reported knowledge of the [Legal Orientation Program for Custodians](#) (LOPC); but after the 14-day call, in which sponsors were informed of the LOPC service and provided the hotline to find a nearby location, 86% reported knowledge of it, and the attendance rate increased significantly. Thus, despite being informed about these services by the shelters, both orally and in writing, a follow-up call was crucial in sponsor utilization of the services.

Legal issues were the biggest concern of families; even if families had attended an LOPC training, many still reported that

they were not able to obtain affordable legal representation or consultation. Many families had spoken to a legal representative and been informed that lawyers would not take cases until the children had a court date. Thus, families also became very concerned if their children's names were not showing up on the EOIR hotline. This is consistent with the data showing that as the number of sponsors who reported that their child's name appeared on the hotline and the number of children with court dates increased, the number of families who reported that they had obtained legal aid also increased. By the 12-month call, about half of the respondents had a court date scheduled. First court dates ranged from 9/19/2013 to 2/16/2016, with future court dates scheduled into 2019.

Contrary to the commonly held belief that migrant children are transient, 76 of the initial 100 sponsors who agreed to participate in the research at the 14-day call were still reachable and willing to participate a year later. Of those, 100% of the UACs participating in the 12-month call still lived with their intended sponsor. None reported safety concerns in their homes, 98% were enrolled in school, and 63% had accessed medical care, despite a low rate of reported medical problems. There was very low reporting of mental health symptoms or utilization of mental health services, however, qualitatively, sponsors reported a high rate of exposure to trauma and community violence. It could be that due to lack of awareness and cultural norms, mental health symptoms are recognized and treated as physical health concerns. In addition, by 12 months, approximately 50% reported participating in community activities, and a majority of respondents perceived

## FOLLOW-UP SERVICES REPORT JULY 2016

**Table 3: Key Results for First 100 Sponsors**

	14 Days (N=100)	3 Months (N=90)	6 Months (N=76)	9 Months (N=76)	12 Months (N=76)
<b>With Intended Sponsor</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<b>Enrolled in School</b>	59%	97%	97%	97%	97%
<b>Safety Problems</b>	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Accessed EOIR Hotline</b>	44%	85%	97%	97%	97%
<b>Name on EOIR Hotline</b>	3%	22%	38%	57%	57%
<b>Had a Court Date</b>	2%	19%	36%	50%	51%
<b>Had Legal Aid</b>	7%	18%	26%	43%	49%
<b>Knowledge of LOPC</b>	39%	86%	97%	97%	97%
<b>Attendance at LOPC</b>	6%	30%	35%	35%	35%
<b>Identified MH Concerns</b>	18%	18%	17%	18%	14%
<b>Accessed MH Care</b>	6%	6%	10%	13%	13%
<b>Identified Physical Health Concerns</b>	15%	12%	1%	.08%	.08%
<b>Accessed Medical Care</b>	23%	48%	58%	62%	63%
<b>Attended Church</b>	66%	75%	76%	76%	76%

that they had social support in their community. In addition, by the 12-month call, over 75% of respondents reported going to church in their communities.

**Results for second group of sponsors:** When looking at this data, it is important to note the attrition rate, and to consider what may be different about those families who dropped out of the research from those who remained. As seen in Table 4, as with the first group of sponsors, a high number of youth were still with their sponsors 12 months post release from shelter, and few reported safety concerns. Sponsors of youth who were no longer in the home believed that youth left to be able to work without waiting for a permit. Although fewer than in the first 100, many youth were enrolled in school throughout the first year with their sponsors. However, sponsors of the second group did report difficulty in school, often due to challenges learning English. Among those youth in school, only 1% of sponsors reported difficulty in school at 14 days. By 3 months, however, 23% of sponsors noted trouble; at 6 months, 41% reported difficulty; at 9 months, 49% and at 12 months, 55% of sponsors noted difficulty in school. Families reported that some youth chose to leave school to work. Consequently, the level of employment among youth, including part-time employment, increased as the year progressed.

As with the first 100 sponsors, data indicates that in the initial three months of having the youth at home many families are accessing and utilizing community-based services independently, when needed. At 3 months, 60% of youth were enrolled in school, 85% were calling the EOIR hotline, and 25% had accessed medical care, often to obtain necessary vaccinations in order to enroll in school. There was very low reporting of mental health

symptoms, however, qualitatively, sponsors reported a high rate of exposure to trauma and community violence. It could be that due to lack of awareness and cultural norms, mental health symptoms are recognized and treated as physical health concerns. Similar to the first group of sponsors, legal concerns were sponsors' biggest concern; however, by 6 months, 51% of sponsors in the second group had obtained legal aid, while only 26% had done so by that time in the first group. Sponsors in the second group reported feeling a sense of panic regarding youth 'aging out,' which may have encouraged them to get legal aid more rapidly, despite the cost. In contrast to the first group of sponsors which reported that only about half of the youth had court dates by the end of 12 months, almost all of the youth in the second group had been to court at least once in the first 12 months of being released from shelter. Court dates ranged from 8/1/2014 through 11/15/2019. Although sponsors described being fearful of going to court, they did not avoid court dates. Families reported that if they had legal representation, they were requesting asylum, and sponsors who had gone to court without legal representation consistently said that judges were extending court dates, telling them to come back with legal representation.

As in the first group, the research phone call acted as an intervention in some ways. At 14 days, only 45% of respondents had accessed the EOIR hotline to gather case status information, and some were not familiar with it. After being contacted by the researchers, 86% of respondents had done so by the 6-month interval. Similarly, at the 14-day call, only 23% of sponsors reported knowledge of the LOPC program, while 11% reported having attended. By 3 months, 94% reported knowledge of the LOPC program, while 17% had attended. Sponsors admitted that at the 14-day and 3-month calls, few had read or looked at

**Table 4: Key Results for Second Group of Sponsors**

	14 Days (N=64)	3 Months (N=48)	6 Months (N=37)	9 Months (N=33)	12 Months (N=33)
<b>With Intended Sponsor</b>	97%	90%	95%	90%	90%
<b>Enrolled in School</b>	23%	60%	86%	76%	72%
<b>Safety Problems</b>	6%	.04%	.08%	.09%	15%
<b>Accessed EOIR Hotline</b>	45%	85%	86%	88%	88%
<b>Name on EOIR Hotline</b>	0	27%	59%	82%	85%
<b>Had a Court Date</b>	3%	40%	68%	90%	94%
<b>Had Legal Aid</b>	5%	21%	51%	67%	79%
<b>Identified Mental Health Concerns</b>	14%	15%	11%	15%	15%
<b>Accessed Mental Health Care</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Identified Physical Health Concerns</b>	8%	1%	22%	27%	27%
<b>Knowledge of LOPC</b>	23%	94%	100%	100%	100%
<b>Attended LOPC</b>	11%	17%	22%	22%	22%
<b>Accessed Medical Care</b>	9%	25%	51%	61%	64%
<b>Attended Church</b>	62.5%	65%	62%	70%	70%
<b>Employed</b>	8%	17%	32%	36%	48%

the ‘packet’ given to them by the shelter at release. Thus, despite being informed by the shelters about some services such as LOPC or EOIR, both orally and in writing, a follow-up call was crucial in encouraging sponsor utilization of the services. In addition, throughout the 12-month call, families consistently reported that the LOPC is not functioning effectively—that no one answers the LOPC telephone hotline and that their calls are not returned.

### Other Qualitative Findings

It is important to include impressions and information gained by the research team that was not the product of the direct questions asked of the participants in the telephone interviews. Thus, below are some key qualitative impressions gleaned from the research on topics not included in the quantitative findings and, where appropriate, their potential implications for services.

- Information packets provided to families at shelter release are rarely opened or looked at. Families knew they had received a packet of information, but many preferred to ask the research team questions that would have likely been answered if they looked at the packet. Families reported that going through the packet seemed too overwhelming during a time of reconnecting with youth. A follow-up service, such as the telephone call, often directed sponsors to where they needed to look for information or where they could go to get information about local services. Packaging the material in different ways, or using local social or cultural events as “teaching tools” with families could be useful.
- Trust was an important part of participation in the research. In the first group, families often positively commented

on youth’s relationships with shelter workers and looked forward to each 3-month call. Many of these families called the research team with questions about resources between calls. However, in the second group, conducted after the surge in summer 2014, many families noted a lack of trust as a reason for declining participation. This highlights the need for consistent, trusted follow-up services with workers who are familiar with local services.

- Particularly in the first sample, families returned researchers’ calls and called them between calls to ask questions, especially regarding youth legal status or where to access health or educational services. “Will my child be able to stay in the U.S.?” was a commonly asked question, as were questions about where to find educational support programs or health care. This, too, highlights the need for consistent, trusted follow-up services with workers who are familiar with local services.
- Families wanted to comply with rules, including legal proceedings. Above all, families in both groups felt stressed about youths’ legal situations and were in search of affordable legal aid. Families wanted to live legal, upstanding lives in their communities. Very few families reported not showing up at court dates or that youth had run away.
- Sponsors in both groups reported a high level of community involvement in their churches. In both groups, a high number of sponsors attended church. Churches and schools were the places sponsors went to ask questions, gather support, and receive information.

- The families' biggest barrier to school enrollment was not having record of sufficient vaccinations. In addition, families of older children reported difficulty with English and lack of language support as a barrier to success in school.
- Interviewers noted a marked difference in the attitude toward youth by sponsors in the different age groups. In the older group, sponsors expected youth to be contributing members of the family—the reason they were here was to help their families, not be another dependent. Whereas with the younger group, sponsors, who were more likely to be parents, expected to take on the caretaking responsibilities inherent in having a dependent child. One possible service implication is the need to create programs that provide older youths with an opportunity to earn some money (even if just a bit) to strengthen their sense of contributing to their families. It might be useful to develop a program in which older youth mentor younger youth (with adult supervision) and are provided with a modest stipend for their work.
- In the older group, participants were asked why youth left their home countries. Almost all 66 participants reported gang threats and violence as reasons for migration, a question not asked of the first sample. They reported continued involvement with coyotes because they owed money for their journeys and were subjected to ongoing threats, possibly resulting in less stability. This has implications regarding the importance of shelter staff and advocates strengthening their connections to local anti-gang programs and police departments in order to decrease youths' possible involvement with the criminal justice system.

### Conclusions and Implications

Initial findings from the study underscore the importance of supporting locally-based service interventions and outreach that take into account the individuality of each community in order to enhance the existing capacities of UAC sponsors. The researchers found that sponsors were committed to the youths' education and looked toward the school for guidance. A majority of children completed the school year and would move to the next grade; many attended summer ESL classes. Thus, locally-based services could include support for schools as they absorb a diverse and demographically changing student population, and represent a major point of integration and an opportunity for social inclusion. In addition, the drastically lower response rate and higher level of youth employment among sponsors of older youth underscore the need to develop programs specifically tailored for this group. The research also supports the need to explore the creation of a peer navigation program that could tap into the expertise of existing community members, as well as the need for some sort of follow-up service for all youth released from shelter.

The research process has served as an unintended intervention by identifying the lack of awareness of available services and service utilization among sponsors. For both sets of sponsors, the researchers found that while families were initiating the process of integration, ongoing sponsor and child support was useful to facilitate enhanced understanding of system navigation. Based on these findings, several implications emerge for shelters assisting unaccompanied migrant youth, individuals and groups who are advocating on their behalf, and the communities in which they are resettled. Post Release Service providers, for example, could strengthen their relationships with organizations that provide legal assistance; expand training programs for the families of these youth and make them more culturally accessible; and work more closely with local courts to reduce legal obstacles that impede the successful integration of migrant youth into their new communities. Shelter staff could better liaison with communities to help families make contacts with resources earlier. Placing youth in shelters in close proximity to sponsors would facilitate the likelihood that shelter staff could become familiar with community resources. A more comprehensive review of resources and needs at discharge would allow for sponsors to ask questions and give shelter staff the opportunity to let families know what to expect in the following months, especially regarding legal and educational situations, which we found most concerning to families. Shelter staff could also educate families around trauma and mental health, which could help begin the process of normalizing treatment in migrant communities. Advocates could produce user-friendly informational materials in a variety of formats (print, online, graphic), distribute them to families through existing networks (e.g., churches), and educate local providers of social services, health and mental health care, police departments, immigration officials, and community-based cultural, recreational, and educational programs about the specific needs of this population and their families. Both staff and advocates can work more closely with community schools to identify the problems migrant youth might experience and work with school personnel to develop proactive interventions to prevent these problems from developing or reaching a more serious stage should they arise.

Although this research does provide some insight into the lives of migrant youth released from shelters with no follow-up services, further research is warranted to better understand long-term integration of these youth into their communities.

*Further insights and recommendations from this research are available at [lirs.org/learn](http://lirs.org/learn).*

---

Jayshree Jani, Ph.D.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County

---