

## ***Whoever Welcomes Children Welcomes Me*** (Matthew 18) **The Facts about Child Refugees on Long Island**

### **Background and Causes for the Children Coming to LI**

- Their core reason for coming is to escape life-threatening violence in their Central American homelands (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador). Other motivating factors such as extreme poverty are secondary.
- This crisis started in 2006 with only a few thousand children, increasing each year as horrific drug and gang-related violence (murders, rapes, kidnappings) in these countries escalated.
- The U.S. is not the only destination for these children. Child refugees have also fled to Panama, Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize.
- Almost half of the children are girls, and many are elementary school-aged kids -- some are as young as four years old.

### **The Actual Presence of the Children on Long Island**

- The approximately 2,500 children settled on Long Island year-to-date represent only one-half of 1 percent of the total immigrant population on Long Island.
- Those who stay in shelters stay briefly -- 2 weeks to 2 months at most.
- Almost all are being reunited with family members. Very few will become wards of the state.
- Congressmen Steve Israel and Peter King have introduced a federal bill that will reimburse school districts experiencing a surge in refugee children up to \$12,000 per child.

### **The Children's Legal Situation**

- Most are scheduled for immigration court appointments or interviews with Department of Homeland Security within a month of arriving on Long Island.
- Not all will be awarded protected status and allowed to stay. Many will be deported.

### **Health and Well-Being of the Children**

- Social workers visit the home that they are placed in to ensure the living conditions are acceptable, among other matters.
- Every child has been medically examined before being released to Long Island. Most (93 percent) were vaccinated as infants in their home country.
- When they arrive on Long Island they are hungry, hurting, and scared. Yet they are also very happy to be seeing their parents and other relatives after many years.
- They are normal children. They want to go to school, make friends, play sports, and have freedoms they don't have back home.

## STORIES OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

**Cristian Omar Reyes**, an 11-year-old sixth grader from **Honduras** lost his father in March after he was robbed and murdered by gangs while working as a security guard protecting a pastry truck. Three people he knows were murdered this year. Four others were gunned down on a nearby corner in the span of two weeks at the beginning of this year. A girl his age resisted being robbed of \$5. She was clubbed over the head and dragged off by two men who cut a hole in her throat, stuffed her panties in it, and left her body in a ravine across the street from Cristian's house. *New York Times*, 7/11/14

**Anthony O. Castellanos**, a 13-year old from Honduras, disappeared from his gang-ridden neighborhood, so his younger brother, Kenneth, hopped on his green bicycle to search for him, starting his hunt at a notorious gang hangout known as the "crazy house." They were found within days of each other, both dead. Anthony, 13, and a friend had been shot in the head; Kenneth, 7, had been tortured and beaten with sticks and rocks. They were among seven children murdered in the La Pradera neighborhood of San Pedro Sula in April alone. *New York Times*, 7/9/14

**Nodwin**, an 11-year old from Honduras: "Big people force the children to sell bad things, and if they don't do it, they rape them or they kill them." Nodwin once witnessed a boy his own age gang raped in a neighborhood park after the child refused to join a local drug gang. "They were stripping a kid naked, and I went to tell the kid's mom. Later, I went home, but I didn't want to leave my house, because they could have done the same thing to me." *PBS NewsHour*, 6/20/14

**Jenny** opened her front door one day and there were pieces of a body thrown in a plastic bag on her doorstep as a warning from the gangs about what would happen to her if she did not become the "girlfriend" of a gang member. *As related to a Women's Refugee Commission staff member during a focus group discussion.*

**Maritza**, a 15-year old from El Salvador reported the following: I am here because the gang threatened me. One of them "liked" me. Another gang member told my uncle that he should get me out of there because the guy who liked me was going to do me harm. In El Salvador they take young girls, rape them and throw them in plastic bags. My uncle told me it wasn't safe for me to stay there. *UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) report*

**David**, a 16-year old from Guatemala, reported the following: Gangs in a nearby neighborhood wanted to kill me and some other people. They wanted me to give them money, but what money was I supposed to give them? I didn't have any. They asked me if I knew who they were, if I could identify them. I said no, because I knew if I said yes they would kill me. They held my cousin and me for three hours, tied up. My cousin was able to untie the rope and he helped me untie mine. We heard gun shots and we ran. They kept looking for us, but we escaped. *UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) report*

**Kevin Briseño**, 18, and his friend **Omar Barrera**, 19, from El Salvador, both spoke about why it may be a death sentence for those who try to leave but are caught and sent back. One friend fled a year and a half ago after he was threatened and gang members murdered his father, a

policeman. Their friend was trying to reach his mother in Maryland, but he was stopped in Mexico and returned to San Salvador. "He was murdered the week after he got back," Barrera said, shaking his head. [The Desert Sun, 7/13/14](#)

Two workers at the San Pedro Sula morgue in Honduras said the number of bodies they receive is significantly higher today than it was a year ago. Stories are also piling up of young children forced to work as lookouts, messengers or spies for the gangs. Eight children, between the ages of 7 and 13, were kidnapped and killed in La Padera barrio during May. Word on the street is that they were killed for refusing to join the dominant local gang. "In this job you become hardened to seeing death," says one of the morgue workers who recovered some of the bodies, and asks his name not be published. "But to have to recover a child who has been cut to pieces and burned. That was just too much." [The Guardian, 7/9/14](#)