Responding to Child Migration

In the summer of 2014, the United States experienced a significant increase of unaccompanied minors illegally entering the country from Central America. The number of minors apprehended as they tried to enter the U.S. nearly doubled over the previous year from 35,200 to 66,120. The fastest growing segment of child migrants were those under 12 years old, increasing concern that vulnerable children were risking their lives on a dangerous journey to the U.S. to escape violence and poverty in their home countries. The influx posed a number of logistical and ethical dilemmas for state and federal authorities, and overwhelmed the capacity of authorities to process new migrants or even provide shelter for them.

The Obama administration responded with a multifaceted plan that included millions of dollars of emergency funding. The plan called for increased border enforcement, deportation of those deemed economic migrants, more detention facilities, additional immigration judges to process claims for political asylum as refugees, and new programs in countries of origin that would mitigate violence and economic hardship for minors as well as discourage or intercept migrants before reaching the U.S. Because facilities at the border were being overrun, the government also transported some migrants to other parts of the country. This drew protests from local communities that tried to turn back buses filled with migrant children. The administration’s response drew criticism from all quarters.

Human rights and refugee advocates, as well as many religious institutions, argued that the U.S. was neglecting its moral obligation to protect innocent and vulnerable children, many of whom were fleeing violence at the hands of criminal gangs and the drug trade. According to journalist Sonia Nazario, the influx of minors was not a crisis of illegal immigration but rather a refugee crisis: the violence in countries, such as Honduras, was prompting youths to flee their homes as a means of survival. Nazario argued that these refugees, similar to refugees in war-torn regions such as Syria, deserved legal and physical protection. She criticized the Obama administration for concentrating on border enforcement and interdiction of child migrants instead.

Others argued the opposite point: that the crisis was brought on by weak control of U.S. borders. According to Jessica Vaughn, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, the ongoing crisis was “the best evidence yet that lax enforcement, both at the border and within the country, and talk of amnesty only bring more illegal immigration.” She and others promoting stronger limits on immigration urged the Obama administration to turn back those who entered the country illegally on the grounds that the only way to end this crisis was to stem the tide of migrants before they got to the U.S.
Discussion Questions:

1. Does the United States have a moral obligation to accept migrants? Why or why not? Does the impetus for migration matter? For example, should we treat economic migrants fleeing economic hardships any differently than political asylum-seekers escaping political persecution and violence? Explain your reasoning.

2. What values are in conflict in the debate over the economic costs of immigration?

3. Does the U.S. have a special moral obligation to receive child migrants? Why or why not?

4. A faction of Americans protested against accepting minors into the country because of the potential burden and threat that the newcomers might pose to local communities. Do you think there are limits to the moral obligation of the U.S. (and other countries) in accepting migrants, even those fleeing violence? Why or why not?

5. Some commentators argue that if unaccompanied child migrants gain legal status upon reaching the United States, more children will be incentivized to make the dangerous trek to the U.S. Others argue we must protect the most vulnerable. In response to these concerns, what immigration policies would you advocate and why?

6. Does the United States have a moral obligation to help resolve the deeper reasons for mass migration to the U.S., such as economic inequality, the drug trade, and histories of encouraged migration, particularly if American behavior or U.S. policy contributes to these patterns of migration? Explain.

7. Ultimately, the surge in child migration to the United States in the summer of 2014 was controlled in part through cooperation with foreign governments to prevent the transit of minors across their territories. Some argued that the methods used by these governments were not humane and that children intercepted en route to the U.S. were forced to return to dangerous or even life-threatening situations. Do you think this was an ethically justifiable method to limit migration? Why or why not?
Resources:

The Children of the Drug Wars: A Refugee Crisis, Not an Immigration Crisis

The Central American Child Emigration Crisis: Facts, Figures, and Root Causes

How to Stop the Surge of Migrant Children

Children 12 and under are fastest growing group of unaccompanied minors at U.S. border
http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/22/children-12-and-under-are-fastest-growing-group-of-unaccompanied-minors-at-u-s-border/#more-261588

The Refugees at Our Door

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