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UNACCOMPANIED ALIEN CHILDREN

Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Migration from Central America

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United States Government Accountability Office

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GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-16-163T, a testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2012 there has been a rapid increase in the number of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexican border of UAC from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Current data indicate the rate of UAC migration from Central America in 2015 is lower than the record levels of 2014, though apprehensions increased in August 2015. Children from these three countries face a host of challenges, such as extreme violence and persistent poverty.

This testimony summarizes the findings from GAO's July 2015 report, which reviewed (1) U.S. assistance in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras addressing agency-identified causes of UAC migration; (2) how agencies have determined where to locate these assistance efforts; and (3) the extent to which agencies have developed processes to assess the effectiveness of programs seeking to address UAC migration. This testimony also provides updated information on several topics covered in the report. GAO reviewed agency documents and interviewed officials in Washington, D.C., and in Central America for the report.

What GAO Recommends

GAO's July 2015 report included recommendations that DHS and State integrate evaluations into their information campaigns intended to deter migration, and that DHS establish performance targets for its investigative units. DHS concurred with both recommendations, and said that it plans to evaluate its most recent campaign. State also concurred with the recommendation directed to it.

View GAO-16-163T. For more information, contact Kimberly Gianopoulos at (202)-512-8612 or gianopoulosk@gao.gov

October 21, 2015

UNACCOMPANIED ALIEN CHILDREN

Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Migration from Central America

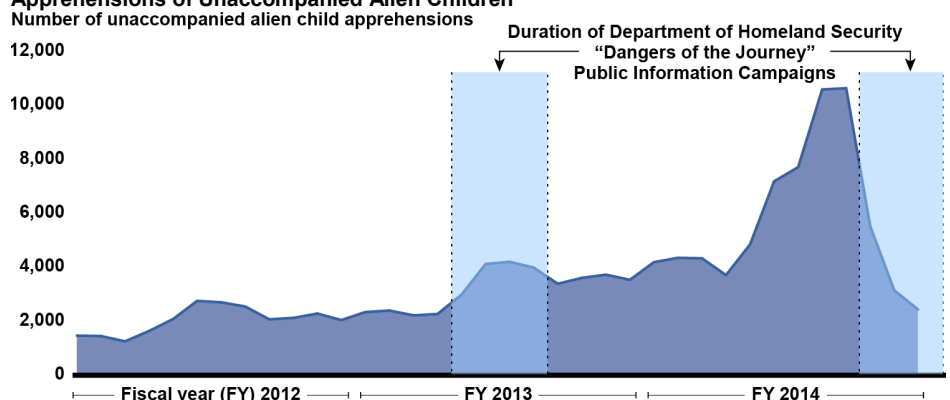
What GAO Found

GAO reported in July 2015 that U.S. agencies had sought to address causes of unaccompanied alien child (UAC) migration through recent programs, such as information campaigns to deter migration, developed in response to the migration increase and other long-standing efforts. The increase in migration since 2012 was likely triggered, according to U.S. officials, by several factors such as the increased presence and sophistication of child smugglers (known as coyotes) and confusion over U.S. immigration policy. Officials also noted that certain persistent conditions such as violence and poverty have worsened in certain countries. In addition to long-standing efforts, such as U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) antipoverty programs, agencies had taken new actions. For example, Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-led investigative units had increasingly sought to disrupt human smuggling operations.

GAO found that U.S. agencies located programs based on various factors, including long-term priorities such as targeting high-poverty and -crime areas, but adjusted to locate more programs in high-migration communities. For example, Department of State (State) officials in Guatemala said they moved programs enhancing police anticrime capabilities into such communities, and USAID officials in El Salvador said they expanded to UAC-migration-affected locations.

GAO found that most agencies had developed processes to assess the effectiveness of programs seeking to address UAC migration, but weaknesses existed in these processes for some antismuggling programs. For example, DHS had established performance measures, such as arrests, for units combating UAC smuggling, but had not established numeric or other types of targets for these measures, which would enable DHS to measure the units' progress. In addition, DHS and State had not always evaluated information campaigns intended to combat coyote misinformation. DHS launched its 2013 campaign in April, but launched its 2014 campaign in late June after migration levels peaked. Neither agency evaluated its 2014 campaign. DHS has reported that it plans to evaluate its ongoing campaign before the end of this year.

Timing of Department of Homeland Security Public Information Campaigns and Monthly Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Alien Children



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Homeland Security data. | GAO-16-163T



October 21, 2015

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our recent work on U.S. agency efforts to reduce unaccompanied child migration from Central America. As has been well documented, in the past several years, there has been a large increase in the number of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexican border of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.¹ Data indicate that fewer children from these three countries were apprehended in fiscal year 2015 than fiscal year 2014; however, apprehensions of children increased in August 2015 compared to previous months this year and exceeded those from August 2014. A number of U.S. agencies provide assistance intended to improve living conditions and strengthen rule of law in the three countries.

My testimony summarizes the findings from our report issued in July 2015, which reviewed (1) U.S. assistance in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras addressing agency-identified causes of UAC migration; (2) how agencies have determined where to locate these assistance efforts; and (3) the extent to which agencies have developed processes to assess the effectiveness of programs seeking to address UAC migration.² This testimony also provides updated information on several topics we covered in our July 2015 report. This report is part of a body of work that GAO has conducted on this issue. In February 2015, we reported on agency-identified causes of, and actions taken in response to, the rapid increase in unaccompanied child migration,³ and in July 2015 we also reported on U.S. efforts to screen and care for UAC migrants who safely arrive at the border.⁴ We also have ongoing work on U.S. agency efforts to care for UAC once they are in U.S. custody.

To address the objectives in our July 2015 report, we reviewed documents for programs that agencies identified as addressing causes of UAC migration, including country and program strategies, operational plans, project proposal and appraisal documents, and progress reports, among others. We also interviewed U.S. and nongovernment officials in Washington, D.C., and U.S., host government, and nongovernment officials in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras,

¹U.S. law defines an unaccompanied alien child, or UAC, as “a child who has no lawful immigration status in the United States; has not attained 18 years of age; and with respect to whom there is no parent or legal guardian in the United States or no parent or legal guardian in the United States available to provide care and physical custody.” 6 U.S.C. § 279(g)(2).

²GAO, *Central America: Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Unaccompanied Child Migration*, GAO-15-707 (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2015).

³GAO, *Central America: Information on Migration of Unaccompanied Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras*, GAO-15-362 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2015).

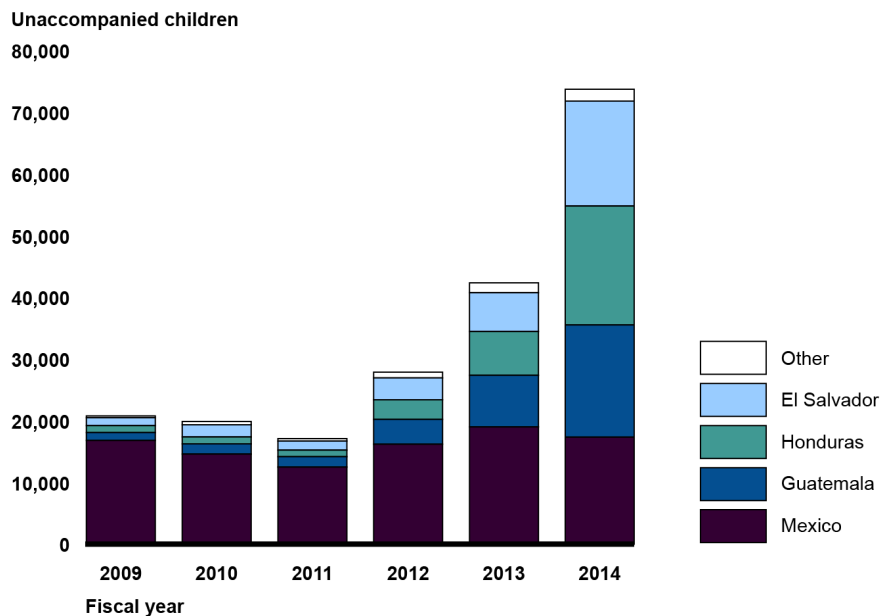
⁴GAO, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: Actions Needed to Ensure Children Receive Required Care in DHS Custody*, GAO-15-521 (Washington, D.C.: July 14, 2015).

where we visited U.S. agency-supported projects and met with children in each country. Further details on our scope and methodology can be found in our July 2015 report. To provide updated information on several topics, we contacted agency officials and reviewed agency documents and studies conducted by nongovernmental organizations. The work upon which this testimony is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the number of UAC from any country apprehended at the U.S. border climbed from nearly 28,000 in fiscal year 2012 to more than 42,000 in fiscal year 2013, and to more than 73,000 in fiscal year 2014. Prior to fiscal year 2012, most UAC apprehended at the border were Mexican nationals.⁵ However, as figure 1 shows, starting in fiscal year 2013, the total number of UAC from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras surpassed the number of UAC from Mexico and, in fiscal year 2014, far surpassed the number of UAC from Mexico.

Figure 1: Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Alien Children by Country of Citizenship, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2014



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Homeland Security data. | GAO-16-163T

Recent data and research indicate that, while fewer UAC are being apprehended in the United States in 2015, the pace of migration from Central America remains high. According to DHS, as

⁵Within DHS, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement apprehend, process, temporarily detain, and care for UAC who attempt to illegally enter the United States. For information on how these apprehension data were obtained, see *GAO-15-707*.

of August 2015, apprehensions at the southwest border are down 46 percent compared with last year—with more than 35,000 UAC apprehended in fiscal year 2015 compared with about 66,000 through the same time period in fiscal year 2014. However, analyses of DHS data indicate that apprehensions in the month of August 2015 increased compared to previous months this year and exceeded by nearly 50 percent August 2014 apprehensions. Moreover, research by two nongovernmental organizations indicates that a greater number of Central Americans this year are being apprehended in Mexico. According to the Migration Policy Institute,⁶ Mexico has increased its enforcement capacity and is apprehending a greater number of Central American migrants, including children. Specifically, in its study published in September 2015, the institute projected that Mexico's apprehensions of children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras will increase this year by 9,000.⁷ In addition, according to research conducted by the Washington Office on Latin America,⁸ Mexico has greatly increased its rate of apprehension of Central American migrants. These studies indicate that many Central American children who in the past may have made it to the U.S. border and been counted in U.S. apprehension statistics, have this year been apprehended in Mexico.

Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face a host of perils both within their countries and along the migration route to the United States. These countries have among the world's highest murder rates, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, along with a widespread presence of gangs, high poverty rates, and a number of other persistent problems. Children who migrate can encounter further risks along the journey, including robbery, extortion, abandonment, rape, or murder. A number of U.S. agencies provide assistance to the three countries. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State (State), DHS, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the Inter-American Foundation (IAF) have programs providing assistance in areas such as economic development, rule of law, citizen security, law enforcement, education, community development, and others. In fiscal year 2014, USAID, State, DHS, and IAF allocated a combined \$44.5 million for El Salvador, \$88.1 million for Guatemala, and \$78 million for Honduras. In addition, MCC signed a threshold program agreement with Honduras in fiscal year 2013 totaling \$15.6 million, a compact agreement with El Salvador in fiscal year 2014 totaling \$277 million, and a threshold program agreement with Guatemala in fiscal year 2015 totaling \$28 million.⁹ Additional information on agency- and program-specific funding is included in our July 2015 report.

In September 2014, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras issued a regional plan in response to the recent migration increase.¹⁰ The plan, referred to as the *Plan of*

⁶The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to analyzing the movement of people worldwide.

⁷ Migration Policy Institute, *Migrants Deported from the United States and Mexico to the Northern Triangle: A Statistical and Socioeconomic Profile* (Washington, D.C.: September 2015).

⁸The Washington Office on Latin America is a research and advocacy organization focusing on human rights issues in the Americas.

⁹A compact is a multiyear agreement between MCC and an eligible country to fund specific programs targeted at reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth. MCC's threshold program is designed to assist countries that have not yet qualified for compact assistance but have demonstrated a significant commitment to improving their performance on the corporation's eligibility criteria.

¹⁰*Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map*. Regional Plan Prepared by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. September 2014.

the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map, outlines four strategic actions that seek to stimulate the productive sector to create economic opportunities, develop opportunities for people, improve public safety and enhance access to the legal system, and strengthen institutions to increase people’s trust in the state. In addition, in March 2015, the administration issued the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, with the primary objectives of prosperity, governance, and security, and the goals of an economically integrated Central America that is fully democratic; economic opportunities for its people; more accountable, transparent, and effective public institutions; and a safe environment for its citizens.¹¹

Agencies Seek to Address UAC Migration with Recently Developed and Long-standing Efforts

Agency-Identified Causes of Increase in UAC Migration

As we reported in July 2015, according to agency officials a variety of factors likely caused the rapid increase in UAC migration of recent years, including the increased presence of coyotes, perceptions concerning U.S. immigration law, recent improvements in the U.S. economy, the increased use of social media, and the worsening of pervasive problems.

Increased presence of smugglers (or coyotes). Agency officials from all three countries that we spoke to said that smugglers, also known as coyotes, had proliferated and grown more influential and sophisticated in recent years. Officials from USAID and State in all three countries noted that coyotes were often well known and trusted in communities. In addition, agency officials we spoke to in all three countries noted that coyotes had instituted new marketing and messaging tactics, such as offering three attempts to migrate to the United States for one fee—known as a “three-for-one” deal. Coyotes had also intentionally spread rumors and misinformation about U.S. immigration policy. For example, agency officials told us that, in some cases, in an effort to drive smuggling business, coyotes led many people to believe children could migrate to the United States and receive permission to stay indefinitely if they arrived by a certain date.

Perceptions of U.S. immigration policy. According to agency officials, general perceptions concerning U.S. immigration policy had played a growing role in UAC migration. According to State officials in El Salvador and Guatemala, local media outlets had optimistically discussed comprehensive immigration reform efforts in the United States and sometimes failed to discuss the complexity of immigration reform. In addition, according to USAID officials, Honduran youth and coordinators of community centers who were interviewed as part of a USAID focus group indicated they believed the United States would allow migrant minors, mothers traveling with minors, and pregnant women to stay for a period of time upon arrival in the United States.

Improvements in U.S. economy and family reunification. Agency officials also noted that recent improvements in the U.S. economy had fueled increased UAC migration, enabling family reunification in the United States. For example, State and USAID officials in Honduras noted that the improving economy had enabled parents who immigrated to the United States to send money back to their home country to pay coyotes so their children could migrate and reunify the

¹¹The White House, *Our Central American Strategy* (posted March 16, 2015), accessed July 14, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/03/16/our-central-american-strategy>.

family in the United States. According to officials in El Salvador, as the economy improved there, more Salvadorans have attempted to migrate to the United States to reunify with family.

Increased use of social media. The use of social media can encourage migration, according to some agency officials. For example, officials in Guatemala noted that social media outlets enable migrants who arrive in the United States to share messages and pictures with families in their home countries, an act that can serve as a powerful and influential endorsement of the decision to migrate. Additionally, according to a study performed by State contractors in El Salvador, many people advertise immigration services through social media and offer travel services to ensure safe arrival in the United States.

Worsening of longstanding pervasive challenges. Violence, poverty, and poor access to education and other services have been pervasive development challenges in all three countries, predating the UAC migration increase. However, according to agency officials we spoke to in all three countries, some of these problems had grown worse in recent years and could have contributed to the rise of UAC migration. For example, in Honduras, agency officials noted that levels and perceptions of violence had grown worse, in part because of the rise in extortions. Worsening security concerns also negatively affect access to education. For example, agency officials in El Salvador noted that many children will not attend school after the seventh grade because traveling to some schools requires crossing gang borders, and that girls in particular face the risk of being attacked or raped en route. In Guatemala, agency officials stated that poor economic and social conditions in the Western Highlands—a remote, mountainous area in the western part of Guatemala, inhabited by over 20 different indigenous groups—had declined even further in recent years. In addition, agency officials noted that deteriorating climate conditions, including several consecutive years of drought and a coffee rust blight that has hurt coffee production and cost jobs in Honduras and Guatemala, exacerbated long-standing economic concerns in many communities.

For our July 2015 report, we met with children from all three countries who offered similar insights concerning the causes of migration.¹² For example, children at a USAID outreach center in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, noted the lack of educational and job opportunities in their communities as a reason for migrating. Children from a particularly violent neighborhood told us it was even more difficult for them to obtain a job because potential employers would sometimes choose not to hire them because of where they live. Children at an outreach center in El Salvador also noted that sometimes, even with an education, one cannot find work in El Salvador and that there are more opportunities and chances to succeed in the United States. Children at this same center indicated that the desire to migrate is even stronger for children with parents in the United States.

Prior to this hearing, we asked agency officials for their observations on what factors may have led to the overall decline in UAC apprehensions in fiscal year 2015 and the increase in UAC apprehensions in August 2015. Several DHS offices offered various perspectives for these changes in UAC apprehension numbers. Officials from U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) U.S. Border Patrol and from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations stated that most of the decrease in the number of UAC apprehensions in fiscal year 2015 could be attributed to Mexico's increased enforcement of its own southern border. Concerning the uptick in apprehensions in August 2015, officials from

¹²These children do not represent a generalizable sample, but provide important insights into the situations in these countries.

CBP's U.S. Border Patrol and DHS's Office of Intelligence and Analysis stated that the increase could be attributed to the recent U.S. policy change ending the detention of migrant families. According to these officials, the policy change may have created the impression that the United States is allowing family units into the country and then releasing them, which could serve as a motivating factor for migration. Similarly, officials from ICE's Homeland Security Investigations stated that interviews with migrants have indicated that migrants believe that if they arrive in the United States with children, they will not be detained for a long time and will be allowed to stay in the United States. Officials from ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations stated that there is no definitive answer for what may have caused the increase in apprehensions in August 2015, but that some of the same factors that caused the UAC migration increase in 2014, such as pursuit of economic opportunities, desire for family reunification, and violence, could be considered.

Agency Efforts Seeking to Address UAC Migration

In our July 2015 report, we found that among the various agency actions taken in response to UAC migration, several sought to directly combat coyotes, which agency officials identified as a key emergent factor causing migration. Agencies also had established efforts to increase legal migration and improve migrant return centers, and had identified other longstanding efforts as seeking to address underlying causes of migration.

Antismuggling efforts. In response to the increase in UAC migration, we found that DHS and State had supported several law enforcement and legislative outreach efforts with an increased focus on investigating and dismantling smuggling operations in all three countries. For example, according to DHS officials, in response to the rapid increase in UAC migration in 2014, DHS shifted the investigative priorities of its Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIU)—which include host government police, customs officers, and prosecutors, among others—to target child-smuggling operations in all three countries. A DHS official in Guatemala told us the unit there was able to dismantle two of the seven criminal organizations it was investigating that were actively smuggling children. In addition, State in Honduras is working with a Department of Justice resident legal advisor to assist the Honduran attorney general's office in prosecuting trafficking and alien-smuggling cases, while State support in Guatemala included assistance to reform police training, with a new emphasis on UAC-related issues in the community policing techniques, criminal investigations, and human rights curricula. State also participated in legislative and political outreach efforts to combat smuggling. For example, in Guatemala, State has advocated modifying certain laws that would better enable Guatemalan law enforcement to investigate and prosecute these cases.

Public information campaigns to deter migration. We also found that DHS and State had carried out several public information campaigns between 2013 and 2015 intended to dissuade citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from migrating to the United States. DHS's campaigns in 2013 and 2014 focused on warning potential migrants of the dangers of the journey. DHS had launched two campaigns in 2015, including one to increase awareness of requirements under the executive action on immigration, which was launched in January 2015 but was stopped February 16, 2015, because of a federal court ruling that granted a preliminary injunction to prevent expansion of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, among other things.¹³

¹³Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was announced by the Secretary of Homeland Security on June 15, 2012. Certain people already in the United States who came to the United States before they were 16 and meet guidelines established by DHS may request consideration of deferred action, which defers their removal from the United States for a certain period of time. It does not provide lawful status, but recipients are eligible for work authorization. The

DHS also has an ongoing campaign, “Know the Facts,” which was launched in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in late July. According to DHS, the campaign, which was developed with the Department of State and was approved by the White House, is intended to deter individuals from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from entering the United States illegally by increasing awareness of U.S. immigration policies and enhanced border security efforts, as well as the dangers posed by smugglers. The campaign was extended to run through the end of November due to the increase in the number of UACs arriving to the United States, according to DHS. State public affairs officials we spoke to at the U.S. embassies in all three countries told us they used the DHS campaign materials and developed their own materials to launch related public information campaigns in-country while also supporting similar host government campaigns.

In-country refugee parole program. In an effort to increase legal migration and reduce the number of children attempting to migrate to the United States, we found that State and DHS had collaborated to implement a new in-country refugee/parole processing program. The program was announced in November 2014 and began accepting applications the following month.

Efforts to strengthen migrant return and repatriation centers. USAID and State also have an interagency agreement to provide assistance to strengthen migrant reception and repatriation efforts in all three countries. Efforts under this program have included providing immediate, basic assistance to returnees; undertaking construction efforts to improve existing facilities; and working with host governments to systemize data gathered from the returned migrants.

Longstanding efforts seeking to address underlying causes of migration. We also reported that USAID, State, IAF, and MCC programs have long sought to address what officials have identified as underlying causes of migration, including persistent development challenges such as violence, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities. For example, USAID supports programs in each country seeking to reduce violence, improve economic opportunities through improved agricultural practices and other efforts, and increase access to education and health services, among others. State supports programs in each of the three countries seeking to reduce violence and improve citizen security by offering training and technical support to prosecutors, the police, and border patrol units, among others. IAF officials said that IAF supports local initiatives in more than 880 communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with nearly half of its investment in the three countries intended to directly benefit youth through job creation and other community-based activities. MCC’s compact in El Salvador and threshold program in Guatemala—each in development prior to the recent migration increase—include programs to improve the quality of secondary education to assist youth in finding employment.

USAID, State, and IAF outlined plans to modify some of these longstanding efforts in response to the rise in UAC migration. For example, in Guatemala, USAID outlined plans to increasingly target youth at risk of migration through various programs and to introduce agricultural programming, including coffee rust-resistant seedlings, and to provide nonagricultural economic opportunities for youth. State and DHS have outlined plans to strengthen border security efforts through their vetted units to stem migration, and to increase the size of antigang units in an effort to reduce violence.

federal government’s most recent motion to stay the preliminary injunction or narrow its scope pending appeal was denied. See *Texas v. United States*, No. 15-40238, 2015 WL 3386436 (5th Cir., May 26, 2015).

Agencies Aligned Program Locations with Long-Term Strategic Objectives and Made Some Adjustments to Reach More Communities Affected by UAC Migration

Our July 2015 report found that agencies had generally located programs in alignment with long-term objectives for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, such as addressing areas of high poverty and violence. These objectives are outlined in various strategy and planning documents. In some cases, the development objectives outline priority geographic locations for programs that agencies have identified as addressing underlying causes of UAC migration, such as crime and poverty. USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategy documents, for example, outline development objectives for each country that focus on specific locations. State country planning documents similarly highlight strategic priorities for the three countries, and in some cases outline priority geographic locations.

Agency officials told us they drew on various sources of information to understand which areas in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras had high levels of UAC migration, including information produced by DHS, USAID, and entities such as the International Organization for Migration, host government agencies, and other local organizations. In particular, they told us a key point of reference was a DHS-produced map that showed the number of UAC by location of origin based upon DHS apprehension data from January 1 to May 15, 2014. DHS officials identified various challenges to obtaining UAC location information, including the inability of children to accurately relay information on their origins, lack of documentation, and inability of border agents interacting with children to collect or record their information accurately. Nonetheless, USAID and State officials in the three countries told us that the top UAC locations of origin identified in the map were generally consistent, with a few exceptions, with their understanding of the top UAC locations of origin.

Further, agency officials stated that their established programs were already located in these areas. In Honduras, where over half of the DHS-identified top 20 municipalities in terms of UAC locations of origin are situated, agency officials told us the DHS map confirmed for them that programs already existed in those locations. In Guatemala, USAID and State officials said that they consulted the DHS map and other available information about UAC origin locations and determined that there was a general overlap between those locations and agency programs. USAID officials in Guatemala noted that about 60 percent of the agency's resources in Guatemala are used for activities in the Western Highlands, which these officials said they have identified as the primary area of UAC migration in that country. In El Salvador, USAID officials stated that, according to their review of the DHS map, their programs were already located in areas of high UAC migration. Finally, according to IAF, the DHS map illustrated a general overlap between the location of its grantees and locations with high levels of UAC migration. We obtained information on the location of USAID and State/INL-funded programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; the location of IAF grantees in these countries; and the top UAC locations of origin in each country, as identified by DHS. Our July 2015 report includes a series of figures that present this information.

In our July 2015 report, we found agencies had outlined plans and taken some steps in the three countries since the recent rise in UAC migration by adding or expanding activities in locations identified as having high levels of UAC migration. For example, according to State's current country plan for Honduras, State plans to expand violence prevention programs, such as the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program, to reach three new police metropolitan areas in Tegucigalpa and six police metropolitan areas in San Pedro Sula, two areas in the country agencies identified as having among the highest levels of UAC migration. In El Salvador, USAID outlined plans to expand educational opportunities to youth in additional

municipalities with high levels of migration. As of June 2015, IAF officials indicated IAF had identified at least 19 new programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that will seek to address underlying causes of migration in areas with high levels of UAC migration.

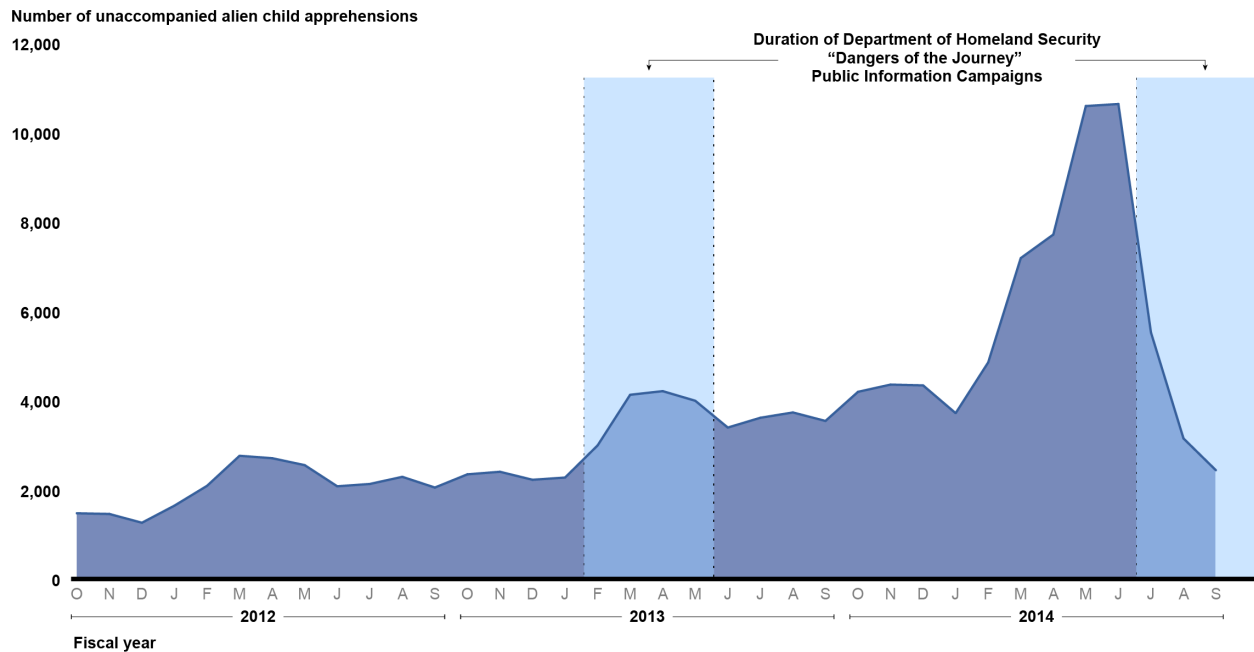
Most Agencies Had Some Evaluation Processes in Place, but Weaknesses Existed in Performance Measurement of Some Antismuggling Programs

As we reported in July 2015, most agencies we reviewed had established processes to measure and evaluate programs agencies identified as addressing underlying causes of migration. For example, USAID had conducted several recent evaluations of its programs developed before the rapid increase in UAC migration but identified as addressing the causes of migration, including programs addressing crime and violence prevention and workforce development. USAID officials and documents indicated that USAID also planned to measure the impact on migration of some future programs, such as whether a program affected a person's decision to migrate. State awarded a contract, which began in September 2014, to evaluate all countries under the CARSI program, including projects that are designed to address causes of UAC migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. IAF also conducts two types of project evaluations, including an end-of-project assessment for all projects, and evaluations of a subset of projects that ended 5 years earlier. According to IAF officials, in 2015, IAF planned to evaluate projects with a focus on youth engagement, including two projects in El Salvador and one in Guatemala. IAF expected these evaluations to be available in 2016.

However, we found that several DHS and State programs intended to reduce migration and counter smugglers had weaknesses in performance measurement. First, DHS had established performance indicators for its TCIUs, but had not established performance targets, making it difficult to track progress of these units' efforts to combat UAC smuggling and other priorities. DHS's Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit Executive Report provides overviews of TCIU efforts by country, including basic performance indicators used to track TCIU success. These measures are divided into three performance categories—enforcement, capacity building, and intelligence—with various types of outputs by category. However, DHS had not set targets for these performance measures. We concluded in our July 2015 report that establishing such targets would enable DHS to compare outputs—such as arrests made—against the pre-established targets, and to better assess TCIU progress. In our July 2015 report, we recommended that DHS establish annual performance targets associated with the performance measures it has established for these units. DHS concurred with our recommendation, and noted that it would work with host nation partners to establish goals to measure TCIU investigative activities and capacity development. Last month, DHS reported to us that it also planned to create additional annual TCIU performance measures in areas such as capacity building, international cooperation, and collaboration. DHS noted it would use these measures, alongside an analysis of host country conditions that can affect TCIU efforts, to determine TCIU successes and inform efforts moving forward.

Second, we found that DHS and State had not consistently evaluated their information campaigns intended to combat the misinformation promoted by smuggling organizations and reduce migration, making it difficult to know the effectiveness of these efforts. DHS evaluated its 2013 campaign but did not evaluate its 2014 campaign. An official from DHS's office of public affairs told us that DHS did not evaluate its 2014 campaign because of funding constraints. Moreover, DHS launched this campaign at the end of June 2014, by which point migration levels had already peaked, reaching record levels, as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: Timing of Department of Homeland Security Information Campaigns and Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Alien Children at the U.S-Mexican Border, Fiscal Years 2012-2014



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Homeland Security data. | GAO-16-163T

Similarly, we found that while State had collected some information on its public outreach efforts, it had not evaluated the effectiveness of its information campaigns, according to public affairs officers we spoke to in all three Central American countries. These public affairs officers told us they did not know what the impact of the campaigns was and believed it would be difficult to measure their impact. All three of these officers expressed either uncertainty or doubt concerning the effectiveness of past campaigns centered on the dangers of migration, indicating that it is uncertain whether such campaigns resonated with citizens of the three countries since the dangers were already well known or would not dictate a person’s decision to migrate.

In our July 2015 report, we concluded that evaluations are an important investment toward ensuring a campaign’s success, and that timely feedback is critical as campaigns intended to deter cyclical migration are time-sensitive. Moreover, given the increased presence of children in recent migration cycles, these campaigns need to be timed right and deliver appropriate messages. In our July 2015 report, we recommended that State and DHS integrate evaluation into their planning for, and implementation of, future public information campaigns intended to dissuade migration. DHS and State concurred with our recommendation and indicated they would take steps to strengthen campaign evaluation efforts. DHS has since noted that it will use performance metrics for its ongoing “Know the Facts” campaign in an effort to measure audience recall awareness of the campaign and its impact. DHS noted in particular that its post-campaign research will include face-to-face interviews in the capital cities and some secondary markets in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico—totaling about 1,400 interviews in each country—with interviews anticipated to begin at the end of October and a final report published by the end of November or early December.

Aside from challenges in performance measurement, USAID, State, and IAF project documents outline various factors that can hamper the long-term sustainability of projects, such as lack of accountability within government institutions, lack of political will, low tax collection, poor market

conditions, and limited private sector engagement. In our July 2015 review, we observed examples of how some of these factors have the potential to hamper assistance programs. For example, an interagency agreement between the departments of State and Justice outlining efforts to train Honduran prosecutors includes an assumption that the government of Honduras would commit to having a certain number of prosecutors available for at least 18 months to participate in the program. However, at the time of our visit to the country, there were no active prosecutors participating in Tegucigalpa. In El Salvador, where we visited a vocational school that, according to USAID officials, had been established in a joint partnership between USAID and a Salvadoran private company, we observed a computer lab filled with computers recently provided by USAID but with no teacher present. According to USAID officials in El Salvador, the school had asked the Salvadoran Ministry of Education to provide a salary for the teacher, but the ministry had not yet done so at the time of our visit.¹⁴ Agencies have outlined approaches for seeking to ensure program sustainability despite the challenges described above, such as by prioritizing improvements to government institutions; identifying sustainable funding sources, such as the private sector; and advocating for legislative and policy reforms that support program objectives. In addition, agency officials have noted the importance of involving communities, the private sector, and the police in program design to ensure they are invested in and supportive of programs' objectives.

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and Members of the Committee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff has any questions about this testimony, please contact me at GianopoulosK@gao.gov or 202-512-8612. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement.

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¹⁴Subsequent to our visit, USAID officials in Washington, D.C., noted that while the ministry had not provided the salary for the requested information management teacher, it had provided salary for two other staff that had been requested at the same time, and that the school had drawn on other teachers in an effort to manage the lab and teach basic computer skills.

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