

Abstract

News of unaccompanied minors (UMs) from Central America entering the US-Mexico border have inundated the media, political and social platforms as policies are discussed to address this crisis. The hope for a future away from violence, poverty, and fear, drives these minors into embarking in an uncertain journey to the United States. The dangers these children encounter on their long travels along with previous distressing experiences from their home country put a devastating toll on their psychological and overall well-being. Moreover, the anguish continues as these youth are placed in transitional settings (i.e., shelters) while awaiting to be released into their new communities in the U.S. While psychological care is often available at these settings, the complex realities of these children call for culturally and trauma responsive guidelines to address their unique psychosocial needs. This conceptual paper reviews existent literature on the mental health needs of these youth as well as relevant theories and principles, such as the evidence informed Psychological First Aid (PFA), which have shown to help youth and families in the immediate aftermath of disasters and other crises. The aim of this manuscript is to adapt and expand on the core elements of PFA and utilize its theoretical basis to 1) enhance the psychological health of Central Americans UMs in transitional settings and 2) equip mental health professionals to address the immediate psychological needs of UMs from a culturally sensitive and trauma informed approach.

Keywords: unaccompanied minors (UMs), culturally sensitive and trauma informed mental health guidelines, Psychological First Aid, Central American youth