

**Opening Statement of Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)  
Committee on Homeland Security**

**Hearing on  
Crisis on the Texas Border: Surge of Unaccompanied Minors**

**McAllen, Texas  
July 3, 2014**

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This year, the Border Patrol has apprehended over 50,000 unaccompanied children crossing our southern border.

My colleagues and I had the opportunity to visit the local U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facilities where many of these unaccompanied children, along with family units and others, are being processed by the Border Patrol.

To look at the faces of the children, many of whom are very young, is to understand that this situation is first and foremost a humanitarian crisis.

I am troubled by testimony submitted today that speaks to cartels and crime, which have nothing to do with the issue at hand.

I hope we can keep that distinction in mind in our discussion today.

These children are not perpetrators or criminals – they are, in many cases, victims.

They are fleeing persistent violence and dire economic circumstances in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and are seeking a safe haven in the U.S., as so many people before them have done.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *these three Central American countries have among the highest per capita homicide rates in the world, with Honduras topping the list and the other two nations in the top five.*

Many of these children are also likely undertaking the dangerous journey to reunite with family members in the U.S., in the absence of action on comprehensive immigration reform.

As a parent, I can only imagine what kind of desperation prompts mothers and fathers to hand their children over to smugglers or send them on a perilous journey to the U.S. in the hope of a better life.

I also would like to commend the men and women of the Border Patrol for their hard work responding to this situation and express my sincere appreciation for their professionalism under the most difficult circumstances.

Despite these challenges, and due to the additional resources in the area, Border Patrol's effectiveness rate has actually increased - *from 67 percent at this time last year to 78 percent this year.*

Also, it is my understanding that Border Patrol is meeting its goal of processing unaccompanied children within 24 hours. Unfortunately, the process appears to break down after that point.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, signed into law by President Bush in 2008 and its language was supported by many members of this Committee, *both Democrat and Republican.*

The law requires that unaccompanied children taken into custody, screened, and transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement within 72 hours.

However, unaccompanied children are currently in CBP custody for an average of five days, apparently due to a lack of bed space.

Last night in Brownsville, we saw an unaccompanied three year old child who had been in CBP custody for days and days.

Despite Border Patrol's best efforts, the Department of Health and Human Services had not yet taken custody of the little girl. So the older girls in CBP custody with her were keeping watch over the child, passing her care to others as they were transferred elsewhere. This is unconscionable.

We will be asking the Department of Health and Human Services about this delay and what can be done to address it. All federal agencies, not just DHS, must do their part.

Today, I hope to hear from our Border Patrol witness, Chief Oaks, about the current situation at the border, how his agents are managing the influx of unaccompanied children, and what additional resources he may need.

I also hope to hear from the Hidalgo County Judge, Mr. Garcia, about any local impacts this situation is having on his community.

And finally, I hope to hear from Bishop Seitz about the "push factors" driving families to send their children to the U.S., as well as what Catholic Charities and other similar organizations are doing to assist these children and families in the Rio Grande Valley and across the southern border.

In closing, I hope we can use today's hearing to engage in constructive dialogue and avoid political grandstanding. Sensationalizing or politicizing the situation does nothing to fix the problem. Protesting buses of innocent children being transported for processing is not indicative of who we are as Americans. We must be better than that as a Committee, as a Congress, and as a Nation.