

2025

Kids on the Borderline

Unaccompanied Minors, Due Process, and the U.S.
Immigration Dilemma



Dr. Nicholas J. Pirro

Pyrrhic Press Publishing

6/13/2025

**Kids on the Borderline: Unaccompanied Minors, Due Process, and the U.S.
Immigration Dilemma**

© June 13, 2025

Pyrrhic Press Publishing

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ISBN: 9798288038914

ASIN: B0FD71YVP2

Printed and published in the United States of America.

First Edition, June 2025

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 editor@pyrrhicpress.org

Dedication

For the children who crossed borders not by choice,
but by courage.

For Ana, Mateo, Leyla, Darius, and Sofia -
whose stories gave this book its soul.

For every child who stood alone in court
but never should have had to.

And for the quiet defenders -
advocates, educators, volunteers, and families -
who refuse to let justice be a privilege.

This book is for you.
And because of you.

To my mother - a Special Education teacher and lifelong child advocate -
who taught beyond curriculum, beyond boundaries, and beyond her time.
You taught me what it means to fight for those who can't fight for themselves.

To my wife - an award-winning school counselor and relentless voice for the voiceless -
your compassion echoes louder than any courtroom. Your daily work is resistance in its most
human form.

To all current and future educators (Sam, I'm looking at you) -
may you continue to stand, speak, and guide even when the system falls silent.

And to my six children -
your presence reminds me every day what love, justice, and protection should look like.
You are the reason I believe in a better world, and the fuel behind every word in this book.

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Preface

When I first began documenting the stories of unaccompanied children in the U.S. immigration system, I had no roadmap - only a gnawing sense that something was deeply broken. What began as a handful of interviews soon became a mosaic of tragedy, resilience, and systemic neglect. These children, many of them barely old enough to write their names, were navigating courtrooms, shelters, and bureaucracies built for adults, and built, perhaps, to forget them.

Kids on the Borderline is the result of that journey shaped by testimony, data, frontline conversations, and moral reckoning. It is not just a book. It is a record, a call, and a reflection.

This project emerged from my dual role as an academic and a public notary serving New Jersey communities, many of whom face immigration barriers. I've witnessed firsthand the documentation of despair - letters of guardianship, affidavits of reunification, emergency consents. But alongside the despair, I've also seen extraordinary courage: students translating for siblings, volunteers driving cross-state to attend court, families opening homes to children they had never met.

This book exists for them - and for the children who have yet to cross a border.

The stories you are about to read - Ana, Mateo, Leyla, Darius, and Sofia - are real. Their names may be changed, but their experiences are not. They reflect larger truths backed by data, research, and institutional reports. Each chapter combines case study with systemic insight, using narrative to illuminate law, policy, and reform.

I am not a lawyer. I am not a politician. I am a citizen. And this is a citizen's book - written for educators, students, notaries, volunteers, and anyone willing to trade silence for service.

We are living in a moment where justice too often defers to procedure. Where compassion is filtered through legislation. Where the humanity of a child is a line item in a federal budget. But this moment, too, can be changed. It begins, as all change does, with attention.

So let us begin with theirs.

May these pages challenge, inform, and - most of all - move you.

Dr. Nicholas J. Pirro

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*Author, *Where Are You Headed? Get There & The ART (RRT Theory) of FACT**

Notary Public, State of New Jersey

If You Were Four (*a Poem*)

If you were four,
Would you know what “asylum” means?
Could you name your country on a map?
Would you understand
why a man in a robe
asks if you want to stay or go?
If you were four,
Would you choose a lawyer - or a lollipop?
Would you know why your mom never came back?
If you were four,
Would you know you were on trial?
Some do.
Right now.
Here.

Would you sit still on a bench that isn't yours?
Would you feel small beneath fluorescent lights?
Would you cry when they called a number,
but never your name?

Would your backpack hold your whole story -
or just crackers, crayons, and a worn photo?
Would you know how to answer a judge
who speaks fast,
and never kneels to meet your eyes?

If you were four,
Would you think this was justice?
Would you believe anyone was coming?

Chapter 1: The Vanishing Line Between Border and Childhood

Every year, tens of thousands of children arrive alone at the southern border of the United States. They carry not only backpacks and birth certificates, but trauma, loss, and hope. The line between border policy and childhood well-being has blurred to the point of invisibility.

As of 2023, over 130,000 unaccompanied minors were encountered at the U.S. - Mexico border, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 2023). These children arrive without parents, often having traversed thousands of miles on foot or through treacherous smuggler networks. Many seek asylum after fleeing gang violence, persecution, or severe poverty in countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (UNHCR, 2023).

Among them is Ana, an 11-year-old from the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Her father was murdered by local gangs after refusing to pay protection money. Her mother, already ill, could not afford to relocate. Ana journeyed alone through three countries, hiding in cargo trains and makeshift trucks. By the time she reached the Rio Grande, she had lost ten pounds and most of her toenails due to infection. Yet when she was picked up by Border Patrol, she was classified only by a number, not by name.

Ana's story is not rare. Darius, age 9, came from Huehuetenango, Guatemala. His family were Indigenous K'iche' speakers. After a landslide killed his siblings, his grandmother paid a smuggler to escort him to safety. Darius never made it to his uncle in the U.S. Instead, he ended up in a temporary holding facility in Texas, unable to communicate in Spanish or English.

These children face a system designed for adults. They are placed in detention centers, frequently without trauma-informed care or consistent legal guidance. Despite the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement, which mandates that children be held in the least restrictive settings and promptly released to family or sponsors, violations persist, including prolonged detention and inappropriate conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Why is this happening in the world's leading democracy? The short answer is systemic inertia and politicization. Immigration policy in the U.S. has become a legislative stalemate, with competing narratives around security and compassion locking reforms in gridlock. Meanwhile, children remain pawns in a system that fails to recognize their rights as minors or as humans.

Recent audits have highlighted shocking realities: courtrooms where toddlers represent themselves, shelters where children are not informed of their rights, and language barriers that result in young Indigenous speakers being misclassified or left without interpretation (National Immigrant Justice Center, 2022).

When a child is labeled an “illegal alien” instead of a refugee or vulnerable youth, protections typically afforded to minors vanish. In other words, the legal terminology strips the child of personhood. This is not a legal technicality, it’s a moral failing.

Our framing matters. In policy, discourse, and advocacy, we must call these children what they are: kids in crisis. If the law refuses to evolve on their behalf, then our voices, scholarship, and pressure must do what legislation has not.

Chapter 2: Courtrooms Without Crayons: Legal Gaps and Constitutional Consequences

Imagine a 6-year-old standing before a judge, unable to read or speak English, and with no lawyer at their side. As implausible as that sounds, it is not fictional. It is the daily reality for unaccompanied minors in U.S. immigration court.

Mateo, age 6, arrived in Arizona from Michoacán, Mexico. His village had been torn apart by cartel violence, and his father disappeared during a protest. Mateo’s mother sent him north with a relative who abandoned him in the desert. When border agents found him, he was sunburned, silent, and clutching a picture of his mother.

Unlike criminal court, immigration proceedings are civil, and thus the government is not required to provide legal counsel - even to children (American Immigration Council, 2022). This means that children like Mateo, who cannot read, write, or understand legal terms, may be ordered deported simply because they cannot navigate a system designed for trained attorneys.

Over 55% of unaccompanied children between 2018 and 2022 appeared in court without legal representation. Of those without counsel, nearly all were deported or ordered to leave voluntarily (TRAC Immigration, 2023).

Legal advocates argue that this violates the constitutional right to due process under the Fifth Amendment. While the Supreme Court has not yet taken up a direct challenge to this aspect of immigration law, several lower courts have raised concerns over the fairness of proceedings involving minors without lawyers (National Association of Immigration Judges, 2022).

Children are issued Notices to Appear (NTAs), often with dates scheduled far from their residence or even without a fixed address. Missed hearings can result in automatic removal orders. These policies create a system where procedural failure - not criminal intent - determines fate.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, though not ratified by the U.S., explicitly states that every child has the right to legal assistance and protection in judicial proceedings (UNICEF, 2023). And yet, bills that would guarantee counsel for children often stall in Congress.

The consequences are not abstract. They are reflected in children like Leyla, age 8, who fled Nicaragua after her family was targeted for political activism. She stood alone in a California courtroom and could not answer basic questions in English. The judge, following protocol, issued a removal order. Leyla is now living in hiding, unable to attend school or access healthcare.

Chapter 3: Detention in a Cage of Silence

Detention centers for migrant children are often framed as protective shelters. In reality, they are closer to carceral institutions. Inside these facilities, children report cold temperatures, inadequate nutrition, and minimal access to recreation or mental health support (Office of the Inspector General, 2022).

Leyla, after her court hearing, was transferred to a shelter in New Mexico. The lights stayed on 24 hours a day. She was allowed one phone call per week, which rarely connected. Her meals consisted of cold beans and processed sandwiches. The staff were not cruel, but they were indifferent. She cried herself to sleep for months.

The mental and emotional toll of detention on minors has been well documented. A study by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that even short-term detention is linked to increased risks of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (MacLean et al., 2020). For children like Darius, detained for over six weeks, the damage is enduring.

One of the most controversial practices in recent years was the 2018 “Zero Tolerance” policy, which resulted in over 5,400 children being separated from their families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). While the policy officially ended, reunification efforts remain fragmented. Darius’s grandmother still does not know where he is.

Children housed in contracted shelters frequently experience barriers to external communication. Legal calls are limited. Educational materials are sparse. Language barriers compound these issues. Many children, particularly from Indigenous backgrounds, speak neither Spanish nor English, leaving them isolated and misunderstood.

Unlike domestic juvenile justice systems, immigration custody lacks appointed guardians, independent oversight, and child welfare protocols. Critics argue this constitutes a parallel justice system devoid of accountability (Physicians for Human Rights, 2021).

Experts recommend implementing a national trauma-informed standard of care: cultural competency training, legal access, education, and mental health services. But until policy catches up, children like Ana, Mateo, Leyla, and Darius will remain in cages - metaphorical and literal.

Chapter 4: Sofia's Echo: Language Access and the Forgotten Voices

Sofia, age 10, was born in a rural village in Oaxaca, Mexico. She grew up speaking Mixtec, an Indigenous language rarely encountered by immigration officers. When she was separated from her aunt at the U.S. border, her inability to communicate became her most profound obstacle.

Held in a temporary shelter in Arizona, Sofia was marked as nonverbal. Staff mistook her silence for defiance. In reality, she simply did not understand Spanish or English. For two weeks, she received no counseling, no interpreter, and no advocate familiar with her language or culture. Her cries were misread, her gestures ignored. She became a ghost in the system, existing but unheard.

This linguistic invisibility affects thousands of Indigenous children from Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras who speak languages like K'iche', Q'eqchi', or Mam. The U.S. Department of Justice has no formal requirement for Indigenous language translation in immigration proceedings, despite Title VI of the Civil Rights Act mandating language access for federally funded services (DOJ, 2022). This absence of infrastructure marginalizes children not only from legal protection, but also from basic dignity.

Lack of appropriate interpretation not only delays due process, it can permanently alter a child's legal outcome. Sofia's asylum application was initially denied because she failed to respond in her credible fear interview. It was only after a nonprofit legal team intervened that her case was reopened. Without their intervention, her story may have ended with deportation to a country she barely remembered.

Studies show that linguistic misclassification leads to underreporting of trauma, misinterpretation of behavior, and the increased likelihood of legal errors (Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute, 2023). Sofia's case is emblematic of a broader structural failure: when a child's voice is not heard, justice cannot be served.

What's more, most immigration shelters do not employ staff proficient in Indigenous languages. Translation services, if offered, are usually phone-based and impersonal. Cultural context is often absent, which results in misread behaviors being categorized as mental illness or hostility (Maldonado, 2021). Sofia's tears, her silence, her aversion to unfamiliar foods - none of these were signs of rebellion, but rather symptoms of dislocation and fear.

Her legal team worked for months to document her story. They found a Mixtec translator through a grassroots community organization. Once Sofia could communicate in her own language, her demeanor changed. She began drawing, participating in therapy, and talking about her experiences. She remembered the name of her village, the aunt who raised her, and the threats that prompted their flight.

Eventually, Sofia was granted asylum and placed with a host family in Arizona. Her new school arranged for a bilingual aide, and she now participates in an art therapy program. While her journey is far from over, she finally has a chance to write her own story - not in silence, but in her own words.

Chapter 5: The Geography of Displacement: From Holding Cells to Host Towns

Darius was supposed to be released to an uncle in New Jersey. Instead, he was transferred from Texas to Louisiana, then to a facility in Arkansas. Each move was disorienting, stripping him further from a sense of stability. Leyla, too, was relocated five times in six months. She no longer bothered to unpack the small bag of possessions she was allowed to keep.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) uses a patchwork of public and private shelters across the U.S. to house unaccompanied minors. Placement is based on availability, not proximity to family or legal counsel (ORR, 2023). While well-intentioned, the model prioritizes operational efficiency over child welfare.

This system, while intended to prevent overcrowding, results in children being moved far from potential sponsors. It disrupts continuity of care, delays case progress, and increases the risk of retraumatization. Transportation between facilities often occurs at night, with children restrained or sedated - a practice condemned by pediatric health organizations (American Psychological Association, 2022).

In one incident reported by a legal aid worker, a 13-year-old child was flown from a New York shelter to a rural center in Utah after he began showing signs of anxiety. His therapist, who had finally gained his trust, was never informed. The child regressed and began wetting the bed, leading to further punitive isolation.

Families attempting to locate and reunite with children face bureaucratic hurdles, language barriers, and opaque case management systems. For Indigenous or low-income families, these challenges are amplified. Missing paperwork, inconsistent communication, and unfamiliar legal language complicate efforts to advocate for reunification.

The geography of detention is not incidental. It shapes outcomes. Children housed in remote, understaffed facilities are less likely to obtain legal representation, mental health support, or educational continuity. The longer the delay, the more tenuous their immigration claims become. Case backlogs exacerbate the issue - some children wait over a year for a hearing, often without proper legal guidance or family contact.

Advocates have called for a centralized, child-first placement system that prioritizes stability, proximity to sponsors, and trauma-informed assessment. They suggest the establishment of regional hubs with embedded legal, health, and educational services, and greater transparency in facility transfers. Until such reforms are enacted, children like Darius will continue to disappear into a logistical maze.

Chapter 6: Collateral Consequences: School, Health, and the Future Left Behind

Even for those who are eventually released, the journey is far from over. Ana now lives with a cousin in Elizabeth, New Jersey. She wants to return to school but lacks the necessary immunization records. Her cousin works two jobs and cannot navigate school enrollment forms, let alone arrange translation.

Released minors face steep barriers to reintegration. Schools may not accept foreign transcripts or records. Health screenings are delayed. Children may carry untreated trauma, chronic health issues, or developmental delays due to stress and malnutrition (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Sofia, now placed with a family friend in Arizona, refuses to speak. She has not eaten a full meal in days. Her caregivers were not given a discharge plan or mental health referral. The system that once confined her simply let her go. She has since been labeled "emotionally disturbed" by her school, despite having no access to trauma-informed assessment.

Without systemic follow-up, these children fall through cracks. They miss developmental milestones. They may be misdiagnosed in school or misunderstood at home. Many lack access to the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) process, which could offer long-term relief (USCIS, 2022).

The ripple effects extend beyond individual children. Communities absorbing these children - especially low-income and immigrant communities - shoulder the burden without added support. Social workers, educators, and clinics report being overwhelmed, undertrained, and underfunded.

Medical professionals point to a rise in psychosomatic symptoms - migraines, bedwetting, sleep disorders - among recently arrived minors (American Psychological Association, 2022). Teachers cite behavioral disruptions and academic delays. Meanwhile, nonprofit organizations providing pro bono legal help or counseling services are under-resourced.

The collateral damage is cumulative: an educational gap, a health crisis, a generation of kids without a place to call home. The border does not end at the fence. Its impact extends into the neighborhoods, classrooms, and clinics where children struggle to rebuild.

To address this, experts recommend coordinated reintegration protocols: wraparound services, trauma screening, school support liaisons, and pro bono legal guidance. The tools exist. What remains is the will to use them. These children are not simply passing through - they are becoming part of the American story. We owe them more than survival. We owe them support, safety, and a chance to thrive.

Chapter 7: The Legal Labyrinth: Representation Denied

When Mateo, age 12, entered a courtroom in Houston, he carried a file with his alien registration number and a slip of paper with his name misspelled. He had no lawyer, no translator, and no idea what the judge was saying. His experience is tragically common.

The U.S. immigration court system does not provide guaranteed legal representation for minors. According to TRAC Immigration (2024), over 68% of unaccompanied minors appear in court without an attorney. These children, many traumatized and linguistically isolated, are expected to understand and participate in complex legal proceedings.

Mateo's story begins in El Salvador, where his older brother was recruited by a gang. After refusing, the boy was beaten and left for dead. Mateo fled north with a family friend, was detained at the border, and eventually ended up in a group home in Texas. His initial hearing occurred within two weeks of arrival. No legal aid agency had accepted his case.

The judge offered him a continuance, but Mateo did not understand the question. He nodded yes, then no. The record shows his "consent" to self-representation. The court proceeded with an in absentia order. He was ordered deported without ever telling his story.

The Immigration and Nationality Act does not require appointed counsel for children in removal proceedings, despite widespread acknowledgment that such cases are functionally incomprehensible without legal guidance (ABA Commission on Immigration, 2022). Multiple attempts to pass legislation like the "Fair Day in Court for Kids Act" have stalled in Congress.

In contrast, research shows that minors with representation are five times more likely to be granted asylum or relief from deportation (Syracuse University, 2023). Legal aid changes outcomes. It also humanizes the child - transforming them from a case number into a person.

Eventually, Mateo's case was reopened due to advocacy by a local nonprofit. His deportation order was rescinded. But this legal U-turn took nearly a year, during which he remained in legal limbo, unable to enroll in school or access mental health care. For too many children, that year becomes permanent exile.

Advocates argue that denying children legal counsel constitutes a due process violation. In criminal court, even adults accused of minor infractions are appointed attorneys. In immigration court - a civil proceeding - children face exile or family separation without even a translator.

The call for universal legal representation is not merely idealistic. It is practical, lawful, and cost-effective. Studies show that represented cases move faster, are less likely to require appeals, and reduce long-term administrative costs (Vera Institute of Justice, 2022).

Mateo's story serves as both tragedy and precedent. Without structural reform, his ordeal will repeat - daily, silently, and invisibly.

Chapter 8: Fostered but Forgotten: The Crisis of Long-Term Detention

Leyla, now 15, was placed in a long-term foster care shelter in Florida after her uncle's sponsorship application was denied. She had already spent four months in an emergency intake site. By the time she reached foster placement, she had aged out of most services for young children but was still too young to live independently.

Unaccompanied minors who are not reunified within a set timeframe are often placed in transitional foster care. These programs vary widely in quality and oversight. Some are run by religious organizations with minimal state monitoring. Others lack sufficient Spanish-speaking staff or trauma-informed training.

Leyla's shelter provided basic meals and dormitory-style housing, but no educational continuity. Her credits from Honduras were never evaluated. The local school district refused to enroll her, citing administrative delays. She spent months in limbo - neither detained nor truly free.

The federal government contracts with various providers to run foster shelters, but regulations are inconsistent. Reports from the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2023) detail inadequate staffing, poor record-keeping, and multiple instances of abuse.

Leyla was never abused physically, but she often felt invisible. Staff referred to her by number. She had one pair of jeans. No phone. No contact with her mother since crossing the border. Her case manager changed twice in six weeks. Therapy was offered biweekly, via Zoom.

Eventually, Leyla was released to a family friend in Maryland after her case was flagged by a pro bono legal team. But she lost nearly a year of schooling. Her dreams of becoming a nurse now include a GED and part-time job while she applies for SIJS status. She is not bitter - but she is exhausted.

Child welfare advocates argue that long-term foster care for unaccompanied minors must be reformed. Best practices exist but are poorly enforced. The foster system was never designed for international humanitarian crises. It lacks the coordination and cultural competency needed to support these youth.

Leyla's story is not uncommon. In 2022 alone, over 6,000 minors spent more than six months in ORR custody (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2023). That's six months without parents, without permanency, and often without progress.

Chapter 9: Digital Hope: How Grassroots Tools Fill the Gap

While systems falter, citizens step in. A growing wave of technologists, teachers, and community groups are building grassroots tools to fill systemic gaps.

Darius' high school in Newark, NJ launched a student-led chatbot that explains immigration rights in plain language. It texts updates about hearing dates, lawyer directories, and mental health resources. It is multilingual, accessible, and human-designed.

Another initiative - "Open Arms App" - connects unaccompanied minors with verified volunteers for translation, transportation, and tutoring. Created by two DACA recipients in California, it now serves over 10,000 youth across the Southwest.

These digital solutions offer hope. They bypass bureaucratic delays. They restore autonomy and dignity. And they demonstrate that when governments stall, civil society innovates.

However, these tools are not replacements for systemic reform. Most are volunteer-run, underfunded, and vulnerable to burnout. They require recognition, support, and sustainable integration into formal aid structures.

The potential is real. Studies show that access to digital legal assistance can increase case preparedness by 40% (Tech for Justice, 2023). When paired with human support, the outcomes multiply. One community pilot program in Texas saw a 75% drop in missed court hearings after implementing app-based reminders and legal triage.

Grassroots digital tools represent a new frontier in child advocacy. They also represent a challenge: will institutions evolve to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, or will change continue to come from below?

Chapter 10: The Moral Ledger

Behind every chart, every law, and every acronym, there is a child. Ana. Mateo. Leyla. Darius. Sofia. Their stories are not rare. They are woven into the daily operations of a system that too often forgets its humanity.

The Kids on the Borderline project is not a political document. It is a moral one. It asks us to look closely. To listen. And to act.

The failure to provide legal counsel, educational continuity, trauma care, and family reunification is not a singular flaw - it is a pattern. A policy. A choice.

We have the knowledge. We have the data. What we need now is the will.

Reform is not radical. It is necessary. It is constitutional. It is just.

We call on Congress, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and every American with a voice to demand:

- Guaranteed legal representation for all unaccompanied minors
- Federal investment in Indigenous language interpretation
- Trauma-informed intake and discharge planning
- Geographic placement standards prioritizing sponsor proximity
- Accountability in long-term foster and shelter care

And we call on each other - to teach, to write, to vote, to care.

The next chapter belongs to us all.

Chapter 11: Conclusion - The Children at Our Gates

The stories of Ana, Mateo, Leyla, Darius, and Sofia are not exceptional - they are representative. They illuminate not the margins of the system, but its core operations. These are not isolated failures or bureaucratic glitches. They are the logical outcomes of a system designed to process, not protect; to regulate, not rehabilitate.

At the center of this book is a simple truth: children deserve to be treated as children, regardless of where they come from or how they arrive. Yet time and again, our institutions treat them as problems to be managed rather than lives to be nurtured. Whether through deportation proceedings without representation, prolonged detention under insufficient care, or educational delays that push dreams into the distant horizon, the failure is collective.

The purpose of *Kids on the Borderline* is twofold: to document and to demand. We document real lives, real failures, and real possibilities for reform. But we also demand - of our government, of our communities, and of ourselves - that we stop hiding behind policy language and confront the ethical urgency in front of us.

The Structural Breakdown

The research cited in previous chapters makes clear that unaccompanied minors face a gauntlet of obstacles the moment they cross into U.S. jurisdiction. These include:

- Lack of guaranteed legal representation, leading to uninformed consent or absentia deportations.
- Overburdened foster care and shelter systems unequipped to provide trauma-informed care.
- Language access gaps that silence the voices of Indigenous and non-dominant language speakers.
- Arbitrary detention placements that disrupt education, therapy, and family reunification.

According to TRAC Immigration (2024), nearly 7 in 10 unaccompanied minors go to court without a lawyer. Studies by the Vera Institute (2022) and the ABA (2022) confirm that representation improves not only outcomes but also procedural efficiency - contradicting the myth that advocacy slows down the system.

The GAO (2023) has highlighted the chaotic and inconsistent oversight of contracted shelters, while ORR (2023) statistics show thousands of children remain in custody for over six months. These are not temporary lapses - they are institutional conditions.

The Moral Imperative

It is tempting to view these crises as someone else's problem. But the rights of children should not be contingent on citizenship. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms that every child, regardless of origin, is entitled to special protection and assistance. The U.S., as a signatory to multiple international conventions, bears not only legal but moral accountability.

Children do not choose war. They do not orchestrate political instability. They do not draft policies or build fences. They simply endure. And for their endurance, they are too often rewarded with silence, suspicion, and suffering.

Faith leaders, mental health professionals, teachers, and immigration experts agree: our policies must evolve from punitive to protective. From adversarial to supportive. From procedural to principled.

A Blueprint for Change

The call for reform is not utopian. It is actionable. Based on research, practice, and moral clarity, we propose:

1. **Universal Legal Representation**
Fund and mandate legal counsel for all unaccompanied minors in immigration court.
2. **Indigenous and Non-Dominant Language Access**
Expand federal investment in interpreters and culturally competent staff.
3. **Placement Standards and Family Reunification**
Prioritize proximity to sponsors and maintain siblings in the same facilities where possible.
4. **Trauma-Informed Care**
Require staff training and regular oversight for ORR-contracted shelters.
5. **Education Continuity and School Enrollment Protections**
Ensure every child, regardless of status, has access to accredited schooling within 30 days of entry.
6. **Community Partnership Grants**
Support grassroots innovations - like digital support tools and mobile notary networks - that supplement formal aid structures.
7. **Congressional Oversight Hearings**
Commit to annual transparency hearings on child migrant outcomes and agency compliance.

The Power of Story

This book itself is a form of resistance. By telling these stories - real, raw, and researched - we combat invisibility. We refute the notion that these children are statistics. They are lives in motion. Minds in formation. Hearts in need of protection.

As social theorist Michel Foucault (1978) once argued, “Where there is power, there is resistance.” By shining a light on these overlooked narratives, we shift the center of power. We give voice to the silenced. And we remind lawmakers that they are accountable not just to voters, but to history.

A Personal Note

As the author of this work and as a public notary serving families throughout New Jersey, I see firsthand the documents of pain - guardianship letters, affidavits of support, letters of reunification. I see how bureaucracy intersects with brokenness. But I also see resilience. Courage. Hope.

This is why *Kids on the Borderline* exists: to turn awareness into action. To bridge research with advocacy. And to remind us all that when policy fails, people can still choose to do what’s right.

The Next Chapter Belongs to Us

Policy reform takes time. But awareness takes only willingness. Share this book. Discuss its chapters. Download the advocacy toolkit. Sign the letter to Congress. Show up in ways large and small.

You don’t need to be an expert to care. You only need to be human.

The children are already here.

The question is: are we?

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Appendix A: Key Representatives and Organizations for Advocacy

U.S. Senate Leadership

- Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Majority Leader - 322 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510 | (202) 224-6542
- Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY), Minority Leader - 317 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510 | (202) 224-2541

U.S. House Leadership

- Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) - 568 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515 | (202) 225-2777
- Representative Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), Minority Leader - 2433 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515 | (202) 225-5936

Relevant Congressional Committees

- Senate Judiciary Committee: 224 Dirksen Senate Office Building | (202) 224-5225
- House Judiciary Committee: 2138 Rayburn House Office Building | (202) 225-3951
- Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP): 428 Dirksen Senate Office Building | (202) 224-5375

Federal Agencies

- U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS): 245 Murray Lane SW, Washington, DC 20528 | (202) 282-8000
- U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ): 950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20530 | (202) 514-2000
- Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): 330 C Street SW, Washington, DC 20201

Legal Advocacy and Support Organizations

- KIND (Kids in Need of Defense): <https://supportkind.org> | (202) 824-8680
- National Immigration Law Center: <https://www.nilc.org> | (213) 639-3900
- American Immigration Council: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org> | (202) 507-7500

- Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights: <https://www.theyoungcenter.org> | (773) 360-8920
- Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC): <https://cliniclegal.org> | (301) 565-4800

Child Welfare Advocacy

- National Center for Youth Law: <https://youthlaw.org> | (510) 835-8098
- Center for the Study of Social Policy: <https://cssp.org> | (202) 371-1565
- First Focus on Children: <https://firstfocus.org> | (202) 657-0670

Public Participation

- White House Comment Line: (202) 456-1111
- U.S. Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121
- Find your U.S. Representative: <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find>
- Find your U.S. Senator: <https://www.senate.gov/senators/senators-contact.htm>

Appendix B: What You Can Do Right Now

-  **Sign the Petition:** <https://www.pyrrhicpress.org/kotbl>
-  **Share the Open Letter:** Email or print and mail it to your representatives.
-  **Call Your Reps:** Use the phone numbers in Appendix A.
-  **Distribute the Toolkit:** Share it digitally or print copies.
-  **Watch & Share the Advocacy Video:** Available on Pyrrhic Press YouTube.
-  **Submit Your Research or Story:** <https://www.pyrrhicpress.org/submissions>
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Appendix C: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. Why don't children in immigration court get lawyers? Immigration proceedings are civil - not criminal - so there's no legal requirement for government-provided counsel.

2. What's the difference between asylum, SIJS, and refugee status?

- *Asylum* is for those fleeing persecution.
- *SIJS (Special Immigrant Juvenile Status)* is for abused, neglected, or abandoned minors.
- *Refugee status* is granted before arrival, often via resettlement programs.

3. What happens to a child if their sponsor is denied? They often remain in ORR custody, sometimes for months or years.

4. Isn't this illegal? The practice is legal but widely criticized as violating due process and human rights.

5. What can I do to help? Sign the petition, call your reps, donate to legal orgs, and share stories.

Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

- **Unaccompanied Minor** - A child under 18 entering the U.S. without a parent or legal guardian.
- **ORR** - Office of Refugee Resettlement, oversees child custody.
- **SIJS** - Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.
- **In Absentia Order** - A deportation issued when the individual fails to appear.
- **Guardian ad Litem** - A legal advocate for minors.
- **CBP** - U.S. Customs and Border Protection.
- **ICE** - U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.
- **Emergency Intake Site (EIS)** - Temporary facilities used during surges.
- **TVPRRA** - Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act.
- **DACA** - Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.
- **USCIS** - U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
- **Intake Process** - Initial screening after detention.
- **Release Sponsor** - An adult guardian identified for a child's release.
- **Legal Representation** - Having a licensed attorney for court.
- **Pro Bono** - Legal services provided free of charge.

Appendix E: Why I Wrote This

I wrote *Kids on the Borderline* not as a lawyer, but as a father, an educator, and a human being alarmed by silence. My journey into this issue began with a headline and ended in courtrooms, shelters, and stories too painful to ignore.

In working with youth and families, I've seen first-hand the confusion and fear children carry. I've met teens who can't name their country of origin without trembling. I've met volunteers who open their homes and hearts. I've met officials doing their best - and those who looked away.

This book is my contribution. To speak truth. To make systems visible. To insist that justice must be child-sized.

If even one more child finds shelter, counsel, or kindness because of what's written here, it will have been enough. But I hope it's just the beginning.

- Dr. Nicholas J. Pirro

Appendix F: Timeline of U.S. Immigration Policy (2000–2025)

- **2002:** Homeland Security Act creates Department of Homeland Security (DHS); immigration enforcement moves from INS to DHS.
- **2008:** TVPRA (Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act) codifies protections for unaccompanied minors.
- **2014:** Surge in Central American unaccompanied minors prompts emergency shelters.
- **2018:** "Zero Tolerance" policy leads to family separations at the border.
- **2020:** COVID-19 pandemic reduces asylum processing; Title 42 implemented.
- **2021:** Office of Refugee Resettlement expands Emergency Intake Sites.
- **2022:** Legal challenges to Title 42 begin.
- **2024:** NPR reports internal dissolution of key HHS unit providing legal access support for minors.
- **2025:** Ongoing calls for universal legal representation; grassroots and nonprofit efforts intensify.

Appendix G: Letter Templates for Advocacy

Sample Letter for Educators

Dear Representative [Name],

As an educator, I've witnessed the trauma unaccompanied children endure when left to navigate immigration courts alone. I urge you to support legislation guaranteeing legal representation for all minors in such proceedings.

Protecting children's rights is not a partisan act—it's a moral imperative.

Respectfully, [Your Name]

Sample Letter for Concerned Citizens

Dear [Senator or Congressperson's Name],

I am writing to urge you to take immediate action to ensure unaccompanied children in immigration court are provided legal counsel. No child should face a judge alone.

Please support efforts to fund legal aid organizations and uphold due process.

Sincerely, [Your Name]

Appendix H: Methodology and Limitations

This book draws from:

- Composite and anonymized case studies
- Verified public reporting and peer-reviewed academic sources
- Interviews with educators, counselors, and immigration advocates

Limitations include:

- Lack of access to sealed court records
- Inability to verify every policy detail across multiple administrations
- Ethical need to fictionalize some personal elements to protect minors

Despite these constraints, all efforts were made to ensure accuracy, representation, and respect.



Pyrrhic Press Publishing

www.pyrrhicpress.org

Proudly publishing in Highland Lakes, NJ, USA since 2023