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# Unaccompanied Alien Children: Demographics in Brief

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## Summary

The number of children coming to the United States who are not accompanied by parents or legal guardians and who lack proper immigration documents has raised complex and competing sets of humanitarian concerns and immigration control issues. This report focuses on the demographics of unaccompanied alien children while they are in removal proceedings. Overwhelmingly, the children are coming from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The median age of unaccompanied children has decreased from 17 years in FY2011 to 16 years during the first seven months of FY2014. A greater share of males than females are represented among this population. However, females have steadily increased in total numbers and as a percentage of the flow since FY2011. The median age of females has dropped from 17 years in FY2011—the year that was the median age across all groups of children—to 15 years in the first seven months of FY2014.

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## Introduction

The sheer number of children coming to the United States who are not accompanied by parents or legal guardians has raised considerable concern.<sup>1</sup> Overwhelmingly, the children are coming from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This report focuses on the demographics of unaccompanied alien children<sup>2</sup> while they are in removal proceedings.<sup>3</sup> It discusses the characteristics of these children by nationality, age, and sex and explores these trends over the past few years. It further builds on a set of Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports examining the issues surrounding unaccompanied alien children.<sup>4</sup>

### Definition of “Unaccompanied Alien Child”

The statutory definition of an “unaccompanied alien child” is 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 is available to provide care and physical custody. [6 U.S.C. §279(g)(2).]

## Office of Refugee Resettlement Data on Unaccompanied Alien Children

After Customs and Border Protection (CBP)<sup>5</sup> agents in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have apprehended and processed an unaccompanied alien child,<sup>6</sup> DHS transfers the child into the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS’s) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).<sup>7</sup> ORR is responsible for placing unaccompanied alien children in appropriate care. The law requires that ORR ensure that the interests of the child are considered in

<sup>1</sup> During the first eight months of FY2014, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) had over 38,000 unaccompanied alien children in custody. For further information, see CRS Report R43599, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: An Overview*, by (name redacted), (name redacted), and (name redacted).

<sup>2</sup> This report uses the terms “unaccompanied alien children,” “UAC,” and “unaccompanied children” interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> For basics on the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) immigration courts and removal proceedings, see U.S. Department of Justice, Executive Office for Immigration Review, *EOIR at a Glance*, September 9, 2010, <http://www.justice.gov/eoir/press/2010/EOIRataGlance09092010.htm>. For an evaluation of EOIR’s performance, see U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General, *Management of Immigration Cases and Appeals by the Executive Office for Immigration Review*, October 2012, <http://www.justice.gov/oig/reports/2012/e1301.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> CRS Report R43599, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: An Overview*, by (name redacted), (name redacted), and (name redacted); CRS Report IN10107, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: A Processing Flow Chart*, by (name redacted); CRS Report R43628, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: Potential Factors Contributing to Recent Immigration*, coordinated by (name redacted); CRS Report R43623, *Unaccompanied Alien Children—Legal Issues: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted); CRS Report R43664, *Asylum Policies for Unaccompanied Children Compared with Expedited Removal Policies for Unauthorized Adults: In Brief*, by (name redacted); and CRS Report R41731, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

<sup>5</sup> Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is one of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security agencies charged with the enforcement of immigration laws. Its two major arms for immigration activities are the U.S. Border Patrol, which is responsible for enforcing immigration law between ports of entry, and the Office of Field Operations (OFO) which is responsible for conducting immigration inspections at the ports of entry.

<sup>6</sup> CBP also issues “Notices to Appear” (NTAs) for removal proceedings.

<sup>7</sup> Not all apprehended unaccompanied children are transferred to ORR, as some are voluntarily returned to their home countries.

decisions and actions relating to the care and custody of an unaccompanied child.<sup>8</sup> ORR also oversees the infrastructure and personnel of residential facilities for unaccompanied alien children, among other responsibilities. ORR arranges to house the unaccompanied child either in one of its shelters or in a foster care arrangement, or it reunites the unaccompanied child with a family member.

In this report, the demographic and placement trends of unaccompanied children are based upon summary data extracted from case file data that ORR maintains on unaccompanied alien children.<sup>9</sup> Due to the confidential nature of ORR data generally, CRS used only selected variables for this analysis.<sup>10</sup> The summary data span the period between FY2011 and FY2014.<sup>11</sup> The FY2014 data are partial (available through April 30, 2014), which made it difficult to reach conclusions about patterns or trends when comparing to the other three fiscal years.

## Demographics of Unaccompanied Children

### Country of Origin

Much attention has been focused on the top countries of origin for the unaccompanied children. Over the past four years, ORR had unaccompanied children in its custody from 87 different countries, ranging from 41 to 50 different countries each fiscal year. Nevertheless, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have consistently accounted for the overwhelming majority of all unaccompanied children in ORR custody (**Table 1**).

**Table 1. Unaccompanied Children in ORR Custody by Top Country**

October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014

	Honduras	Guatemala	El Salvador	All Others
FY2011	848	1,414	1,142	1,481
FY2012	3,692	4,842	3,806	1,992
FY2013	7,028	8,381	6,054	1,859
FY2014*	9,157	8,908	6,425	1,444

**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

While the most notable increase in unaccompanied children over the past three fiscal years and the first seven months of FY2014 was from Honduras (980%)—as it steadily increased in overall rank from fourth in FY2011 to first through the first seven months of FY2014—even the smallest

<sup>8</sup> §235(c) of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act and §462(b) of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296) describe conditions for the care and placement of unaccompanied alien children in federal custody.

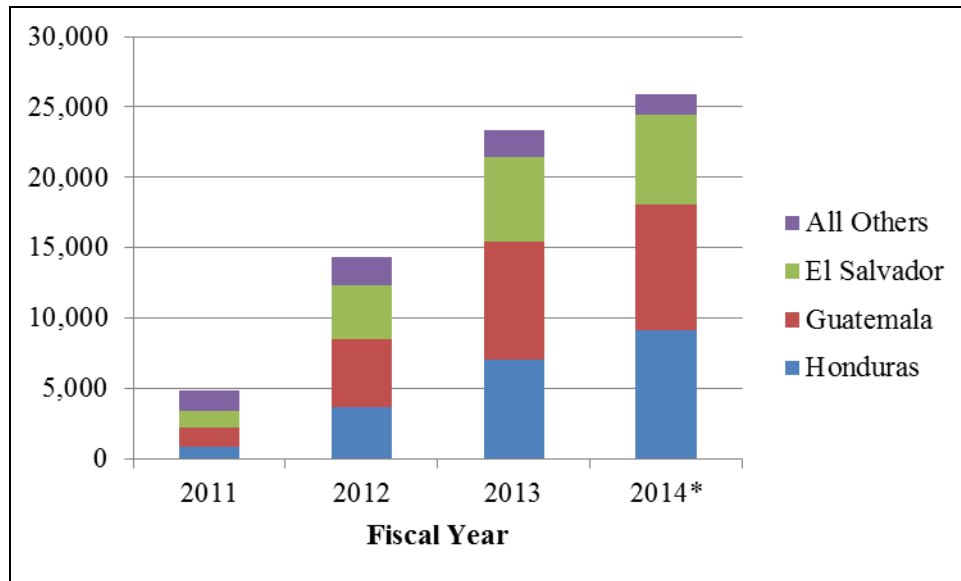
<sup>9</sup> These data are not published; ORR released the data to CRS pursuant to a CRS request.

<sup>10</sup> Those variables that might identify the children or the families have been excluded from the summary files. Therefore, only the age, gender, country of birth, type of discharge, and relationship to the minor are included in the summary files.

<sup>11</sup> FY2014 accounts for data only from October 1, 2013, through April 30, 2014.

increase in unaccompanied children in ORR custody of the three countries (El Salvador) was notable: 463% from FY2011 through the first seven months of FY2014 (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. Unaccompanied Children in ORR Custody by Top Country Distribution**  
October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014



**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

Not all apprehended unaccompanied children are transferred to ORR, as some are voluntarily returned to their home countries. Although Mexican children generally make up a sizeable number of the unaccompanied alien children apprehended by CBP officers, only a portion of them end up in ORR custody. For example, CBP apprehended 11,577 Mexican unaccompanied children in the first eight months of FY2014,<sup>12</sup> and only 494 Mexican unaccompanied children were placed in ORR custody during the first seven months of FY2014.<sup>13</sup>

## Age

Age is a key factor to qualify as an unaccompanied alien child under the law. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 defines an unaccompanied alien child as an individual who has no lawful immigration status in the United States, has not yet reached the age of 18, and has no parent or legal guardian in the United States or no parent or legal guardian in the United States who is

<sup>12</sup> CBP released FY2014 data through May 31, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> CBP personnel screen unaccompanied children to determine that the child has not been a victim of a severe form of trafficking in persons and that there is no credible evidence that the minor is at risk if returned to the country of nationality or of last habitual residence, that the child does not have a possible claim to asylum, and that the child is able to make an independent decision to voluntarily return to his or her country of nationality or of last habitual residence. As a result of the initial screening, a greater proportion of Mexican children are returned to Mexico and not transferred to ORR custody compared with unaccompanied minors from non-contiguous countries. See CRS Report R43599, *Unaccompanied Alien Children: An Overview*, by (name redacted), (name redacted), and (name redacted).

available to provide care and physical custody.<sup>14</sup> Those 18 and older in ORR custody could have entered the United States shortly before turning 18, could be awaiting transfer back to DHS custody, or could have special needs<sup>15</sup> that have kept them in ORR custody past the age of 18.

**Table 2. Unaccompanied Children in ORR Custody by Age Group**

October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014

	Median Age	0-9 years	10-12 years	13-15 years	16-17 years	18 years	19+ years
FY2011	17 years	175	179	556	1,819	1,870	286
FY2012	17 years	430	706	2,502	7,063	3,412	221
FY2013	16 years	1,169	1,717	5,504	12,857	1,800	278
FY2014*	16 years	1,803	2,700	6,501	11,872	2,925	133

**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

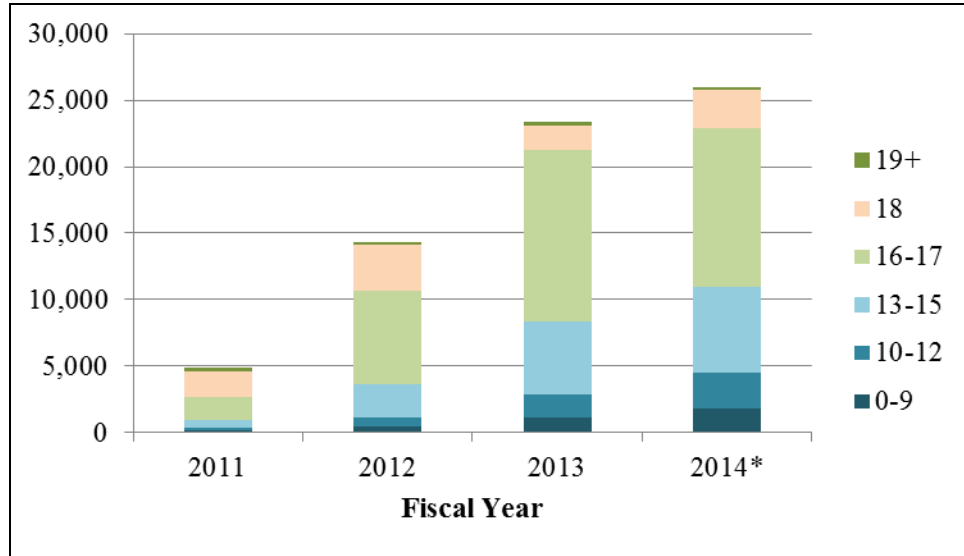
**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing 7 months of a full fiscal year.

The median age of unaccompanied children in ORR custody was 17 years old in FY2011 and FY2012, as **Table 2** presents. The median age fell to 16 years old in FY2013 and has remained there in the first seven months of FY2014. The youngest three age groups (0-9, 10-12, and 13-15 years old) experienced the most percentage growth compared to the oldest three age groups (16-17, 18, and 19+ years old), which have experienced a percentage decrease during the period examined (**Figure 2**). While there continued to be a greater overall number of older children in ORR custody, there was also a noteworthy increase in younger children in ORR custody, particularly in the 10-12 age group (**Figure 2**) over the period studied. From October 1, 2010, through April 30, 2014, ORR had a total of 8,879 unaccompanied children under the age of 13 in its custody.

<sup>14</sup> Homeland Security Act of 2002, §462.

<sup>15</sup> Unaccompanied children with special needs are those who have medical and psychological needs. For further discussion, see University of Texas at El Paso, National Center for Border Security and Immigration, *Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) Project*, March 20, 2014, pp. 11-24, <http://ncbsi.utep.edu/documents/UAC%20Project%20Site%20Visits/UTEP%20NCBSI%20Final%20Report%20March%202020%202014.pdf>.

**Figure 2. Age Distribution of Unaccompanied Children in ORR Custody**  
 October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014



**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

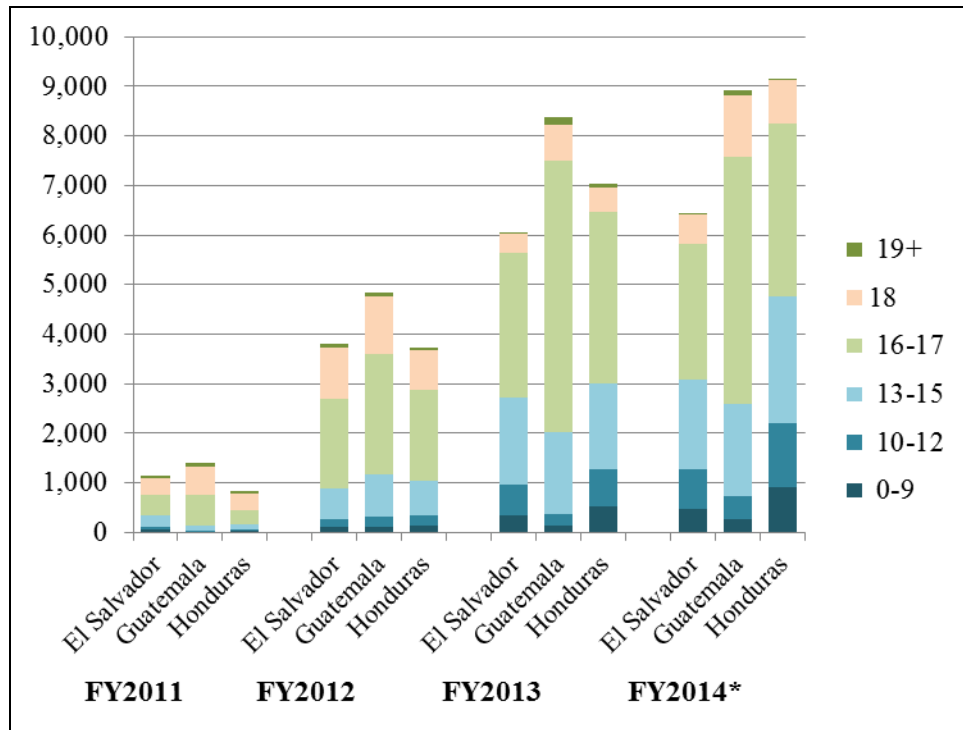
**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

## Nationality and Age Distribution

From FY2011 through the first seven months of FY2014, there was an increase in the number of children in each of the three youngest age brackets (0-9, 10-12, and 13-15) for Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Most notably, in the first seven months of FY2014, the youngest three age brackets for Honduras made up over half of all Honduran unaccompanied children (6,242). Like Honduras and El Salvador, Guatemala had an increase in the three youngest age brackets, however, it also had the greatest number of unaccompanied children in the oldest three age brackets (16-17, 18, and 19+) (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 3. Unaccompanied Children in ORR Custody by Nationality and Age**  
October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014



**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

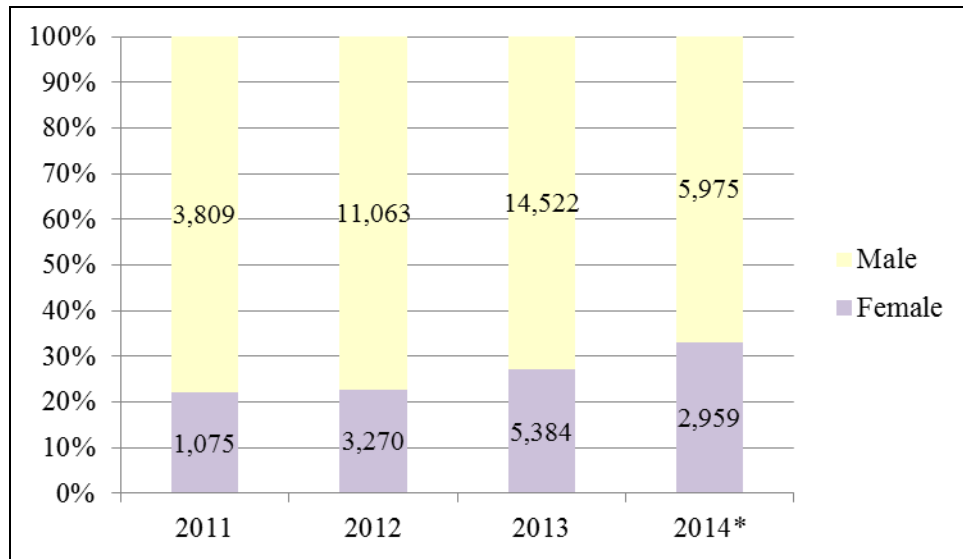
**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

## Sex

Traditionally there have been more male than female unaccompanied children in ORR custody. In 2002, immigration officials testified that the overwhelming majority of unaccompanied alien children were male.<sup>16</sup> The number of unaccompanied females increased from 1,075 in FY2011 to 5,385 in FY2013. The number of unaccompanied girls reached 2,959 in the first seven months of FY2014. Similarly, the percentage of females among unaccompanied children has grown. The share of females was stable at about 22% in FY2011 and FY2012 and increased to about 27% in FY2013 and 33% in the first seven months of FY2014 (**Figure 4**).

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *The Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act*, hearing 107<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., February 28, 2002, p. 38.

**Figure 4. Sex Distribution of Unaccompanied Children in ORR Custody**  
 October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014

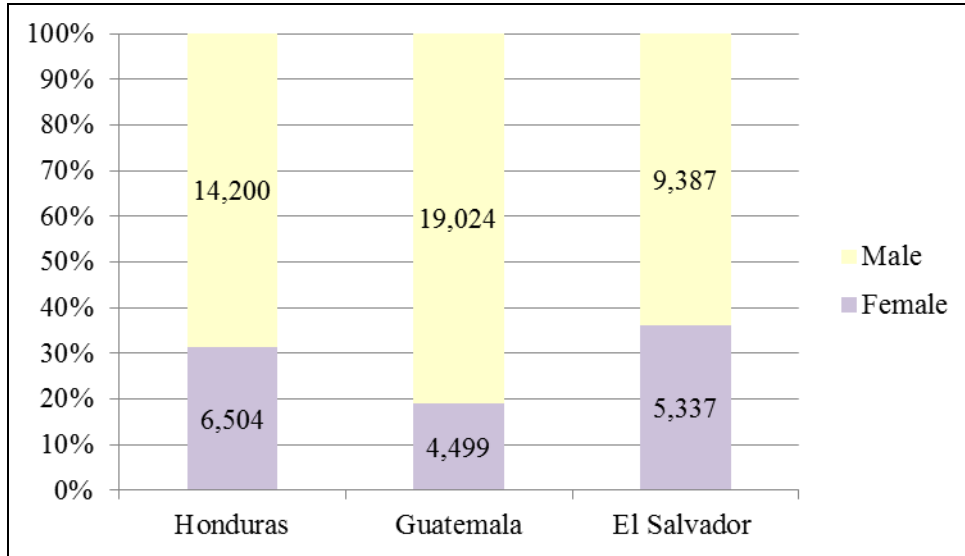


**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

As previously shown in **Figure 1**, the overwhelming majority of unaccompanied children in ORR custody from FY2011 through the first seven months of FY2014 originated from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The sex distribution from the top countries of origin among children in ORR custody was examined to provide a better understanding of the female population. Examining the male-to-female ratio for each specific top source country reveals that a greater proportion of females in ORR custody originated from El Salvador than from Honduras, while a lower proportion of females originated from Guatemala (**Figure 5**). Honduras had the most females in ORR custody and was also the country with the greatest number of minors in ORR custody overall.

**Figure 5. Sex Distribution of Unaccompanied Children by Top Countries**  
October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014

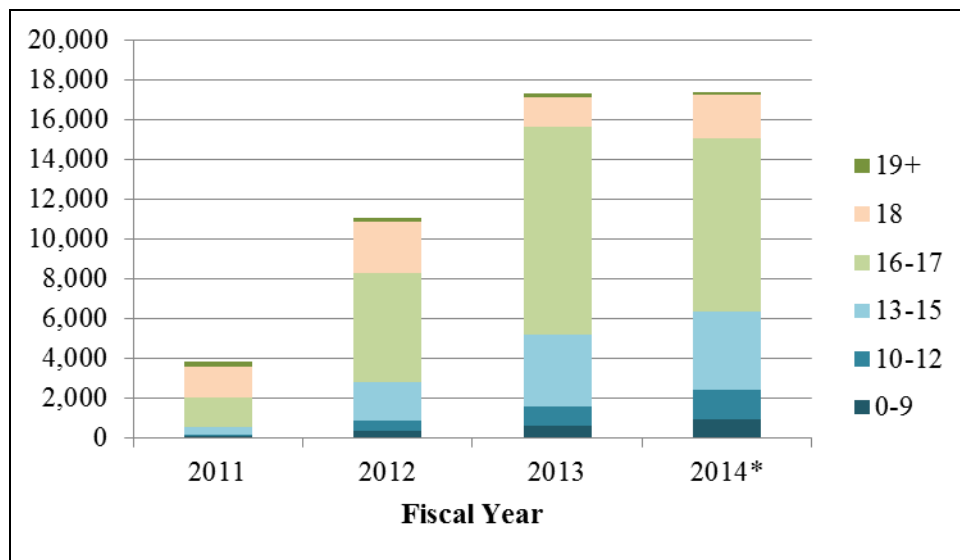


**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

In absolute numbers, most males in ORR custody were ages 16-17 in each of the three fiscal years and in the first seven months of FY2014; however, the number of males age 0-9, 10-12, and 13-15 steadily increased over the past three fiscal years and in the first seven months of FY2014 (Figure 6). Similar patterns occurred for females. In the first seven months of FY2014, the number of females in the 16-17 age bracket increased, whereas the number of males decreased (Figure 7).

**Figure 6. Age Distribution for Unaccompanied Males**  
October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014

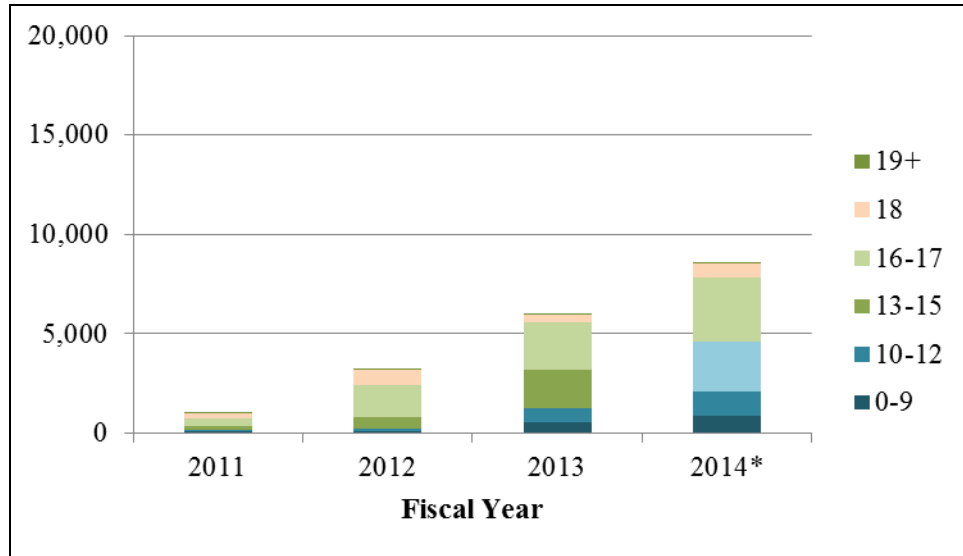


**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

**Figure 7. Age Distribution for Unaccompanied Females**

October 1, 2010, to April 30, 2014



**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Note:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

The median age of unaccompanied children by year, sex, and top country (**Table 3**) present the age trends a bit more starkly. The median age of females has dropped from 17 years in FY2011—the year that was the median age across all groups of children—to 15 years in the first seven months of FY2014. The median age for females in FY2013 was 13 years. When viewed by country, the median age decreased for all three and fell to 15 years for Honduran children during the first seven months of FY2014.

**Table 3. Median Age of Unaccompanied Children by Year, Sex, and Top Country**

Year	Sex		Top Countries		
	Male	Female	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador
FY2011	17	17	17	17	17
FY2012	17	16	17	17	16
FY2013	17	13	16	16	16
FY2014*	16	15	16	15	16

**Source:** CRS analysis of summary data from unpublished ORR data on unaccompanied alien children.

**Notes:** FY2014 accounts for data only through April 30, 2014, representing seven months of a full fiscal year.

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