

Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming here today to this hearing on the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, commonly referred to as the TVPRA, and exploited loopholes that affect Unaccompanied Alien Children, or “UAC.”

Integral to the success of this country is a robust, fair, and accountable immigration system – one that learns from mistakes of the past, adapts to the problems of the present, and guides aspirations for the future.

I hope that this hearing will facilitate a continued bipartisan policy discussion that strikes a balance between protecting unaccompanied minors who face legitimate humanitarian challenges, and preventing violent actors such as MS-13 from exploiting loopholes.

Apprehensions of unaccompanied minors increased consistently every year from 2011 to 2014. Referrals to HHS’ Office of Refugee Resettlement have increased every year since 2008, testing the limits of the agency’s capacity to house these individuals.

Between October and November 2016, Border Patrol apprehended 14,128 UAC – 4,000 more than the previous year – and the Associated Press just reported that Border Patrol apprehended 4,300 unaccompanied minors in April 2018.

The non-partisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) has identified several factors to explain the recent surge in migration, including the search for economic opportunity, the desire to reunite with family members, and – the reason we are here today – U.S. immigration laws.

A perception of relaxed U.S. immigration policies toward children under the Obama Administration undoubtedly led to the sizable increase in UAC flows. Immigration authorities believe laws such as TVPRA and the *Flores* Agreement create “pull factors” that invite more illegal immigrants and encourage parents to pay and entrust their children to criminal smugglers.

The human rights consequences are particularly alarming. Thousands of unaccompanied children – particularly young teenage girls – are subjected to sexual abuse by smugglers, criminals, and even foreign officials along their journey to the United States.

Many never make it here, and are instead forced into service at brothels in Mexico and Guatemala. This does not include the number of children who die every year crossing the border.

The influx of unaccompanied minors has also created recruiting opportunities for gangs such as MS-13. In a series of articles about the gang and its growth amongst teens, the Washington Post found that unaccompanied youth at the border – once released – are quickly recruited by the gang.

In the Washington metro region alone, over 42 UAC were involved in MS-13 violence over the past 3 years, including 19 charged in connection with murder and attempted murder.

Another Washington Post article details several cases in which U.S. immigration authorities either knew, or had sufficient evidence to believe, that the UAC in their custody was an MS-13 member. In some cases, the UAC openly admitted the affiliation. Nevertheless, these individuals were allowed into the country.

Let me be clear. The vast majority of unaccompanied minors are NOT gang members or criminals. They are fleeing to our country from a very legitimate threat.

We need laws in place that protect these individuals from those bad actors who would seek to exploit our laws and migrants' desperation to facilitate their own agenda.

Both sides can agree that the status quo is unsustainable and unacceptable. Reforming our laws does more than prevent unlawful entry of those whom we would welcome through the proper channels.

Bipartisan reform can promote our nation's humanitarian goals here and abroad, while also preventing members of MS-13 from infiltrating unaccompanied minor populations to enter the country and recruiting new members along the way.

Bipartisan reform would send a message to our law enforcement and immigration officers at the border that the federal government has their backs.

And most importantly, reform reaffirms our country's commitment to an immigration system that incentivizes fair, efficient, and lawful entry.

And now to Senator Durbin to give his opening remarks, and I understand Senator Feinstein would like to give a short statement after.