



Unaccompanied Minors: Central America's Exodus Continues

Christine Wade | Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2015

In June 2014, headlines sounded the alarm

(<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13939/despite-u-s-efforts-root-causes-of-migration-crisis-prevail-in-central-america>) over an influx of unaccompanied minors clandestinely entering the U.S.

from Central America. While the story has largely receded from view, the crisis continues.

In recent years, more than 100,000 Central American children have undertaken the perilous 3,000-mile journey to the United States, exposing themselves to extortion, kidnapping, rape and murder along the way. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, more than 68,000 unaccompanied minors, ranging in ages from less than 1 to 17 years old, were apprehended (<http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2015>) at the Southwest border between October 2013 and September 2014. Among them were more than 16,000 children from El Salvador, more than 17,000 from Guatemala, and more than 15,000 from Honduras. The dramatic increase in unaccompanied minors, up from 4,444 apprehensions in fiscal year 2010, included an alarming increase (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/migrants-deported-united-states-and-mexico-northern-triangle-statistical-and-socioeconomic>) in the number girls as well as of children under age 12.

The causes of the surge of child migration are complex, though many observers have linked the recent increase in unaccompanied minors to gang violence and organized crime in the region. Transnational youth gangs, locally known as “maras,” are known to engage in activities including extortion, kidnapping, drug trafficking, prostitution, murder and possibly human trafficking. Recently, the gangs have increased their presence in schools, threatening and forcibly recruiting students, extorting teachers, and, in the case of Honduras, effectively control some schools (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/08/honduras-school-gangs_n_6288824.html).



Immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala who entered the U.S. illegally board a bus after being released from a family detention center in Texas, July 7, 2015 (AP photo by Eric Gay).

Meanwhile, violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, sometimes collectively referred to as the “Northern Triangle,” is among the highest in the world. While homicide rates have reportedly improved in Honduras, declining from 82 per 100,000 in 2013 to 66 per 100,000 in 2014, those numbers are still well over the World Health Organization’s standard for a homicide epidemic of 10 per 100,000. In San Pedro Sula, one of Honduras’ most violent cities, homicide rates exceeded 168 per 100,000 in 2014. Caught in a web of escalating violence, El Salvador’s 2015 homicide rate may exceed 100 per 100,000, again making it the most violent country in the world.

But Central Americans, including unaccompanied minors, are not only fleeing gang violence and organized crime. Some are also fleeing abuses by their own governments. Honduras’ nefariously corrupt police force is known to have participated in extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and drug trafficking. Even members of the TIGRES—a U.S.-funded, special security unit vetted under the human rights provisions of the so-called Leahy Law—have engaged in corruption. Days ago, El Salvador’s human rights ombudsman announced (<http://www.eleconomista.es/politica-eAm/noticias/7208919/12/15/Cuerpos-de-seguridad-los-mas-denunciados-por-violar-los-DDHH-en-El-Salvador.html>) that more than 90 percent of the country’s reported human rights violations had been attributed to state security forces. Impunity in the region is rampant. Few crimes are ever investigated, and even fewer are prosecuted.

The number of Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans seeking asylum in the U.S. due to the unrelenting violence and impunity increased 410 percent between 2010 and 2014 (<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/northern-triangle-immigration-to-us-up-410-since-2010>). The asylum process is long and arduous, and claims are often difficult to prove. Speaking anecdotally as a Central American expert, I’ve received a significant increase in requests for expert testimony in asylum cases during the past year. Even with compelling testimony on the human rights landscape of particular countries, however, it’s difficult to document specific threats and political persecution experienced by individuals. Sadly, dozens of deportees have been murdered (<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/12/obama-immigration-deportations-central-america>) after returning to their home countries.

Central Americans are not only fleeing gang violence and organized crime, but also abuses by their own governments.

But violence is only the most recent impetus for Central American migration. Migration from El Salvador had already increased significantly since the end of the civil war. In 2000, there were approximately 817,336 native-born Salvadorans living in the United States. By 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there were almost 1.7 million, an increase of more than 150 percent. In 2011, Salvadorans became the third-largest group of Latino-origin immigrants. Until recently, Salvadorans have primarily come to the United States seeking economic opportunity.

The exodus is driven by a post-civil war economy that has suffered from malaise. Low growth rates, high cost of living and lack of employment drove many Salvadorans to migrate. This was compounded by the 2008 global economic crisis, from which El Salvador has still not recovered. Were it not for the remittances sent home from Salvadorans living in the U.S. and elsewhere, which totaled \$4.2 billion in 2014, the economic situation would be even worse.

But those remittances, though the single largest source of foreign income for the country, have come at a social cost. Two decades of migration have had a serious impact on El Salvador's youth, as many children of migrants live in either single-parent households or with extended family. Studies have suggested that this migration has not only contributed to the disintegration of the family, but also led to the increase in crime and gang membership among youth that is partly responsible for the latest wave of immigration. Many children of migrants don't know if or when they will see their parents again. Strikingly, more than 80 percent of apprehended unaccompanied minors interviewed cited family reunification (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/dramatic-surge-arrival-unaccompanied-children-has-deep-roots-and-no-simple-solutions>) as a factor in their migration.

A cursory look at recent apprehension rates at the U.S. border might suggest that the crisis has abated somewhat, but this would be deceiving. While U.S. apprehension declined in fiscal year 2015 and 2016, this is largely the result of increased apprehensions by Mexico under its Southern Border Program. In fact, Mexican apprehensions are expected to increase by 70 percent in 2015 (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/migrants-deported-united-states-and-mexico-northern-triangle-statistical-and-socioeconomic>), while U.S. apprehensions are expected to decrease by half. And while the data

suggests that fewer Central Americans overall appear to be making it to the United States, more than 10,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended at the U.S. border in October and November, a 106 percent increase over the same period in 2014. Some suggest that smugglers may have responded to the crackdown and increased border security by changing their routes (http://www.wola.org/commentary/increased_enforcement_at_mexico_s_southern_border) and even methods of travel to evade border control. This makes the journey for Central Americans, and especially unaccompanied minors, even more dangerous: Away from the more frequently traveled common routes, Central American migrants are more vulnerable to police abuses and human-trafficking rings, and civil society groups in Mexico have reported (http://www.wola.org/commentary/increased_enforcement_at_mexico_s_southern_border) an increase in crimes against them.

More than a year after news reports about tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors from the region made headlines, the Central American exodus continues. Efforts at enhanced border security designed to stem the tide of migrants may have made the journey more perilous while dissuading few from undertaking it. Meanwhile, Washington appears to have few policy solutions. The Alliance for Prosperity, a \$1 billion regional security and economic development aid package developed in the wake of the crisis, offers little in the way of anything new, even as the root causes of this growing humanitarian crisis persist.

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