



Broken Dreams:

Central American children's dangerous journey to the United States

BROKEN DREAMS

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Nering, Honduras

Nering, 15, says he will soon try to make his way to the United States. He says he is fully aware of the dangers he will face along the way, but points out that he lives with danger every day in his gang-run neighbourhood in northern Honduras.

"Here, we live in fear," he says. His sister was grabbed by unknown assailants and killed. Outside the youth outreach centre where he likes to hang out, five teenagers – aged 14 to 19 – were gunned down in the street. And the grocer around the corner was shot. The list goes on.

Says Nering: "I've thought of it a lot. I will go."

"I've
thought of
it a lot.
I will go."

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The flow of refugee and migrant children from Central America making their way to the United States shows no sign of letting up, despite the dangers of the journey and stronger immigration enforcement measures implemented after a major increase in numbers in mid-2014.¹

In the first six months of 2016, almost 26,000 unaccompanied children and close to 29,700 people travelling as a family – mostly mothers and young children – were apprehended at the US border.² Most are from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, which have some of the world's highest murder rates.³ They seek to get away from brutal gangs that target them or poverty and exclusion that deprive them of education and hope. Many also travel north to reunify with their families.

Many of the adults and some of the children apprehended at the US border are deported in expedited proceedings, women and young children spend weeks, and at times months in detention, while unaccompanied children may face years of uncertainty as their cases go before immigration courts.

If deported, some of them could be killed or raped by the gangs they had sought to escape in the first place.

All these children need protection every step of the way – at home, along the journey and at their destination.

Thousands never make it as far as the US border. In the first six months of 2016, more than 16,000 refugee and migrant children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were apprehended in Mexico.⁴ In addition, hundreds of refugees and migrants die every year in the harsh environment along the Mexico-US border.⁵ Many more are missing and are feared to have been kidnapped, trafficked or murdered.⁶

"It is heart-rending to think of these children – most of them teenagers, but some even younger – making the gruelling and extremely dangerous journey in search of safety and a better life. This flow of young refugees and migrants highlights the critical importance of tackling the violence and socio-economic conditions in their countries of origin," said UNICEF's Deputy Executive Director Justin Forsyth.

Migrant Routes from Central America to the United States, 2016



Note: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Migrant Routes: Americas 2016*, IOM Regional Office for Central and North America and the Caribbean and IOM Costa Rica, March 2016.



Child Alert is a briefing series that presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. This issue focuses on refugee and migrant children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, looking at the reasons they leave home, the dangers they encounter along the journey, and the challenges they face in seeking refuge in the United States.

Nakisha, 15, at a beach near her home in Travesia, Honduras

FORCED TO LEAVE HOME

Alexei, Honduras

Thirteen-year-old Alexei recently tried to make it to the United States with his mother and a brother, but only got as far as Guatemala. He won't say exactly why they decided to turn back, simply that "things got ugly." Alexei and his family were fleeing poverty and violence in hope of a better and safer life. "There is a lot of poverty here, and there are a lot of gangs," says Alexei.

His neighbourhood – Colonia Rivera Hernandez- is one of the toughest in Honduras, a country that has one of the world's highest homicide rates. The neighbourhood is run by violent gangs, who often force teenagers to join their ranks. Poverty and lack of opportunity also sometimes drive young people to join. Asked if he enjoys school, Alexei shrugs. "More or less ... less because sometimes when I go to school all I have is a cup of coffee and some biscuits."

"There is a lot of poverty here, and there are a lot of gangs"

The levels of violence so many children seek to escape are staggering.

With 103 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2015, El Salvador has the world's highest murder rate. Honduras and Guatemala figure near the top of the global ranking, at about 57 and 30 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.⁷

Organized crime grew in the wake of civil wars in the region, which left many people unemployed and with easy access to weapons.

The heavily armed gangs now have tens of thousands of members in the three countries, where they engage in extortion, assassinations, drug trafficking, car theft, illegal gun sales, kidnappings and turf wars.⁸

For many children, joining a gang is “a question of survival,” says Pastor Arnold Linares, whose church is located in a notoriously violent suburb of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. “Families may have no money for food, but gangs have plenty of money,” says Linares, who works with COMVIDA, a youth outreach group supported by UNICEF and the Government of Canada.

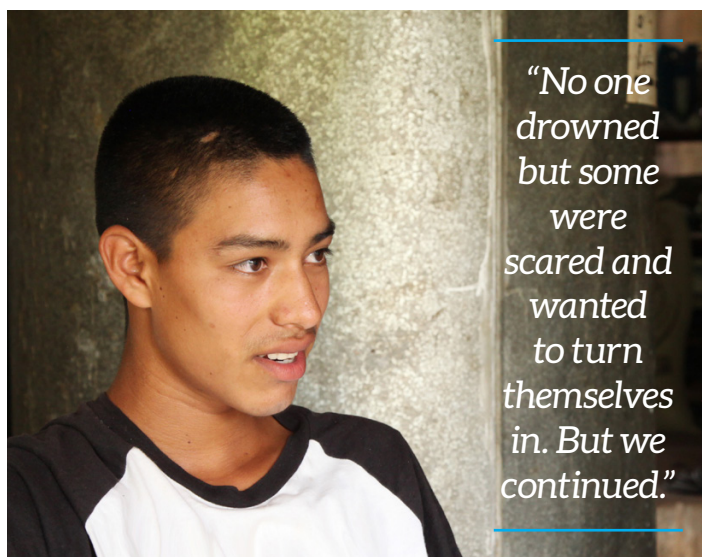
Others are pressured to join through threats on their lives or those of family members. A few blocks from Linares' Baptist church, police found the body of a 13-year-old girl buried behind a house that was used by local gang members. Authorities say she was killed for refusing to join the gang.⁹

In rural communities, it is often stifling poverty and lack of opportunities that motivate young people to risk their lives on the northward journey.

Almost 63 per cent of the population of Honduras lived below the national poverty line in 2013. In Guatemala, the rate is comparable, at close to 60 per cent in 2011, while in El Salvador it was just under 32 per cent in 2013.¹⁰

"We don't always have money for food," says Jackie, 17, whose family ekes out a living doing odd jobs and raising chickens on a small mountainside plot in northern Honduras. She says she is determined to make the long journey to the United States, but admits it scares her. "It terrifies me. But it also terrifies me to live this life, knowing there is no hope."

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"No one drowned but some were scared and wanted to turn themselves in. But we continued."

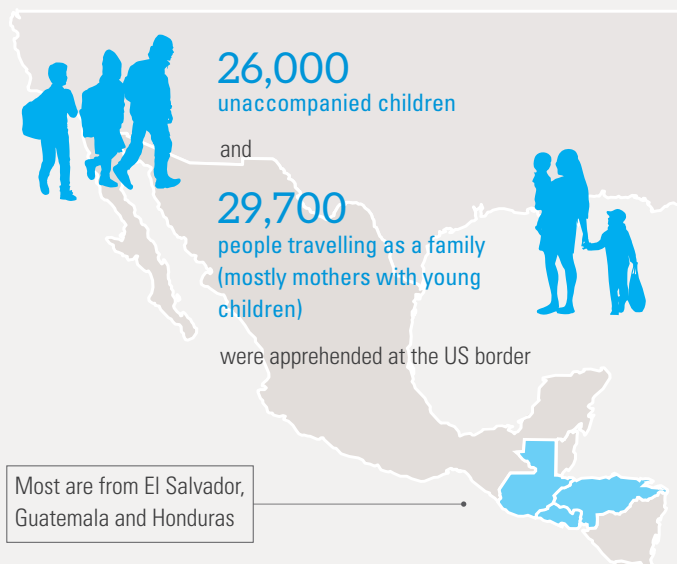
Wilmer, El Salvador

Wilmer left El Salvador in February 2015, hoping he'd be able to study in the United States. The 17-year-old says he had to quit school because of threats by gang members. But now he is back at home, having been deported from Mexico.

"I was travelling with a coyote," he says, in reference to a human smuggler. "We were a group of 14, there were boys, girls – young people." The trip was rough. "The first time we were caught was in Guatemala ... They said we were gang members and they were going to deport us ... but the coyote paid bail so they would let us continue on our way."

Wilmer and his travelling companions made part of the journey by sea. At one stage, the boat keeled over. "No one drowned but some were scared and wanted to turn themselves in. But we continued." The group were arrested again in Mexico City and spent 10 days in detention before they were sent back to El Salvador. Wilmer says he hopes to try again, but has no idea where he'd get another \$7,000 – the amount he had paid the smuggler.

In the first six months of 2016:



Those without an attorney are far more likely to be deported.
(about 40% have no representation)



Of cases initiated in 2015, 40% of unrepresented children had been ordered deported by June 2016, compared with only 3% of children with representation.

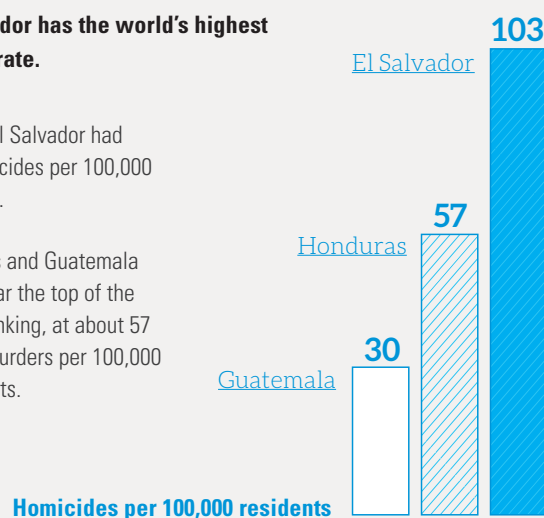
Population living below the national poverty line



El Salvador has the world's highest murder rate.

In 2015 El Salvador had 103 homicides per 100,000 residents.

Honduras and Guatemala figure near the top of the global ranking, at about 57 and 30 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.



A HARROWING JOURNEY

Jackie knows how dangerous the journey can be – her brother lost a leg when, exhausted by the gruelling trip, he fell off a moving freight train in Mexico. More than 100 refugees and migrants suffered a similar fate when riding atop the trains commonly known as “La Bestia” or “The Beast” in recent years.

As part of a major shift in migration policies, Mexican authorities have now made it difficult to ride the rails. But refugees and migrants, and particularly children, still face numerous threats on their weeks-long journey.

Children are at risk of falling into the hands of traffickers, and many girls have reportedly ended up working in brothels and bars in Mexico or Guatemala.¹¹ The risk of rape is also high – Amnesty International estimates that as many as six out of 10 women and girls experience sexual violence during the journey.¹² Maria de la Paz Lopez, who runs a centre for deported refugee and migrant children in Guatemala, says she has heard many horrendous stories. Rape is so common that “girls take measures so as not to get pregnant. Girls aged 12, 13, 14,” she says.

Unaccompanied children, as well as parents travelling with young children, are easy targets for the powerful crime syndicates that control parts of the migrant routes.

Pedro, 43, shudders as he recalls the conditions in which kidnappers held him and his four children – aged 4, 6, 12 and 13 – for 42 days. Hundreds of others, including many children and babies were held in the house in northern Mexico. Pedro and his children were kidnapped as they were travelling from Honduras to join his wife, who was working in Houston. “They gave us water and beans, sometimes once a day, sometimes nothing ... Whenever the children did something wrong they would punish them, lock them in a place with no air. They’d only let the child out when he would collapse.” At times, the kidnappers would fight among themselves. “They’d kill someone and put him in the trunk of the car.” The kidnappers called his wife demanding a ransom of \$15,000. “They said that if she doesn’t send money by a certain date, they would send a finger, they would send a part of a child.” The police eventually rescued the hostages, and Pedro and his children were deported.

Estimates of the numbers of kidnappings vary from hundreds to thousands a year.¹³

Armed cartel members often extort money from the migrants or force them to carry drugs as they make their way into the United States, threatening to kill them if they don’t comply.¹⁴

Unaccompanied children, as well as parents travelling with young children, are easy targets for the powerful crime syndicates that control parts of the migrant routes.

Children also face a high risk of detention and deportation. In 2015, some 35,000 children – more than half of them unaccompanied – were held in immigration detention in Mexico, according to Human Rights Watch. Less than 1 per cent of the children apprehended in Mexico were granted asylum.¹⁵

A final hurdle in getting to the United States involves a lengthy trek across the desert.

Francisco Salguero fears, but refuses to believe, that his youngest son, Erick, was one of the victims of the harsh environment. Erick was 11 when he left El Salvador to join his mother in the United States in 2008. “The young men who were travelling with him said he stayed behind, in the desert,” Salguero, says, holding back his tears. But he quickly adds: “I believe he is alive and that God will give us an answer.” Salguero, who lives in El Salvador, says he was very close to Erick, but had allowed him to head to the United States “thinking of his future, because we are a poor family ... I had let him go because I wanted a future for him, but it turned out not to be a future, but a nightmare.”

"I wanted to get there and work and help my brothers and sisters and my mother."

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Alexis and Jackie, Honduras

When he was 16, Alexis and a cousin packed their meagre belongings and hit the road, hoping to escape the bitter poverty in which they grew up in Honduras. They had hoped to make it to the United States. But for Alexis, the journey ended in Mexico, when he fell off a freight train and lost his right leg – not an uncommon injury on the notorious route. Now, he is back home – a wood and corrugated iron shack built on a slope that turns into mud every time it rains. His mother and his teenage siblings work odd jobs when they can find them, harvesting chilies, taking care of other people's children or helping out in food stalls. Getting to the United States, was about more than just "an American dream," says Alexis. "It's about getting out of the country, which has

so much poverty. I wanted to get there and work and help my brothers and sisters and my mother."

Alexis who is now 18, sometimes joins a local UNICEF-supported outreach group to tell other young people about the dangers of the journey. But he's convinced his own siblings will eventually try to head north. "For the same reason I left here, my brothers and sisters could do the same one day, because of poverty, because you sometimes spend days without eating. There's not enough money to go to college, only to primary school, then it's over." His fears for the future: "That things continue the way they are. That my siblings continue to live this way, with this poverty. It would be horrible."

Nakisha, Honduras

At the age of 15, Nakisha – a member of Honduras' minority Afro-Caribbean community – is used to acting as a parent to her two younger siblings. Her single mother is often out of the house, working in neighbouring countries or making her way to the United States – which she attempted at least four times. The situation at home is dire. "Where I live there are gangs ... They're the ones who rule here," says Nakisha. "They look for children from the community to bring them into their gang. I have a cousin who converted, he's in the gang now, and he's only 12 years old. Now they're looking for him, to kill him ... A friend of his was just killed. They stabbed him. Then they cut him into pieces and put him in a bag which they left for my aunt."

Nakisha would love to get away from it all, study and get a job as a nurse to support her family. But she says she is too scared to make the perilous journey to the United States again. She had tried it once, in 2014, with her mother, her 3-year-old brother, her 8-year-old sister and a cousin. They were attacked on a couple of occasions, narrowly escaped arrest several times but eventually made it across the Rio Grande river that separates Mexico from the United States, only to be sent back by immigration authorities. While riding a freight train in Mexico, she saw a boy who fell off and "was cut in two." Nakisha says she never wants to travel that way again. "I want to go one day, but with the proper papers ... I want to go, because of high school, college and all that."

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*"I want to go one day, but
with the proper papers."*



THE END OF THE ROAD

For many of the refugees and migrants, the US border marks the end of the road.

More than 75,000 nationals from the three countries were deported from the United States during fiscal year 2015.¹⁶ For some children, deportation might end up being a death sentence. Anyone who fled from a gang or other criminal organizations is at high risk of being attacked, raped or killed upon returning home.

After an increase in the flow of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in 2014, the US administration expanded the practice of holding women and children – including infants – in family detention centres, in some cases for many months. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) warned that detention further traumatizes "scared, vulnerable children, many of whom have been victims of violence."¹⁷

Unlike adults, unaccompanied children from countries that do not share a border with the United States – such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – are guaranteed an immigration court hearing where they can make their case for asylum or other forms of protection. But these children, who have often fled unimaginable violence and endured harrowing journeys, still face major challenges and often years of uncertainty.

Following their detention at the US border, unaccompanied children are transferred to government-operated shelters or foster care homes for an average of just over one month, and then – whenever possible – released to sponsors, usually relatives. Reported incidents of abuse of the children have raised questions about the screening process for sponsors.

"Despite the staggering levels of violence in their home countries, nationals from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras often find it difficult to convince the authorities that their claim for asylum or protection from deportation would have a reasonable chance of prevailing in court – a first step to start the legal process."

Most unaccompanied children are placed in deportation proceedings before an immigration judge, but do not have access to court-appointed lawyers – though there is a small federally funded programme providing representation to some children. While various groups provide pro bono legal counsel to immigrants, thousands of children are left to navigate the complexities of immigration law on their own. Data shows that those who do not have an attorney – about 40 per cent – are far more likely to be deported than those who do. A comparison of cases initiated in 2015 shows that by June 2016, 40 per cent of unrepresented children were ordered deported, as compared with 3 per cent for those who had representation.¹⁸

Because of the backlogs in immigration courts, it can take years before the cases are decided. During that time, the children have no legal status in the United States, and are generally not eligible for healthcare and most other public services. While they are guaranteed access to school, there have been reports of instances where they have been prevented from attendance.¹⁹



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Yeremy, Guatemala

Yeremy, 17, says his family is so poor that "sometimes there is no food in the kitchen." He is convinced that if he manages to make his way to the United States he'll be able to earn enough money to lift his parents out of poverty. He recently attempted the journey, but "it was not God's will that I should get there," says Yeremy, sitting on a bunk bed at a shelter for deported refugee and migrant children in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. He had been on the road for eight days, walking and hitching rides, when Mexican police detained him. He says he spent three weeks in detention before he was sent back.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and the United States, as well as civil society and UN organizations, have taken measures to address the causes of migration and assist children in need of protection.

Tackling the root causes

Governments in the countries of origin and a wide range of partners, including UNICEF, work to improve the lives of children and families, remove inequalities and address violence, so that no one feels forced to migrate. They also seek to strengthen social and child protection services that reduce the vulnerability of children to violence, crime and other threats, with a strong focus on education and health. UNICEF works to keep children in school, make schools safe, strengthen community centers and collaborate with local government, community partners and faith-based organizations to provide psychosocial support to children affected by gang violence. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have adopted an Alliance for Prosperity Plan to address high migration levels by creating jobs and improving security.²⁰ The United States has committed \$750 million to the three countries for fiscal year 2016, partly in support of the plan.²¹

Protecting migrants

UNICEF supports governments and other partners in ensuring that the rights of migrant children are respected throughout their journey. It supports efforts to strengthen protection authorities, procedures and mechanisms to ensure that migrant children are treated as children in need of special protection. In Guatemala, the National Congress was working in 2016 for the approval of a new Migration Code, which spells out the rights of migrants, with a strong focus on children and women. UNICEF and other UN agencies support the new measure. In Mexico, UNICEF has supported the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR) in developing a protocol to detect cases of children who may require international protection. Training in specialized interview techniques was provided to 300 officials. In addition, Mexico's National Welfare System (DIF), with support from UNICEF, has developed a guide for the implementation of special protection procedures. The US administration, for its part, says its Central American

Minors (CAM) programme provides "a safe, legal, and orderly alternative to the dangerous journey that some children are currently undertaking to the United States."²² The programme allows parents who have a lawful immigration presence in the United States to apply for their children in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to receive refugee status. If the child qualifies, processing is done in-country. The scope of the programme has been limited, but the US Government announced in July 2016 that it would be expanded.

Helping returnees

All three countries offer reception services to returnees. Children receive hygiene kits, food, water, medical check-ups, and in some cases psychological counselling, and remain in shelters until they are released to parents or other relatives. Authorities also help with school enrolment. In Honduras, UNICEF has supported the creation of a community network to provide psychosocial support. UNICEF also works with Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Honduran consular authorities for the protection of children in Mexico and the United States, and with migration and child protection bodies to establish and implement standards on how to treat apprehended refugee and migrant children. ●

CHILDREN MUST BE PROTECTED

Every year, tens of thousands of children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras try to make their way to the United States. They face huge risks at every step of the journey. Every one of these children is in need of protection and entitled to the rights guaranteed under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children should have full access to health and other services and should be allowed to live with their family whenever possible. The best interests of the child should always be a primary consideration in any decision concerning that child. UNICEF is concerned about “expedited removals” and is concerned that mothers and children are held in detention centres. Detention of children on the basis of their migration status should be prevented.

“We must remember that children, whatever their status, are first and foremost children. We have a duty to keep them safe in a healthy and nurturing environment,” said UNICEF's Deputy Executive Director Justin Forsyth. ●

Endnotes

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