8-14-2014

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Undocumented Salvadoran Children Migrating North in Record Numbers—Why Now?

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Category/Department: El Salvador  
Published: 2014-08-14

An upsurge in child migration to the US, where border officials have intercepted record numbers of unaccompanied minors in recent months, has exposed Central America’s smallest country, El Salvador, to a suddenly large dose of outside scrutiny. But while the phenomenon—which also involves Honduras and Guatemala—has prompted plenty of finger-pointing, it has produced little so far in the way of solutions.

Migration to the US from Central America in general and El Salvador in particular is nothing new. More than 2 million Salvadorans are already estimated to be living in the US, concentrated largely in the states of California and Texas, and in and around Washington, DC. They send home approximately US$3.5 billion in annual remittances, the country’s single-largest source of revenue, according to the World Bank.

What has changed, US authorities claim, is that so many of the people now arriving from El Salvador and from its neighbors in the "Northern Triangle" (an area that also includes Honduras and Guatemala) are unaccompanied children and adolescents. In 2011, US border officials detained nearly 4,000 unaccompanied minors from those three countries. The number more than doubled the next year (10,443). In 2013 it doubled again (21,537). And, in just the past nine months, US police and border agents stopped more than 40,000 unaccompanied Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan children, along with another 20,000 undocumented minors from Mexico.

Fleeing gang violence

Observers trying to explain the situation point first and foremost to the extremely high incidence of violent crime in the Northern Triangle, where powerful street gangs have killed tens of thousands in recent years. This year’s UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report listed Honduras as the most-murder-prone country in the world, with an annual average of 90.4 homicides per 100,000 residents. The global average is 6.2. El Salvador (41.2) and Guatemala (39.9) ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, on the UNODC list. Venezuela (53.7) ranked second, followed by Belize (44.7).

El Salvador’s homicide rate was significantly higher prior to a government-backed truce brokered in early 2012 between the country’s rival Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (MS-18, or Barrio 18) gangs (NotiCen, April 26, 2012). The gang accord proved early on to be a major success, nearly halving the country’s murder numbers (NotiCen, Dec. 20, 2012). In the past year, however, the deal has largely unraveled, pushing the homicide rate back up (NotiCen, April 24, 2014).

The proliferation of street gangs (in El Salvador MS-13 and Barrio-18 are thought to have approximately 30,000 members between them) has been particularly problematic for children, who not only risk being caught in the crossfire but are also forcibly recruited into the rival factions. Refusal to join one of the maras, as the gangs are known, can mean death. "Parents are trying to save their children, and even though they know about the danger of the journey to the US border, they would rather take that risk than let the maras kill them or recruit them," Anita Zelaya, director of
the group Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos (COFAMIDE), told the Spanish daily El País last month.

On July 11—four days after the El País article was published—two teenagers, aged 15 and 16, were murdered in San Salvador, El Salvador’s La Prensa Gráfica reported. That same day, in the central department of Cuscatlán, an 11-year-old boy disappeared on his way home from school. Soon afterward, police discovered his dismembered body—one of the hallmark signs of gang killings—in a shallow grave. The victim, identified as David Orellana, lived in territory controlled by MS-13 but went to school in a Barrio-18 zone. His parents reportedly live in the US.

**Power of the grapevine?**

As palpable as those dangers are, the Northern Triangle’s dismal security situation doesn’t necessarily explain why so many youth are migrating right now and not, for example, five years ago. Gang violence, after all, is a long-standing problem in the region, as is the other major push factor that has historically motivated Central Americans to head north: poverty. The economic situation in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is far from ideal, but there is no indication that conditions in those countries have taken a sudden turn for the worse.

Another theory is that the child-migration wave, while clearly related to the aforementioned factors, is also a product of the proverbial grapevine. The rush of unaccompanied minors might simply be a trend—one being powered in large part by word of mouth. Families making the decision to pool their resources and hire coyotes (smugglers) to guide their children to the US—where, as unaccompanied minors, they can take advantage of US regulations preventing their immediate deportation—inspire other families to do the same, and so on and so forth.

"Spreading information by word of mouth is powerful in Central American communities," award winning Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez wrote in a recent article published by the online news site El Faro. "It’s plausible that all of this started with one mother who wanted to have her child by her side. Another mother saw that, then a father, then another mother, and then 52,000."

Economics on the US-side of the equation may also be playing a role, according to former Salvadoran ambassador to the US Rubén Zamora. The diplomat claims that, with the passage of time, Salvadorans who migrated earlier to the US—without their children—have gained more stability and accrued more resources. They are thus better prepared to receive the children they left behind and to pay coyotes (who tend to charge several thousand dollars) to guide those children north.

"The Salvadoran community in the US has grown economically. People have gone from crowding together in a single room to, in some cases, paying US$1,000 to rent a two-bedroom house on the outskirts of a city," Zamora told El Faro. "More people can now pay to have their children brought [to the US]. And, clearly, the maras and the violence in the region add more pressure. ... They see that the security situation is too complicated for their children to stay or for them to go back to El Salvador. But, at the same time, they don’t see any opportunity to bring them up to the US legally. What other option do they have?"

"The tale of the coyote"

While paying coyotes to smuggle undocumented children into the US may, as Zamora explained, be the only option for many Central American families, few people see it as a good one. Some
children die making the journey. Others are robbed, raped, or otherwise abused. The situation is clearly an undesirable one as well for authorities in the US, where the agencies responsible for processing the "flood" of child migrants are swamped (SourceMex, July 23, 2014, and July 30, 2014). The "humanitarian crisis," as he labeled it, has been troublesome, too, for US President Barack Obama, who is awash in criticism from both the right and left.

In late July, Obama met with Presidents Salvador Sánchez Cerén of El Salvador, Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala, and Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras to discuss the matter firsthand. The four leaders agreed that addressing the problem is a "shared responsibility" but offered little in the way of actual solutions. The Central American presidents would like increased US government funding to help them crack down on gangs and drug traffickers and thus improve security in their respective countries. So far, though, no such money has been forthcoming—neither the US$2 billion Pérez Molina says will be needed to tackle the problem effectively nor the US$300 million Obama earmarked for the three countries as part of a US$3.7 billion funds petition he submitted to the US Congress. So far, the US House of Representatives, controlled by the opposition Republican Party, has refused the president's request.

Prior to the meeting, Salvadoran President Sánchez Cerén, a leftist who came to power less than three months ago (NotiCen, June 19, 2014), made a special request of his own, asking US authorities to "respect the right of unification [between migrant minors and their family members in the US]." In a July 16 press conference, Sánchez Cerén called on US authorities to "keep following the legal procedures that the law establishes."

The Salvadoran leader may be disappointed on that front as well given pressures President Obama faces to revisit the law in question. The law, implemented in 2008, stipulates that unaccompanied child migrants cannot be fast-tracked for deportation but must instead be handed over to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and then, pending hearings on their possible refugee status, be placed with relatives living in the US.

The Sánchez Cerén administration took its own initiative last month by launching a public-awareness campaign aimed at counseling Salvadoran families not to send their children north. "Parents need to take into account the danger involved," the Salvadoran president said. "The children suffer. Girls are raped." The campaign includes an animated video being broadcast on Salvadoran television, called "El Cuento del Coyote" (the tale of the coyote). Plans are in place to disseminate the video in certain US cities as well.

Observers say Sánchez Cerén and his counterparts in the Northern Triangle will have to offer more if they really hope to stem the flow of underage migrants. "As long as you do not combat the actual causes and make structural, social, and political changes in the countries of origin, and inequality grows, there will be no border to stop those seeking to feed their children or those looking to flee violence," Leonel Flores, president of the Instituto Salvadoreño del Migrante (INSAMI), recently told Americas Program, a Mexico-based organization.