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## Crackdown Reduces Number of Unaccompanied Central American Minors Reaching U.S.-Mexico Border

by Carlos Navarro

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The Mexican government has quietly toughened its policies against undocumented Central American migrants transiting through Mexico en route to the US-Mexico border. President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration implemented tougher policies against migrants from Central America following the surge in the number of unaccompanied minors from Central America traveling to the US via Mexico at the end of 2013 and through 2014 ([SourceMex, June 25, 2014](#), and [NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014](#), and [Aug 28, 2014](#)). Statistics from the official Mexican and US migration agencies and private research organizations show that Mexican authorities are now detaining and deporting a much larger number of Central Americans than US counterparts.

The US-based Pew Research Center, in a recent report, said US officials apprehended 12,509 unaccompanied minors at the US-Mexico border in the first five months of the current fiscal year (October through February), down from 21,403 in the same time period a year ago. Nearly 7,800 of the apprehensions this year were minors from three Central American countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—and the rest were from Mexico.

In contrast, Mexico deported more than 3,800 Central American minors between October 2014 and February 2015, according to the Pew Research Center. While the numbers remain much lower than those of the US, they represent an increase of 56% from the same five-month period a year ago.

Statistics from Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) indicate that the rate of arrests and deportations continued at a fast pace into the middle of this year. The INM says Mexico arrested and deported 11,893 unaccompanied minors from Central America in the first five months of this calendar year, an increase of almost 50% from January-May 2014.

The trends are also manifested in the overall picture for arrests and deportations. A recent report from the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) indicated that US authorities detained and deported 85,000 undocumented immigrants of all ages from countries other than Mexico (primarily from Central America) in the first eight months of the current fiscal year (October 2014 to May 2015).

During the same period, Mexican authorities detained and deported almost 93,000 Central Americans, according to statistics from the INM. For the first time, Mexican arrests and deportations of Central Americans surpassed those of the US.

### *Mexico taking on role of enforcer*

Critics suggest that this trend reflects Mexico's role of immigration enforcer for the US. "The United States is asking Mexico to detain and deport migrants for us, and Mexico has clearly done that. But in the process tens of thousands of vulnerable children and families are getting sent back into harm's way without getting the chance to seek protection or refugee status," Maureen Meyer, an officer with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), said in a television interview.

In an earlier comments, Meyer said the arrangement that US President Barack Obama's administration has made with Mexico has helped eliminate a public-relations nightmare that plagued the US during the summer of 2014, when an apparently endless wave of unaccompanied minors from Central America seemed to be coming to the US border via Mexico.

"The Obama administration has found a way to hide the so-called crisis of Central American migrants at the border, but at what cost?" said Meyer, who serves as WOLA's senior associate for Mexico and migrant rights.

While the crackdown in Mexico is seen as the most important factor behind the decline in the number of detentions of unaccompanied minors along the Texas border with Mexico, experts say there are other reasons behind the trend. "In addition to the Mexican government's record number of deportations, there are other possible reasons for this year's decline in children attempting to cross the US-Mexico border," said a Pew Research Center report authored by research associate Ana Gonzalez-Barrera. "The decrease in apprehensions comes as the US government has sped up the processing of immigration court cases for unaccompanied minors and launched public information campaigns in Central America to discourage children from trying to cross into the US."

A recent WOLA analysis found that the economic and security conditions that have forced Central American children to migrate to the US have not subsided, even though the US media is no longer covering their plight in the same manner as it did last year.

Some experts believe Honduras and El Salvador are now among the most violent countries in the world because of a spike in gang activity and the increased presence of criminal organizations in those countries (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015, and May 20, 2015). "Honduras has a homicide rate of 68 homicides per 100,000 people. This year El Salvador threatens to top Honduras. In fact, in recent weeks, El Salvador saw a frightening spike in homicides, exceeding the numbers seen during its bloody civil war," said the WOLA report.

Even with the continuing problems in Honduras and El Salvador, the Pew Research Center found that an increasing number of the unaccompanied minors who were detained recently came from Guatemala. In the first five months of this fiscal year, Guatemalans comprised about one-third (35%) of unaccompanied children apprehended in the US, compared with 18% from El Salvador and 9% from Honduras. The numbers were even higher than last summer, when 27% of minors detained came from Honduras, 25% from Guatemala, and 24% from El Salvador.

"Guatemalan children now comprise a higher share of deportations, as their numbers have doubled in the first five months of this fiscal year compared with the same period a year ago," said the Pew Research Center study.

Despite the trend, WOLA emphasizes that conditions have not changed in any of the three countries. "Substantial numbers of these migrants—a lot of them children and families—are fleeing violence and poverty," said Geoff Thale, WOLA program director. "Many would qualify for asylum or refugee status if given the chance to tell their stories to authorities."

### *A more focused immigration policy*

Some observers agree that the increased crackdown in Mexico is part of an agreement with the US but also point out that this is an effort by Mexico to strengthen security on its southern border known as "Estrategia de Contención Migratoria" ([SourceMex, July 23, 2014](#)).

Columnist Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez of the daily business newspaper *El Financiero* says there is a more focused attitude at the INM about fulfilling its mission to guard Mexico's borders and enforce the country's immigration policies. "After a meeting with [INM Commissioner Ardelio Vargas], my impression is that the INM—after years of clear neglect—has launched a phase of institutional reconstruction, allowing the government to regain control over immigration policy."

Guerrero Gutiérrez said Mexico's immigration crackdown on the southern border in the past year involves several actions, including surprise visits to hotels and nightclubs, although tighter vigilance at stations and depots where migrants typically board freight trains remains a central aspect of the campaign.

"As a result of the Estrategia de Contención Migratoria, we have managed to substantially reduce the flow of migrants jumping on board the freight train known as *La Bestia*, which is no doubt a very dangerous mode of transportation," Guerrero Gutiérrez said, referring to the railroad that transports thousands of Central American migrants to the US-Mexico border daily ([SourceMex, Aug. 29, 2007](#), and [May 21, 2014](#)).

The INM decision to increase processing immigrants has also served as a deterrent. "A total of 127,000 undocumented migrants were brought to the INM in 2014, an increase of 50% from 2013," said Guerrero Gutiérrez. "The biggest impact of this effort is that the number of undocumented migrants who reach the northern border has decreased significantly."

### *Human rights commission raises concerns*

The increased crackdown in Mexico has also raised concerns that the government is adding another layer of violation of the rights of citizens of Central American countries, who were already under siege from criminal organizations—both from Mexico and their home countries—and corrupt police and military in Mexico ([SourceMex, April 13, 2011](#), and [Dec. 11, 2013](#)).

Luis Raúl González Pérez, president of the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), acknowledged that the violations of individual rights against migrants—primarily those from Central America—have increased since the government toughened its immigration policy last year. The CNDH president said the commission has received "a lot" of complaints regarding aggressions against migrants, but he did not offer any figures.

Speaking at the 25th anniversary of the creation of the CNDH, González Pérez noted that Mexico has made some advances in protecting human rights, but the violation of the rights of migrants is not one of those areas. "This was a problem [at the foundation of the commission], and 25 years later it is getting worse," said González Pérez.

González Pérez said Mexico must strengthen the mechanisms to prevent violations against individuals who are vulnerable to become victimized twice. "The Central Americans migrate because of poverty and violence in their own countries," said the human rights ombud.

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