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Migration of Central American Minors to U.S. Increased in 2016

by Carlos Navarro

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Officials in Mexican states continued to see a steady stream of Central American minors traveling through Mexico on their way to the US in 2016, although tougher immigration regulations enacted by US President Donald Trump's administration might begin to deter the flow children and youth arriving in the US primarily from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

According to a report released by Mexico's population agency (Consejo Nacional de Población, CONAPO) in late January, 54,000 unaccompanied undocumented minors were detained at the border between October 2015 and August 2016, compared with 40,000 the previous October-August period. The lower figure for the previous year had been attributed to a crackdown on the Mexican side ([SourceMex, July 1, 2015](#)). While the statistics through the summer of 2016 represented a slight year-over-year increase, the numbers fell short of the 68,000 minors who were detained at the border in 2014 ([SourceMex, June 25, 2014](#), [July 23, 2014](#), [NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014](#)).

The CONAPO report, which obtained the statistics from the US Border Patrol, acknowledged that measures enacted in Mexico to contain and deter unaccompanied minors traveling to the US have failed. Those measures included an increase in monitoring of minors entering Mexico, detention of the young migrants, speedier processing of migratory paperwork, quicker repatriations, and an intensive media campaigns in Central American countries to warn about the dangers of making the trip.

The efforts by the Mexican government to discourage migration of Central American minors had the unintended effect of forcing children and teens to seek more dangerous routes, exposing them to exploitation by human traffickers. "The lack of success of our campaign ... makes it necessary to rethink our strategy and the public policies we need regarding the migration of minors," said the CONAPO report.

Salvadorans flee violence

According to CONAPO, most of the unaccompanied minors tried to cross the border through Texas, although crossings through Arizona and California were also attempted. The largest percentage of the unaccompanied minors came from El Salvador "in direct relation to the increase in violence experienced in that country," CONAPO said.

A recent US report confirms that children and youth from El Salvador now make up the largest number of unaccompanied minors crossing to the US. The report, published by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), said US border authorities apprehended a record 17,512 unaccompanied Salvadoran children in the fiscal year that ended in September 2016, an increase of 87% from the previous year.

The DHS report said more than 27,000 minors or adults traveling in family units also were apprehended between October 2015 and September 2016, an increase of 150% from the year before.

Crime and gang violence remain the single largest factor behind the Central American exodus, but the problem appears to be most acute in El Salvador, despite a major crackdown on criminal street gangs on the part of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén's administration ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#)). In 2016, the murder rate in El Salvador surpassed the 5,000 mark for the second consecutive year, the Salvadoran national police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC) said in a report released earlier this year ([NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017](#)).

"Children as young as 9 are recruited for gang membership. Extortion is rampant, with gangs squeezing street vendors, restaurant owners, and even grandmothers for cash," The New York Times reported. "Last year, nearly 1 in 4 people were victims of a crime, according to a poll conducted by Central American University, which also found that more than 40% of Salvadorans hoped to leave the country within a year."

Authorities in northern Mexican states are also tracking the increase in unaccompanied minors. For example, officials in Durango said 43 minors were detained in the north-central state in the first few weeks of 2017. Of those, 25 were traveling by themselves and another 18 were traveling in family units, according to spokespersons at the Durango office of the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM).

A total of 614 children and youth were taken into custody in Durango in 2016. "The majority of these young migrants are originally from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras," said the daily newspaper *El Siglo de Durango*. "They are frequently found in the Laguna region [the Gómez Palacio-Torreón metropolitan area], on the highway that connects Fresnillo and Gómez Palacio, and on the Fresnillo-Durango-Parral portion of the Pan-American Highway."

Trump's executive orders raise concerns

The Trump administration's new immigration regulations are likely to affect the number of Central American minors that attempt to cross into the US. One proposal in the president's blueprint is to eliminate a special protection for the minors who arrived at the US-Mexico border.

In his first executive order on immigration and refugees, the president halted a government program that allowed Central American children to seek refugee status in the US. More than 11,000 people have applied for the program since 2014, when former President Barack Obama launched the initiative to dissuade Central Americans fleeing violence from making risky journeys to the Mexico-US border. The program, which was available only to children who have a parent residing in the US legally, and in some cases a child's adult relative, would screen applicants in their home countries. Under the initiative, more than 2,000 people were resettled in the US, either as refugees or through a process known as humanitarian parole, according to the State Department.

Trump's first executive order on immigration, which he issued on Jan. 27, suspended all refugee admissions to the US for 120 days. Although the change was directed primarily at migrants fleeing war-torn regions of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, there was concern about the impact on children and families from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America.

"This program was an important recognition of the very real violence in these countries," Maureen Meyer, senior associate for Mexico and Migrant Rights at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) told the Los Angeles Times. "Clearly the suspension of this program puts these children at more risk. A lot of people that are in danger could be killed."

A federal court ruled Trump's original executive order as illegal, so the president released a revised version on March 6. The new executive order keeps most of the provisions of the original plan, only making changes in some of the areas that the court deemed unconstitutional. This means that the 120-day ban on refugee admissions is back in place.

Trump is proposing to change the criteria for when a minor is considered unaccompanied. The president's plan would reclassify children and teens as "accompanied" if a parent steps forward to claim them. DHS has not explained what criteria would be used to determine the new designation, although advocates are concerned that 60% of minors would be stripped of the protection. "There is a range of how bad this might be," Michelle Brané, director of the Migrant Rights and Justice Program at the Women's Refugee Commission, said in an interview with *The New York Times*.

Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly also hinted of other changes. In an interview with CNN on March 7, Kelly said the department is considering separating children from parents caught crossing the border. The proposal would result in detention for the parent while any accompanying children would be placed in the care of the government or sent to live with relatives in the US.

Kelly acknowledged that splitting families was intended to deter illegal border crossings.

"I would do almost anything to deter the people from Central America getting on this very, very dangerous network that brings them up from Mexico," Kelly said in the interview.

Immigration lawyers argue that separating families would be traumatic for children and would put additional pressure on an already overwhelmed judicial process.

The Obama administration opened several detention centers in 2014 to accommodate an increase in families crossing the border, as well as to deter others from crossing. However, a US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that child migrants who are accompanied by a parent and in family detention should be quickly released.

The Obama government complied with this ruling by limiting the time by which women and children could be held together at family detention centers to no more than 21 days. Trump officials are attempting to change this policy, pointing out that the quick release encourages parents to bring children with them, thus exploiting the system.

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