

## CENTRAL AMERICA'S UNACCOMPANIED MINORS: SHARED PROBLEM, SHARED SOLUTION

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Nearly 50,000 unaccompanied minors from Central America and Mexico have poured across the United States' border with Mexico in the past eight months, the vast majority of which stem from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, Central America's Northern Triangle. Unlike Mexican minors, who can be deported within hours, Central Americans are placed in removal proceedings that may take several months. The recent surge in the number of these minors has overwhelmed the operational capacity of the U.S. Border Patrol, strained the detention resources of immigration authorities, and overburdened American immigration courts. It has also raised the level of public emotion and fueled much political theater over the issue of immigration.

Critics of the Obama administration blame the surge on what they consider to be the president's lax immigration enforcement policies—despite the fact that Obama's presidency

has set a record with the highest number of deportations in American history. Others attribute it to deteriorating governance and economic conditions in Central America, including rising crime and gang activity in the Northern Triangle and deepening poverty. There also seems to be a perception in these Central American countries that the United States does not deport minors, which can partly be ascribed to the 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA). This act guarantees that children who have been the victims of human trafficking, broadly defined, cannot be summarily deported but must instead receive a hearing before a court of law in order to determine their eligibility for asylum. Based on this law, organized criminals have fed rumors in the region that children will get to stay in the United States, then offer their services to transport minors to the border. A combination of these factors has fueled the migration of children and the hope they will be granted a deportation reprieve and placed with relatives in the United States while awaiting a hearing.

In reality, there is no single cause for the problem—nor is there a simple solution. Migration is usually the primary responsibility of two parties: the sending country and the receiving country. In the case of the Central American minors, the problem is shared among three parties: the sending countries, mostly Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador; the main transit country, Mexico; and the receiving country, the United States. Each country must act individually, and all must act collectively, to both address the short-term crisis and implement the long-term measures required to help manage these migration flows.

Some steps have been taken in the past few weeks to attend to the immediate problem. In the United States, President Obama has requested congressional approval for resources to feed, house, transport, and expeditiously process the unaccompanied minors; to fund efforts by immigration courts to process cases more quickly; and to aid development in Central America. The three Central American sending countries have begun aggressive media campaigns to dissuade their citizens from leaving. For instance, Guatemala's *Quédate* ("stay," in Spanish) program explains the life-threatening risks entailed by migration and that the most likely outcome is deportation, recommending that people stay home where things will be getting better. Federal immigration authorities in El Salvador initiated a similar public-awareness campaign last month in response to the crisis. In the case of Mexico, the transit country, the government launched *Programa Frontera Sur* (the "Southern

Border Program”), a five-point plan to secure Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala. Laws in Mexico, unlike those in the United States, allow the immediate deportation of Central American minors, and the country has been deporting thousands of immigrants every day.

Additionally, a couple of weeks ago, Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina hosted a [meeting](#) with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and high-level officials from Mexico and Central America to discuss a coordinated approach to combat human trafficking networks—an important piece of this complex problem. All of these efforts address the short-term problem and are important, but they do not fundamentally address deeply rooted “push” forces behind the wave of undocumented migrants. Any potential long-term solution must take into account Central America’s recent history, as well as its history of interaction with its northern neighbor, the United States.

In the 1980s, Central America became one of the main battlegrounds in the ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Civil wars plagued the region, from Guatemala to Nicaragua. American and Soviet weapons flooded the area. Students and young workers were turned into soldiers. Authoritarian governments set up paramilitary forces to repress dissent. In addition, the economic hardships of the 1980s plunged the region into a deep and permanent crisis, which increased the extreme poverty that prevails today. At the time, the United States increased economic and military aid to Central American governments and other groups in accordance with its global fight against communism.

After communism collapsed and a series of peace accords ended the Central American civil wars in the 1990s, the United States turned its attention elsewhere. This neglect made the region’s existing poverty worse, and also saddled it with ineffective authoritarian governments. The U.S. government may have actually compounded Central America’s problems when, in the mid-1990s, it began the mass deportation of Central American immigrants—mostly Salvadorians—who had fled the region’s wars in the 1980s and became gang members in the streets of Los Angeles. The Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and Mara 18 gangs, for example, are products of this exodus. The MS-13 quickly became known as one of the most violent gangs, since its founders had been trained in guerrilla warfare. Once deported, these convicted criminals continued their gang activities and

cemented the foundation for what is today a serious problem of organized crime in the Northern Triangle. Although the United States could hardly have kept these gang members in the country, sending them to Central America set the stage for their eventual spread throughout the continent. Their business model ranges from serving as contract killers for drug cartels to running their own extortion businesses to carjackings and murders. The region is now the staging ground for much of the drug trafficking violence in the South American-North American smuggling axis. These gangs have played an important role in turning Central America's Northern Triangle into one of the most violent areas in the world.

The three Central American governments in question—Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—are taking responsibility for their part in this shared problem. They are well aware that two of the primary drivers pushing their people north are violence and poverty. Their underpaid and outgunned police forces are doing what they can to combat violence. In an effort to create more job opportunities and alleviate poverty, they are developing infrastructure projects and tackling tax reforms, hoping to generate much-needed revenue to finance these and other projects. They are also implementing economic reforms; benefits include lower electricity costs and improved conditions that will make their countries once again attractive to foreign investment. Thus far, their efforts have not turned the tide. Overarching, transformational changes will probably take a full generation to realize—but for the *Quédate* message to actually take root in stressed communities throughout Central America, significant improvements in security and economic opportunities must be made, and soon.

The United States must follow the example of these Central American nations by assuming its share of responsibility for this joint problem. It must increase its efforts to stop the flow of arms to this violent region. It must also address its massive problem of domestic drug consumption, which fuels drug trafficking networks operating in Mexico and Central America. Critically, as a people and as a government, it must realize that the immigration challenges we are facing today did not begin under the current U.S. administration—nor will they end with it. Some policymakers in Washington are missing this crucial point, or are taking the opportunity to play to emotions for their own political benefit.

As long as there is hope of a better life elsewhere, and as long as parents dream of a better future for their children, people will find a way to migrate to the United States. Parents in Central America will risk their children's lives—and many minors will, of their own accord, risk their own lives—to escape violence and what seems like a sentence to lifelong poverty. Murder, extortion and sexual assault are risks these children (and their families) face every day in their home countries—but the situation is such that they are willing to face them in a journey that, once traveled, may result in a reunion with their loved ones and a life free of the constant stress that fear and hunger produce.

Measures including building more and higher walls in the United States and increasing the number of border agents will not change the motivation that drives these minors and their parents, or the heartbreaking outcomes of their struggles we are currently witnessing in the media. Change will come when each of the parties involved—the sending, transit and receiving countries—takes responsibility for their part of the problem, and all work together to develop a long-term regional strategy. A peaceful and prosperous Central America is in the best interest of both the region and the United States.

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