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Children on the Border: Could Migration be the Problem, Not the Solution?

Posted on [November 30, 2015](#) by [David Stoll](#)



Youth gang recruits in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America are at risk at home, during migration, and even once they reach the U.S. Photo courtesy of [USAID](#).

Can a border crisis originate in nurseries? More and more Americans are hiring women from Central America to raise their children. More often than not, the women are undocumented single mothers who, in hope of escaping poverty, left their own children behind with relatives. One day a Los Angeles journalist named Sonia Nazario was horrified to learn that her housecleaner Carmen had four children in Guatemala whom she had not seen in 12 years. How could she leave them behind like that? Carmen began to cry: Her husband had run off with another woman, leaving her with too many mouths to feed. Eventually, after a separation of 13 years, one of Carmen's sons found her in Los Angeles. He made part of the journey on top of a Mexican freight train.

In Sonia Nazario's mind a story was born. She would ride the trains north like Central American children seeking their mothers (never mind that Carmen's son was in his twenties). In a Catholic shelter she found a youth who was still a minor (seventeen), who also had traveled on top of boxcars, and who would tell her everything. Nazario became

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part of Enrique's life, and got to know his family in Honduras and his mother in North Carolina. She also retraced every step Enrique took. Nazario's series for the *Los Angeles Times* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2003. Three years later she published *Enrique's Journey*, which has become the most widely read book about Central Americans coming north to find work.

Nazario's discoveries merit a close look because they reflect a troubling new era in U.S. immigration. She noticed a chronological synchrony between the increasing number of American women working outside the home, hence wanting domestic help, and family disintegration in Central America. Was this just a coincidence?

The first Central Americans to seek U.S. jobs were mainly men, but they have been followed by increasing numbers of mothers and children. Enrique's father never went north, but he no longer supported his family when Enrique's mother, scraping by as a door-to-door vendor, decided to try her luck as a migrant. Enrique was five years old when his mother Lourdes suddenly departed, without warning or explanation. Typical of children left behind, he fell apart. Passed from one relative to the next, he stopped going to school, went to work in the street, and paid debts to drug dealers by robbing kin. By the time he was sixteen, his relatives were fed up; now it was time for him to go north too.

No one regarded Enrique as a reliable future wage-earner, so no one was willing to borrow \$5,000 to pay a smuggling network. He had to go on his own. This meant the *gusano de hierro* or iron worm, the freight trains that Central Americans ride through Mexico when they can't afford smugglers. Unfortunately, taking the train requires fending off bandits, extortionists, rapists and cops. In Enrique's case, he was caught by the Mexican police and dumped back where he started seven times before he made it to the U.S. in 2000.

Enrique's journey didn't end in a happy reunion with his mother. He and Lourdes had become strangers and they were soon recriminating each other. He accused her of abandoning him; she accused him of being a drug addict. Enrique's half-siblings, about whom he hadn't known and who were U.S.-born citizens, threatened to denounce him as an illegal. Nazario is at her unflinching best in detailing life at the bottom of the U.S. labor market.

Back in Honduras, Enrique's faithful but slender remittances became a bone of contention: exactly which relative would receive them? Dashed hopes were soon pulling another single mother to the U.S.; she too left her children behind with relatives, repeating the pattern set in motion by Enrique's parents and so many others.

Why the disappointing remittances? The most obvious reason is that, even in the U.S., everyone has trouble finding enough work.

All the trouble befalling Enrique and his family—fathers abandoning mothers and children, single mothers seeking to escape poverty by going north but failing to send enough remittances, children following them—has been growing apace. Also, even nine years ago when Nazario published *Enrique's Journey*, increasing numbers of parents with children and pregnant women were riding the trains. In 2012 the number of underage Hondurans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans detained by the U.S. Border Patrol began shooting upward. This was the year that, to humanize enforcement, the Obama administration set up Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a provisional legal status for youth entering the U.S. without permission.

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Current youth arrivals are not eligible so, strictly speaking, DACA was not a green light. Not between October 2013 and July 2014, along the Rio Grande and westward to Arizona, agents arrested 57,000 unaccompanied minors and another 22,000 minors traveling with a parent. Most were from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Some rode on top of trains like Enrique; more came with smugglers who have been paid thousands of dollars.

The surge of minors, mothers and small children has sharpened the U.S. immigration debate. Are these victims who deserve sanctuary? Or is the language of human rights being manipulated to globalize the U.S. labor market? Is there a limit to how many people can be admitted on humanitarian grounds?

The most influential voice on underage migration is Sonia Nazario. She reports that, in Enrique's old neighborhood Nueva Suyapa on the outskirts of Honduras' capital, youth gangs are pressuring children to sell drugs, rob people at gunpoint and extort businesses. The police are unhelpful, unpredictable and lethal.

"Deportation condemns them to death," Nazario concludes—which, if true, makes this a refugee crisis in which many Central Americans deserve asylum. According to a legal-aid group which Nazario promotes, 40 to 60 percent of the underage migrants it has interviewed could qualify to stay in the U.S. To determine which children qualify, Nazario argues, each deserves a child-friendly process including legal counsel. To house them while this is going on, she suggests, the U.S. should allow the United Nations and relief groups to set up tent cities.

Nazario's warning, that children are on the run from Central American gangs, has become the dominant theme in sympathetic media coverage. The refrain that these are mere children requires a cautionary note. In U.S. law anyone under eighteen is a child, but in daily life Americans avoid applying this term to teenagers. In fact, only 16% of the unaccompanied minors are twelve years or younger. A large majority are between fourteen and seventeen. This is working-age for most Central Americans and coming north at this age is nothing new—only the numbers being caught at the border are new.

The refugee claim requires another cautionary note. Ever since the civil wars of the 1980s, human rights advocates have urged the U.S. to admit Central Americans as political refugees. Several million Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Honduras have made it to the U.S., usually without papers, but few meet the test for asylum—having suffered persecution for belonging to a social group defined by race, religion, nationality, or politics.

Most are victims of economic dislocation and seek opportunity. Unfortunately, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees only the right to leave your country of origin, not the right to live anywhere you please. This is why many advocates insist that Central Americans are also fleeing oppressive political situations. On the advice of lawyers and fellow migrants, detainees began telling U.S. immigration judges that they had fled youth gangs and police death squads. If they were sent home, they might be killed.

No one questions that gangs are a serious threat in parts of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. The gangs have been strengthened by the U.S. War on Drugs, which multiplies the profits that can corrupt local authorities. Thanks to gang extortions, rivalries and initiation rites, in 2013 the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula had a homicide rate of 187 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Not so clear is why Central Americans threatened by gangs would escape via the migrant trail through Mexico, where gang violence is even worse. In 2010-11 the Zetas of

Tamaulipas massacred at least 265 migrants, mainly Central and South Americans, for failing to pay protection money. This is the number of victims found in mass graves; the total number could be far higher. Taking your chances with the Zetas would be logical only if you were weighing the risk against an attractive goal such as joining your relatives in the U.S.

According to the Salvadoran journalist [Oscar Martínez](#), author of the most revealing [book](#) about the gauntlet run by Central American migrants in Mexico, many of the unaccompanied minors caught by the U.S. Border Patrol are actually traveling with smugglers paid by their parents. As he quotes a Salvadoran coyote or smuggler:

They bring the kid to the other side. They leave him there, in the urban part of the city, and they prepare him well— they tell him to say that he came alone, that he is looking for his mom or his dad. [The kids] have to forget that they were accompanied by a coyote, they follow directions. There is always someone watching to make sure the kid speaks with the police—even then he is not alone, there is always somebody watching to make sure they pick him up. Then he is in safe hands. As soon as the police have him, the coyote informs the family: “He’s in the hands of the law now; give it a little time.” Immediately, the authorities communicate with the mother; the child always carries with him names and telephones.

Martínez confirms that getting children away from gangs is an important motive for the parents paying for these journeys. But gang outrages are nothing new, he adds, so they are not a good explanation for the steep rise in underage immigrants since 2012. What explains the timing, he believes, was the rumor that U.S. authorities were allowing migrants under the age of eighteen to join their parents. The rumor proved to be true: according to federal officials, 85% of the unaccompanied minors are being released to parents or other close relatives.

When the Border Patrol arrests unauthorized border-crossers under the age of eighteen, it handles them differently than adults. Until recently, this meant being locked up for longer—but in youth homes which are supposed to meet educational and medical needs. Now that the system is overloaded, youth are being released to their relatives with fewer questions than before. For example, it doesn’t seem to matter whether relatives are in the U.S. legally or not.

The most important stipulation is that, after reaching eighteen, the underage border-crosser must appear before an immigration judge who will decide his or her fate. The right to work in the U.S. or deportation? How many show up for their court dates is in dispute, as well as how many comply with deportation orders. Not in dispute is that immigration courts face an enormous backlog—375,000 cases, of which 41,000 involve minors. This postpones deportation but also keeps underage migrants and their families in legal limbo.

In Sonia Nazario’s reporting on the recent surge of underage migrants, she concedes that most seek to join their parents or other relatives. She also concedes that Central Americans who come to the U.S. merely to find work should be sent home. But if fleeing gangs becomes grounds for admission, won’t labor migrants also say they are fleeing gangs?

Asylum applications have become controversial because they are easy to fake. Since immigration judges have little ability to verify events in foreign countries, even successful applicants often have no evidence apart from their stories. Later, some of the stories shrivel. This is why opponents of high immigration flows assume that most asylum

applicants are frauds. Advocates argue that, even if some applicants are not telling the truth, the potential harm of sending them home (death) far outweighs the harm of waving them through.

If underage migrants receive the legal protection that advocates believe they deserve, many will win legal status. But will bringing large numbers of young Central Americans to the U.S. improve their lives? On closer examination, the experience of Enrique, his mother and other Central Americans suggests that the answer is no.

Consider what a social service provider in Baltimore has told Pam Fessler of National Public Radio: “so far almost every single one of the kids that we’ve gotten has been through some horrendous trauma.” According to a migrant translated by Fessler: “many of the children have been physically or sexually abused at home or along the way here....one 11-year-old girl was raped by the men her family paid to bring her to the U.S. And now she’s pregnant.” Other agencies are reporting similar cases, Fessler adds: “children with layer upon layer of problems that will need to be dealt with soon.”

The biggest fear according to Fessler: “That these kids will become prey to U.S. gangs like those they were trying to flee.”

The question we need to ask is: How can the U.S. be a refuge from gangs if we are the society that gave birth to the gangs? The two biggest networks in Central America—18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13—were started by Mexican and Salvadoran youth in Los Angeles. Deportations of convicted members sent gang culture back to their countries of origin. And as Sonia Nazario was one of the first to point out, gang life is particularly appealing to Central American youth whose parents have gone to the U.S.

Meanwhile, in El Norte many Central Americans never achieve their financial goals. Nazario’s portrait of Enrique and his mother illustrates how migration has such disappointing returns that it compels further migration. In the U.S. Lourdes never is able to send home enough dollars for her children to escape poverty. Instead, her sojourn becomes a struggle to keep her head above water. As her son and other relatives come north to join her, their tribulations suggest that this kind of migration is a vicious cycle that worsens the problems it is supposed to solve.

The fundamental difficulty experienced by Lourdes, rarely acknowledged by migration advocates, is that the more newcomers arrive, the harder it is for them to find work. As low-wage labor markets become saturated, many immigrants find employment only in ethnic enclaves. Here they are employed by fellow immigrants at sub-legal wages which barely enable them to support themselves, let alone remit to their families. The repercussions are especially sharp for the intended beneficiaries back home. Having lost their most energetic breadwinners to the U.S., these families become heavily dependent on remittances. Any interruption in the flow of dollars makes them poorer than they were to begin with.

A second vicious cycle is the search for safety in the U.S. Researchers may never be able to get inside the most murderous gangs. But from survivors, we know that Central American gangs are based on intense admiration of American culture, or at least what passes for it in movies and music. Particularly admired are self-determination at an early age, consumption of sex, drugs and the latest electronics, and becoming a law unto yourself with a gun.

This is the love/hate affair that gave birth to Latino gangs in Los Angeles, and that has made them a model to emulate in Central America. Youth at the bottom of the social hierarchy are inundated with media depictions of flashy consumption but have no law-

meritarily are indicated with media depictions of hungry consumption but have no law-abiding means to attain it.

How gangs are generated by migration-distended families and saturated labor markets is too subtle for the victim/victimizer dichotomies of most immigrant-rights activism. From advocates all you're likely to hear is that the U.S. government is to blame for the gangs, by deporting gang members back to their countries of birth and waging the War on Drugs. What you won't hear is that the gangs were also spread by offering "sanctuary" to large numbers of economic migrants during the civil wars of the 1980s. Unfortunately, dangerous neighborhoods, bad jobs, or no jobs at all were no sanctuary, nor will they be for the latest generation of Central American youth to come north in large numbers.

Victim/victimizer dichotomies also gloss over the practical difficulties of dealing with troubled youth. The distance between the "children" being embraced by humanitarian advocates and the "gang members" from whom they are fleeing is not as large as these terms imply. The youth most likely to be killed by a gang, and most in need of protection, are members of rival gangs and gang dropouts. But media campaigns require a dichotomy between innocent children and ruthless criminals. If there is the slightest chance that a story about fleeing criminals is true, safety requires that a youth be allowed to stay in the U.S.—even if he is already part of the problem.

In Central America, photos of migrants crowding the roofs of Mexican boxcars are achieving the same resonance as Plymouth Rock for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants and Ellis Island for later arrivals from Europe. This is the Central American gateway to the promised land, but not one that is going to turn out very well. Plymouth Rock stood for a continent that, once it was seized from Native Americans, became bountiful for generations of settlers. Ellis Island became the gateway to the mightiest industrial economy on the planet, enabling many immigrants to rise into the middle class. But Mexican boxcars are delivering Central Americans into an economy that is shedding good jobs, not multiplying them.

The weakness of the humanitarian argument for admitting large numbers of Central Americans is that it has no effective limit. The mere fact of facing risks is becoming grounds for admission as a refugee. But humanitarians are ignoring obvious limits in the protection that can be provided by U.S. society. Defining labor migrants as refugees is far from a no-cost enterprise. If advocates are successful in justifying higher flows of youth and mothers, this will increase the number of migrants competing for jobs and add to the deficits of their families back home, pressuring yet more to come north.

American elites, in both political parties, have considerable sympathy for immigrants. They are not just being charitable. The cheap-labor lobby no longer consists mainly of agribusiness and sweatshops; it includes more and more employers, in more and more sectors, who are hungry for cheap foreign labor. Judging from our latest border drama, they will get more of what they want.

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**David Stoll** is the author of [\*El Norte or Bust! How Migration Fever and Microcredit Produced a Financial Crash in a Latin American Town.\*](#)

## One thought on “Children on the Border: Could Migration be the Problem, Not the Solution?”

*Tom Neely says:*

[May 29, 2017 at 3:03 pm](#)

David, All of this is much too real and way too true. People in the USA only will pay attention to simple cartoons and simple-minded myth. They will accuse you of being fancy, suspect you of being smart or some such. Thank you for this wonderful summary of the complicated, contradictory real world.

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