

# The Economics Behind the Border Pile-Up; For many, migration to the U.S. is a dream that can destroy families and leave people even more vulnerable.

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## ABSTRACT

An intimate portrait of the phenomenon is Sonia Nazario's "Enrique's Journey" (Random House, 2006), about a Honduran boy who rides Mexican freight trains to find the mother who abandoned him a decade earlier. When an earner remits to his wife and children in Central America, the money goes much further than it does in the U.S. Once everyone reaches El Norte, even two parents working for the minimum wage may not be able to support a family.

## FULL TEXT

A peasant leader in Guatemala asked last year if I could help him get several men deported from the United States. Why? They were no longer sending money to their children, and their wives hoped they could be deported back to their responsibilities. When my friend took this petition to the Guatemalan foreign ministry, he was informed that its mission is to support migrants to the U.S., not extradite them.

The episode comes to mind as tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors, mothers and small children pile up on America's border with Mexico. As Americans debate the influx, most of us assume that a better life awaits those who are able to stay. My research in a Guatemalan town suggests that the dream of migration produces many tragedies.

The Obama administration reports a 92% surge in the detention of unaccompanied minors in the last fiscal year. Children traveling with their mothers are also overwhelming the U.S. Border Patrol. Most are Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans. Some say they are escaping gang violence--although getting through Mexico is usually more perilous for Central Americans than what they face back home. If they hail from rural areas, they are likely to have more problems with gangs in U.S. cities than where they come from.

Critics of the Obama administration say the women and children are taking advantage of its attempts to dial back immigration enforcement, such as a measure called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Northward-bound mothers tell reporters that, within a few days of being arrested, they hope to be released in the U.S. on humanitarian grounds.

Missing from both these explanations is an obvious concern for any needy mother traveling with small children: her relationship with the father. Either the women and children seek to join a father somewhere in the U.S. or they

hope that, once inside the U.S., some combination of employment, public benefits or private charity will make up for his absence. Whatever these women's calculations and illusions, one thing is certain: They come from complicated family situations.

Child migration has been mushrooming for more than a decade. An intimate portrait of the phenomenon is Sonia Nazario's "Enrique's Journey" (Random House, 2006), about a Honduran boy who rides Mexican freight trains to find the mother who abandoned him a decade earlier. Enrique is only 5 feet tall, but he turns out to be 17 years old, has been working for years and fathered a child.

So when you read about unaccompanied children flooding detention facilities, it is important to ask: How old are they? In the U.S., anyone under age 18 is legally a minor, but the average age of unaccompanied minors caught by the U.S. Border Patrol is 14 or 15, which in Central America is old enough to work. Many of these youths are aiming for the U.S. labor market, and often with financial support from their parents.

In the Guatemalan town where I do research, approximately 20% of the working-age male population has departed for the U.S. Some men are paragons and send home every dollar they can. Thanks to their remittances, some children eat better, are better clothed and schooled. But remittances are never a secure income stream, and not merely because of U.S. deportation policies. Many migrants fail to find steady work. Some fall victim to cheap beer and other amusements. The longer they stay in the U.S., the more likely they are to start a second family.

One way to hold the original family together is for the mother and children to come north. But family reunification is no panacea even when it can be done legally. When an earner remits to his wife and children in Central America, the money goes much further than it does in the U.S. Once everyone reaches El Norte, even two parents working for the minimum wage may not be able to support a family. So their children get an education in downward mobility and relative deprivation, which is one reason immigrants brought here as boys run a high risk of being sucked into gangs.

Immigrant-rights activists insist that unauthorized border-crossers are victims of human-rights abuses. If migrants have not been victimized by their countries of origin, the argument goes, they must have been victimized by U.S. border agents' attempt to stop them. Advocates also argue that migrants have been displaced by wrongheaded U.S. policies, such as supporting dictatorships or free trade, so the U.S. has a moral obligation to accept them.

But migration itself produces victims, such as wives hoping for the deportation of their husbands, and they are far from the only ones. Where I work in Guatemala, remittances have inflated the price of land to astounding levels; most families are unable to buy property unless they can place at least one wage-earner in the U.S. So every family is under pressure to send someone north. Migrants must borrow at least \$5,000 to pay human smugglers. Many pay 10% monthly interest and put up family land as collateral. So they're betting the farm. When something goes wrong, they lose it.

Migration on these terms is not a solution to the problems facing Central Americans. Because jobs in the U.S. are scarce, and living costs are so high compared with Central America, even legal migration can beggar them.

So what about all those women and children piling up on the border? Humanitarian advocates assume that the U.S. is their sanctuary—but what if it is the illusions of migration that wrecked their families in the first place?

Mr. Stoll is the author of "El Norte or Bust! How Migration Fever and Microcredit Produced a Financial Crash in a Latin American Town" (Rowan & Littlefield, 2012).

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