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Getting to America:

The new normal in undocumented migration from Central America to

The United States

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Getting to America:
The new normal in undocumented migration from Central America to
The United States

by
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Abstract

Getting to America:

The new normal in undocumented migration from Central America to The United States

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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Abstract: A visual and written treatment of the driving forces behind undocumented migration to The United States from Central America in 2016, the dangers of the journey, and US policy responses to the phenomenon through the perspectives of those affected and informed by testimony.

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Getting to America:

The New Normal in Undocumented Migration from Central America to the United States

[See: “The United States of America” Slideshow]

As night falls across the sluggish Rio Grande, there is a light drizzle and sporadic bursts of lightning emerging from the tall and dark clouds. On an overgrown dusty trail that is the width of a big SUV, and less than 50 yards north of the riverbank, 13 people carrying little but the clothes they’re wearing and small backpacks step gingerly into the glare from the headlights of US Border Patrol Agent José Perales’ vehicle. As they slowly approach, they draw slightly closer together.

“Women and children don’t flee,” explains Perales, a mountain of a man and a 16-year veteran of the border patrol, as he watches from inside his car. “We can sit here and wait and you’ll see the family units just walk up.”¹

So they do.

One young girl wears a bright pink Hello Kitty T-shirt that looks like a knock-off. A woman is carrying a small boy in one arm and holding hands with another child.

As they reach the Border Patrol vehicle, Perales greets the group with a tenderness seemingly at odds with his massive frame and the lingering booms of thunder across the river. In a much-practiced manner, he and his partner go about recording the names, ages, and places of origin for all 13. All are undocumented and all are from Central America.

Specifically, they're from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the three "Northern Triangle" countries that have seen a dramatic exodus in recent years as gang violence has reached unprecedented levels.

"The real motivating thing is the violence--if there's a way out, people will leave and they'll go where it's safe," says Dr. Alfonso J. Valdez of the University of California Irvine, and a former gang unit expert with the Orange County District Attorney's office. "All the immigrants that I've interviewed and I've interviewed thousands of immigrants coming from the Northern Triangle, mostly from El Salvador and Honduras, they leave to escape the violence from the gangs and the police suppression."

By June-2016, over 43,000 unaccompanied Central American children like Alejandra had been apprehended at the US-Mexico border, up 60% from the year prior and up 140% since 2012. Over 51,000 families have been apprehended this year, up 105% from last year and up 495% since 2012.

As of May this year, Border Patrol apprehended more Central Americans traveling as families than they did in all of 2015.

"It's like this every day," says Perales. "It's always busy."

And with the forecasts pointing toward continued surges of Central American refugees seeking haven in the United States, experts have identified persistent gang violence in Central America as the key factor driving folks north. In 2014, gang violence in Central America spiked particularly high, contributing to what has since been named the "Central American Refugee Crisis," when a record [239,229 Central American migrants](#) were apprehended at the US-Mexico

border. It marked the first year in which more Central Americans were apprehended than Mexicans.

Since then, as gang violence in the Northern Triangle has increased and as interim measures to stem the tide of migrants have been stretched to their limits, observers are asking if 2016 will be the year of a second Central American Refugee Crisis.

“You are going to see, not only in the United States and Mexico but a lot of the other Central American countries, larger increases in potential refugees or people fleeing the Northern Triangle,” says Maureen Meyer of the Washington Office on Latin America, a group that studies the region and immigration issues.

Alejandra, the girl in the hello Kitty shirt, is from Guatemala. She’s 14 years old and was on her way to Houston to be reconnected with her mother before she turned herself into Agent Perales.

“I want to get to know her,” she says simply. “I don’t remember much about her.” Alejandra hasn’t seen her mother since she was six—over eight years ago--and made the trip north with her 12-year-old brother, Brayan, and their nine-year-old cousin, Christofer, eating day-old bread and drinking stale water in the back of a bus for nine days straight.

The three crossed the river with the help of a smuggler that her family in Texas had arranged for them to meet -- but who, halfway across the Rio Grande suddenly swam off, returning to the Mexican shore and leaving the children alone to fight the current.

Perales has heard this story in one form or another hundreds of times from the constant stream of unaccompanied children and families that he's encountered fleeing Central America over the past several years. Still, tonight, he listens to Alejandra's story and tries to soothe her anxieties, offering her family bottles of water.

The light drizzle is turning into a steady downpour as a white van with grates over the windows and the signature Border Patrol green stripe running down its side pulls up. Silently, the 13 pile Central Americans pile into it--without any luggage, their thin frames have no trouble fitting inside--and the van drives off down the trail and back to the Border Patrol sector headquarters.

Climbing back into his own vehicle, Perales switches on his police radio. It starts squawking loudly, rising above the sound of the heavy rain on the car roof, announcing news about other migrants being spotted at other places along the river.

Undocumented migration to the United States from Central America in 2016 will surely surpass levels seen in 2015 and may even reach the levels from 2014 --when the "Central American Refugee Crisis" shocked immigration experts.

Those experts have concluded that the uptick in Central American migrants is directly tied to the vicious and widespread gang violence. El Salvador's homicide rate in 2015 was the [highest in the world](#) and Guatemala and Honduras also ranked among the hemisphere's top five

in terms of homicide rates-- in the past three years more than half-a-million Central American migrants have been apprehended by the Border Patrol after making the months-long trek from Central America to the United States in spite of the extraordinary danger.

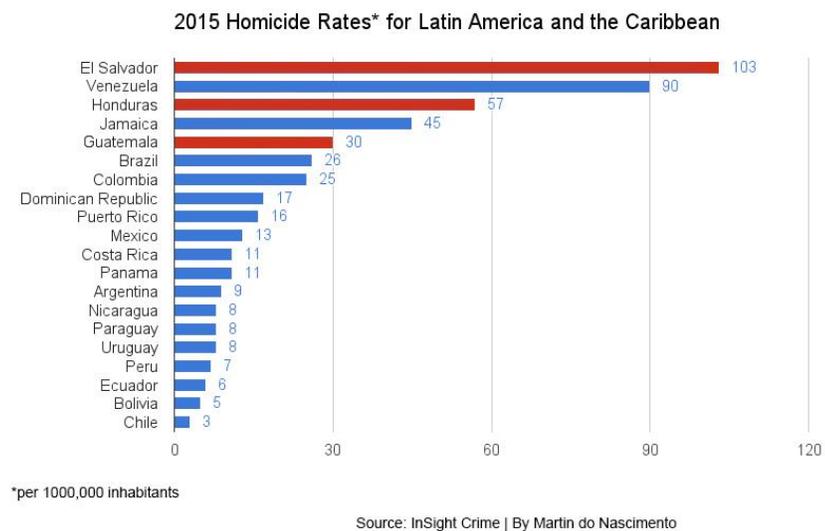
Since the end of a failed truce between the gangs and the government in El Salvador in 2012, gang-violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras has worsened to the extent that their [members now](#)

[number in the tens of thousands and their armaments rival even those of the militaries](#) in some countries.

Trying to get to the deeper, underlying roots of both the gang

violence and the migration involves an acute examination of Central American history. The region has a long, complicated past defined by U.S. economic and political domination, grinding poverty and a seemingly endless series of corrupt governments – including dictators and communists. Often, ordinary people have fallen prey to the machinations of big corporations and corrupt leaders.

“In many cases these things are built on cycles of policy and conflict.” says Justin Wolfe, Associate Professor of History at Tulane University.



“US intervention did lay the groundwork for the rise of certain kinds of authoritarian regimes that would become part of that cycle as well,” says Wolfe, who has spent decades teaching and conducting research on 20th century Central American history. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras “the U.S. was there in some sense setting up a set of relationships and supporting a regime that would often produce the civil wars that would come.”

In the 1980s, many in the U.S. turned their attention to the often overlooked region when stories emerged about possible rebel insurgencies – and attempts to unseat unpopular rulers – in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and even Mexico.

News particularly spread when the U.S. was revealed to be supporting anti-socialist and anti-communist groups who were trying to “take back” Nicaragua from the Sandinista party that had emerged in the 1980s. As social unrest spread through the region, thousands of poor people began fleeing – afraid of the erupting civil wars, government crackdowns or being forced to go to war. The upheaval only exacerbated the poverty, which only led to more and more people wanting to seek a secure life in the United States, even if it meant separating from families.

“When massacres were at their height in Guatemala or El Salvador, there was nothing you could do to keep your head low. If you were in the wrong place, you would be killed,” says Wolfe. “As people realized that there was no way to be safe, they often moved and I think that built up over time. As you witnessed cousin your, then your friend, then your brother get killed, there was a point where the amount of violence that you faced the proximity of it to you and your own family, as well as the breakdown of your own social networks that comes as that happens, were all part of the factors that leads people to move out.”

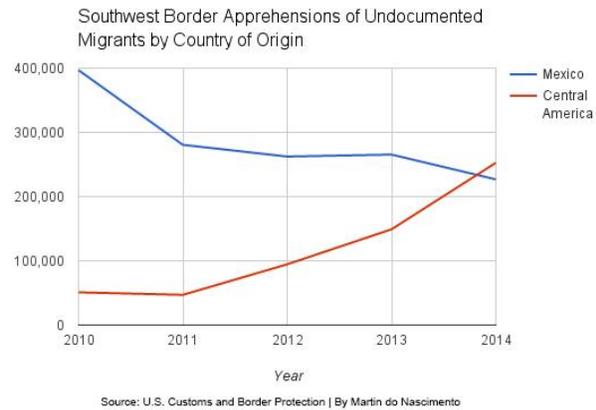
Beginning in 2010 there was a new cycle of refugees coming from Central America.

Droves of migrants, many of them unaccompanied minors like Alejandra, showed up at the US-Mexico Border, particularly in South Texas, crossing into the country without any documentation. Rather than running from the authorities, they voluntarily turned themselves in.

News coverage focused first on the sheer unprecedented nature of so many unaccompanied young people making the perilous journey from their homes to the United States, but eventually turned to why the mass exodus was occurring in the first place. The stories described the same cycles of poverty but especially the exploding threat of gang violence in the region – and disturbing accounts about [teenagers threatened with death](#) if they didn't join one gang or another, or if they refused to enter into a romantic relationship with a gang member.

Of the almost 2.7 million Central Americans from the Northern Triangle living in the United States, almost half have arrived since 2000, long after the end of the civil wars, and over 100,000 unaccompanied minors arrived between October 2013 and July 2015. And gang violence seems central to the migration:

The Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13) and 18th Street (Calle 18) are the most pernicious of the gangs now operating in the region – the two also flourish in the United States. After, fleeing the Central American violence, and then moving to ghettos in the largest cities in the United States –



and without legal status or legal sources of income -- some refugees were confronted by the same gangs they had escaped.

“The new immigrants, some of them become victims of 18th Street. Other young kids join and others become members of a group called the Mara Salvatrucha Stoners, MSS,” says Valdez. “It was a stoner gang and they smoked dope and drank beer and listened to heavy metal music.”

By the mid-1980s, the gangs were becoming an integral part of the criminal scene of Los Angeles. As they continued to grow, the imprisonment of gang members served to professionalize their operations – putting them in contact with long-standing criminal operations and providing them with the time and space to form relations -- and when some begin being deported back to their home countries, they took their newfound structures and operations with them.

“When we started deporting, in the mid-80’s and early 90’s, these gang members back to their countries, they acted like catalysts,” says Valdez. They returned to Central America and kickstarted more violence.

In 2012, in an attempt to reduce the soaring gang violence, [the government of El Salvador struck a temporary truce](#) with the gangs. Known as “La Tregua,” the truce did manage to reduce gang violence until it began to unravel in late 2013.

“They had a change of government,” says Valdez, and the incoming government “didn’t want to honor the truce. So now you’ve got a war on your hands between the establishment and street gangs.”

Since then, [violence has skyrocketed](#).

[See: Mexico Slideshow]

Dikeni Carias remembers his journey: A total of 2,143 Mexican pesos--just under \$115 -- is how he had on him when he was robbed.

Carias, his wife Carina, and their 18-month-old son Jean François had barely crossed the Suchiates river from Guatemala into Mexico when they were held up at gun-and-machete-point by a band of robbers lying in wait for unsuspecting Central American migrants.

“Imagine, losing everything in less than ten minutes’ time,” says Carias. The sum was the family’s entire life savings and their only recourse while trying to make it from their native Honduras to start a new life in San Antonio, Texas

Still, Carias is grateful to the robbers.

“They came out with machetes, with guns. They stopped us and told us to strip,” he recalls. “All I said to them was ‘I’ll give you everything that we have but please don’t harm my son or my wife.’”

“How much do you have?” the robbers asked.

The 2,143 pesos was enough and Carina, who is seven-and-a-half months pregnant, and Jean François were allowed to go on ahead while Dikeni turned over the money.

Just as he was leaving, another band of robbers arrived with two young women in tow.

“They had it bad,” he says. “You can still hear even if the woman doesn’t want to scream.”

Now, 270 miles from the scene, Dikeni watches Jean François scooting around the courtyard of a sun-soaked and dusty compound in Ixtepec, MX. The child, wearing only a

diaper, has chestnut hair that falls just shy of his eyes. He intently stares at the cracks in the concrete patio outside the dormitory where his mother is resting.

The compound is a migrant shelter--one in a string of places up and down southern Mexico where countless Central American migrants making their way to the United States can spend a few nights free of charge and get two rudimentary meals a day. Comprised of two dormitories--one for men and one for women and children—and a mess hall and kitchen, an outdoor chapel, and the offices of the Catholic mission that maintains the shelter, the entire compound is walled-in by ten-foot tall cinder block battlements to keep robbers out.

Through a chain-link gate at the back of the lot, one can make out a single set of train tracks stretching into the arid, hilly countryside; before, the train known as *La Bestia* was the main means of transportation for the migrants. Beginning in Tapachula, near the border with Guatemala, and extending all the way to Reynosa, Ciudad Juarez, or Nogales on the U.S.-Mexico border, migrant shelters began to crop up in the towns that the train passed through -- so that migrants making the journey could have somewhere relatively safe to sleep, a decent meal or two, and maybe even receive some medical attention.

Still, hitching a ride on *La Bestia* was a risky way to travel--[horror stories of assaults and robberies abound](#)--but for the most part it kept migrants contained to a few routes. And that meant that aid agencies that operated the shelters and provided other services to migrants knew where to concentrate their efforts. It also meant that the migrants travelled in larger groups: Sometimes as many as several hundred would catch the train at any given time and were far less at risk of assault by gangs.

But since the numbers of Central American migrants started rising, and particularly since the Central American Refugee Crisis in 2014 at the US-Mexico border, the Mexican government has made it a top priority to keep migrants off of the train.

The result is that ever since they crossed into Mexico from Guatemala, Dikeni, Carina, and Jean François, have had to walk the 270 miles from the border to Ixtepec -- just like most other migrants these days, risking a greater likelihood of falling victim to robbers and sleeping in the elements while trekking from one town to the next. Carina's pregnancy has made the walking difficult, not to mention she and her husband having to take turns carrying little Jean Francois, but Dikeni says that there was no other option for them.

“Our dream, the reason why we're going through this, is for our family to have a better future,” he says.

Setting out, their goal was to reach San Antonio before their new child was born. With the robbery however, that dream seems an impossibility and the couple now hopes simply to scrape together enough money working odd jobs in Ixtepec to have the baby in Mexico City, where there's better medical attention available.

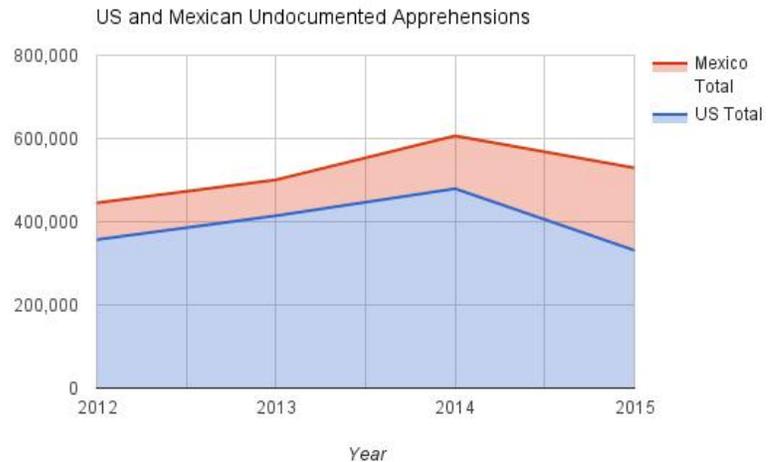
“The only option that we have now is to keep walking little by little,” says Carias. “If I have to endure hunger, or if I have to walk barefoot, or to ask for a shirt or pants, I do it so that my children don't have to.”

Following the spike in violence caused by the end of the truce in El Salvador in 2014, the numbers of apprehensions at the US-Mexico border ticked up dramatically.

But in 2015, with gang violence just as pervasive across the Northern Triangle as the year before, apprehensions on the US-Mexico border actually fell. Observers say that it is tied to

[Mexico stepping up its own detentions of undocumented Central Americans](#) --

detaining over 190,000 migrants as part of a US-supported initiative known as “Programa Frontera Sur.”



Sources: U.S. Customs and Border Protection; M.X. Secretaría de Gobernación | By Martin do Nascimento

After the unprecedented apprehension of Central Americans at the US-Mexico border in 2014, President Obama met with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto “to develop concrete proposals to address the root causes of unlawful migration from Central America,” according to [a White House statement](#).

Two and a half weeks later, Peña Nieto rolled out *Programa Frontera Sur* [under the auspices of protecting migrants](#) traveling through Mexico. That “Southern Border Program” by Mexico effectively [tripled the country’s number of apprehensions of undocumented migrants](#), according to Claudia Ruiz Massieu Salinas, the Mexican Secretary of Foreign affairs.

But experts say the increased enforcement has only served to make the journey through Mexico all the more dangerous for migrants:

“These routes expose migrants to new vulnerabilities while isolating them from the network of shelters established along traditional routes,” according to a study last year by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a human rights advocacy organization.

The [report highlights how the prospect of being captured by Mexican officials forces migrants to alter their routes and modes of transport](#) – and in doing so puts them in greater danger. The deployment of *Programa Frontera Sur* makes it next impossible to travel via *La Bestia*, as Mexican authorities have taken to detaining and deporting any undocumented riders, and instead forces migrants to walk great distances through sparsely inhabited territory for up to days at a time.

The crackdown by Mexican officials has led to the refugees being preyed upon as they wander north in small bands– including sexual assaults, robberies and kidnappings. Migrants even claim that they regularly suffer abuses at the hands of the very Mexican authorities charged with protecting them.

Critics say that the U.S. support of Mexico’s crackdown has been damaging: where it comes to deterring Central Americans from reaching the US-Mexico border “the US has had a role in certainly encouraging and pressuring Mexico to be a partner with them and there are real consequences from that for migrants themselves,” said Maureen Meyer, who co-authored the WOLA report.

She added that U.S. officials “have supported efforts that we would view as having put migrants at a lot more risk.”

Earlier this year, [the Mexican publication Animal Politico](#) conducted a study suggesting that “Programa Frontera Sur” led to a 246 percent increase in assaults of migrants, and a 61

percent increase in robberies, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, in just the first year of the program.

Mexican officials in the US and in Mexico did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

[See: El Salvador Slideshow]

The buses begin arriving around 9:30 a.m. --they'd set out from southern Mexico the night prior and driven clean across Guatemala to El Salvador--and promptly upon arrival begin issuing droves of tired-looking folk onto the cobble-stoned parking lot in front of the repatriation center.

Descending from the massive coaches, the puffy-eyed people retrieve whatever bag contains their meager belongings and follow the concrete steps to the center where they are given juice boxes and crackers to tide them over while awaiting processing -- a repatriation interview, an optional doctor's consultation, and finally a ride to the nearest bus station.

Sitting in a large open hall and waiting their turns, some of the deportees swap stories with one another, others doze in and out, lulled by the sound of the general commotion of so many people in one place. Mothers breastfeed their babies or try to put them to sleep and young kids fidget anxiously in their chairs.

Geremias Gomez Guerrero, 28-years-old from Izalco, El Salvador, looks tired as he reads through the pamphlet given to El Salvadoran migrants upon their deportation back to that country.

“Guide for the Return,” is the title of the slight blue booklet and, like many of the several hundred deported migrants who arrived at the Dirección de Atención al Migrante repatriation center earlier that morning in a series of buses from Mexico, Geremias flips quickly from page to page before stashing the booklet in a disheveled green backpack.

“I was working as a mechanic at a traveling carnival,” he explains, which meant going from town to town, setting up a few small-scale rides and games for a week or two at a time--not the best gig for a man with a wife two small daughters, 2 and 7, at home in Izalco, but the best he could get.

His town of Izalco was controlled by the 18th Street gang but the traveling carnival he worked for was controlled by the MS 13 gang. And then the 18th Street gang banned Geremias from returning home -- and the MS 13 gang banned him from the carnival. He was caught in the middle of a gang war.

“I talked to the boss,” says Geremias, “and he said ‘I can’t help you. I tried to help by giving you the job but, you know how they are. You can’t reason with them.’”

Geremias was without a job, without a home, stranded away from his wife and daughters, and reduced to living on the street and collecting tin cans to survive. For three months, he lived alone, broke and afraid on the street in San Salvador, El Salvador’s crime-crippled capital. Eventually, Geremias came to the conclusion that life in El Salvador was untenable. However dangerous the journey, he might as well try his luck at making it to the United States.

At 4 a.m. one day, Geremias and a friend set out from a migrant shelter in Guatemala and crossed the Suchiate river into Mexico hours before day-break, hoping any would-be robbers known to wait by the water’s edge to prey on unsuspecting migrants would still be asleep.

Geremias had met Jonathan, the friend, in the shelter and they had decided to stick together, for safety and for company and because Jonathan had an uncle in Los Angeles that could get them work if they made it there.

Rather than try to hitch a ride, they walked the 25 miles from the border to Tapachula that same day, in an attempt to avoid the Mexican migration checkpoints on the highway and also because they didn't have hardly a cent between them. In Tapachula, they spent a few nights in a migrant shelter run by the Catholic mission and from there they'd walked north along the coast following the train tracks of *La Bestia*, staying in migrant shelters when they could but more often than not walking through the night and sleeping during the day in the brush just off from the tracks.

Passing through one of the region's tiny hamlets, they would go from door to door, asking for tortillas or spare change and eventually they gathered enough money for the bus fare to Arriaga, the next town with a migrant shelter, and save their feet some abuse.

While Geremias and Jonathan had been warned about the migration checkpoint between the border and Tapachula they didn't know about the one outside of Arriaga. When the bus was stopped at the checkpoint, Jonathan was asked to show his papers but Geremias wasn't. When he couldn't, Jonathan was pulled off the bus and, not wanting to abandon his friend, Geremias got off too – and he was taken into custody and sent to the repatriation center.

Now, at the repatriation center, it's Geremias' turn for his interview.

He approaches one of the 20-some dark gray cubicles assembled against a wall of the center to process the steady stream of deportees.

The curt-looking agent has Geremias write down his name, age, hometown. Then there are a few more questions.

“Education?” she asks.

“8th grade.”

“Why did you leave?”

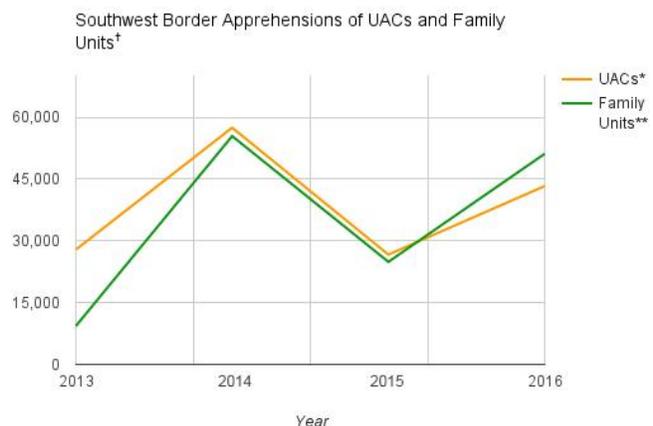
“It’s better to be alive than stay there.”

“Will you try to go again?”

“I will.”

U.S. Border Patrol apprehensions of undocumented migrants for this year are up dramatically compared to 2015 and recent reports suggest that this may be a result of Mexico’s ability to regulate Central American migration through the *Programa Frontera Sur* initiative being [stretched to the limit](#). Mexican authorities did not respond to repeated requests for comment here either.

Complicating things is a problem that has existed for decades: The people crossing the southern border often have absolutely no legal recourse -- no lawyers to argue on



*UAC - Unaccompanied Alien Children
**Family Units - Individuals apprehended with at least one other family member
†Figures provided through June of each year for the basis of comparison to 2016 statistics

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection | By Martin do Nascimento

their behalf for asylum or refugee status. As many sit in detention centers across the country, they have no immigration lawyers arguing to US officials that their clients will be in grave danger if they are deported.

Meanwhile, in two separate operations this year, US immigration officials have [stepped up raids and deportations](#) of undocumented Central American migrants specifically targeting those who arrived as part of the Central American refugee crisis in an attempt to deter future undocumented migration to the country.

"We stress that these operations are limited to those who were apprehended at the border after January 1, 2014, have been ordered removed by an immigration court, and have no pending appeal or pending claim for asylum," said U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spokeswoman Jennifer Elzea about an operation undertaken in May of this year.

While ICE declined to release the number of undocumented immigrants detained in the operations that were instituted in May, a similar series of raids and deportations against Central Americans undertaken at the outset of the year resulted in 336 apprehensions and deportations of, predominately people who entered the country as unaccompanied children and have since turned 18.

"Rather than responding to the refugee crisis in Central America with an intelligent strategy to address the root causes of violence in the region, and to ensure that the victims of that violence who arrive at our border have a full and fair opportunity to seek protection," said Benjamin Johnson, Director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) in a

statement released in May, 2016. “It is clear that the administration has decided to ramp up its indefensible strategy of deterrence through incarceration and intimidation.”

The AILA has been a vocal opponent to what it has deemed “[Due Process Denied](#)” by the U.S. Justice system for the Central American migrants fleeing violence and therefore qualifying for refugee status or asylum in the U.S. By its estimation, nine out of 10 Central American families had a “credible fear of persecution” in their home countries, qualifying them for a hearing in front of a judge, but fewer 20 percent of migrants ever receive such a hearing.

Human rights observers like Maureen Meyer from WOLA have also noted that official policy is putting the lives of the migrants in greater danger while accomplishing little in terms of deterring future migration.

“I don’t think the raids are an effective deterrence strategy,” Meyer says. “Rather, they are instilling fear in Latino communities in the United States and targeting for deportation women and children who pose no risk to the country and who often did not receive adequate legal assistance to be able to effectively make their case for asylum,” she says.

Elizabeth Kennedy, a former Fulbright Fellow and researcher and doctoral candidate at San Diego State University who has spent years conducting field research on deportees in Central America, agrees. The idea that these raids serve to “send a preventative message that the borders aren’t open to undocumented migrants is absurd,” she says.

“Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans that flee their countries, which are among the most violent in the world, come in the hopes of finding some sort of refuge,” Kennedy says. “They only choose to leave because they can’t stay where they are.”

While official records don't exist documenting how many deported migrants have been killed upon deportation to Central America, Kennedy's research has identified [at least 83 cases of migrants known to have been murdered](#) upon deportation to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras since January 2014.

A [2015 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) report](#) found that women especially face elevated levels of rape, assault, extortion, and threats by armed criminal groups in the Northern Triangle and Mexico following deportation.

At the end of 2014, Congress approved \$750 million for fostering economic growth and security in Central America under what officials called the "Alliance for Prosperity" initiative. Some observers see the approach as [a step in the right direction](#) – but also have concerns. "In the interim you are going to see, not only in the United States and Mexico but (in) a lot of the other Central American countries, larger increases in potential refugees or people [...] fleeing the Northern Triangle countries," says Meyer of WOLA.

People like Alejandra and her 12-year-old brother and cousin who were abandoned in the middle of the Rio Grande after spending days on end in the back of a bus fleeing desperately from the violence in Guatemala.

People like Dikeni and Carina and Jean François.

People like Geremias.

"I think what we're seeing right now should be considered a new normal," Meyer added.

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