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UPROOTED IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

Migrant and refugee children face a vicious cycle of hardship and danger

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Migration routes in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico



Note: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

COVER: Eliasa, 15, and his mother are reunited at a government reception shelter in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, after his deportation from Mexico.

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OVERVIEW:

In the best interest of the migrant child

“I asked my father if we could leave our country because the gang was going to kill me.”

– A 15-year-old girl from Honduras seeking asylum in Guatemala

In the countries of northern Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – and in Mexico, gang-related violence, organized crime, extortion, poverty and limited access to quality education and social services are part of daily life for millions of children. Each day, families facing these harsh conditions make the painful decision to leave their homes, communities and countries in search of safety and a more hopeful future. Some move within the region, while others head north to Mexico and the United States.

Yet many of the families trying to escape their desperate circumstances experience a host of new problems and traumas once they turn to irregular migration routes. These families must navigate a long, uncertain journey in which they risk being preyed upon by traffickers or other criminals, or losing their bearings in a mountain pass or desert while they try to avoid the authorities. They may be apprehended in transit or upon reaching their destinations, only to be detained and then returned to their

countries of origin. If they are sent back, they are likely to experience an intensification of the factors – violence, poverty, lack of opportunities, stigmatization, social exclusion and internal displacement – that drove them to migrate in the first place.

The end result is, essentially, a circle of danger and hardship that violates the best interests of children and young people throughout the migration and deportation cycle.

This Child Alert takes stock of the root causes of irregular migration from northern Central America and Mexico. It examines the array of challenges and dangers faced by migrant and refugee children and families during the arduous process of migration and return. And it employs evidence and interviews with some of these children and families – as well as non-governmental organizations and government partners – to highlight workable solutions that can protect the lives and well-being of uprooted children.

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A pastor shows his devotion to protecting children and young people

SAN PEDRO SULA, HONDURAS – Pastor Arnold Linares is the director of Puerta a las Misiones, a youth outreach centre in Rivera Hernandez, one of the most dangerous neighbourhoods in San Pedro Sula. Rivera Hernandez is split up into five smaller districts that are under the control of different gangs. The gangs here have usurped much of the local authority that typically would be held by municipal bodies.

“This community has been plagued by gangs, violence and poverty,” says Linares. “There are also no opportunities here, which is why people want to leave.”

Linares estimates that around half of the gang members in Rivera Hernandez are under the age

of 18. He says gangs often recruit children to carry out executions on their behalf because they know that young children will not be sent to prison. Gangs in the area are also known to bring children to their *casas locas* (crazy houses), where they are forced to witness drug use, executions and sexual relations.

Linares and his team at the outreach centre, which is supported by UNICEF, provide children with activities and creative outlets to keep them out of gangs. Linares recalls one of the gang leaders actually supporting these efforts.

“Please keep the children busy,” the leader said, “or else we will!”

ABOVE: A mural advocates peace in Rivera Hernandez, a neighbourhood in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, that suffers from rampant gang violence and a high homicide rate.

There are proven approaches that help alleviate the root causes of irregular and forced migration; protect migrant and refugee children in transit and upon reaching their destinations; provide children with access to essential services throughout the migration journey; and ensure that deportation and return take place only when they are in the best interest of the child. As this Child Alert demonstrates:

- Solutions must address the root causes of irregular and forced migration from northern Central America and Mexico, including poverty, gang violence and a lack of educational and economic opportunities. Addressing these causes will help reduce the factors that push families and children to leave their homes in search of safety or a more hopeful future via irregular and dangerous migration routes. Stricter border control measures do not effectively deter irregular migration but do increase the unnecessary suffering of migrants. In many cases, forcible return to their countries of origin leave migrants in even worse circumstances than before – increasing the likelihood that they will take the risk of migrating again.
- Governments must adopt procedures and safeguards ensuring that migrant and refugee children and families have access to the protections afforded them by international law – and that they are not being sent back to environments where their lives or physical integrity are threatened. Under the internationally agreed principle of ‘non-refoulement’, authorities are prohibited from returning people under such circumstances.
- Keeping families together and supporting alternatives to detention are in the best interests of migrant and refugee children. Detention and family separation by migration authorities are deeply traumatizing experiences that can adversely affect a child’s long-term development.
- Even in countries with stretched resources, it is possible to implement policies, provide services and make investments that effectively support refugee and migrant children – in their countries of origin, as they cross borders, upon reaching their destinations and if they are returned. Strong child protection systems are pivotal in identifying children at risk of forced migration or displacement, and ensuring that returned migrant children receive appropriate protection and support in their reintegration.
- But while UNICEF-supported programmes in northern Central America and Mexico are benefiting many young migrants, refugees and returnees, many other such initiatives are needed – and all of these efforts would have to be scaled up enormously to meet the challenges facing the region’s children at risk.

1. The root causes of migration

Every day, children and families from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico* leave their homes and communities to set off on the perilous journey northward. The decision to leave is often a wrenching one shaped by an interplay of factors – including grinding poverty, the pervasive threat of violence, an appalling lack of educational opportunities for children and a profound desire to reunite with family members who have already migrated.

Underscoring the latter point, in a 2016 registry of migrant children and adolescents who had been returned to Honduras, 31.5 per cent of respondents cited family reunification as their main reason for migrating. In a 2018 survey of returnees to El Salvador,

28 per cent said family reunification was their primary motivation.

Families' hopes for the future – everyday aspirations for their children's safety and security, a higher standard of living, a decent job – also influence their decisions about where and when to migrate.

UNICEF offices in northern Central America and Mexico partner with government authorities, civil society organizations, schools and others to improve the lives of children and families whose untenable circumstances force them to consider making the migration journey despite the risks they will face. Indeed, the fact that many families understand the perils of the journey, and decide to take it anyway, is a testament to the severity of the root causes of irregular migration from the region. Following is a brief summary of those causes and some of the UNICEF-supported programmes that work, often against daunting odds, to help address them.

* While families migrating from the countries of northern Central America often view Mexico as their destination, Mexico itself also suffers from root causes of irregular migration – including extreme poverty and violence – that motivate many of its most vulnerable citizens to head northward to the United States.

Parents upend their lives to protect a daughter from threats

GUATEMALA CITY – Pilar,* age 15, from the city of El Progreso in Honduras, is seeking asylum in Guatemala along with her parents and seven-year-old brother after being threatened by the notorious B18 gang. The family has been in Guatemala City since early April.

Back in El Progreso, a female schoolmate and known gang member insisted that Pilar join the gang and work as a prostitute to generate funds. When Pilar refused, the girl began making threats. "She told me that because she didn't like me and because I didn't want to sell my body, she would make [the gang] kill me," Pilar says. Gang members also started following her home from school.

Pilar told her parents about the threats. They made the difficult decision to sell their home and possessions and leave for Guatemala, where they hoped they would be safe.

Speaking from a migrants' reception centre in Guatemala City, Pilar's father notes that "adolescents are dying every day" in El Progreso, and sometimes the gangs do not even return their bodies to family members for proper burial. "It is common for the gangs to take girls," he adds, "but you cannot go to the police because they are in the chain of corruption."

For her part, Pilar says she hopes to study and become a veterinarian one day. "I support her decision to study and do whatever she wants," her father asserts. "We are a family."

* Name changed to protect identity.

ESCAPING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE

For many families, migration to Mexico or the United States is the only path they can imagine to escape the torment of extreme poverty.

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are three of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Some 74 per cent of children in Honduras live in households classified as poor, as do 68 per cent in Guatemala and 44 per cent in El Salvador. Notably, 63 per cent of Guatemalan migrant children apprehended in Mexico and the United States are from indigenous communities, which are disproportionately poor.

These high levels of poverty have direct consequences for children across a range of indicators, severely limiting their access to adequate nutrition, health care and sanitation. Moreover, families living in poverty may not be able to send their children to school. And even if they do attend, these children are likely to receive low-quality education in under-resourced schools with teachers who have not, themselves, had access to proper training. Without quality learning, children are less likely to secure jobs as adults – perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage.

In some parts of northern Central America, poor school enrolment rates get even worse as children reach adolescence. In Honduras, for instance, just 46.7 per cent of adolescents aged 12 to 14 – and only 28.1 per cent of adolescents aged 15 to 17 – were in school in 2017. Many poor families in the region see migration to Mexico or the United States as one of the few possible routes towards better education as their children grow older.

To help the region's children and young people escape the cycle of poverty and disadvantage in northern Central America and Mexico, UNICEF and partners support government authorities and service providers working to expand access to basic services such as education and health care – especially for the most vulnerable. For example:

- UNICEF's offices in the region are involved in various efforts to measure and address multidimensional child poverty, strengthen public investment in children and develop child-responsive social protection initiatives. In addition, they provide technical support to help governments improve the reach and effectiveness of conditional cash transfer programmes, which aim to reduce poverty and facilitate access to services for children and women who otherwise might have to migrate.
- UNICEF has also developed programmes to identify out-of-school children and support their educational reintegration through more flexible and adaptable curricula, and other measures. These efforts help children and families contend with financial barriers, such as school fees and related costs, as well as threats of gang violence in and around schools.
- At the regional level, UNICEF has advanced a six-point agenda for action to protect the rights of migrant and refugee children from northern Central America and Mexico (see pages 21–25). The agenda includes a call for enhanced investment to break the cycle of poverty by increasing access to education and social protection; expanding opportunities for family income and youth employment; and fostering more accountable and transparent governance.
- UNICEF also works with national education systems, develops pedagogical materials, provides training, and raises awareness to fight discrimination against migrant and refugee children.

VIOLENCE AND GANG ACTIVITY

For many families, migration to Mexico or the United States seems like the only way to leave the danger of unrelenting violence behind.

Northern Central America contains some of the world's most violent countries that are not engaged in active warfare. According to the InSight Crime foundation, in 2017 there were homicide rates of 60 per 100,000 people in El Salvador, 26.1 per 100,000 in Guatemala and 42.8 per 100,000 in Honduras. These are staggeringly high figures when compared with the homicide rate in a country like Canada, which stands at 1.68 per 100,000 people.

Rates of child killing in the region are also high. On average between 2008 and 2016 in Honduras, for instance, approximately one child became a victim of homicide each day. Likewise in El Salvador, 365 children were murdered in 2017. In Guatemala, the National Institute of Forensic Sciences reported 942 violent deaths of children last year, 77 per cent of them by firearms.

In El Salvador and Guatemala, much of this violence is rooted in the civil wars of recent decades. These conflicts left large populations of unemployed men with access to weapons, as well as weak state institutions undermined by corruption. In addition, thousands of violent gang members incarcerated in US prisons were deported back to northern Central America in 1996 and subsequently regrouped across the region. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS13) and the 18th Street Gang (M18) – which were formed by youth in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1980s, respectively – now have a combined membership of 54,000 in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

These and other gangs have exerted territorial control on neighbourhoods across the region, using funds from local extortion rackets and low-level drug dealing to sustain their operations. Gang members employ violence – either actual or threatened – to control their territory by subduing the local population and keeping rivals out. Some children are forcibly recruited or join the gangs in an attempt to protect themselves from violence. Thousands of children have dropped out of school to get away from gang threats and harassment, particularly as they travel to and from school through gang-controlled areas.

UNICEF and partners provide targeted support to help national and local child protection systems prevent, detect and safeguard children from violence in northern Central America and Mexico. For example:

- UNICEF works with municipal governments, faith-based organizations, communities and schools to reduce violence through the creation of safe spaces and alternative recreational, educational and vocational opportunities.
- In collaboration with its partners, UNICEF also provides psychosocial support and other assistance to children and families affected by gang activity and other forms of violence.
- Communication for Development initiatives supported by UNICEF give children and young people important information – such as hotline numbers and the location of shelters – that they can use to protect themselves from violence.
- UNICEF has been pivotal in strengthening the capacity of the region's child protection systems to identify children affected by different forms of violence, and ensure their referral and access to alternative care, psychosocial support, family counselling and other necessary services. UNICEF also works with national justice systems to improve protection measures for child victims of violence and reduce impunity for perpetrators of crimes against children.

As gang violence closes in, a mother fears for her family

PUERTO CORTES, HONDURAS – Erica,* a 38-year-old mother of two daughters, ages 16 and 19, sits in the living room of her home near Puerto Cortes. Visibly stressed and upset, she fidgets with her dress as tears well up in her eyes. Erica is desperate to leave Honduras and go to the United States, where she and her family will be safe from the gangs she believes are targeting them.

Gang violence took the lives of one of her closest friends in 2013 and her older brother in 2015. Then, just a few weeks ago, her 18-year-old nephew was killed by gang members after being deported from the United States. Erica is afraid the gangs will come after her and her daughters next. The girls no longer go out alone.

Erica applied for a visa to the United States twice and was rejected both times. She is now applying for the third time. If she is rejected again, the family will pay *coyotes* – human smugglers – US\$3,500 each to get them to the United States, where they will apply for asylum.

** Name changed to protect identity.*



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2. The migration journey

The perils of the journey from the countries of northern Central America to Mexico and the United States are well documented. Lacking the resources to access safe and regular migration pathways, many of the region's poorest and most disadvantaged families take dangerous informal routes. As gruelling as life is for these families in their home communities, the migration journey can add even more dire levels of risk and deprivation.

Unaccompanied children and women are at the greatest risk. Unprotected and often alone, they become easy prey to traffickers, criminals, organized gangs, security forces and others who abuse, exploit or even kill them.

Irregular migrants are also at high risk of apprehension and detention during their journey, and many children migrating from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been separated from their parents or guardians along the way. In other cases, family members have made the difficult choice to go north alone in hopes of reunification at a future date. There are circumstances, as well, in which family members are forced to separate or parents have to make harrowing choices to protect their children en route.

APPREHENDED IN TRANSIT

Beyond the need to escape endemic poverty and endemic violence, some children and families from northern Central America have been uprooted by critical events – such as civil conflicts, hurricanes, earthquakes, crop diseases and other crises. These events generate spikes in the number of people exposed to the hazards and stresses of irregular migration.

In the wake of surging violence and a severe drought in northern Central America during 2014, for example, there was a sharp rise in the number of unaccompanied child migrants crossing into the United States at the border with Mexico. A total of 68,541 unaccompanied minors were apprehended at the border from 1 October 2013 to 30 September 2014, up from 38,759 in the previous 12 months. More than 68,400 family units (i.e., children with parents) were apprehended in the same period. US agencies tasked with managing the situation struggled to keep up with the growing number of new arrivals, particularly unaccompanied minors.

Most of the arrivals were Central Americans passing through Mexico on their way to the United States. In an effort to manage the influx, Mexico and the United States implemented the Southern Border Plan, which used US funding to dramatically strengthen border security and immigration enforcement at Mexico's southern border with Guatemala.

The Southern Border Plan has led to an increase in the apprehension and detention of irregular migrants, including children, on their journey through the southern Mexican states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Tabasco. In 2017, some 18,300 children and adolescents from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were detained in Mexico. Another 9,995 were detained from January to April of this year.



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For a former child migrant, the emotional scars have yet to heal

EL PROGRESO, HONDURAS – Eric, 18, his younger sister and his mother attempted to reach the United States from Honduras nine years ago.

“My mother was hopeless because she couldn’t get a job,” he says. “She was looking for ways to provide food for us. She was hopeless. She decided to leave for the United States with us so we could have a better education, a better life, to give us the best.”

The family left Honduras and travelled by bus through Guatemala for many hours before finally arriving in Mexico. And then everything changed.

“At a police roadblock, a policeman carrying a gun got me out of the vehicle,” Eric says. “The first thing he said was, ‘Kid, get off the bus, please.’ And I got off. They treated me like a criminal. They treated a nine-year-old boy like a criminal, aiming a gun at my head. I was so scared that I was shaking.”

Eric then heard the officer making a phone call in which he said the woman in his custody was darker-skinned than the children who accompanied her. “There should be no problem, because they don’t look like her.... so come here as soon as you can, and you take them,” the officer said.

“In that very moment we got scared the most, because the man wanted to sell us,” Eric says.

“But another officer came and took us to a jail full of mothers with their children. After four months, we were deported to Honduras, penniless. We didn’t have a house. We had sold everything. We stayed at an uncle’s house, one of my mom’s brothers, and then my mom decided to leave again to make money. I had to look after my sister.”

Eric recalls his mother telling him, “You are a little boy, but you don’t have the mind of child. You have the mind of an adult because of all these events.”

Today, Eric acknowledges that his emotional scars have yet to heal. “All that suffering is still present,” he says. “I had psychological problems from the distress I had suffered. I wasn’t a kid like the others who played, relaxed and happy. I was different because of the problems.... I was aloof because, since I was little, I was always thinking how to help my mom. And leaving the country was what marked my life the most. Those problems made me a lonely boy because I had to think like a grown-up.”



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ABOVE: Maria and her daughter, Sandra, 8, embrace at Casa del Migrante, a transit centre in Guatemala City, Guatemala, having been deported from Mexico after a horrific journey northward.

THE HIGH COST OF MIGRATION

As enforcement has tightened, transiting through southern Mexico has also become more perilous. Many migrants from northern Central America try to avoid detection by using coyotes (human smugglers) or informal routes – through the bush and over mountain passes – where they are at greater risk of exploitation, abuse, assault and extortion.

The journey can cost US\$3,500 per person with a coyote, or US\$15,000 for a coyote taking an unaccompanied child. Poor migrant families are often forced to finance the trip by selling what little property and belongings they have, or taking out substantial loans.

Confronted by economic hardship, stigma, psychological stress and threats of violence in their countries of origin, many of the migrants who are returned from Mexico and the United States will try to migrate again despite the hardships and dangers of the journey. Recognizing this reality, some coyote fees now cover up to three attempts to reach the United States.

“Unless there is a comprehensive effort to address the root causes of migration,” says Nadine Perrault, UNICEF Representative in El Salvador, “people will continue to go.”

UNICEF and partners support policies and provide services to assist children and families from northern Central America who face hardship, exploitation and, in some cases, mortal danger on the irregular migration journey. For example:

- UNICEF works with the Regional Conference on Migration (as well as other bodies such as the International Organization for Migration, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross) to develop policies and standards for the protection of migrant and refugee children at every stage of the journey. In cooperation with protection, migration and refugee authorities, UNICEF also advocates for rigorous procedures to determine the best interests of migrant and refugee children, and identify those who need protection under international standards.
- In Guatemala and Mexico, UNICEF programmes are working to strengthen consular protection for migrant and refugee children – including those who are apprehended or detained in transit. These programmes have helped develop child-sensitive interview techniques for consular officials to detect children’s protection needs and give them information about their rights and options. UNICEF has worked with consular offices to make sure they are able to provide psychosocial support, as well.
- Along migration routes in the region, UNICEF works with shelters to provide tools and training on psychosocial ‘first aid’ for migrant children, including child-friendly materials on avoiding risks and where to seek help, if necessary. In countries of origin, UNICEF programmes raise local awareness about the risks of irregular migration and its impact on children, families and communities.

3. Detention and family separation

Despite the implementation of the Southern Border Plan – which the Government of Mexico announced in July 2014 to help bring order to migration from northern Central America – a large number of migrant children and families still use irregular routes through Mexico to reach the United States. From October 2017 to June 2018, at least 286,290 migrants were apprehended at the southwest US border, including 37,450 unaccompanied children and 68,560 family units.

In Mexico, meanwhile, almost 60,000 migrant children were held in detention centres between 2016 and 2017. Children above age 12 are usually kept in a separate area, even if accompanied by their families, while younger children stay with their mothers. Children in these detention centres are not allowed to exit for services or recreational purposes, even in cases where the process of determining migration or refugee status is long, and they often remain in detention for weeks or months.

In April 2018, the United States began enforcing a ‘Zero Tolerance’ policy of criminally prosecuting all adult migrants who enter or attempt to enter the country illegally. The border authorities also implemented a policy of detaining these migrants and separating them from their children. In the ensuing weeks, while the practice remained in effect, 2,551 child migrants age 5 or older – and 102 under age 5 – were separated from their parents at the border.

Then, on 20 June 2018, the US administration issued Executive Order 13841 to end the separation of migrant children from their parents. As of 26 July, the administration reported that a majority of the separated children had been reunited with their families. Some migrant children are now reportedly in detention with their families while asylum or deportation proceedings unfold. *Flores v. Reno*, a US federal court decision from 1997, limits the amount of time child migrants can be detained legally in the country.

BELOW: Adolescents who were recently deported from Mexico await a meal before being reunited with their families at a government reception shelter in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.



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IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

In a series of interviews recently conducted by UNICEF, children and families returned from Mexico and the United States to northern Central America reported being held in detention prior to deportation. Some interviewees also reported forcible separation of families. (The interviews took place before Executive Order 13841 was issued.)

Detention and family separation are traumatic experiences that can leave children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and can create toxic stress. Multiple studies have shown how such stress impairs children's long-term development well after the initial experience is over. UNICEF Chief of Early Childhood Development Dr. Pia Rebello Britto notes that prolonged exposure to traumatic situations – including child detention and family separation – can cause extended release of the stress hormone cortisol, which harms brain functionality.

“Adverse experiences over a long period of time can seriously undermine brain development in children,” says Dr. Luis Zayas, professor of psychiatry at Dell Medical School in Austin, Texas. “Executive functions, problem solving and social cues can all be disrupted.” Dr. Zayas adds that intensely stressful experiences can also be triggering events for the onset of serious mental illness.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

To avoid such consequences, numerous alternatives to detention – such as community-based care, group homes and foster care – have been implemented at various times for both families and unaccompanied children. Many of these approaches have shown positive results, including low rates of absconding and high rates of compliance with migration processes.

In the United States, for example, the Family Case Management Program, launched as a pilot initiative in 2016, operated in five locations until June 2017. The initiative provided the least restrictive care option for special populations of asylum seekers, including pregnant women, nursing mothers and families with very young children. Families could remain in the community during their immigration proceedings. They were monitored through check-ins and court hearings, and case workers helped them access community-based services based on individualized family service plans.

In light of the risks posed by the detention of migrant children and separation from their families, UNICEF and partners support a range of alternative approaches to detention and family separation – approaches that provide for the best interests of the child. For example:

- At the regional level, UNICEF's six-point agenda for action on migration from northern Central America (see pages 21–25) offers a comprehensive approach to protecting the rights of children in their countries of origin, during transit, in countries of destination and – for those who are returned – during the process of reintegration. One of the agenda's key principles is that immigration detention of children is never in their best interests.
- In Mexico, UNICEF is developing models for alternative care to prevent the detention of migrant children. In the state of Tabasco, UNICEF is supporting the implementation of an 'open-door' shelter for migrant and refugee children. At this community-based residential care facility, children receive appropriate psychosocial support, have access to education and health services, and get legal information and assistance.

A family's life on the US-Mexico border is disrupted by separation

CHIMALTENANGO, GUATEMALA – Mary's life fell apart in August 2017, when she and her children – daughter Sami, age 12, and son Jason, age 10 – were taken into custody as undocumented immigrants in Brownsville, Texas.* At the time, Mary had been living illegally in the United States for nearly ten years, the children for almost eight.

After being taken to a local police station, Mary, Sami and Jason were separated. Mary was sent to a migration detention centre and the children went to a shelter for unaccompanied children. After that initial separation, the mother and children would have no news of each other for two months. "I had no idea where they were," Mary says with tears in her eyes. The children didn't know where their mother was, either. They began to think she had abandoned them.

Finally, in October 2017, Mary was told that Jason and Sami were being cared for in an institution for children supported by a Catholic charity. She was permitted to speak with them over the phone once a week. The first conversation was heartbreaking for Mary. "My son was crying," she says. "He asked me, 'Are you in such a beautiful place that you don't want to come here with me?'"

After four months, Mary was informed that she and the children would be deported. But it wasn't until seven months after they had been separated that the family was reunited – on the plane that would take them back to Guatemala.

Mary recalls that the reunion was bittersweet: "My girl started crying and said, 'You're finally here and I'll go with you wherever you go.' Jason was very depressed." Asked what went through her mind on the plane back to Guatemala, Mary responds, "I was worried about having nothing, where we would live, the children starting over again. I had plans for our lives, and now those lives are gone."

Mary, Sami and Jason are among more than 31,900 people who were returned from the United States and Mexico to Guatemala between January and April of this year. Mary and her children are receiving some psychosocial services through a local non-governmental organization supported by UNICEF. The children are now in school, and she is looking for work.

Yet what Mary really wants is to go back to the United States, because she fears for her children's safety in their new community and wonders how she will make ends meet. Still, she is hopeful. "This is God's will," Mary says. "He knows what is in my heart."

* Names changed to protect identities.



BELOW: Mary walks her children to school in Chimaltenango, Guatemala, following their deportation from the United States.



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4. The challenge of reintegration

As detailed previously in this Child Alert, a growing number of migrants from northern Central America are being returned to their countries of origin. Some 96,000 people – including more than 24,000 women and children – were returned from Mexico and the United States from January to June of this year.

There are many questions about how immigration authorities make return decisions, and whether those decisions are in the best interest of migrants – especially children. But once the return decision is made, it is clear that reintegrating migrants safely into their communities is more complicated than simply sending them home.

Many returnees face significant barriers to successful reintegration, and governments in northern Central America have neither the resources nor the capacity to provide the support that returned children and families need. The impending termination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Hondurans and Salvadorians living in the United States will exacerbate the situation, sending thousands more people back to countries that already struggle to manage the existing caseload of returning migrants. TPS was established to allow eligible foreign nationals to live and work in the United States while the conditions in their home countries make it unsafe for them to return. This protection is scheduled to terminate for Hondurans in January 2020 and for Salvadorians in September 2019.

The result – even before the region feels the impact of TPS termination – is a compound crisis in which returnees find themselves in worse circumstances than they experienced when they set off for the United States in the first place.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Migrants who are forcibly returned from Mexico and the United States frequently find themselves in crippling debt, unable to earn back the money they spent on the journey. Having sold everything and taken out loans to finance their trip, they are left with nothing when they return. This economic pressure can leave children and families without homes or the resources to pay for essentials such as food, health care and school fees.

Forced returns can also have negative economic consequences for households and communities that depend on remittances from family members working in the United States. These remittances comprise a considerable portion of the gross domestic product of the countries of northern Central America and sustain many families in the region. In 2016, they totalled US\$6.7 billion in Guatemala, US\$4.19 billion in El Salvador and US\$3.37 billion in Honduras.

When migrants who have been sending remittances home are returned to their countries of origin, a lifeline of needed income for their families is abruptly severed.

LEFT: San Miguel Attican, 26, and his son, Jorge, 5, arrive at La Aurora International Airport, Guatemala City, Guatemala, following their deportation from the United States.

Deported twice and separated from her family, a girl holds onto hope

SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR – It was June 2016 and Isabel,* age 13, was travelling by bus through Mexico with her parents and four-year-old sister to find safety in the United States. Her father had been receiving death threats in their community of Santo Tomás, one of the most violent municipalities in San Salvador.

Before arriving in Monterrey, Mexico, the bus was stopped by police officers who boarded to look for undocumented migrants. In the confusion and desperation of the moment, Isabel was separated from her family. She was left stranded in an unknown country, with unknown people, and no idea how to get home. It is a scene she replays in her mind every day.

Isabel was taken by the police to a children's shelter in Reynosa, where she spent a month before being deported. At the shelter, she recalls between sobs, "I thought of two things: that I wanted to return to El Salvador and that I wanted to be with my parents. But I wanted to be with my parents the most." In the end, she was returned to Santo Tomás.

Three months later, Isabel's mother telephoned from the state of Virginia, where her parents had settled in the United States, and asked Isabel's aunt to take the girl to the border of El Salvador and Honduras. There, she was delivered to the same coyote who had guided her family northward during the first trip.

Isabel made it as far as Mexico City before she was again stopped by immigration authorities.

"They caught us as we were leaving Mexico City," Isabel says. "They took me to a place where sometimes the food had dead flies and worms, and I didn't like to eat." After another three months, Isabel was again deported to El Salvador.

"Last year, I returned to school," she says. "At first it was difficult to concentrate, because I would tell myself to not think too much about my parents, but I would fail."

Now 15 years old, Isabel often spends time in a local park, thinking about her situation. "It's the only moment where I can clear my mind of my sad thoughts, of loneliness or of guilt for not having been able to cross the border," she explains.

But she does not want to repeat the experience. "If a girl told me she was going to migrate, I would tell her not to because if she is caught, she will suffer a lot and what she dreams of will not come true," Isabel says. "I wouldn't try it again. I think that if I set my mind to it, with the help of family, and school, I can achieve my goal of becoming a doctor and learning English. And then I'll be able to visit my parents."

** Name changed to protect identity.*



A battered sign indicates that guns are prohibited in San Martín, a municipality in El Salvador. The country has one of the world's highest homicide rates.

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STIGMA AND MENTAL HEALTH

Community stigmatization of returnees from Mexico and the United States is another serious problem. Dr. Alex Alvarado, a psychologist who works with migrants returned to Honduras, explains that adult returnees in many communities are stigmatized and refused employment for having failed in their attempts to reach and stay in the United States.

This stigma extends to children and adolescents who have been returned to their home communities. UNICEF Representative Perrault identifies a particularly insidious form of stigma directed against returned girls in El Salvador. “People in some communities think girls who have come back have been subjected to sexual violence during their trip to the United States, so they are somehow tainted,” she says.

Dr. Zayas – the professor of psychiatry quoted earlier on the impact of detention and separation – notes that children who have spent their formative years in the United States before being returned to their countries of origin often have difficulty integrating into what is, effectively, a foreign environment. “These children are faced with entirely new socioeconomic circumstances upon their return to Central America, which can create a disrupted sense of belonging or feeling of exile,” he says. “Depression and hopelessness can set in. Some of these children are singled out and bullied in their new schools.”

Regardless of the amount of time children have spent outside of their country, migration and reintegration can have negative consequences for their mental health. Dr. Alvarado says that traumatic experiences linked to the migration process have robbed some children of their childhood. “Many returned children are not trusting,” he says. “They don’t feel like children anymore. They had to face difficult situations, so they adapted and grew up on the inside – especially older children who were helping to care for younger siblings.”

VIOLENCE AND DISPLACEMENT

In many cases, it is unsafe for migrant children and families to return to their home communities because of gang violence. In one round of interviews, more than a quarter of Salvadorian returnee children cited violence as their primary motivation for making another attempt at migrating. Some returnees interviewed by UNICEF in Guatemala and Honduras said that if local gang members knew someone had been deported from the United States, they would likely target that person based on the assumption that he or she had money.

Despite such challenges, there is very limited case management or psychosocial support for returned migrant children and their families in northern Central America. Nor are there many alternative care options for children and families who cannot return to their communities due to the threat of violence.

To meet the multiple challenges of reintegration for migrant children and families who have been returned to northern Central America, UNICEF supports a variety of programmes focused on their security, health and well-being.

- In El Salvador, UNICEF is working in local municipalities that have some of the country's highest levels of violence and migration. It aims to ensure that safe spaces, recreational activities and flexible educational and vocational options are available to the most vulnerable children – including those who have been returned from other countries. UNICEF also provides legal assistance, food, accommodations and other support for families displaced by gang violence and extortion. And UNICEF is supporting the development of a digital tracking system to facilitate case management and effectively manage the reintegration of returning migrant children.
- In Guatemala, UNICEF has developed a protocol for consular support to migrant children. It has also been informing unaccompanied Guatemalan migrant children and families about their rights in countries of transit and destination – and about the administrative and judicial procedures for international protection.
- In Honduras, UNICEF has developed a model for psychological support using a peer-to-peer approach. This model – which is being implemented in 21 municipalities – helps returning migrant children process their emotions and find motivation and strength during the reintegration process. In addition, UNICEF has identified thousands of girls, boys and adolescents who are out of school as a result of migration, forced internal displacement or violence. It is now helping them pursue their education through flexible schooling options and reintegration into the formal education system.
- Throughout northern Central America and Mexico, UNICEF works to provide psychosocial counselling for children and families who have endured violence, exploitation and abuse at different stages of the migration journey and upon their return. Given the scope of the challenges and the abysmally low number of trained counsellors across the region, however, these efforts urgently need much more support – especially to assist returning migrants.



5. Call to action for uprooted children

Given the current context of migration from northern Central America to Mexico and the United States, the issues of detention, family separation and discrimination warrant specific attention – along with the need to address the root causes of migration and protect the rights, health and future of every child. We must:

- Invest in strong national child protection systems to safeguard migrant children from exploitation and violence, and ensure compliance with adequate procedures to determine their best interests.
- Strengthen regional coordination to provide effective consular and protection services to children across migration routes.
- Increase the accessibility and availability of alternatives to detention, to move towards ending the practice of detaining children because of their immigration status.
- Register the births of all migrant children, keep families together, provide reunification mechanisms for separated families and provide different options for regularizing the legal status of child migrants.
- Provide comprehensive care and access to services to help migrant children stay in school and stay healthy in countries of origin, transit and destination.
- Address the causes that uproot children from their homes.
- Protect migrant children from discrimination and xenophobia.

To realize these objectives, UNICEF continues to urge United Nations Member States to adopt the following six-point **agenda for action** on ensuring the safety and well-being of all migrant and refugee children



ACTION ON **ROOT CAUSES** OF MIGRATION

UNICEF calls on governments and partners to press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants, and to address the root causes of conflict, violence and extreme poverty in countries of origin.

Unless the root causes of irregular migration from northern Central America and Mexico are addressed, children and families will continue to move in large numbers within and beyond the region – including via dangerous irregular migration routes.

To address migration from northern Central America, the Governments of Mexico and the United States can invest in alleviating poverty and violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, rather than focusing resources on punitive border control measures and migration detention. In addition, governments and partners should establish strong protection systems to identify children at risk of violence, support their access to essential services and manage alternative care options.

ACTION ON **DETENTION**

UNICEF calls on national governments, including those of Mexico and the United States, to develop action plans that increase the coverage and quality of alternative care options replacing child immigration detention.

Immigration detention of children – whether they are travelling alone or with their families – is never in their best interests. It can be highly damaging to their physical and psychological well-being, stands in violation of their rights and should be avoided at all costs. Immigration detention is an expensive and burdensome system to administer, and rarely fulfils its stated objectives as a migration management tool. Furthermore, as the consistent flow of migrants arriving at the southwest border of the United States shows, detention does not act as a deterrent to would-be migrants.

The provisions on detention of children (as a ‘measure of last resort’) in the Convention on the Rights of the Child may apply to children in conflict with the law, but they are not applicable to immigration proceedings. Immigration detention cannot be justified solely on the basis of a child being unaccompanied or separated from his or her family. And when a child is accompanied, the need to keep the family together does not justify the child’s detention.

There are numerous viable alternatives to detention, such as community-based care, group homes and foster care. These alternatives are used for both unaccompanied children and families in many locations, with low rates of flight and high rates of compliance with legal processes, including removal orders.



ACTION ON **FAMILY SEPARATION**

UNICEF calls on governments and authorities to respect family unity and the right to family life in the context of migration.

Separating children from their families for the purposes of migration control violates their rights and is a destabilizing, traumatic experience, which can have long-term adverse consequences on child well-being, safety and development. Family separation leaves children more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, no matter what the care setting. In addition, traumatic separation from parents creates toxic stress in children and adolescents, which can profoundly affect their development.

Regardless of their refugee, temporary protection or migration status – or that of their parents – all children have the right to grow up with their families. Family unity protects children's lives and futures. By physically remaining together, migrant and refugee families can thrive and contribute to their host communities, fostering acceptance and integration.

Respecting family unity in the context of migration involves allowing families to move together; enabling separated families to promptly reunite; and prioritizing family unity and the best interests of the child when considering whether to return migrants to their countries of origin.

ACTION ON **PROTECTING CHILDREN** FROM ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE

UNICEF calls on governments to prevent children from being returned to contexts in which their integrity or lives are threatened.

Protecting migrant and refugee children from violence entails making sure that adequate standards and procedures are in place to determine their best interests, and identifying solutions that provide for their long-term well-being. Consular offices and child protection systems must also be equipped to offer psychosocial support and detect protection concerns in countries of transit and destination. Emergency mechanisms, such as hotlines, should be activated for migrant and refugee children to report any protection violations and gain access to support services. Child-friendly justice procedures for this population should be in place, as well.



ACTION ON **REINTEGRATION**

UNICEF calls on national and local governments to help reintegrate returned migrant and refugee children into their communities and schools.

To expedite their full reintegration, these children need specialized attention, including psychosocial support and comprehensive health care, educational levelling, tutoring and reinstatement into formal and informal school programmes. They also need individualized case management from national child protection institutions as well as access to social protection and information on available services in their communities. In addition, children who cannot return to their homes or communities due to protection concerns need options for alternative care.

ACTION ON **DISCRIMINATION AND XENOPHOBIA**

UNICEF calls on governments and partners to develop, promote and implement measures combatting xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization of migrants in countries of transit, destination and return.

To this end, governments, non-governmental organizations, community organizations, the private sector, religious groups and political leaders must take responsibility for influencing public opinion. Their efforts can prevent the spread of xenophobia and discrimination directed at migrants – including those who are forced to return to their countries and communities of origin.



UNICEF stands ready to reinforce efforts by governments, non-governmental organizations, foundations, United Nations agencies and other partners to meet the needs of children and young people migrating from northern Central America and Mexico. UNICEF's advocacy efforts reflect the conviction that migrant and refugee children are children first, regardless of their migration status. On that basis, UNICEF and partners are mobilizing to expand existing programmes and strengthen the protection measures that are in place for the safety and well-being of uprooted children.

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Child Alert is a briefing series that presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. This issue examines the root causes of irregular migration from northern Central America and Mexico, the challenges faced by migrant and refugee children throughout the migration journey – including reintegration into their countries and communities of origin – and the need for workable solutions to protect uprooted young people.