

# Child Migration and Transnationalized Violence in Central and North America

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of unaccompanied migrant children attempting to enter the United States. In 2014, total numbers peaked at 68,000 apprehensions, mostly from Central America and Mexico. Since then, rising immigration enforcement strategies within Mexico have decreased the ability of unaccompanied migrant youth to reach the US border. However, underlying factors driving child migration have not changed. Children continue to flee high levels of violence, particularly from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, which are currently among the most violent nations in the world. Yet, violence does not end for youth once they leave the borders of their countries; as youth ride buses, trains, boats and trucks north, they continue to encounter it along every step of the way. Due to increasing militarization and punitive immigration policies in the United States, migrant children contend with further violence when they cross the US/Mexico border. In this paper, we examine how varied nuanced manifestations of violence shape migrant children's lives and experiences. While youth may be able to escape immediate and corporeal violence, we explain how different forms of violence influence not only their decisions to leave, but also their journeys and encounters with Mexican and US immigration policies. We argue for a more spatially expansive understanding of violence that considers how state policies and practices extend far beyond national borders to negatively affect migrant children's lives.

Keywords: *children, unaccompanied, migration, Latin America, violence*

## **Resumen**

En los últimos años, ha habido un aumento dramático en el número de niños migrantes no acompañados que tratan de entrar en los Estados Unidos. En 2014, el número total alcanzó un máximo de 68,000 aprehensiones, en su mayoría de Centroamérica y México. Desde entonces, el aumento de las estrategias de control de inmigración en México han disminuido la capacidad de los jóvenes migrantes no acompañados de llegar a la frontera con Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, los factores subyacentes que impulsan la migración

infantil no han cambiado. Los niños siguen huyendo de altos niveles de violencia, en particular de El Salvador, Honduras y Guatemala, que actualmente están entre los países más violentos del mundo. Sin embargo, la violencia no termina para los jóvenes una vez que salgan de la frontera de sus países; como los jóvenes toman autobuses, trenes, barcos y camiones al norte, ellos lo siguen encontrando a lo largo de cada paso del camino. Debido al aumento de la militarización y las políticas punitivas de inmigración en los Estados Unidos, los niños migrantes luchan contra más violencia cuando cruzan la frontera de Estados Unidos/México. En este trabajo, examinamos cómo matizados y variadas manifestaciones de violencia forman las vidas y experiencias de los niños migrantes. Mientras que la juventud puede ser capaz de escapar de la violencia inmediata y corporal, explicamos cómo las diferentes formas de violencia no sólo influyen su decisión de salir, sino también sus viajes y encuentros con las políticas de inmigración de México y EEUU. Argumentamos a favor de un entendimiento más amplio y espacial de la violencia que tiene en cuenta cómo las políticas y prácticas estatales se extienden mucho más allá de las fronteras nacionales para afectar negativamente la vida de los niños migrantes.

Palabras claves: *niños, no acompañados, migración, America Latina, violencia*

## Introduction

Lisbeth<sup>1</sup> was thirteen years old when she left her home in urban Honduras. She grew up close to San Pedro Sula—the 2015 murder capital of the world. She was told it would only take one week to get to Miami, Florida. There, she would reunite with family members and try to build a better life, far away from the gangs and police that had terrorized her community. But after the *coyote*, or human smuggler, left her and her nine year old brother Danilo behind, their journey extended to six weeks. Determined to make it to *el otro lado*—the other side—she and Danilo continued travelling northwards. During the last leg of their journey, they walked for fifteen days in order to make it to Tijuana, a city perched on the southern edge of the US/Mexico border. She pointed to the deep scars on her legs where she'd been scratched by cacti and thorny bushes. Her feet hurt a lot, she recalled.

Lisbeth's story is both remarkable and yet sadly common. Each month, thousands of Central American and Mexican youth leave their homes to seek better lives in the United States. While unaccompanied children's migration to the US has been happening for years (Heidbrink 2014), numbers have escalated rapidly since 2009, particularly from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. In 2014, US officials apprehended over 68,000 unaccompanied migrant children. Although there was a slight decrease in 2015, in 2016 total numbers remained substantial with almost 60,000 apprehensions. Of these, 32 percent were from Guatemala, 29 percent from El Salvador, 20 percent from Mexico and 18 percent from Honduras (United States Customs and Border Protection [USCBP] 2016).

There is a strong correlation between high homicide rates and child migration (Wong 2014). Children, like Lisbeth and Danilo, are leaving their homes in order to escape intense levels of violence that shape their everyday activities. Their work, study, play, and social activities are mediated by their fear of gangs, the police, and sometimes their family members (Kennedy 2014; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2014a). Yet, as they journey to the US, they encounter sustained violence through preda-

tory cartels, border militarization, and punitive immigration policies (Aitken *et al.* 2014; Hernández-Hernández and Ramos Tovar 2014; Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2016; Slack *et al.* 2016). The perceived crisis created by rising unauthorized migration in the United States has legitimized heightened state surveillance and further investment into the fortification of the US/Mexico border. Apprehension, detention, repatriation, and deportation represent a further continuum of violence enacted on young people's bodies (Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Heidbrink 2014; Terrio 2015; Slack *et al.* 2016).

Debates surrounding unaccompanied child migrants often focus on their status as young people. Some perceive young migrants as innocent victims who have forsaken their childhoods to flee for their lives; others perceive them as dangerous teenage hoodlums who are a threat to American safety and values. In the 2016 US election, this latter current of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee discourse has run strong. Notably, President-elect Donald Trump declared that Mexican migrants were mostly criminals and rapists (Miller 2015). Some lawmakers deny that violence plays a role at all in the increase of unaccompanied migrant children. According to Representative Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Florida), "The violence isn't new. The situation in those countries is not new" (Herridge 2014). Instead they blame the Obama administration's immigration policies, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), for enticing young immigrants. However, there is little evidence to support this position as the rising trend of unaccompanied arrivals predates DACA (American Immigration Council 2014) and none of the recent children would qualify. Others, such as Jeh C. Johnson Secretary of the US Department of Homeland Security, blame parents for "sending" their children to the US (Department of Homeland Security 2014). But doing so denies the agency of children and young people. In fact, many youth choose to embark upon their US-bound journeys entirely of their own will.

In this paper, we tell the story of child migration through the Americas, and explore the multiple interconnected manifestations of violence woven throughout their experiences as they travel across state borders. We use children's stories and artwork to share their perceptions and experiences with migration and we explore how Latin American migrant children's experiences with violence have become transnationalized. In doing so, we argue for a more spatially expansive understanding of violence to consider how state immigration policies extend far beyond national borders to affect children's lives. For instance, the United States has vastly expanded the spatial reach of its anti-immigrant policies through US-funded programs, such as *Plan Frontera Sur* – a Mexican policy designed to stop Central American migrants from reaching US soil. Alan Bersin, Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Chief Diplomatic Officer for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), openly claimed that, "The Guatemalan border with Chiapas is now our southern border" (Miller 2014). In effect, the US has shifted its border 2,000 kilometers south in order to interfere with children's chances of reaching the US. Moreover, by outsourcing immigration enforcement to Mexico and keeping child migrants off US soil, migrant children are hidden from the US public's gaze, thus diminishing any sense of responsibility for the plight of unaccompanied migrant children in the Americas.

Our analysis draws from our years of collective experience working with migrant youth from Mexico, Central America, and South America. Kate Swanson has been working with migrant Ecuadorians for fourteen years, many of whom now reside in New York

City. She also has two and half years of experience volunteering with unaccompanied migrant children at a non-profit, state-funded detention center in Southern California. At this facility, she taught weekly geography classes to migrant girls under eighteen and boys under twelve – classes that often involved mapping their journeys through the Americas. She also volunteered with a non-profit legal advocacy group in California to conduct legal screening interviews with unaccompanied minors in detention.

Rebecca Torres has over nineteen years of experience working in migrant origin communities in Mexico. In 2014, she volunteered with a Texan legal aid group to conduct intake interviews with Central American youth being temporarily housed at the Lackland Air Force Base emergency shelter. She has also assisted with intake interviews with women and children incarcerated in immigrant family detention in Texas who have positive “credible fear” interviews, but who are held on a “no bond, no release” policy intended to deter other immigrants.

While acknowledging our long history of work with migrant youth, in this article we largely pull from media analyses and secondary literature. To enrich our narrative, we also we pull from Torres’ participatory research with Mexican migrant communities (Torres and Carte 2014). This research included workshops with children in order to gauge their perceptions of US migration. From this work, we cull stories and children’s drawings in an effort to illustrate the deep layers and multiple forms of violence that encapsulate young migrants’ lives.

This article begins with a brief review of the literature on violence. Following a discussion on why young people leave their homes, we then trace children’s journeys to the US/Mexico border, where the militarization of the border proceeds apace with triple fencing, high tech surveillance, and growing numbers of border patrol guards. Next, we examine rising anti-immigrant policies in the United States and argue that these policies continue to enact violence on the bodies and minds of Latin American youth through apprehension, custody, screening, detention, and repatriation.

### **Violence in the Americas**

While there has been a long-standing engagement with violence in the social sciences (Fanon 1963; Galtung 1969; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), geographers have only recently turned toward violence as a lens of analysis (Gregory and Pred 2007; Hyndman and Mountz 2007; Fluri 2009; Pain 2010; Wright 2011; Springer 2012; Tyner 2012; Woon 2013; Tyner and Inwood 2014; Slack et al. 2016). Below we review some of the key thoughts and critiques of violence as a conceptual lens of analysis put forth by leading scholars. We conclude that studies of violence have the potential to reveal often-invisible factors of political, social, and economic relations underlying child migration. In particular, we believe that a framework of violence unmasks naturalized and normalized routine practices that contribute to child migration and inflict harm on children.

*Structural violence* is a particularly useful concept for understanding the underlying socio-economic and political conditions that shape Latin American children’s lives. Following Farmer (2004), structural violence (Galtung 1969) can be understood as the historically produced political and economic suffering wrought upon society’s most vulnerable popu-

lations. This form of violence is rooted in the everyday workings of asymmetrical social, political, and economic structures. It operates at multiple scales that exploit and impose social suffering on the most vulnerable (Farmer 1996; Bourgois 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Structural violence manifests through different forms of “socially produced harms” (Tyner and Inwood 2014) such as health, housing, and education disparities, racism, gendered inequalities, and lack of political power that disproportionately affect the poor and effectively limit life opportunities. Structural inequalities such as state neglect often associated with neoliberalism, are commonly dismissed as unfortunate but necessary externalities (Woon 2013). Tyner and Inwood (2014: 10) argue that by viewing structural violence as something that simply happens, it is rendered a part of the structure of society in which no individual is held accountable. They argue that structural violence must be understood as being just as “direct” as other more “concrete” forms of violence.

*Normalized violence* is a concept that draws from Scheper-Hughes’ (1993) work on everyday violence. She explores how indifference to suffering is produced through institutional, social, and cultural norms. Bourgois (2009: 20) argues that an analysis of this form of violence “can heighten our awareness of the ‘commonsensical’ discourses that render systematic patterns of brutality invisible, such as romantic love manifesting as domestic violence, scripts of masculinity leading to the toleration of ‘femicide’ by the state, and rape being ‘misrecognized’ as harmless or deserved.” Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) and Farmer (2004) emphasize that many of the most violent acts are not deviant, and indeed are ordinary, mundane, socially accepted practices considered part of conventional social, economic and political norms. Springer (2012) suggests that the “abandonment of Others” who are outside of “neoliberal normativity,” based on age, class, race, sexuality, and ability, among other characteristics, is a form of “exceptional violence” (which elicits an affective response of shock and horror) that becomes “exemplary violence” (forms the rule), complacently accepted. A poignant example of this is the indifferent response of certain segments of the US public to migrant children’s narratives of fear and brutality, where violence is negated as a cause for the increase in child migration because “those countries” have always been violent. Tyner and Inwood (2014) contend that as long as violence is fetishized, considered normal and natural, oppressive structures and practices will be perpetuated at the expense of those most marginalized and disadvantaged.

Several scholars have critiqued the analytical power of violence (Wacquant 2004) and many acknowledge it is a slippery construct (Bourgois 2004; Farmer 2004; Springer 2012). Despite the proliferation of typologies, Tyner and Inwood (2014) contend that violence defies simple classification – it is everything and nothing, visible and invisible, gratuitous and strategic. They warn against theoretical binaries separating “direct” and “structural” violence, but rather recommend that scholars situate them in their historical and geographical contingencies, and critically explore how they are interconnected through sociospatial relations. They suggest acknowledging the relational nature and ontological challenges of violence and recommend a dialectical approach. In addition, violence must not be presumed to be universal or uniform, but rather existing in diverse forms across space and place (Galtung 1969; Springer 2012; Tyner and Inwood 2014). While emphasizing the multi-faceted and multi-sited character of violence, Pain (2010) urges scholars to dissolve the conventional boundaries between the personal/political, global/intimate,

family/state in their constructions. Finally, violence should be understood as mutually constitutive (Springer 2012) or in the words of Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004: 1), “Violence gives birth to itself.”

This literature has particular resonance in the US/Mexico border region, where violence is central to increasing border militarization. Jeremy Slack and his colleagues (2016) reveal the uneven manifestations of violence across the border region and argue that border militarization has re-arranged the region’s lethal geographies. In other words, US policies designed to deter unauthorized border crossings in some regions have increased rates of migrant death in others. Moreover, they argue that violence is a central mission of the US Border Patrol. Because the US Border Patrol is tasked with protecting Americans from terrorists and dangerous people, they must assert that undocumented migrants are dangerous threats to US citizens: “This rationale reinforces the need, or, at the very least, tolerance for violence against migrants as an acceptable or necessary aspect of border enforcement” (Slack *et al.* 2016: 12).

Given the conditions outlined above, we contend that violence is a productive lens from which to understand Latin American unaccompanied child migration to the US. How do we make sense of the atrocities that child migrants face in their home countries, on the journey, at the border, in detention, in the US legal system, in repatriation, and return home? How do we make sense of a US federal judge declaring that three- and four-year-old unaccompanied child migrants are perfectly capable of representing themselves in immigration court (Markon 2016)? Violence cannot be treated as a “thing,” act, or event without a history or geography (Springer 2012). It is critical to situate child migration within everyday forms of structural and normalized violence in contemporary North and Latin American landscapes. We argue that the erasure of this context in public discourse and policy serves to justify other forms of institutionalized aggression, indifference, and harm to migrant children through the absence of proper asylum screening, due process, legal representation and relief; the rapid and unsafe repatriation to dangerous origin country contexts; and neglect for children’s rights. Furthermore, the failure to contextualize child migration negates the uneven power structures at play, and, in particular, the role of the US in generating and exacerbating conditions leading to migration. Othering narratives which place the sole blame of child migration on “those” irresponsible, corrupt and violent societies fosters an emotional detachment among sectors of the US public, which in turn reinforces damaging restrictive immigration policies and practices.

In the remainder of this article we provide an account of youth migration that is spatially expansive – mirroring children’s trajectories through the Americas. We explore the journey, the border, detention, deportation, and repatriation. While the discussion is informed by the theoretical underpinnings of violence reviewed in this section, to avoid ill-conceived, ontologically problematic typologies (Springer 2012; Tyner and Inwood 2014), we make no attempt to categorize or label all forms of violence in separate containers. We acknowledge this to be messy at the margins, leaving some interpretations of violence to the reader. We believe, nevertheless, this is preferable to an oversimplified account of violence that is neatly packaged into discrete categories, which are at best artificial, and at their worst, distorted.

## Leaving Home

In Central America and Mexico, high levels of inequality partly explain escalating rates of violence (World Bank, 2016). A UN survey of over 400 unaccompanied minors in US immigration custody revealed that organized criminal violence and domestic violence are the leading causes of child migration from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico (UNCHR 2014). From El Salvador, children described having to evade criminal extortions in family businesses, witnessing murders of friends and family members, and dealing with serious threats to their personal health and wellbeing. From Guatemala, close to 50 percent were from indigenous communities and many reported having to cope with violence in the home and in society, as well as with severe economic deprivation. From Honduras, almost half of all children reported being threatened with or being victims of violence by organized criminal actors. Finally, from Mexico, almost 40 percent of youth reported that they had been recruited by criminal organizations to work in the human smuggling industry (UNCHR 2014).

Although overall income inequality has decreased in recent years, Central America and Mexico have some of the highest rates of income inequality in the world (World Bank, 2016b). Many scholars link this persistent inequality to the neoliberal shift, which arguably began with Mexico's debt crisis in 1982 (Jackiewicz and Quiquivix, 2016). To deal with the crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) offered financial aid in exchange for so-called structural adjustment. Thereafter, Latin American nations accepted aid requiring contingent implementation of sweeping financial reforms, resulting in cuts to education, social spending, healthcare, infrastructure, agricultural subsidies, as well as the removal of trade barriers. While this increased wealth for some, many experienced rising inequality and declining opportunities. During this neoliberal era, consolidated with the passing of NAFTA in 1994, cartels and narco-trafficking began to spread in the face of anemic public institutions, corruption, unemployment, and growing inequity. The US intervened in the form of military aid for the "War on Drugs," but this has failed to quell rampant organized crime, drug-related homicides, and on-going human rights violations (Watt and Zepeda 2012). In fact, there is strong evidence to suggest that the US-led War on Drugs has only made the situation worse (Carpenter 2014).

On top of this, the 1990s saw mass deportations of Latin American immigrants from the US. Ninety percent of deportees landed in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Rodgers 2009). For youth, the impacts of deportation were profound. Because many had spent the majority of their young lives in the US, deportation resulted in a complete disruption of their identities, families, and communities. Gangs represented alternative communities to which marginalized and ostracized youth could belong. In El Salvador, Zilberg (2011: 14) notes how, "the 'everyday' violence of gangs is coproduced by 'structural' violence, or political and economic disenfranchisement, and by 'symbolic' violence, or the internalized humiliations and legitimations of existing social inequalities." In other words, the violent activities of youth gangs – as evidenced through high crime and homicide rates – are a direct response to highly unequal societies and ongoing youth marginality and disenfranchisement.

Extreme violence has become normalized in many young peoples' lives as evidenced through staggering homicide rates in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. El

Salvador currently has the highest homicide rate in the world (Gagne 2016). In Honduras, rates of violence have skyrocketed since the US-supported military coup in 2009. Weakened state institutions, along with rampant criminal impunity, gave Honduras the notorious “murder capital of the world” title beginning in 2012, until overtaken by El Salvador in 2015. Latin America has the highest youth homicide rate in the world, and this is especially acute in Central America (Jones and Rodgers 2007). Young men between the ages of 15-29 are at the highest risk of violent death, which is worrying given that the under thirty cohort constitutes the bulk of the region’s demographic profile (Mugah and Aguirre 2013). Because so much of this violence targets youth, Mexican scholar Quintana (2010) has recently referred to this as a *juvenicidio* – or a ‘youthcide’ – which can be described as the extermination of youth with impunity (Wright 2013: 833). Quintana (2010) frames these youth as victims of structural adjustment and years of state neglect, processes that have devastated social support systems and opportunities for youth. The impunity comes from the fact that very few of these violent crimes are investigated or solved, perhaps for good reason: in Honduras, at least 81 lawyers were murdered between 2010 and 2013 (Comisionado Nacional de Los Derechos Humanos 2013).

Given the push factors of ongoing social marginalization, limited educational options and employment opportunities, and high levels of violence, many youth have decided to leave in search of safety and better opportunities. Yet, there is an additional and important aspect to this story: many youth are leaving to reunite with their mothers and fathers. There is a strong correlation between child migration and previous parental migration to the United States (Donato and Sisk 2015). Family reunification is a strong motivating factor for many child migrants. Many migrant youth believe that once they reunite with their parents in the US, their lives will become immeasurably better (cf. Nazario 2006). Sadly, this is not always the case.

### **Perceptions of the Journey**

When it comes to migration, youth often play important roles in decision-making (Holt 2010; Huijsmans 2011). Many carefully consider the costs and benefits of their journeys based upon their knowledge of migrant experiences in the Americas. Yet, we know little about young people’s perceptions of migration prior to their journeys. Children’s geographers have long advocated for the inclusion of children and young people’s voices in research (Aitken 2001; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Prout and James 1997; Katz 1991; Ruddick 1996). More recently, scholars have turned their attention to children’s experiences with migration and borders (Aitken *et al.* 2011; Aitken *et al.* 2014; Akesson 2014; Bhabha 2014; Heidbrink 2014; Terrio 2015; Spyros and Christou 2014). Children provide unique vantage points from which to understand how migration journeys are perceived, absorbed and circulated. Visual methods and creative storytelling are particularly useful with children, as it allows them to provide rich details that might otherwise be difficult for them to convey (Torres and Carte 2014; Sletto and Diaz 2015).

Through participatory workshops in rural Veracruz, Mexico (a region with high emigration to US), which were designed to explore children’s perceptions of migration, we found wide-ranging ideas about risk, danger, and violence. In Figure 1, fifth grader Marco Antonio used his drawing to depict migration in a positive light. He drew a smiling,

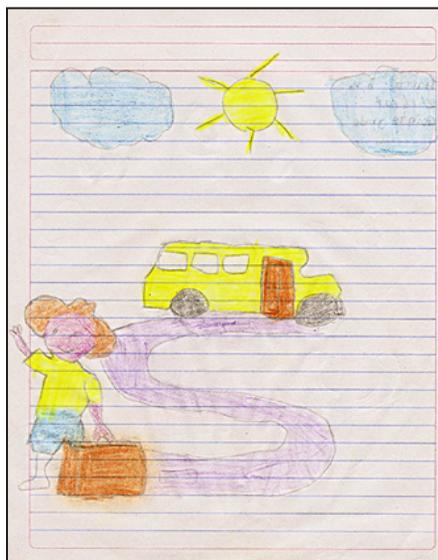


Figure 1: Drawing representing one 5th grade boy's vision of migration from participatory workshops in Mexican sending communities of rural Veracruz.

waving child holding a suitcase, with a bus and sunny sky in the backdrop.

Mariana, a third grader, was also optimistic. She wrote a hopeful tale of the American dream fulfilled:

Once upon a time there was a man named Manuel who was very poor. He didn't have any money. One night while he was sleeping he dreamed that he was on the largest bridge in the United States where he encountered a treasure full of diamonds and pearls. When he awoke, he realized it was just a dream. The man worked very hard and saved his money and decided he'd go to the United States. It was very beautiful. He bought a house, clothes, shoes and then he decided he'd go the largest bridge. When he arrived he saw a marvelous treasure. He returned to the city but never told anyone about the treasure. He then decided to return home to his village and give the young people of his village everything that they needed. The man was the richest of them all, he fulfilled his dreams and he lived happily ever after. The End.

Meanwhile, a fifth grader, Gabriel, wrote the following migration story of two boys struggling in a desert while trying to avoid being shot by 'migrant hunters'. His story was titled "The Dream":

-Listen Luis, my feet are bleeding, -said the cousin  
 -Yeah, and my body is full of spines, let's rest awhile, I feel like I'm going to faint – said Luis.  
 -Cheer up, we've already walked two days and in two more we'll be on

the other side [of the border] – said the cousin. Be careful - the cousin suggested – don't make so much noise-there are migrant hunters and if they see us they'll shoot us-said the cousin.

-That's good that you told me because I don't know all of the dangers – Luis commented.

Guadalupe, another classmate, portrayed a similarly dark vision of migration, including the dangers of the desert, swimming the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande), “the barb wire fences where they cross” and border patrol helicopters and trucks (Figure 2).

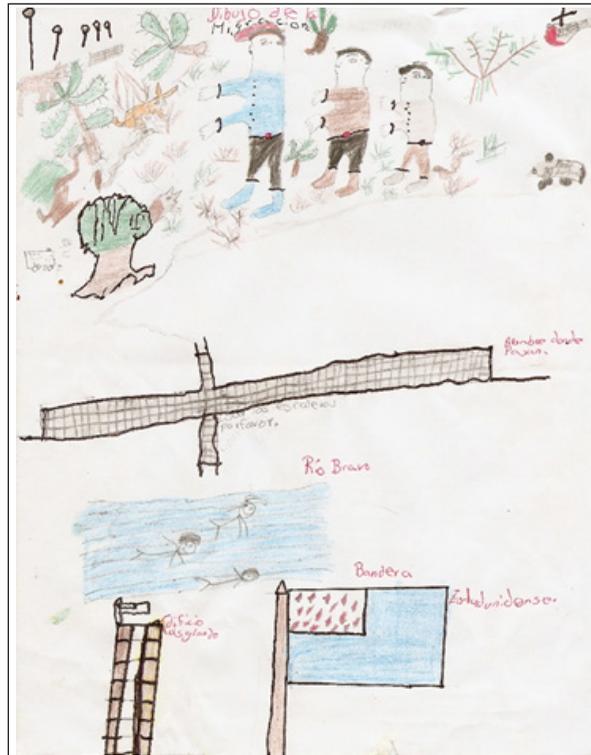


Figure 2: A 5th grade girl's drawing depicting the dangers of migration. The artist adds levity ironically placing stairs over the barbwire border fences and the comment “please use the stairs”.

A third grader, Josefina, wrote a story of a fifteen-year-old who was pushed to migrate on his own after the death of his grandfather, who was his primary caretaker:

Once upon a time, there was a village named “Loma.” In this village there lived a seventy-four year old man named Don Beto and a thirteen-year-old boy named Pedro. One Tuesday at about nine pm, his grandfather died. Two years went by and Pedro grew up. One day a group of men asked him if he knew anyone who wanted to go to the United States. Pedro asked them what it was like and they said it was really beautiful

and really big. So Pedro asked them when they were going and they said in seven days, and they asked him what his name was. They said, ‘Pedro, we’ll see you in seven days.’ Pedro sold his animals and his belongings. Seven days passed and Pedro left. They arrived [at the border] and they said, ‘On the other side, there’s the United States.’ They crossed the border and everyone went their different ways. Pedro and his friend were left on their own and so they started walking, but from a distance they could see the Border Patrol. The Border Patrol saw them and asked for their papers. Pedro replied that they didn’t bring them, so they put Pedro in jail. But they killed Pedro’s friend.

Josefina’s story is less optimistic and reveals a strong ingrained distrust of the US Border Patrol. Participatory workshops with children uncovered imaginaries of migration that ranged from rosy happily-ever-after narratives of building new houses back home, finding treasure in the US, stories of estranged fathers making lives with new families in *el norte*, violence at the border and along the journey, to migrants returning home in caskets. There are elements of truth to all of these stories. While some migrants certainly have positive experiences with migration, violence – physical, structural and normalized – cuts across space and borders to remain a pervasive imaginary and reality in many young people’s lives.

### The Journey

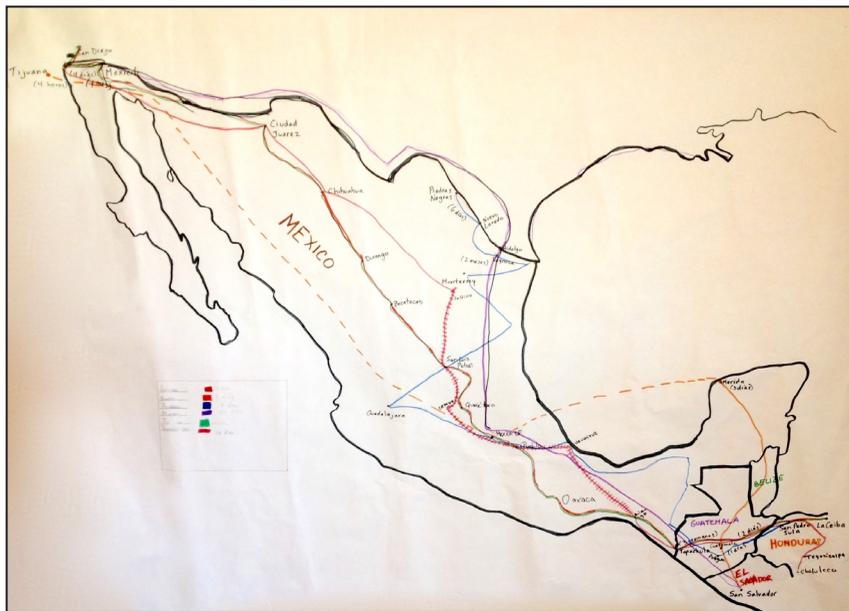


Figure 3: Map depicting the routes that six unaccompanied migrant youth took through Central America and Mexico. Their journeys took between 3 to 60 days. The dashed line represents a flight, whereas the hashed line represents a train journey. This collaborative map was made with youth in an immigrant detention center in Southern California.

By all measures, the journey to the US is riddled with violence. The relative risks that youth face often depend upon their income levels. Those from prosperous households can afford to fly to a Mexican border town and buy false documents or hire a *coyote* to smuggle them across the border. Those with fewer economic means often travel by car. However, the poorest youth must travel by boat, bus, truck, train, and foot. The train journey is, arguably, the most dangerous. Many youth, particularly boys, hitch rides atop freight trains to travel thousands of kilometers through Mexico. Getting on the train is the most difficult part, since a careless move can result in grievous injury. A twelve-year-old boy from El Salvador told us that to prevent themselves from falling off the train while asleep, he and his uncle strapped themselves to the roof of a freight car during their twenty-day journey. Through the freezing cold nights and hot desert days, they rode atop the metal freight cars until reaching the US/Mexico border.

To get into Mexico, Central American youth must first travel through Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, depending upon where they begin their journeys. Many cross the Guatemalan/Mexican border through Tapachula, Chiapas. This border crossing involves navigating a river on rickety rafts made of logs and inner tubes, which is worrying given that many youth cannot swim. Chiapas is one of the more dangerous regions in Mexico and is particularly renowned for cartel violence. This is because this border state is not only a crossing point for migrants, but also for drugs. In recent years, Mexican drug cartels have been gaining power and control in the state, and often operate along popular migration routes. Undocumented migrants are at particular risk of violence at the hands of the cartels. Because they travel without legal documentation and with all of their possessions on their backs, they are easy targets. In fact, kidnapping migrants and holding them for ransom has become lucrative. Over a six-month period in 2010, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission estimated that over 11,000 migrants were abducted by cartels (BBC News 2011). They often capture migrants on buses or trains and hold them for ransom until their family members in the US or back home agree to pay for their release. At times, the cartels work in coordination with the *coyotes*, so that they can share the profits. In a Human Rights Watch report, 16-year-old Edwin explained how his *coyote* worked with the Zeta cartel:

There were fifteen of us in the group. All fifteen were kidnapped. . . It was the morning after we arrived. Some men came to the place we were staying. Some had guns; others had machetes. They started threatening us. 'If we don't get the money, we'll kill you.' . . . We had to pay the money. There wasn't any other way. They burned me with an electric cord to get me to call my family. I called, and my family arranged to send 43,000 lempiras [approximately \$1,950] (HRW 2016: 35).

Along with kidnapping, cartels have also forcibly recruited migrants to do their bidding. In one particularly disturbing case, migrants were kidnapped and enslaved to dig drug smuggling tunnels into the US. They were kept underground over a period of months until US military forces discovered them (Kahn 2014). The outcome is often grim for migrants who refuse to cooperate with the cartels. In 2010, the Zeta cartel kidnapped

and detained seventy-two Latin American migrants who were en route to the United States. When the migrants refused to do their bidding, they were massacred. Only one eighteen-year-old survived. The psychological damage from their journeys can often be intense. Some witness horrific violence along their journeys, whereas others experience it corporeally. Because this trauma occurs at a critical developmental stage for young people, they are at risk of long-term psychological harm (UNHRC 2014a).

After travelling thousands of kilometers to reach the US/Mexico border, many youth hope to claim asylum once they reach US soil. Yet, since 2014 it has become increasingly difficult for youth to make it to the border. Following the “surge” of 2014, Mexico implemented *Plan Frontera Sur*, a comprehensive immigration control strategy aimed to enhance capture, detention, and deportation within Mexico. The United States is a key backer of this plan and has donated millions of dollars in equipment, training, and support (Wilson and Valenzuela 2014). Not only has this made the journey more difficult, it has also become more expensive. Many migrants now have to bribe their way north, as they pay off Mexican police and immigration authorities. Once they get close the US/Mexico border, however, their bribes stop working; they end up in immigration detention instead (Swanson *et al.* 2015). Central American children now spend weeks to months in Mexican immigration detention before being deported to Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador. In fact, Mexico now detains more Central American migrants than even the United States; while US apprehensions of unaccompanied minors fell by 22 percent in 2015, Mexican apprehensions increased by 70 percent (HRW 2016). In effect, through public policy, political pressure, and financial support, the United States has outsourced immigration enforcement to Mexico and extended its own border further south (Swanson *et al.* 2015). As stated by former US Border Patrol Chief, Michael Fisher, “the U.S.-Mexico border is our last line of defense” (Miller, 2014b).

## The Border

For those unaccompanied youth who manage to elude Mexican immigration authorities, their difficulties do not end once they reach the US border. Since 1994, there has been an acceleration of US border militarization. Beginning with Operation Gatekeeper, the US government has invested billions of dollars in fortifying its 3,145-kilometer border with Mexico. There is a pungent irony to the militarization of land that once belonged to Mexico (Nevins 2008). The Secure Fence Act of 2006 called for double layer fencing along 1,125 kilometers of the border to stop both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. In San Diego, the border consists of a ten-foot high fence made of military surplus material, plus a secondary fifteen-foot high fence. Across the entire border, the number of border patrol agents has surged to over 20,000 (USCBP 2015). Meanwhile popular border crossing areas are surveilled by radio control towers, infrared video cameras, motion sensors, and drones. Beyond this, US states have also invested in border fortification. In 2014, the Texas Department of Public Safety (TDPS) launched Operation Strong Safety, a program that has spent more than a hundred million dollars on integrated ground, air, and marine around-the-clock enforcement (TDPS 2015).

Despite intensification of US/Mexico border surveillance, evidence suggests that the militarization of the border has not slowed overall migration rates (Massey *et al.* 2016).

Rather than discourage migration altogether, migrants are seeking out more remote areas in the desert and mountainous regions instead. But due to the high risks of exposure and dehydration, this has led to a tripling of the migrant death rate since 1994 (Massey 2005). By some estimates, there have been over 5,500 deaths since intensive militarization of the border began. In 2012 alone, 477 migrant bodies were found (Anderson 2013). With temperatures as high as fifty degrees Celsius during the summer months and below zero degrees Celsius in the winter months, the risks of hypo- and hyperthermia are high (Slack *et al.* 2016). This is especially the case for migrant youth, many of whom arrive wearing only the clothes on their backs.

Humanitarian groups have been working to prevent further deaths in the border region by supplying water stations for migrants. Yet, evocative of the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the Southwestern US, the act of leaving water for migrants has been made illegal in the state of Arizona. In 2008, a volunteer working for an organization called No More Deaths was convicted of littering in a national wildlife refuge. The court argued that the water bottles posed a threat to wildlife. In fact, upon discovering the GPS coordinates for all of the organization's water rescue stations, seventeen water bottles were removed. The volunteer was sentenced to a year of probation and 300-hours of community trash collection (Cohen 2010).

These punitive policies coincide with rising anti-immigrant sentiment more generally. In recent years, some states have been trying to enact stricter legislation to discourage further illegal immigration. Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Utah, and South Carolina claim they are crafting stricter immigration bills because the federal government is not enforcing existing laws. One of the first states to do so was Arizona, which passed a bill entitled the 'Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act,' or SB 1070. This bill was designed to make life very difficult for undocumented migrants. Critics argued that the law would lead to extensive racial profiling, since it required police officers to determine a suspect's immigration status during every stop as long as a "reasonable suspicion" existed regarding the legality of the suspect's residency in the US. This provision was contested by the federal government but was later upheld in a federal court (Liptak 2012). In 2011, Alabama went above and beyond Arizona to make life even more difficult for undocumented migrants by enacting the 'Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act' or HB 56. Among other draconian measures, the law demanded: immigration status verification for all newly enrolled students at K-12 public schools, criminalization of unauthorized work solicitations, and criminalization of renting to or transporting undocumented migrants. One result was that many children were immediately withdrawn from schools, fearful that authorities would discover that their families were in the country without legal authorization (Associated Press 2011). In 2013, the federal government overturned many of the most controversial aspects of the Alabama law (including the three mentioned above) on the grounds that they were unconstitutional (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC] 2013).

### **Everyday Violence of US Immigration: Custody, Detention, Legal Proceedings, and Repatriation**

If they successfully navigate the perils of the journey and make it to the United

States, the majority of unaccompanied migrant children present themselves to US Border Patrol officials to seek political protection. From this initial contact, through custody, screening, detention, repatriation or asylum – children face multiple layers of overt and hidden structural violence. Children describe the Customs Border and Protection (CBP) holding cells in Texas as the *hielera* – the freezer – because of the bitter cold. During the summer 2014 “surge” they reported being crammed together so tightly that they had to stand and take turns lying down to sleep. There are various reports of guards taking away jackets, taunting children, providing misinformation, or using deceptive tactics to obtain signatures on statements, as well as numerous micro-aggressions. Even though they are not supposed to be held in CBP custody beyond 72 hours, many children, notably Central Americans, are sometimes held for several days, even weeks beyond this limit. While this treatment is egregious, the damage inflicted by the uneven geographies of the US legal system can be far more devastating in the long term (Ramji-Nogales *et al.* 2011; Gonzales 2013; Shoenholtz *et al.* 2014).

Central American and Mexican children are treated vastly differently despite often facing similar circumstances of gang brutality, drug violence, trafficking, sex trade, indentured servitude, and other forms of abuse. The 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) requires that all unaccompanied minors, regardless of nationality, be screened as potential victims of human trafficking. This is not being applied in practice to Mexican children who are, in most cases, immediately removed and repatriated upon apprehension (Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; UNHCR 2014a and b). Due to a previously negotiated bi-national repatriation agreement, US Homeland Security border patrol agents screen Mexican youth within 48 hours of arrival. If agents determine no risk of trafficking or persecution and the child is “capable of voluntary return,” these youth are immediately removed and repatriated across the border. In 2013, 95.5 percent of all Mexican children were returned, thus eliminating any opportunity to seek relief or protections afforded under TVPRA (UNHCR 2014b). A UNHCR (2014b) report expressed serious concerns that US Border Patrol agents are serving as “de facto adjudicators” of children’s claims for asylum and relief – often rejecting and returning Mexican children with legitimate claims. Having border patrol agents conduct asylum screening violates simple conflict of interest conditions. With rare exceptions, US Border Patrol agents lack training to do this type of work with children.

The differential treatment of Mexican children is, in part, premised on the assertion that they will be handed over to the safety of Mexican authorities. However, human rights organizations suggest that many children are not safely delivered home (Cavendish and Cortazar 2011; Thompson 2008), but rather end up on the streets of Mexican border towns where they are vulnerable to forced servitude, prostitution, recruitment into drug cartels, and human trafficking. Given children’s small size and greater capacity for risk-taking, deported children are increasingly perceived as ideal candidates for human smuggling (UNCHR 2014a). Coyotes know that if caught these *niños del circuito* (circulating children) will simply be returned within 48 hours leaving children trapped in a vicious cycle with little recourse but to continue working for smugglers (Washington Office on Latin America 2015). There are recent reports, however, that some of these children are being held in US custody for months to gather intelligence on cartels through a little-

known “Juvenile Referral” program, which places them at risk of being targeted by cartels upon release (Partlow 2015).

In contrast, Central American child migrants are placed under the custody of the Office for Refugee Resettlement (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR] 2015). Over an average detention period of 35 days (Goździak 2015), they are screened, placed in removal proceedings, and held in a shelter until they are sponsored by family or friends with whom they will reside while waiting for their cases to be determined by US immigration courts. With the recent increase in child migrants in summer of 2014, however, the Department of Justice ordered that immigration courts expedite the cases of unaccompanied children and families. These so-called “rocket docket” made it even more difficult for youth to secure pro-bono attorneys. Children as young as three-years-old now appear alone before immigration judges – where the court presumes that they are perfectly capable of representing themselves. Without formal rights or access to legal representation and counsel they have little possibility of winning their cases. Asylum is notoriously difficult to obtain, even for survivors of horrific violence, as applicants must provide proof of a well-grounded fear of persecution because of membership in a specific group (i.e. race, religion, nationality, sexuality, etc.). It is not enough to have suffered violence and fear of return to qualify for asylum. Even for those who do meet these rigorous criteria, many – notably children – are unable to express in the legally “correct” manner the traumatic experiences when questioned in the sterile contexts of border patrol field offices, detention centers, and court rooms (McKinnon 2009; Shoenholtz *et al.* 2014; UNHCR 2014a and b).

There are also uneven geographies of legal outcomes based on access to attorneys and location of court jurisdiction. Rogers (2015) reports that 88 percent of removal orders issued since July 2014 have gone to children without attorneys. Also, children’s chances for relief are far lower in North Carolina, Texas, and Georgia compared to California, Florida, or New York. With this rather bleak outlook, some “disappear” into the ranks of the millions of undocumented immigrants in the US – despite valid claims for asylum or other forms of relief such as the Special Immigrant Juvenile visa (SIJ). Many others are deported to their places of origin with little regard for their safety. Human rights groups argue that repatriation places children at extreme risk, since many are fleeing gangs and other forms of severe violence (HRW 2014). Central American homicide rates are among the highest in the world and children should be given the opportunity to make an informed case for asylum. The United Nations (UN) recently issued a call to the United States to treat unaccompanied child migrants as refugees of an armed conflict, given that 58 percent described being “forcibly displaced” (UNHCR 2014a and 2014c).

Another one of the critical outcomes of the recent wave of immigrant children and families in 2014 was the return of the Obama administration’s costly and widely repudiated practice of mass immigrant family detention. In addition to facilities in Artesia, New Mexico and Karnes, Texas, a new 2,400 bed facility opened in Dilley, Texas in 2014. In the words of Antonio Ginatta, Advocacy Director for the US program Human Rights Watch, “There’s nothing like walking into a prison and the first thing you hear is a crying baby. Two things that should never go together. Never ever” (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Women’s Refugee Commission 2014: 1). Women and children who committed no crime other than crossing a border without legal authorization, and

who pose no flight or security risk are being held in for-profit, private, rural, prison-like detention centers on a “no bond, no release” ruling or on exorbitantly high bonds for months. Unlike unaccompanied minors who are generally released to sponsors as soon as possible (although this can last months as well), these children are incarcerated with their mothers, often indefinitely (Figure 4).

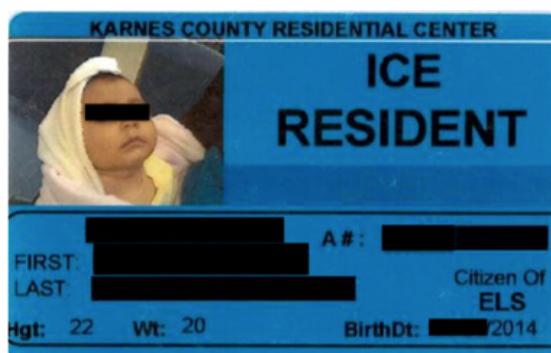


Figure 4: Infant identification card from Karnes County detention center for immigrant women and children (Source: Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), Texas).

While in these detention centers, women and children have inadequate access to medical care and legal assistance, and in some cases are subject to sexual violence and other forms of abuse. Syracuse University’s Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) case-by-case court record database, determined that even with a positive “credible fear” asylum screening, 98.5 percent of women with children lacking attorney representation received deportation orders. In the small number of cases with attorneys, only a quarter were allowed to stay (TRAC 2015). In a recent statement released by 20 mothers with children detained in Karnes City, they laid out the numerous physical and psychological suffering endured by their children in detention. Citing the many cases of women and children killed upon deportation, they pled: “Please help us, we don’t want to return to that life of violence in our countries, we want to live in peace with our children” (End Family Detention 2015). Many of these women went on to join a hunger strike of 27 mothers in this same facility. In a further act of structural and bodily violence, rather than investigating the conditions that led the detainees to such desperate measures – ICE has retaliated against these women by holding them in solitary confinement, transferring them to remote facilities and threatening deportation (Foley 2015).

## Conclusion

Migrant children face tremendous levels of violence in their lives. In this paper, we argue that we must adopt a more spatially expansive understanding of violence to consider how state policies and practices travel far beyond national borders to negatively impact migrant children’s lives. For unaccompanied migrant children, violence has become transnationalized, permeating life experience across time and space. Violence is a permanent companion of migrant children, even before they immigrate, yet especially as

they navigate smugglers, cartels, border patrol officers, as well as complex legal systems involving apprehension, custody, screening, detention, and repatriation. By delegitimizing broader interpretations of violence, or by accepting the violence in Central American and Mexican children's lives as a normalized, existential condition, the suffering children experience becomes invisible. The inevitability of violence becomes part of a common sense discourse about the region that allows for indifference to the plight of migrant children.

Moreover, if violence in children's lives is decontextualized and normalized, no one can be held accountable (Tyner and Inwood 2014). Many US citizens may choose to shrug their shoulders because the blame lies elsewhere. It is not their problem, because the "violence isn't new." This approach eschews responsibility and allows for an emotional detachment that can justify other forms of harm – such as deporting traumatized children back to unsafe conditions, allowing three-year-old children to 'defend' themselves in court, holding infants and toddlers in immigration detention centers, or keeping children in the *huelera* after harrowing journeys.

An alternative narrative to the problematic of violence would be to recognize the significant role the US has played in exacerbating inequality in the region through decades of political and economic intervention. The violence experienced by Mexican and Central American migrant youth is situated within much longer histories and geographies that have been shaped by US policies and practices. With a more nuanced contextualization, perhaps we can move toward spatially expansive ethics of care and responsibility (Lawson, 2008). Rather than turn a blind eye to the thousands of children currently wallowing in Mexican detention centers at the behest of US funded programs, we can identify the actors, power structures, and policies implicated in perpetuating child migration and their transnational experiences of violence. Only through a position of responsibility and accountability is it possible to break new ground for ethical engagements and openings for more progressive and humane approaches to addressing the profound challenges associated with child migration in the Americas.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

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