



# A Documentary of Unaccompanied Central American Children Migrants

Susana Vargas Evaristo\*

The documentary *VOCES: Cipotes, Patojos y bichos migrantes y refugiados en México* (VOICES: Migrant and Refugee Kids, Urchins, and Little Buggers in Mexico) was produced by anthropologist Abbdel Camargo Martínez in 2015.<sup>1</sup> His aim was to disseminate the reasons little boys and girls and teens would travel without the company of an adult from their countries of origin to Mexico and the United States.

This audiovisual material is novel and original. It tells the story of four migrant minors from Central America who were interviewed at the Migratory Stations in

Tapachula, Chiapas and Mexico City. It also includes Guadalupe Sánchez's presentation of an animated cartoon that uses sensitivity and emotions to take the viewer by the hand to understand what the characters in this story of migration go through, leading you to a place of profound reflection.

In addition to the video's ability to sensitize viewers, the material also presents concise information, the result of long academic research, specifying some of the main reasons that push these children to leave. It is, then, an audiovisual document that looks at a sensitive topic in a systematic, informed way. All of this serves to expose the enormous problem of social inequality on a transnational level represented by these social actors.

\* Post-doctoral UNAM fellow at CISAN; [Susana.vargas.e@gmail.com](mailto:Susana.vargas.e@gmail.com)  
Illustrations by Guadalupe Sánchez Sosa.



## THE NUMBERS

Migration of little girls and boys and teens traveling alone from Central America began rising in 2009. By 2014, more than 60 000 children were traveling alone toward the Mexico-U.S. border, turning this into a recognized humanitarian crisis. Getting to the United States through Mexico is the main intention spurring these youngsters on to withstand the violation of their human rights on the way.

In addition to the risks they have experienced in their places of origin, the spiral of violence continues and is expressed with every step they take on their journeys. The chain of events that endanger them spans everything from theft, tricks, and harassment to human trafficking. All these factors cause constant stress, accompanied by the obsessive idea of arriving to the United States as the only possibility for safety.

The figures for Central American child migrants travelling alone speak for themselves: between 2013 and 2015 alone, Mexican and U.S. authorities detained more than 95 000 of them.<sup>2</sup> Of this number, 90 percent were children and adolescents from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. As a result of pressure brought to bear by the United States on countries involved in child migration, Mexico implemented the Southern Border Plan, whose aim is to turn the country into a huge restraining wall and to deport migrants

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back to Central America.<sup>3</sup> One criticism of this government response is that it is not based on instigating the preventive and protective measures this particularly vulnerable group requires, but rather aims for criminalization, rejection, and return.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Mexico's Ministry of the Interior reported a 54.6-percent increase in the number of unaccompanied children and teens brought before Mexican authorities *vis-à-vis* the previous year and a decrease in detentions by U.S. authorities of up to 42 percent, according to Border Patrol data.<sup>5</sup>

Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador were the countries of origin of 98 percent of migrant minors (a total of 26 566) detained by Mexican immigration authorities between January and October 2015. In that period, 6 210, including 2 379 girls, were from El Salvador; 12 649, 4 417 of whom were girls, were from Guatemala; and 7 707, 3 338 of whom were girls, were from Honduras.<sup>6</sup>

One item of particular interest is that these Central American migrants are mainly between the ages of 12 and 17. The Guatemalans are the most often accom-

panied, followed by the Salvadorans, while the Hondurans tend to travel unaccompanied by any adult.

### REASONS FOR LEAVING

The stories presented in the video came from the report “Arrancados de raíz” (Pulled Out by the Roots), produced by the Mexican office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (or UN Agency for Refugees, as it is also known) (UNHCR).<sup>7</sup> It presents the splendidly illustrated stories of adolescents, taken from interviews done directly in the Tapachula, Chiapas, and Mexico City Migratory Stations.

The study “Niñez y adolescencia migrante en Centroamérica” (Children and Adolescent Migrants in Central America), carried out by the Regional Group of Organizations to Protect Migrants’ Human Rights (Gredemig) in 2006, includes interviews with Central American chil-

dren and teen migrants about the causes of their migration; 54 percent of them said they had left due to economic conditions, and 39 percent, to rejoin their families.<sup>8</sup> The third cause they mentioned was insecurity, defined by a culture of violence born in the family itself, which motivates many children and teens to leave their homes and migrate. The same study pointed out that for Salvadoran children, the first cause of migration was to rejoin their families, while for Guatemalans and Hondurans, it was due to economic conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The 2014 ACNUR study “Arrancados de Raíz” recognizes these factors as part of the causes of this kind of migration, but looks at them from a more precise, micro-social perspective. First of all, it explains that the displacement of unaccompanied minor migrants is multi-causal and that the factors are interrelated. Secondly, it shows that the children’s subjective view is important to take into account since it is constructed and consolidated along with their life experiences. Thirdly, it also shows that we cannot talk about a single type of violence; what we are dealing with here are *mul-*

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*multiple types of violence* that these minors are subject to in their countries of origin.

The violence ranges from battering, intimidation and threats, to insecurity as the cause for leaving; this explains how completely unprotected these children are.

In the fourth place, the violence has different specificities according to their place of origin and the child's gender. Finally, the study concludes decisively that this segment of the population requires international protection.

***DIEGO, AGE 17***  
**(GUATEMALA)**

Diego's story shows how the children in his place of origin grow up fast and are forced to deal with day-to-day situations like helping support their families or making decisions to resolve threatening conflicts stemming from youth gangs. Different factors come into play in this context like violence, poverty, and migration by family members, particularly parents.

***JONATHAN, AGE 17***  
**(EL SALVADOR)**

His dream is to bring his family, scattered in different places, back together again. He expresses the emotions that come from having to deal with abandonment, flight, and crossing borders, and those that emerge both between the relatives who stay in their country of origin and those who are spread around Mexico and the United States. Jonathan says that he would like his life to be like it was when he was seven years old, and "not like it is now, where my whole family is flung far and wide."

***RUBY, AGE 17***  
**(EL SALVADOR)**

Ruby tells us about the sexual violence experienced in her home, joined to the abuse from the gangs. Early

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pregnancies and early parenting in the framework of violence are components that are unleashed and worsen women's day-to-day lives. This makes them prefer to disappear to save their lives and those of their children in the face of death threats, which almost always come from a man.

One constant in the stories is the idea that each person has about the existence of a relative or acquaintance in the United States, even when there is no strong emotional bond. For the migrants, this becomes a fundamental factor that helps them in the desperate circumstances they face in their places of origin. It makes traveling to the U.S. the most viable solution they see.

However, given that Mexican immigration authorities have implemented a return mechanism as the way to preserve unaccompanied minors' security, the truth is that returning to their countries and communities of origin means facing violence and death threats once again, the very thing they journeyed north in the first place to escape. Ruby says that "going back would be the worst" that could happen to her and her baby. The

return worsens the risks for child migrants because the reason they left in the first place was linked to escaping to a particularly risky situation like intimidations from relatives or gang members.

***JOSUE, AGE 15***  
***(HONDURAS)***

Lastly, Josué's story adds an example to the documentary of the migrants' need to be able to apply to Mexican immigration authorities for refugee status, which could make them "safe" from being returned and having to confront the violence at home. However, this mechanism is not always an option for them, since the rush to cross the border between Mexico and the United States leads them to deprive themselves of this right due to the uneasiness and uncertainty of the process itself.

The "Arrancados de Raíz" study shows that information about refugee status is not always adequately communicated to these unaccompanied minor migrants; 30 percent of those interviewed who received no information in a timely manner said they would be interested in applying. This implies that the Mexican government makes mass deportations of unaccompanied minors who actually require greater protection.

To conclude, we can also say that gender is a recurring risk factor that affects females, both adult and minors, given the ominous possibility of being harassed both in their country of origin and in the transit countries, Mexico among them.

The violence is generalized, but is greater among young Central Americans. This is one of the crosscutting themes the documentary deals with through the stories of the adolescents who have faced the gangs linked to organized crime.

Ethnicity and cultural origins are also aspects of the Central American child exodus. This is no minor consideration, as shown, on the one hand, by the challenge the children and teens face when crossing linguistic barriers, and on the other hand, their forced abandonment of rural and community life, all to save their lives.

Family reunification is the driving force behind the children and teens' need to start the journey away from their places of origin. Searching for their relatives in the United States implies finding a solution to a series of events charged with violence and insecurity that have been part of their lives.

To disseminate the need to protect these Central American children and adolescents beyond the sphere of academia, the creator of the original idea of the documentary managed to transform a long, important piece of academic research into a visual document accessible to all interested audiences. **MM**

#### Watch the documentary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uotemh80HBs>

### COMPOSER ALBERTO DELGADO ON WRITING THE SCORE FOR THE DOCUMENTARY

"Initially, I intended to recreate the music played in Central America. But, as we listened to the narration, we made certain variations that musically softened the real story, which is very brutal. Throughout Central America, people listen to *son* in 3/4 and 6/8 time. And if you listen to the music in the documentary, it's in those tempos.

"Composing the score for this video was an enormous responsibility for me, a way of contributing something to changing this situation. I'm Mexican, and these atrocities happen in my country. It's very painful for me to see what we Mexicans have turned into."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Cipote," "patojo" and "bicho" (loosely, "kids," "urchins," and "little buggers" are colloquial terms for little boys and girls in the three countries in question. They are not pejorative, but, rather, terms of endearment. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> Unidad de Política Migratoria, Secretaría de Gobernación, "Menores migrantes en México Extranjeros presentados ante las autoridades migratorias y mexicanos devueltos por Estados Unidos," <http://www.politica.migratoria.gob.mx/work/models/SEGOB/Resource/2510/1/images/Menores%20migrantes%20feb%202015%2014042015.pdf>, accessed August 16, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Initially, the Southern Border Program was put forward as a mechanism to help regulate migratory flows and diminish the risk to the Central American migrant population; however, in fact, it became the main mechanism for containing migratory flows.

<sup>4</sup> Pablo Ceriani Cernadas, comp., "Niñez detenida: lo derechos de los niños, niñas y adolescentes en la frontera entre México y Guatemala," (Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, and Buenos Aires: Ed. Fontamara/Universidad Nacional de Lanus, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías/Ford Foundation, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Secretaría de Gobernación, Unidad Migratoria, "Menores migrantes resumen estadístico mensual, octubre, 2015," <http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/SEGOB/Resource/2473/1/images/menores%20migrantes%20resumen%20oct%202015%2018122015.pdf>, accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, "Arrancados de raíz. Causas que originan el desplazamiento transfronterizo de niños, niñas y adolescentes no acompañados y/o separados de Centroamérica y su necesidad de protección internacional," report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Mexico, <http://www.acnur.org/donde-trabaja/america/mexico/arrancados-de-raiz/>.

<sup>8</sup> GREDEMIG, "Niñez y adolescencia migrante en Centroamérica. Marzo 2006," Juan Carlos Rivas, July 3, "La triste historia de los niños migrantes," *Vértice*, <http://www.elsalvador.com/vertice/2005/030705/repotaje1.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Carolina Escobar, *Los pequeños pasos en un camino minado: Migración, niñez y juventud en Centroamérica y el sur de México*, (Guatemala City: Consejería en Proyecto, 2008), p. 119.



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Año LXVI · Nueva época · núm. 69 · julio-septiembre, 2016.

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Suscripciones:  
[margarita.bedolla@udual.org](mailto:margarita.bedolla@udual.org)  
Tel: (55) 5622 0093

Circuito norponiente de Ciudad Universitaria, Ciudad de México, 04510