

# A child's transnational journey “to be someone”

## A child's transnational journey “to be someone”

[Elizabeth Kennedy](#) [1] 5 September 2012

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The number of child migrants to the USA continues to rise despite border militarization. Liz Kennedy teaches at shelters along the Mexico-US border where those caught are detained. She reveals why they feel that the 2,000 mile journey is their only choice.

This year the [United States](#) [12] has seen a [significant increase](#) [13] in the number of children under the age of 18 arriving from countries such as El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala without documentation and without a parent or legal guardian. They are known as ‘unaccompanied minors’. In the first six months of 2012 alone more children [arrived](#) [14] than in all of 2011.

Various theories have been posited to explain this increase in young migrants. A Mexican law introduced in 2011 has supposedly [decreased](#) [15] the likelihood that children will be deported back to Central America from Mexico en route, meaning that more make it to the US border. However, there is also evidence to suggest that key portions of this law have [not been enacted](#) [16], and Mexico claims to be deporting [record numbers](#) [17] of Central Americans. Conservative politicians [assert](#) [18] that the US border is not secure enough, despite [billions of dollars](#) [19] spent and huge increases in [agents on the ground](#) [20]. Then, some academics believe that because adult migration to the US has stopped, kids must now come to [reunite](#) [21] with their parents. In personal conversations, numerous service providers and lawyers have said that they believe “the word has gotten back to families that their kids will be cared for [in the US].” Yet as the President and CEO of the US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, Lavinia Limon, has [said](#) [22]: “none of [this speculation] is supported by hard proof or cited by the children themselves...Since our policies fail to [provide a way](#) [23], the children, unsurprisingly, are taking matters into their own hands.”



[24] Sign on a freeway near

the US-Mexico border

My own experiences with over 100 unaccompanied minors over the past year confirm Limon's view and highlight significant differences between the decision making of child migrants and their adult counterparts.

From an early age, many Central American and Mexican youth internalise the phrases *al otro lado* ('to the other side') and *al norte* ('to the North'). For decades, members of their community have left hoping to fulfil the 'American Dream', and many have not seen one or both of their parents for years. Culturally, many are expected to contribute financially to support their family once in their teens.

Their stories reveal that they consider the same opportunities and factors their parents did, but they also suggest that they are more willing to embrace risk. The faltering US economy, border militarization, and gang violence now [detering adults](#) [25] does not seem to keep children from coming; they feel that the 2,000 mile journey is their only choice. Most minors specifically reference the better education, greater career mobility and higher pay available in the US when talking about their reasons for migrating.

### **In the USA but on the Border**

Three days a week, I drive 30 minutes to facilitate creative writing, book club and music and dance classes at two detention shelters for 10 to 15 children and youth who were caught crossing the Mexico-US border in search of a better life. The kids' artwork and their countries' flags cover the walls inside, and their murals outside span much of the basketball court and soccer field. Local stores donate groceries, and the smell of cooking is always present. The three meals and two snacks they receive is far more than the one tamale, beans and rice they received at home, and many sleep in a bed (alone) for the first time while at the shelter.

When Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents apprehend migrants, they are required by the [Trafficking and Victim's Protection Reauthorization Act \(TVPRA\)](#) [26] to ask abuse - and age - related questions. These questions are limited and very straightforward, partially because they are asked by agents with little relevant training. If the migrant is determined by the TVPRA screening to be an unaccompanied minor, s/he must be transferred to Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) facilities

within 72 hours of apprehension.

Seven different types of facilities are provided by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to house unaccompanied minors, which differ by security level and purpose. All are [privately contracted](#) [27], but the [1997 Flores Settlement Agreement](#) [28] mandates the provision of various medical and social services, including mental health care at all of them. There is nonetheless significant variability among shelters; the number of beds ranges from 7 to over 300, meaning that staff-to-child ratios differ and the mental health care and substance use treatment at three of seven facility types is limited. [Abuse](#) [29] is reported at some, whereas others are [commended](#) [30].

As presented at the [US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants Conference](#) [31] on 24 April 2012, the average length of stay is 61 days, and 88 percent of detained children are placed with family residing in the US upon leaving. The assumption is that all unaccompanied minors who arrive to the US have a family or community member who can sponsor their residency here. For the 5 to 10% who come from living on the streets, their long journey ends with a short “repatriation” flight back, where they become vulnerable to both [human and drug trafficking](#) [32]. In theory this should not occur, since orphans and victims of trafficking are eligible for “[Special Immigrant Juvenile Status \(SIJS\)](#) [33]”, which allows them to enter the US foster care system and eventually become legal residents. Yet with no right to [legal representation](#) [34], children and youth rarely learn of this option.



[35] Friendship

bracelets made my children in the detention centre during a creative workshop

All children and youth in the centres have been separated from their family, friends and community and have frequently experienced traumatic incidents traveling to the US or prior to migrating. Since Health and Human Services (DHHS) shelters like ours have limited capacity to evaluate and treat related mental health problems, creative activities are arranged as alternative and therapeutic ways to express their emotions. Many of the children who have participated in my classes have recounted their lives and hopes for the future to me.

### **14-years-old. Indigenous. From Honduras.**

A girl we'll call Maria arrived at the shelter pregnant, struggling to communicate in either Spanish or English. She persevered, and soon started her first assignment. It began: “At 10 years old, my papá started to tell me the good things and the bad things.” When I asked Maria what this meant the next

day, after sitting in silence for 30 minutes, she wrote: "while my father is a good man, he did not always do good things. Some of these things created a bad situation for me." Afraid to tell her mother, she called her brothers in Alabama to help her escape the sexual violence which her father had been inflicting on her for the past four years.

Maria's story is unusual, both because she lived with her mother and father and because of the severity of her abuse. Most at the shelters have been separated from one or both parents for prolonged periods of time and experienced a nexus of inequality, exclusion and violence. Many, male and female, write that they've come "to fill the emptiness in [their] heart" that resulted from their parent(s) migrating to feed, clothe and educate them years before. In their alternative living arrangements they experienced greater neglect and abuse. After her parents migrated North to earn more money, for example, a girl called Angela lived with nine of her cousins in their grandparents' two-bedroom house. With minimal supervision and friends who were several years older, she had already had sex and used alcohol at the age of 12.

Three years prior to Maria's own departure, at the peak of the global recession, her then teenage brothers could not find work in their rural area. The neighbouring city offered no opportunities because of all too common [racism](#) [36] against indigenous people. The rest of the country was [ripped apart](#) [37] by gang violence and related drug trafficking. Her brothers decided to risk the journey to the US by [jumping trains](#) [38] through Mexico and then walking for days across Texas's mountainous and arid terrain. Once there, they went to Alabama and Florida for seasonal farm work. Many of the boys, and some of the girls, in the shelter hope their journey will end in similar fields.

### **"The necessary suffering to be someone"**

Like 85 percent of the minors in these shelters, Maria and her brothers come from one of three countries with the [highest rates](#) [39] of crime and violence in the world: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In these countries children are disproportionately exposed to traumatic events caused by the increased drug smuggling, trafficking and gang activity throughout Central America and Mexico. Gangs, and corrupt officials, are now the [perpetrators](#) [40] of persecution, but unaccompanied minors have had [very limited success](#) [41] in obtaining refugee status in the US. This is part of a larger trend. UNHCR's [2011 data](#) [42] fails to record any of the internal displacement in the aforementioned nations and documents only a few thousand refugees. In addition, despite the introduction of ground breaking legislation in 2011, Mexico grants very few asylum.

Even aware of the low likelihood of obtaining legal status and of the dangers she would encounter en route, within days of finding out about Maria's abuse, her brothers sent her all their savings – \$4,000 – and arranged for a *coyote* (people smuggler) to accompany her to the US. Migrants pay anywhere from [\\$300 to \\$6,000](#) [43] to cross the border safely. Some *coyotes* charge a one-time price, meaning that if multiple attempts are required, the migrant will not have to pay again. Many must make multiple attempts before they are successful, and each time they face abuse from not both *coyotes* and officials. Just yesterday, one boy recounted to me how Mexican federal police had beat him uninterrupted for 30 minutes. The bruises and scars remain several months later.

It is certain that Maria also endured many hardships during her journey across Mexico to the US. As an unaccompanied female, she was [more vulnerable](#) [44] to exploitation, abuse and sex-trafficking. Like most at the shelter, she is unwilling to discuss what happened on her journey, describing it as "the necessary suffering to be someone."

### **The struggle to become "someone"**

Because of changing [state immigration laws](#) [23], in the two months it took Maria to arrive, her brothers had moved. This delayed their reunification and put her at risk of deportation. Meanwhile she continued to plan for her life in the US.

Like most in the shelters, she said that, once out, her biggest desire was "to work hard and give the money my brothers provided me back." Back home her family had required her to work after finishing third grade, so when asked about school she said "there's no reason to start here." While she is very intelligent and could do well in school, her brothers (who also didn't attend high school)

will need her working to pay the bills – for their home and their parents' home in Honduras. Indeed, many who arrive at the shelters already have worn hands from working in the fields and have explicit hopes to contribute financially to their families back home. This is part of how they hope "to be someone."

As Nando Sigona has recently [encouraged](#) [45] with undocumented child migration in Europe, undocumented child migration to the US "should not be looked at in isolation" from the history, policies, social networks, and limited choices stemming from regional violence, family separation, poverty and racism that adults also face. And as USCRI's Limon concludes: "the answer lies in the one place it has not yet been sought: in the patchwork of failed US immigration policies...[T]his is a regional problem and requires a regional response including increased educational and development assistance in Central America and Mexico."

Until then, we all have the right to be someone, and children seem more willing to embrace great risk to have an opportunity at realizing this fundamental right.

*This is the second article in a three-part series on undocumented migration to the United States. Read the first [here](#) [23].*

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 About the author

Elizabeth Kennedy is currently doing a PhD in Geography at San Diego State University in the United States where she is working with unaccompanied minors. You can follow her on twitter @EGKennedySD.

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