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# MIGRATION POLICY PRACTICE

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## CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES ON THE CENTRAL AMERICA–MEXICO–UNITED STATES MIGRATION CORRIDOR: DATA AND POLICY

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## Introduction

*Gabriella Sanchez*<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *Migration Policy Practice* on children in the current Central America–Mexico–United States context identifies critical blind spots of child-related migration data. It urges readers to look beyond cyclical trends, to instead identify underlying and pressing policy and practice issues that have remained unattended or ignored by past United States administrations, and that are at risk to remain so unless we collectively – and critically – examine our understandings of child migration.

The return of the democrats to the United States White House generated excitement among migrant advocates, who saw in the arrival of the Biden Administration an opportunity to reverse some of the migration-related measures implemented during the Trump years. The transition also unleashed an overabundance of information – often contradictory and confusing – that did not take long to reach communities along the migration pathway. Encouraged by the prospect of a more lenient approach towards immigration, thousands of people throughout the Americas and the Caribbean headed north, despite the pandemic-related restrictions imposed by governments across the entire region.

Among many others, rumours concerning “automatic” asylum, the potential “opening” of the border to families travelling with young children, the possibility of turning oneself over to United States immigration authorities as constituting authorized permanent admission, etc., fuelled the drive to reach the United States–Mexico border across a continent impacted by growing inequality, environmental disasters and political turmoil. Smugglers are often accused of being the forces behind deceitful fictitious claims. However, IOM data suggest that the shutting down of government offices in charge of regularization processes and the reduction of the availability of services provided by civil society organizations during the pandemic – specifically in the case of Mexico – left migrants in transit without the only reliable, trusted sources of information available to them (IOM, 2021a).

A quick look at any of the multiple groups aimed at supporting migrants’ journeys, in sites like Facebook, reveals widespread confusion, misunderstandings, and proliferation of false or unconfirmed information. Repeated endlessly through likes and shares, advice and tips (even if unfounded) became fundamental pieces of information to hold on to (IOM, 2021b).

Against this background, children became depicted as the tools that parents and other relatives were maliciously employing to enter the United States. As the United States Government announced that some of the measures in place during the Trump Administration would be reintroduced in order to contain the growing number of families being apprehended, relatives had no option other than to send children on their own. Harrowing images of young children abandoned in the proximity of the fence, travelling alongside strangers, or even being dropped from atop the wall further conveyed a feeling of crisis and fear, no matter how much United States–Mexico border-based voices insisted that none of these practices were unprecedented – and of how, in fact, their treatment by media and commentators was obscuring larger, more pressing challenges that needed to be urgently attended to regarding child migration.

In the pages that follow, contributors shed light on aspects that have gotten lost in the noise generated by graphic depictions of child migration in the Central America–Mexico–United States pathway. They encourage readers to recognize, first and foremost, migrant children as critical and not peripheral actors on the migration stage; as capable of identifying the issues that drive them to migrate and of articulating solutions; as ignored and miscatalogued in data-collection processes, yet deserving of being accounted for when alive, and also when missing or dead.

Marta Sánchez Dionis, Andrea García Borja and Kate Dearden (members of IOM’s Missing Migrants Project) open this special issue with an unprecedented and critical piece on migrant children’s deaths and disappearances in the Americas. Recognizing that accounting for the dead and the missing also demands an intersectional approach, the authors examine deaths involving indigenous migrant children – those of girls in particular. They remind us that data gaps

<sup>1</sup> Gabriella Sanchez is an anthropologist and faculty at the Criminal Justice Department at the Texas A&M International University in Laredo, Texas. She is the guest editor of this special issue of *MPP*.

on deaths and disappearances concerning indigenous people along the migration pathway are not random. They can in fact be traced to long-standing marginalization and discriminatory processes that have historically impacted indigenous communities in the Americas and beyond.

Relying on her work among migrant children and children who facilitate irregular crossings on the United States–Mexico border, Gabriella Sanchez examines in her article how data-collection practices concerning irregular migratory journeys have focused on the experiences of adults, leaving those concerning children – and in particular, poor and/or indigenous children – virtually unexamined. Unless built upon graphic, often sensationalistic cases of abandonment and poverty, the experiences of children’s irregular journeys remain vastly unexamined in academia and policy circles. Little is known about how race, class and gender shape their journeys, their encounters with each other on the migration trail, and the mechanisms they deploy to counter risk or violence at the hands of State actors, criminal actors and other adults.

Yaatsil Guevara González and Alexandra Elena Lestón, drawing from their work in Tenosique, Mexico (a city at the core of current migration enforcement measures by the United States and Mexican Governments aimed at reducing irregular migration to the United States via return flights), examine the experiences of unaccompanied Central American migrant children at shelters. While efforts have been made to provide them with mechanisms that allow them to remain in Mexico legally, the vast majority of these children still plan to leave Mexico and eventually reach the United States. This policy misalignment reflects the lack of understanding of children’s decision-making processes, and the efforts to impose adult-centric measures that fail to consider children’s plans.

Also drawing from their work in Guatemala and Honduras, Lauren Heidbrink and Amelia Frank-Vitale examine the development–migration nexus and its impact on young indigenous people in Central America. They argue that development has been an ill-equipped tool to respond to the interrelated reasons for migration, as aid comes with ideological strings that hinder, rather than support, local efforts to respond to poverty, corruption and insecurity. Their work calls to recognize young people as development experts, and to take their diagnoses and solutions seriously.

The article by Lisa Frydman, Elba Coria Márquez and Catherine Mongeon – who write from their experience providing legal services for migrant children –

summarizes the barriers to the full enforcement of laws in both Mexico and the United States that protect unaccompanied migrant children. In response, they provide a series of alternatives that may allow for the countries to work both independently and alongside each other in a way that prioritizes children’s well-being over migration enforcement.

To add to this special issue, Caitlyn Yates sheds light on one of the least examined experiences along the Central America–Mexico–United States migration corridor: those involving the journeys of Asian and African children through Mexico. While granted, they constitute a minuscule percentage of all the children transiting through the country when compared against Central American children, their journeys present unique characteristics – to wit, the fact that Asian children tend to be teenagers travelling unaccompanied, compared to African children (most often girls) who travel with their families and tend to belong to a much younger age group. Their journeys through Mexico are also defined by incidents of discrimination and rampant racism, a theme that migration scholars have only recently started to examine.

Finally, this issue of *MPP* includes an article by Louis Volante, Don A. Klinger and Melissa Siegel that discusses the importance of social protection and education policies that help mediate achievement gaps as well as the prominent mental and physical health challenges disproportionately faced by immigrant students. Recent research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the growing necessity of broader notions of academic resilience that recognize important psychosocial and physical well-being issues among immigrants, which are typically not captured by large-scale assessment measures. The article outlines a range of possible policy directions for a post-COVID-19 world. ■

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## Missing migrant children in the Americas

*Marta Sánchez Dionis, Andrea García Borja and Kate Dearden*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Jakelin died a few days after her seventh birthday, far away from her home and her mother, after having crossed the border between Mexico and the United States of America (Ximénez de Sandoval, 2018). One week earlier, she and her father had left their hometown, Raxruhá, a Mayan Q'eqchi' community in northern Guatemala. They hoped to reach the United States to find the safety and well-being that were lacking in Raxruhá. After enduring the perilous 3,000 km journey through Mexico, they were apprehended by the United States Border Patrol in the vicinity of the Antelope Wells Port of Entry in southern New Mexico, located in a remote desert area. Soon after they were taken into custody, Jakelin fell sick; she started vomiting and had a fever. According to United States authorities, she received emergency medical care an hour and a half after her father first informed them of her symptoms (CBP, 2018). Despite having been transferred to a nearby hospital in El Paso, Texas, Jakelin died two days later from what was found to be a curable bacterial infection (Vera, 2019).

Jakelin is one of the 192 migrant children whose deaths have been documented by IOM's Missing Migrants Project in the Americas since 2014.<sup>2</sup> The Project documents whenever someone dies while trying to migrate to another country, which happens around the world, almost every day. In most cases recorded by the Missing Migrants Project, the deaths of people, including children, are linked to the protracted conditions of irregularity that they face during their journeys or in places of destination, as a result of unequal access to safe mobility paths. The lack of options to migrate safely increases the likelihood of people – including children – taking

irregular migration pathways. In the process, they must try to avoid detection by authorities and often encounter dangerous and abusive conditions that can pose risks to life at any age.

What makes Jakelin's story different is that it was reported in the media. For the most part, there is little publicly available information about children who go missing or die on migration journeys, their lives and the families they leave behind – as overlapping and intersecting systems of discrimination and disadvantage shape which voices are heard and which are sidelined. This is reflected in the data collected by the Missing Migrants Project: for the majority of recorded incidents, including in Latin America and the Caribbean, information on age is not available, and therefore the number of children (and adults) known to have died on migration journeys is unknown.

Despite the many gaps in available data, records that include information on age can provide some insight into where and how children die or go missing during migration. In this article, we highlight some of the risks that children encounter while migrating to reach safety and better opportunities in the Americas. We also present some of the stories that have been documented of children who lost their lives on migration journeys. We share them to demonstrate the complex circumstances in which migrating children can find themselves, and in an effort to show how the conditions of irregularity that they face during their journeys as a result of their unequal access to safe migration channels produce and sustain situations of increased risk of death or disappearance.

<sup>1</sup> Marta Sánchez Dionis (Project Officer), Andrea García Borja (Data Analyst) and Kate Dearden (Project Officer) are working on the Missing Migrants Project of IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) in Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> All testimonies and data in this article can be found on the website of IOM's Missing Migrants Project, available at <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

### Data challenges related to missing migrant children

Why are there so many gaps in information about missing migrant children? Although children are one of the most vulnerable groups of migrants, data on the number of missing migrant children tend to be quite limited.<sup>3</sup> One problem is the challenge inherent to collecting information about children travelling irregularly (Sanchez, 2021). In many cases, especially when deaths occur in remote, clandestine paths or over water, children’s remains are never found. Often, survivors who reach their destinations may be afraid of reporting what happened to their fellow travellers due to fear of reprisals from authorities or armed groups that operate along clandestine routes. For similar reasons, families may not report missing relatives. Additionally, when sources such as the media report deaths, they often include just the number of lives lost, which means that migrant children who die during their journeys may not be identified as such.

Information concerning missing migrant girls is even more scarce. Stories of girls who go missing during their journeys are rarely reported or recorded (Dearden and Sánchez Dionis, 2018), but qualitative evidence indicates that they are at greater risk of death during migration (Pickering and Cochrane, 2012). In a study examining migrant death records in Arizona collected by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, migrant women and girls were overrepresented in the death rates compared with the share of women and girls apprehended by the United States Border Patrol in Arizona, indicating that women and girls are at a higher risk of death during migration across the United States–Mexico border than their male counterparts (Martinez et al., 2014). However, the limited availability of gender-disaggregated data (as well as data on intersecting multiple discriminations linked to age, race, ethnicity, ability or other factors) makes it difficult to measure the impact of unsafe migration on the lives of migrating girls.

Another overarching barrier to better documentation (as well as prevention) of deaths of migrant children is the lack of systems in place to search for missing migrants across borders and to properly identify remains. Because of this, tens of thousands of families worldwide likely do not know what has

happened to their missing migrant relatives (Sánchez Dionis and Dearden, 2021). While many countries have well-established processes for searching for the missing in their own territories, there is not a similar process for missing migrants yet. Governments should urgently address this in line with their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law,<sup>4</sup> and also to fulfil their commitments under Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants”, and Sustainable Development Goal 10.7, which calls on States to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration”.

### Journeys through the Americas

#### *United States–Mexico border*

In March 2021, a nine-year-old girl from Mexico whose name we do not know drowned in the Rio Grande, while she was attempting to cross by swimming with her mother and three-year-old brother (CBP, 2021). The strong currents quickly swept them downriver, but the mother managed to bring her children to a small island, from where they were rescued by United States authorities. After life-saving efforts were attempted on the girl, she was pronounced dead, and her little brother and mother were taken to the hospital. Her death did not receive the same media attention or cause the same public outrage as Jakelin’s. Only local media reported on it, and they offered conflicting information.

At least 78 children have lost their lives on the United States–Mexico border since 2014. The risks of crossing the border at unofficial points between Mexico and the United States are high and well documented, and they can be even higher for children. The most common direct causes of death are drowning, conditions related to the harsh environment (such as hyperthermia and hypothermia), and a lack of shelter, food and water. A study of border deaths in South Texas found that at least 17 children drowned in the Rio Grande between

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed look at the risks that children face on irregular migration routes globally and the gaps in data, please see: Laczko et al., 2019.

<sup>4</sup> This includes the obligation to uphold the right to life, which includes the right for all people to be treated with dignity after death, and mandates all States to effectively investigate deaths when their cause is uncertain, to identify the deceased, and to provide information to their families. These rights must be upheld in a non-discriminatory manner, irrespective of the victim’s race, ethnicity, national origin, gender or other status.

2012 and 2019, including a 10-month-old baby (Leutert et al., 2020). Migrant children crossing this border irregularly are also known to have died in vehicular accidents, after accidental falls from the border wall and in the rough terrain, and from violence from armed groups, authorities and other actors. Due to the scarce human presence along these borderlands, the vastness of the territory and the inhospitable terrain, in many cases the remains of children who have died are found long after their deaths or are never recovered. This means that their families may never have confirmation of what happened to them, and they may never be recorded as deaths during migration.

### *Central America*

On 7 March 2019, Vilma, a 16-year-old indigenous Mam girl from Guatemala, died in a vehicular accident along with 23 other Guatemalan migrants in Chiapas, Mexico (Barreno Castillo, 2019). Before she left home, Vilma had a flower stand in her hometown in Cajolá. The eldest of three siblings, she decided to go to the United States when her father took ill, as the income from selling flowers could not cover the cost of the medicine needed to keep him healthy.<sup>5</sup> Two other children lost their lives in the same vehicular accident, including Keida, a 15-year-old girl travelling with her older brother.

Vilma's story is one example of the spaces and contexts in which indigenous girls die on migration journeys. Their deaths and disappearances are not accidental or random tragedies, but a systematic outcome of the structural marginalization that indigenous communities experience before and during their migration journeys (Ybarra, 2019; Heidbrink, 2020). The lack of accurate and reliable data on migrant fatalities disaggregated by ethnic origins contributes to rendering their deaths invisible: there are no counts of how many indigenous people, including children, have died during migration, and how they may be disproportionately affected by the lack of options for safe and legal routes.

Vilma and her group were travelling on one of the main migration routes running north from Central America (through Mexico) to the southern border

of the United States. These routes generally require people to take highly unsafe means of transport and to walk through long stretches of desolate terrain where they often encounter abuse, injury and extortion (Yates and Leutert, 2019). The main recorded cause of death on migration routes through Central America is vehicular accidents, which are mostly related to unsafe modes of travel (such as overcrowded vehicles or freight trains).

Violence along the route – ranging from murder to physical abuse and sexual violence – is the second most common cause of death in the region. Besides age, other factors such as gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics also influence the risks that children (and teenagers) face during migration. Research indicates that deeply entrenched unequal gender relations result in migrant girls facing higher risks of violence as they travel on irregular migration routes across the region (Save the Children, 2020). Children with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics also experience high levels of violence, discrimination and exploitation while in transit (KIND and Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova A.C., 2017). The Missing Migrants Project has recorded 825 deaths and disappearances of migrating people while on transit through Central America, including 67 children.

### *The Darién Gap*

In 28 January 2019, six minutes after setting off from La Caleta beach in Capurganá, Colombia, towards Panama, a boat carrying 32 migrants capsized. “In a second, everything turned into chaos and despair. A wave covered us completely, split the boat in two and the sea silenced our screams,” said Didier, one of the eight survivors of this shipwreck (Gómez, 2019). At least 24 people lost their lives in this incident, including 10 children. No personal details were reported by data sources, which means that we do not know who they were, where they were from and whom they left behind. We know only the barest details of their deaths, but lack any information on the complex, meaningful lives they lived.

Since 2014, the Missing Migrants Project has documented 132 deaths on the Colombia–Panama border, including 18 children. People on this route usually travel in small boats from the northern coast of Colombia across the Gulf of Urabá to Panama. Upon reaching land, they continue on foot across

<sup>5</sup> On the decision-making processes concerning migration among the indigenous youth in Central America, see: Heidbrink and Frank-Vitale, 2021.

the Darién Gap, a notoriously inaccessible region of swampland and dense rainforest spanning 100 km of the border. Data from UNICEF (2021) indicates that the number of children migrating through the Darién Gap has increased more than fifteenfold in the last four years: from 109 in 2017 to 1,653 in 2020, with a peak of 3,956 children travelling through this route in 2019. A record 11,965 children arrived in Panama from Colombia after crossing the Darién Gap in the first seven months of 2021, accounting for 26 per cent of the total number of people transiting through the jungle (SNF, 2021).

Children crossing the Colombia–Panama border come from different countries around the world, with growing numbers originating from Africa (Yates, 2019 and 2021). The 10 children who lost their lives in the January 2019 shipwreck were believed to be Congolese, according to survivors’ testimonies. African migrant children transiting through the Darién Gap and other countries along the migration route to the United States face multiple and overlapping experiences of inequality and marginalization, including lack of access to services, racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination, as well as racialized violence (Priya Morley et al., 2021).

### South America

It was 3 p.m. in the afternoon on Monday, 19 April 2021, when Pedro grabbed the hands of his grandchildren Yadira and Anderson, aged 15 and 10 respectively, as they ventured across one of the hundreds of clandestine trails (known as *trochas*) which criss-cross the 2,200 km Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela–Colombia border. Once on the Colombian side of the border, Yadira, Anderson and their grandfather were trying to wade the Pamplonita River to reach the border city of Cúcuta, when they were swept away by a rapid current. Yadira’s remains were found that night. The remains of her 10-year-old brother and her grandfather were recovered the next day (Carvajal, 2021).

Hundreds of people, including children, resort to *trochas* to cross the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela–Colombia border without legal documentation every day<sup>6</sup> – a dangerous venture,

as people have to trek through risky paths and wade rivers to evade capture and are often forced to pay extortion fees to the multiple armed groups that control the *trochas* (Collins, 2021). As many as 164 Venezuelans are known to have died on migration routes across South America since 2014, 18 of whom were children. However, the actual number of deaths is not known, as there are no official systematic efforts to count the dead and missing along this or other irregular cross-border routes.

### Caribbean

Walkiria was 17 years old when she boarded a boat on the coastal province of El Seibo in the Dominican Republic, together with her sister Yoleydi and 13 others (8 men and 5 women), on the night of 21 February 2017 (CDN, 2017). They intended to reach the neighbouring island of Puerto Rico, where they hoped they could build a better future for themselves and support their families back home. But after several hours at sea, their boat capsized, and they fell into the water. Their remains were pulled from the sea two days later.

The remains of Walkiria and Yoleydi were identified and returned to their family. This is an exception: in reality, many migrant children die in anonymity, far from home. Their deaths largely go unrecorded, unreported and untold. There are several maritime migration routes in the Caribbean which, as with all overseas irregular crossings, are dangerous. Migrants taking these routes risk drowning in shipwrecks and becoming stranded at sea. Migration routes in the Caribbean have the second highest number of migrant deaths and disappearances recorded by the Missing Migrants Project in the Americas, after the United States–Mexico border, with some 900 deaths recorded since 2014, including the deaths of 12 children. A complete registry of children who have lost their lives on migration routes in the Caribbean does not exist: all records have gaps, as much of the most basic information (including age and gender) is missing. Likely, any count barely scratches the surface of the tragedy.

<sup>6</sup> In December 2020, the Organization of American States (OAS) estimated that between 500 and 700 people may be leaving the Bolivian Republic of Venezuela daily through irregular routes (*trochas*) to Colombia (OAS, 2020).

## Conclusion

For children, migration can present both risks and opportunities. But for those who have no choice but to travel irregularly, migration journeys can deeply impact their development and pose serious risk to life at any age. Children migrating across and between borders irregularly face increased marginalization and vulnerability during their journeys, especially if they are travelling on their own. The fear of being reported to the authorities, language barriers (among transcontinental and indigenous children), or the discrimination that children may experience in transit on account of their age, race, gender and other intersecting factors often mean that they struggle to reach out to others in the communities through which they pass, and these may open the door to increased exploitation, violence and abuse. In the most tragic of cases, children who cannot access safe mobility options may lose their lives during dangerous journeys by land or sea.

Still, data on the irregular journeys of children and young people on the move are inadequate and fragmented, both globally and in the Americas. The lack of data on missing migrant children consistently hinders the ability to influence policy, monitor progress and demand accountability. While data by itself might not bring about change, it can provide the necessary evidence to prompt action. There is a need to improve data collection to better document how migrant children are disproportionately affected by the lack of options for safe and legal routes. It is also essential to disaggregate data by factors such as age, gender, disability, ethnicity, class, migration status and sexual orientation to inform rights-based migration policies aimed at reducing the risks faced by all children on the move. ■

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## Raising questions on data analysis practices: The irregular migratory journeys of children

Gabriella Sanchez<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

From the beginning of the Biden Administration, most commentary on irregular child migration in the Americas has focused on the journeys of Central American children to the United States–Mexico border. Powerful images abound of young children and infants wandering on their own in the Texan desert as they encounter United States migration agents, or being held under concerning conditions in detention facilities. Media sources often cite cases of parents who agonize over allowing their children to cross the border on their own or with a smuggler, rather than risking family separation or return – not just to the border, but all the way to their countries of origin (Guevara González and Lestón, 2021).

While we must not deny the critical nature of any of these incidents, it is important to highlight that they only provide a partial, often curated picture of the experiences of children migrating irregularly. The truth is that for the most part, we lack data on the ways that children experience and manage irregular migration. The data on sex, age and nationality that may help establish the magnitude of child migration are unavailable in some cases and inexistent in others – for example, most recorded cases of migrant deaths in the Americas do not include age, which prevents researchers from having a well-informed notion concerning migrant children mortality (Sánchez Dionis et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the tendency of some migration research to count and quantify often leads to people being unaccounted for (Powell et al., 2013), and for the multiple ways in which intersecting systems of discrimination and disadvantage lead migrants' experiences of irregular migration to be ignored (IOM, 2021). This has particularly been the case with migrant children. The vulnerabilities they encounter and the dangers they face are not only poorly understood but often left unexamined. The ways in which race, class

and gender ultimately shape their encounters with other children like themselves and/or other people on the migration pathway have hardly been scrutinized.

This contribution explores how incorporating perspectives into data-collection processes that examine inequality qualitatively can improve our understanding of children's irregular migration, and in fact yield empirically sound perspectives to inform policy and practice. As paths to migrate regularly become increasingly restricted for people whose identities have led them to be historically and systematically pushed to the margins, it is critical that any effort to collect migration-related data is aware of the power differentials it can reinforce. In other words, by ignoring dimensions like race, class and gender in their analyses, migration researchers run the risk of reinscribing dominant power relations (Fonow and Cook, 2005) of the kind that have systematically silenced specific lives and experiences, as in the case of migrant children.

What follows examines two examples: the case of Nohemí Álvarez Quillay, an Ecuadorian teenager whose suicide in the aftermath of her "rescue" from a smuggling group was widely reported by United States, Mexican and Ecuadorian media; and the case of Ramón and his role as a teenage child working in the facilitation of migrant smuggling – a case that generated no media interest. Both cases took place in the city of Ciudad Juárez, an important hub for irregular migration on the United States–México border. They showcase not only the complexity of children's migratory experiences, but most importantly, the urgent need to deploy data-collection strategies that show how race, class and gender overlap, shaping specific forms of violence, discrimination and disadvantage that migrant children encounter on their journeys – this way informing targeted policy and response on the ground.

### Nohemí

On 11 May 2014, Mexican authorities at a migrant children's shelter in Ciudad Juárez, México, found the lifeless body of Nohemí Álvarez Quillay. Despite an initial controversy, it was eventually determined that

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she had committed suicide. Only a day earlier, Nohemí had been identified during an immigration raid. She was in the custody of a man who, after initially posing as her uncle, admitted to having housed her for a few days in preparation for her irregular journey across the border. Being only 12 years old, Nohemí was referred to a local shelter for children. Here, in the middle of the night, she was subjected to a round of intense questioning by judicial authorities, who demanded information regarding the smuggling group who had transported her to Mexico, and the circumstances of her arrival to Ciudad Juárez. At no point in time was Nohemí provided with psychological support or legal counsel, nor was she able to contact her family.

It was later revealed that this was not Nohemí's first journey towards the United States of America – it was her second. Both had been facilitated by smugglers from her village in Ecuador's Southern Highlands. Her first attempt had failed and also resulted in her detention when migration authorities detected the group of migrants that she was part of as they travelled through Nicaragua, where she remained presumably in detention for two months (Stone-Cadena, 2016). This failed attempt did not serve as a deterrent. Nohemí's family decided she had to embark on an irregular journey for the second time so that she could reunite with her parents, who as irregular migrants living in New York were ineligible to apply for family reunification. They had borrowed a significant amount of money from a local *chulquero* (moneylender) to cover Nohemí's journey – a loan that was not condoned even after the death of the child was confirmed (Pérez-Bustillo, 2014).

While indigenous people from the Americas constitute an important segment of the population travelling towards the United States, their experiences on the migration pathway have been historically underexamined. In the indigenous communities of Cañar, Ecuador (Nohemí's ancestral homeland), *coyoteros* (facilitators of irregular migration) have historically been community members that, while operating amid broader structural constraints, are expected to adhere to communal principles of reciprocity and trust (Stone-Cadena, 2016). Over time, these principles have weakened, and reports of abuse, violence and deception abound.<sup>2</sup> Contrary

<sup>2</sup> On 30 March 2021, the report of two Ecuadorian girls being dropped from atop of the United States–Mexico fence with a rope by two smugglers caused commotion. The girls were eventually reunited with their mother, who lived irregularly in the United States. (Kocherga, 2021)

to widely held beliefs reproduced by the media, however, this is not merely a decision on the part of smugglers. Routes and borders are increasingly policed by migration control agencies as a result of local, regional and even global efforts to control irregular journeys. This translates into migrants and smugglers facing delays, failed journeys, encounters with groups involved in illicit activities and corruption, decisions to cut loose weaker or non-paying migrants who may be holding groups back, the loss of personal property put as collateral to cover smuggling costs, arrests, and even deaths (Stone-Cadena, 2016; Ruiz Muriel and Álvarez Velasco, 2019; Guevara González and Lestón, 2021). For many indigenous families, reporting a smuggling-related crime to State bodies that have historically marginalized them, or consider them less than human, is an unlikely proposition. It has in fact been reported that in the event a migratory journey goes wrong, indigenous Ecuadorian families often opt to reach agreements directly with smugglers found at fault, rather than reporting the case to the authorities (Álvarez Velasco, 2018).

### Ramón

On 14 January 2021, Ramón (not his real name) received a lethal shot to the head while in the company of his brothers. They were visiting a friend, also in Ciudad Juárez. From the age of 13, he had worked sporadically, guiding small groups of migrants across the border for a fee. Now 17 and with a child of his own, Ramón had increasingly found himself unable to make ends meet.

Compensated jobs for young people had dried out as a result of the pandemic in Ciudad Juárez, and border enforcement had limited Ramón's ability to successfully cross people and get paid. The United States Government's restrictions as a result of COVID-19, specifically Title 42<sup>3</sup> which prevents people from applying for asylum – combined with the intensification of patrols by the Mexican National Guard and the local police in the neighbourhoods

<sup>3</sup> On 20 March 2020, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued an emergency regulation to implement Section 265 of U.S. Code Title 42. Title 42 permits the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to "prohibit ... the introduction" into the United States of individuals when "there is serious danger of the introduction of [a communicable] disease into the United States". Title 42 allows officers of the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) – such as Border Patrol agents – to implement the CDC's order. (AIC, 2021)

located along the fence separating the United States from Mexico – meant crossings were often thwarted. These, along with rumours that he mistreated the migrants he transported, made Ramón disposable to those he worked for, and were believed to be the reasons behind his death.

Fearing both further violence against the rest of her children and questioning by local authorities, Ramón's mother declined to file charges. This made her ineligible for the State's victim compensation fund. Instead, she had to borrow money from a bank that provides loans for low-income workers at a very high interest rate, in order to cover her son's funeral expenses.

*Maquiladoras* (transnationally owned manufacturing plants that make components for the electronic and auto industry) have been a staple of Ciudad Juárez for decades. They are the leading employers in the city and have, from the onset, relied almost entirely on a female workforce (Ramón's mother herself has been a maquiladora worker since age 13). Women from the periphery of Ciudad Juárez, with limited education, and some as young as 14, constitute the majority of the employees at the maquiladoras, which despite paying low salaries are seen (in the event one can stand the multiple forms of control and surveillance they employ) as potential paths towards financial stability.

Young men from similar backgrounds, on the other hand, find it difficult to be hired not only by the maquiladoras where labour has become feminized. They are also often discriminated against by employers on the basis of their skin tone, tattoos or haircuts. They are also the constant target of local authorities, who profile them as juvenile criminals and often subject them to emotional and physical abuse (Durán Martínez, 2014; Chávez Villegas, 2020). Ironically, Ciudad Juárez's strategic location right on the United States–Mexico border makes it an important hub for illicit activities, ranging from drug trafficking to migrant smuggling (Sanchez and Zhang, 2020). Contrary to the maquiladoras, these industries rely on the labour of one of the cities' most marginalized populations: the young men and boys who, unable to secure formal employment, find in their geopolitical knowledge a way to generate an income (DHIA, 2021). The fact that their availability exceeds their demand often renders them disposable, and the intimidation and violence they endure have been seen almost as an occupational hazard – and not as the outcome of a labour model that coincidentally exists on cities along the entire United States–Mexico border, where migrant smuggling occurs (DHIA, 2017).

### Towards an intersectional analysis of child migration data

Children are pivotal actors in irregular migration. Yet as the two prior cases show, they are not just migrants. They also work in facilitating the migration of other children and adults. They are boys and girls facing gender-specific forms of violence and abuse at the hands not only of those who facilitate illicit journeys, but also of authorities under increasing pressure to dismantle smuggling groups. They often find themselves having to reconcile their own desires against those of their family members. When they migrate, children often carry not only the hopes of their relatives for a better life, but also their own. This can translate into them acquiring significant financial responsibilities to cover smuggling fees (Heidbrink, 2020), which even when trips are thwarted – due to tragedy, enforcement or both – must still be paid. This places children and their families in even more precarious situations than the ones they were originally trying to overcome (Heidbrink and Frank-Vitale, 2021). Furthermore, while images of small children from Central America wandering alone suggest that they are the only ones arriving to the United States–Mexico border, data show that children are travelling from countries as far as Ghana, Nigeria, India and Bangladesh, seeking to reach the United States – either in the company of relatives or on their own (Yates, 2021a).

More than 20 years after the signing of the Palermo protocols, the facilitation of irregular migration, despite being a key component of the ways in which people around the world move, continues to be an understudied and stigmatized topic. While academics have extensively examined people's experiences as irregular migrants, they have consistently avoided examining the processes in which children and/or their families facilitate their journeys. Researchers and policy actors often articulate legitimate fears concerning organized crime as the reason for these gaps. Yet these concerns can in fact further the stigma that young people on the migration pathway already face as a result of having to travel irregularly, or depending on or engaging in criminal and/or illicit activities themselves in an effort to advance their journeys (Yates, 2021b), making them even more reluctant to speak. Intersectional ways of looking at data avoid reducing children's experiences in migration to stories of pain and suffering or crime and vice – and can ultimately allow us researchers to tackle some of the power imbalances embedded in the field of migration research. ■

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## Young migrants and asylum seekers in Tenosique, Mexico: Ongoing and pressing challenges

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*“I lived across the street [from La 72 Migrant and Refugee Shelter] for a month. I was out on the street all day, and at night they [the shelter] would give us permission to go in and sleep there. I didn’t really want to go into La 72 because there are many rules. They are very strict there. They control a lot. They don’t let you go out. They keep you locked in. Outside, we go hunting for iguanas, fishing to eat fish at night – we all take care of each other. When I finally came to rent my room here, I even missed those people.” (Antonio, 16 years old, born in Honduras)*

Antonio arrived in Tenosique, Mexico in March 2021. During his first month in Tenosique, he lived on the street in front of the migrant shelter La 72. Then he was able to rent a room with other migrant persons. He decided to seek asylum in Mexico, and he is waiting for his final resolution. He works occasionally.

### Introduction

While information about the number of unaccompanied boys, girls and adolescents arriving in Mexico from Central America has increased during recent years, there are still many gaps in the data. Mexico collects statistics on unaccompanied migrant children who are apprehended – and mostly deported to their countries of origin – through the National Migration Institute (INM). It is known, for example, that from January 2015 to August 2020, the INM processed 70,787 unaccompanied migrant children (Amnesty International, 2021). Most of them were from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala; and until the year 2019, the INM “deported more than 90 percent of the unaccompanied migrant children whom they apprehended” (ibid.). In addition, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR)

collects statistics on asylum requests submitted by unaccompanied migrant children in Mexico, which have increased significantly in recent years (ibid.). There are also statistics that reflect the number of apprehensions made by the Border Patrol at the United States–Mexico border. From November 2020 to April 2021, approximately 60,000 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended by Border Patrol along the southern border of the United States of America (ibid.).

Beyond these numbers, we know little about unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents or the challenges they face when crossing Mexico. There is scant information on how they are treated by Mexican authorities, or what kind of crossing strategies they have to develop to diminish the risks they face while in Mexico – and much less about their life outlooks when and if they decide to stay in the country.

In this contribution, we present a general context of the current situation faced by some unaccompanied migrant children along the migratory route connecting Santa Elena, Guatemala, to Tenosique, Mexico. The information used for this contribution was collected during the years 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2021 through ethnographic methodologies, which help capture details and build understanding about social lives around irregular migration paths.

### Mexico’s southern border: The back-door rhetoric

The last three United States administrations have prioritized controlling United States–bound irregular migration from Central America. This has involved coupling irregular migration with the rhetoric of security, which claims that those moving clandestinely through this migration corridor may be doing so with the assistance of transnational organized crime groups. Children have been key actors in this rhetoric, defined as a group that has to be protected or saved from traffickers and their predatory practices. For example, in July of 2014, the Obama Administration declared that the arrival of unaccompanied Central American children to the

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southern border of the United States constituted an “urgent humanitarian crisis” (White House, 2014).

This rhetorical framework served as a basis for the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies by the United States and Mexico, in order to stop irregular migration along the Mexico–United States and the Mexico–Guatemala borders. Starting in 2014, the Southern Border Program (*Programa Frontera Sur*) was implemented along Mexico’s southern border. Its objectives included: the disarticulation of criminal groups that have systematically attacked and harmed the migrant population; the implementation of the Special Mechanism for Attention to Unaccompanied Girls, Boys and Adolescents; and the ordering of the border and better security for migrants, among others (Presidencia de la República EPN, 2014).

Rather than protecting migrants and asylum seekers, the Southern Border Program made it difficult for them to move through the Mexico–Guatemala border zone and increased their vulnerability because of the marginal living conditions they faced as they waited along the routes for long periods. After Obama, Trump implemented policies that effectively dismantled the United States asylum system and began a precedent of returning asylum seekers to Mexico regardless of nationality. These policies have been continued and expanded under the Biden Administration.

Implemented in January 2019, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) (DHS, 2019) has forced tens of thousands of asylum seekers, including many children, to wait for a turn to be heard by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services for an undetermined amount of time in Mexico.<sup>2</sup> In March 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) effectively suspended all foreign entry into the United States along the United States–Mexico border, in a measure known as Title 42. Between March 2020 and April 2021, more than 642,700 expulsions to Mexico were carried out by Customs and Border Protection under Title 42, the vast majority of whom were migrants and asylum seekers (HRW, 2021). Finally, in July 2021, the United States Department

of Homeland Security (DHS) (2021) began to implement “expedited” deportation procedures, which allow immigration authorities who encounter people without a justification to apply for asylum to return them to Mexico’s southern border or to their countries of origin via deportation flights, without being seen by an immigration judge.

In August 2021, mass deportations were carried out at the El Ceibo border crossing point (Mexico–Guatemala border). In an interview with the coordinator of the migrant shelter in El Ceibo, Guatemala, we were informed that at least 70 people per day, mostly women and children, were deported to this city. Most were people coming from the United States who were sent to the city of Villahermosa, Tabasco, by plane, then transported in buses by the INM to the border.

In sum, the securitization and enforcement of the Mexico–United States and the Mexico–Guatemala borders have forced migrants and asylum seekers to stay for longer and uncertain periods in the cities located along both borderlands. In this article, we focus on the specific case of Tenosique,<sup>3</sup> a border town located 60 km from the Guatemalan border with Mexico, to portray some facts about the current situation of unaccompanied children on this migratory route.

### Humanitarian aid and unaccompanied children in Tenosique, Mexico

Migrant shelters are just one of the many places used by some migrants in transit to recover from their journeys, rest and continue on their way. However, since 2014, due to the impossibility of continuing their journey to the United States as a result of the Southern Border Program’s stepped-up enforcement, many migrants in transit have decided to seek asylum in Mexico instead, using the support provided by shelters. This led migrants to remain in former transit cities for longer periods of time as

<sup>2</sup> “By December 2020, of the 42,012 MPP cases that had been completed, only 638 people were granted relief in immigration court.” (AIC, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Tenosique borders El Petén, Guatemala. Its most traditional economic activities include logging, especially of precious hardwoods, and more recently sugarcane and livestock cultivation. Nevertheless, due to the long-standing economic devastation, an important part of Tenosique’s rural territory is used for the clandestine movement of migrants, which has caused the growth and proliferation of new informal economies dependent on migration along the Tenosique–Petén corridor. The consolidation of the Santa Elena–Tenosique track as a migratory route is an example of this tendency.



they waited for responses to petitions presented to the COMAR. Migrant shelters acknowledged this trend and began training their staff to provide support and follow up on the asylum requests. Several international organizations began to cooperate with many migrant shelters in Mexico as they became more aware of this trend, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children, and Asylum Access.

The need to provide support to asylum petitions forced migrant shelters to initiate professionalization processes, and some of them have become important platforms for the collection of statistics. Contrary to official numbers, data collected at the shelters facilitate a greater understanding of how many children and adolescents use their facilities, how long they stay there, and details concerning their social life.

There are three sources of information that could provide crucial quantitative and qualitative approximations to the trajectories of migrant children in the Tenosique–Petén corridor: (a) the number of detentions carried out by the INM in Tenosique, (b) the number of asylum petitions received by COMAR at this border point, and (c) the number of children and adolescents who use the facilities of La 72 Migrant and Refugee Shelter.<sup>4</sup> La 72 (as it is informally known) was founded in August 2011, and it provides humanitarian assistance (food, shelter, clothing and medical attention) and legal support to people who are forced to flee their countries and travel towards Mexico and the United States. Currently, this shelter is one of few in Mexico that provide a special focus and support to unaccompanied children, adolescents and LGTBQI+ community members.

### The train's disappearance in Tenosique

Humanitarian aid to unaccompanied children and adolescents in La 72 began as a reflex-like response from 2014 onward, due to the increase in enforcement

controls and the stranding of migrants. While during the first half of 2014, the number of unaccompanied migrant children received at La 72 was very low, compared to the bulk of the adult male population using the facilities, from the second half of that year, the presence of unaccompanied children in transit was more noticeable. More unaccompanied children were using the facilities to recover from their journeys and continue their transit, but even so, only two decided to request asylum in Mexico. By 2015, the influx of this population increased to the extent that a new area to focus on vulnerable populations (unaccompanied children and LGBTQI+ migrants) had to be built. Since that year, the monthly number of children living in the shelter (with or without a refugee application) has ranged between 10 and 15. Most of these are boys from Honduras between the ages of 13 and 17.

The trend in the increase of unaccompanied children and adolescents crossing through Mexico has remained constant for almost a decade. However, little is known about their biographies, their trajectories, the challenges they face upon arriving in Mexico, how they transit, how they integrate into Mexican society, or what their experiences are like when crossing into the United States.

In the case of the Tenosique route, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, transit migrants used the freight train to move towards central and northern Mexico at a low cost. However, as a result of development initiatives in the region (e.g. the Tren Maya project),<sup>5</sup> as of the last quarter of 2020 the train has stopped departing from Tenosique. This has undoubtedly led to the emergence of new migratory routes and sub-routes in this region. Some migrants interviewed in early August 2021 reported that many of them are now more frequently using the sub-route that goes from the Guatemala border to Palenque, avoiding Tenosique entirely. This potentially increases the vulnerability of children and adolescents, as it is known that drug cartels and organized crime groups are heavily involved in illicit activities on migratory routes and constantly recruit young people into their networks (Izcara Palacios, 2017).

4 The name of the shelter refers to the events of San Fernando, Mexico, in August 2010. Seventy-two bodies – fifty-eight men and fourteen women – most of whom were migrants from Central and South America, were found dead in this location in the vicinity of the United States–Mexico border. Federal Police and Los Zetas drug cartel have been identified as the perpetrators. (Hernández-Hernández, 2020)

5 The Maya Train is a development project implemented by Mexico's Federal Government which envisages to restore and build approximately 15,000 km of train tracks. This project is still very controversial in the southern States of Mexico.

### The COVID-19 pandemic

In addition to the above-mentioned development plans, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 has brought new challenges to the process of caring for unaccompanied children and adolescents in transit through Mexico. Many migrant shelters have been forced to be more selective with their admission and hosting policies or even to temporarily close their facilities. This trend has impacted the attention given to unaccompanied children and adolescents, who have been faced with the decision of bearing the isolation and following the more restrictive policies in the shelters or opting not to stay there in order to have more freedom of movement. Antonio's testimony at the beginning of this contribution is an example of this. As mentioned earlier, children find themselves at greater risk of forced recruitment into criminal groups or being subjected to exploitative or abusive forms of labour.

La 72 has been forced to implement more restrictive access policies to avoid massive outbreaks of COVID-19. It already had to close its facilities twice – in November 2020 and June 2021. In August 2021, there were only approximately 30 people using the shelter's services, 5 of whom were unaccompanied children and adolescents. They are Honduran and Guatemalan children ranging in age from 13 to 17 years old, and all of them are seeking asylum in Mexico.

While the policies of La 72 have become more restrictive due to the pandemic, the arrival of UNHCR in Tenosique in 2015 has contributed to diminishing the vulnerability of unaccompanied children in the city. Currently, for example, most children and adolescents seeking asylum at La 72 receive monetary assistance from UNHCR while they are waiting for their asylum resolutions – for up to a maximum of five months. Due to the pandemic, however, none of the children attend school, and they only “kill time” in the shelter, participating in recreational activities, cooking, or performing other support activities. Also, most of these children, even while considering asylum, have relatives living in the United States who, according to their testimonies, would be willing to receive them. Therefore, most efforts to regularize the children or grant them asylum in Mexico are impractical or ineffectual in the long term (Frydman et al., 2021).

### Final thoughts and recommendations

In November 2020, the Mexican Government implemented a reform of the National Migration Law that prohibits the detention of minors – both accompanied and unaccompanied – by immigration authorities (DOF, 2020). While this reform is a significant step towards guaranteeing the human rights of unaccompanied migrant children in Mexico, for both irregular migrants and asylum seekers significant vulnerabilities persist. The lack of public policy to support and facilitate the integration of unaccompanied minors who seek asylum in Mexico, the lack of programmes to foster the reception of minors who try to cross the United States' border and are expelled to Mexico, and the continued securitization of the clandestine migratory routes used by minors are some of the principal factors that contribute to the continued precarity and vulnerability of migrant children and asylum seekers in Mexico. Policy recommendations to address these issues include the following:

- (a) In interviews with some of the children and adolescents inside and outside of La 72, most of them affirm that after receiving their recognition as refugees in Mexico, they will still try to cross the United States border. This means, among other things, that unaccompanied children do not see a future in Mexico. Therefore, it is urgent that the Mexican Government develops a policy regarding the attention given to unaccompanied migrant children who make Mexico their destination country.
- (b) Although migrant shelters have become a kind of refuge for this population, many lack trained personnel (social workers, psychologists, child psychologists, specialists in reproductive and sexual health, etc.). In this sense, it is urgent to create institutions that receive, implement and promote the integration (i.e. into education or, later, into the labour market) of unaccompanied children and adolescents who decide to stay in Mexico, through the provision of professional services.
- (c) There are notable differences in the access to protection services of unaccompanied children living in and out of migrant shelters. On the one hand, although the asylum policy in Mexico is still precarious and limited, children who receive support in shelters are better informed

and are able to insert themselves faster into the local community. They receive support from the shelter's staff, through international organizations such as the UNHCR and Doctors Without Borders, or through national bodies such as the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF), or COMAR. Children who choose not to or cannot stop at shelters, or who are not referred to, identified, and supported by these institutions – most likely the majority – are at risk of abuse, labour exploitation, and co-optation by drug trafficking networks, to mention just a few examples.

- (d) While the 2020 reform to the Mexican Immigration Law prohibits the detention of unaccompanied and accompanied children, as well as the separation of these children from their family units, the continued securitization of clandestine migratory routes has facilitated the separation of unaccompanied minors from other adult migrants and travel companions that provide crucial support and protection. Several unaccompanied minors interviewed in Tenosique mentioned being “stranded” en route after Mexican immigration authorities detained and deported their adult travel companions, including a stepfather, an aunt and an uncle, and friends. Children should not be separated from family members along migratory routes, and those who are separated from other travel companions should be canalized to governmental institutions or shelters that can provide the necessary protection.
- (e) It is urgent that Mexico develops and implements a plan to protect vulnerable children and asylum seekers who are expelled from the United States into the national territory under MPP, Title 42 or expedited deportation.
- (f) It is urgent that the institutions responsible for the care and integration of children in Mexico, such as DIF, work more closely and in coordination with COMAR and humanitarian aid institutions such as migrant shelters. This could allow concerned actors to give better care to unaccompanied migrant children.

- (g) Above all, it is urgent that unaccompanied migrant children's asylum applications are expedited and prioritized in Mexico, as their vulnerability increases the longer they stay, with uncertainty, in a country that provides few prospects. ■

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## Development aid: A “root cause” of child migration

Lauren Heidbrink and Amelia Frank-Vitale<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In the early days of the Biden Administration, there was once again heightened public attention to unaccompanied migrant children arriving at the United States–Mexico border. In response, United States President Joe Biden proposed USD 4 billion in development aid to address the “root causes” of migration from Central America. The Biden–Harris Administration has publicly denounced government corruption, high rates of femicide, the marginalization of indigenous peoples, and discrimination against LGBTQI+ peoples as principal culprits leading to migration. One of Biden’s top aides, Senior Director of the National Security Council Juan Gonzalez, specifically referred to the region’s “predatory elites” who have plundered public coffers and evaded taxation with impunity (Chappell, 2021). Indeed, Central American government officials have been charged – and sometimes convicted – of being directly responsible for international drug trafficking (DOJ, 2019). Yet absent from the discussion is how United States aid itself has been a root cause. In this piece, we argue that to avoid another child migration crisis at the border, the Biden Administration must take a fundamentally new approach to development in Central America.

Scant research supports the claim that development creates alternatives to migration (de Haas, 2012; Fratzke and Salant, 2018). As researchers who examine the development–migration nexus and its impact on young people in Central America, we have seen first-hand how development is an ill-equipped tool to respond to the interrelated reasons for migration, masking the variations in needs and dynamics between and within countries. Frequently, aid comes with ideological strings that hinder, rather than support, local efforts to respond to poverty, corruption and insecurity (Frank-Vitale, 2020). In Mexico and Central America, aid is often siphoned off,

subcontracted out to organizations who have little on-the-ground knowledge, or funnelled to those aligned with the same predatory elites that the United States of America now decries.

Here, we identify three reasons why development aid has failed as a mechanism to reduce the pressures on young people to migrate, and – in many cases – actually has the unintended consequence of producing child migration. These include the homogenization of regional aid programmes, short-term approaches to development interventions, and the failure to follow local diagnoses and solutions. To illustrate, we offer ethnographic vignettes from our longitudinal research with youth deported to Central America. Throughout, we identify alternative approaches to development that recognize young people as development experts and take local diagnoses and solutions seriously.

### Breaking down the “Northern Triangle”

Central America is not monolithic. The oft-used military term “Northern Triangle” implies a uniformity to the region that masks the significant linguistic, cultural and experiential variation among communities. Programmes designed to address the root causes of migration have tended to take examples from one place and then uncritically implement them across the region. For example, an IOM initiative implemented by the Honduran Ministry of Education sought to combat stigma against deportees by teaching students in San Pedro Sula not to look down upon them. Deportees in El Salvador were once heavily stigmatized as criminals, and many young Guatemalans – especially indigenous girls – now face gendered stigma following deportation. Yet in urban Honduras, deportation is so commonplace that it no longer carries a negative marker. The IOM pilot programme was targeted at the schools that had the highest rate of re-enrolment among students who had been deported – many of the students subjected to these activities had already been deported once or multiple times themselves.

Even within a country, programmes identified as best practices may be successful in one locality and fail in another. For instance, faith-based microenterprise programmes that effectively assisted deportees in

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the rural ranching department of Olancho, Honduras, faltered in urban San Pedro Sula, as economic subsistence is just one factor among many intersecting reasons that lead young people to migrate.

So too, the characteristics of young deportees themselves vary across time and space. “Reintegration” – the idea that deportees require assistance in readapting and readjusting to life in their country of citizenship – is a keyword for migration management, yet this is not what many deportees today need. Programmes aimed at validating degrees earned abroad or employment opportunities in the burgeoning call centre industry in Central America are useful for some English speakers – namely, those who are deported after growing up in the United States. Yet these same initiatives are wholly irrelevant for the growing number of children and youth deported from Mexico to Central America or after short periods of detention in the United States. Furthermore, statutes designed to ensure young people can re-enrol in school after deportation do little to address the fact that many youths did not have access to adequate schooling prior to migration. Deportation only compounds the reasons compelling their migration just a few months earlier.

Often overlooked are the experiences of indigenous youth in particular. As Maya-K’iche’ youth Eliana asked, “How are we supposed to belong to a State that, during the armed conflict, tortured and murdered my grandparents, that massacred my community, that disappeared my aunts and uncles, that sought to exterminate us from the land of our ancestors?” For Eliana, reintegration in Guatemala presumes integration in the first place. In Guatemala, indigenous peoples are systematically expelled from public education, health care and the labour market, and political participation requires structural reform. Thus, reintegration is a fallacy that ignores the structural racism embedded in Guatemalan institutions (Heidbrink, 2020).

To create meaningful and sustainable opportunities, aid programmes must be responsive to the multifaceted and varied histories, social contexts, and experiences of all young people. Critical to understanding differing contexts is recognizing the expertise of the young people affected. They must be consulted in designing the policies and programmes aimed at them. Young people like Eliana possess a wealth of local knowledge, skills, and capacities to contribute their insights and analysis. They merely lack access to the mechanisms to do so. Explicitly acknowledging young people’s expertise and eliciting

their insights create opportunities for them to redefine the meanings and practices of development.

### Short-term reintegration programmes

In Central America, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)–funded initiatives targeting young people often revolve around short-term, basic-skills training. These programmes fail to address the underlying structural issues that contribute to the decision to migrate. Seventeen-year-old Juan Gabriel migrated unaccompanied from Guatemala’s rural highlands in order to afford basic health care for his mother and his sister who got sick when a gold mine contaminated the soil and local water sources. For Juan Gabriel, the adverse consequences of extractive “development” in tandem with a failing public health system spurred his migration to the United States. Being deported three times from Mexico only compounded his precarity, as he and his family confronted the repayment of USD 7,500 in smuggling debt, his mother’s mounting medical bills, and lost wages due to the coronavirus pandemic. Learning to cut hair or to make piñatas through USAID workshops did not provide the alternatives to migration that Juan Gabriel and his family needed. Cutting hair is a useful skill but does not replace robust public investment in health care, combat the adverse consequences of unmitigated environmental contamination, nor address the crushing burden of migration-related debt (Heidbrink, 2019).

In many instances, top-down, external solutions are incompatible with local contexts. At a migrant shelter in Mexico, for example, foreign aid brought resources to build a brick oven so those at the shelter could bake and sell bread to raise funds. It also provided seed money to start an organic garden and graze animals. However, these projects did not consider the context: the shelter could not pay its electricity bills, let alone purchase flour and fuel to bake bread. Shelters like this one are stopover points for migrants in transit, designed to house people for a few days while they gather their strength before continuing their journey. Most migrants never intend to stay at the shelter long enough to harvest plants or tend chickens. Instead, the oven and the farm became burdens rather than sustainable solutions. Development solutions must originate and meaningfully incorporate the input of the local development experts – in this instance, the shelter staff and migrants themselves.

In the absence of critical local knowledge, aid solutions can bring unanticipated consequences. In urban Honduras, entrepreneurial programmes designed to help young deportees initiate microenterprises have the unintended downside of attracting the attention of organized crime groups that control neighbourhoods and demand *renta* (extortion payments) from small businesses. In Guatemala, programmes that advertise “alternatives to agriculture” frame long-standing, family-based forms of agriculture as neither viable nor valued options for young people. Over time, these messages seep into the ways that indigenous youth learn to (de)value the ancestral knowledge and skills of their elders (Heidbrink, 2020). Devoid of local, contextualized knowledge, these programmes risk harming rather than helping.

While there has been substantial investment in Central America in infrastructure for the processing of deported children and youth, these efforts fail to include follow-up and long-term support. USAID, IOM and other international organizations have worked to streamline support for arriving deportees, including getting registered by the government and receiving a backpack with a *kit de aseo personal* (personal hygiene kit) – and in some cases, a bus voucher to return to their communities. Beyond these immediate responses, deportees are on their own to confront the same situation that spurred their migration, at times with the added burden of debt, additional threats, and the often-fraught process of reconnecting with loved ones left behind (Frank-Vitale, 2018). The infrastructure built to receive and process deportees – while efficiently managing the moment of return – has little impact on the situation that people face once they exit the reception centre.

Short-term initiatives to help migrants often fail to have an impact because they do not recognize that the decision to migrate is the result of longer processes that begin before migration and endure long after deportation. If Juan Gabriel’s family and community were to be consulted as to what would make him able to stay home, they would likely come up with different ideas other than piñata-making workshops. Similarly, if the shelter in Mexico had been able to decide what the funds should have been used for, they might have opted to fortify their water supply, to construct additional bathrooms, or to purchase a generator to defray electricity costs – rather than build a brick oven or plant crops. Addressing the root causes of migration is a decades-long endeavour that requires fundamental policy change rather than a series of short-term fixes.

### Enacting local solutions

The Biden Administration cannot undo the damage inflicted by decades of United States interventionist policies, but it can begin by listening to and consulting with local communities and enacting local solutions (Americas Program, 2021). The co-option of grass-roots associations by outside actors like the United States, known as the NGO-ization of Central America (Alvarez, 2014; Meyers 2016; Roy, 2011), has made Central American associations less representative and less responsive to local needs. In other words, NGOs are not interchangeable with local communities. Development programmes must partner up, with local communities in the lead. In Guatemala, to offer one example, this means participating in *consultas comunitarias* (community consultations), where indigenous peoples are consulted on projects prior to decision-making, allowing for consensus-building that is free of coercion and misinformation. These community forums – enshrined in the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 (1989) but often bypassed or outright ignored – are in place to respect the autonomy of indigenous communities to guide development on their own terms.

Alternatively, we can take the example of public education in Honduras. Many young people indicate that lack of affordable access to schools is a contributing factor to migration. In the town of Potrerillos, the youth line up all night outside the school each year in an effort to secure a coveted seat in the classroom. Those who do not arrive first must wait until the following year to continue their education. Seventeen-year-old Brayan, already a deportee, decided that if he were not able to secure a spot, his next best option would be to migrate. In contrast, in the Rivera Hernandez sector of San Pedro Sula, there are plenty of open seats in the one public school, as many students simply stop attending because they must cross gang lines and risk their lives to attend. Juan, a public school teacher, blames the Government for failing to provide pedagogical resources and public safety.

Parents, teachers and students all want access to dignified public education. In 2019, rather than investing in public education infrastructure, the Honduran Government followed the recommendations of the Association for a More Just Society, a large foreign-led NGO which receives substantial funding from USAID, and proposed reforms that would have fully privatized public education (Funes, 2019). Mass

uprising quashed the proposed reforms (Geglia, 2019), but the dynamics are clear: United States–funded “solutions” to problems in Central America are often not aligned with what communities want and can worsen conditions in the name of development. Rather than waiting for mass protest, proactive policies must listen to local diagnoses and enact solutions with the community in the lead.

The wounds from decades of top-down, homogenous and sometimes harmful development interventions will not heal easily or quickly. It will take time and sustained commitment to repair relationships and build trust with communities, but the current Administration has an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of its predecessors and take a new approach to development aid.

An essential starting point is listening to local meanings and practices of development; people’s own perceptions about the very idea of what development means should be at the core of any initiatives. The young people with whom we work speak of not only the right to migrate but also the right *not* to migrate (*el derecho a no migrar*). Sixteen-year-old Neri explains, “The right to not migrate is having the conditions in which I can choose to stay just like I can choose to leave, but you see the difference? It is a choice.” The right to not migrate implies fortifying the options and opportunities for communities to thrive on their own terms, including the provision of improved schools, dignified employment, and access to health care. These twinned rights challenge the co-option of development as a vehicle for managing migration or immobilizing a population.

Approaching root causes from the vantage point of the people who are migrating is the only way that foreign aid can contribute to holistic, sustained, and durable solutions to the underlying issues that youth and communities identify. At its core, migration itself is not the issue to be solved, rather it is a consequence of other structural inequities. By directing aid towards the problems that local communities identify as paramount – whether environmental, social, economic, or political – forced migration will decrease. Any other approach to aid will only replicate the failures of the past and ensure that future generations of youth continue to seek refuge and opportunity elsewhere. ■

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## Improving protections for migrant children in Mexico: Recommendations to the Mexican and United States Governments

*Lisa Frydman, Elba Coria Márquez and Catherine Mongeon<sup>1</sup>*

Seventeen-year-old Karen (a pseudonym) endured gender-based violence by multiple actors in her community in Guatemala. Traumatized and scared, she fled and headed for the relative she felt safest with – her mother – in the United States of America. When Karen crossed the United States–Mexico border, officials from the United States authority in charge of immigration enforcement, the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP), picked her up. However, they immediately expelled her to Mexico under Title 42, a policy used during the Trump Administration to refuse the entry of asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, and other migrants at the border, allegedly due to public health concerns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Karen was expelled even though she was under the age of 18. Karen ended up in the custody of Mexico’s child welfare agency, the National System for Integral Family Development (Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, DIF), and was quickly sent back to Guatemala. With nowhere to turn for safety, a few days after she landed in Guatemala, she once again headed north in the hope of reaching her mother in the United States.

The number of unaccompanied children arriving at the United States–Mexico border from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras has been on the rise since 2011, with particular spikes in 2014, 2016, 2019 and again in 2021 (CRS, 2021). Many authors have written on the causes, including, for example, pervasive gender-based violence, child abuse, and violence by gangs and other organized criminal actors; discrimination; and lack of access to food, education and other opportunities.

After entering office, President Biden committed USD 4 billion to address the root causes of migration from Central America and signed an executive order on the issue (White House, 2021). Although Mexico and the United States have jointly pledged to attend to such causes, results will take years. Children in danger, like Karen, cannot wait. In this article, we argue that Mexico and the United States should work together to craft a coordinated child-centred approach built on the best interests of the child.<sup>2</sup> This contribution provides a brief overview of Mexican and United States laws that protect unaccompanied children, as well as barriers to their full implementation. It also sets out recommendations for each country and for both in coordination so that they can work together to develop a shared approach that prioritizes the well-being of children over migration enforcement.

### Unaccompanied children in Mexico and recent legal reforms

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) and other organizations have published reports<sup>3</sup> on the challenges faced by unaccompanied children in Mexico, such as rapid deportation, inadequate shelter and lack of access to quality legal representation. For example, from 2019 to 2020, Mexico detained 17,946 unaccompanied children in its territory and returned 15,286 (or 85%) of them to their countries of origin (SEGOB, 2019 and 2020). Only 2,295 children applied for asylum during this same period.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, returns happened without a Best Interests Determination (BID), which is required by law, thus the safety and well-being of the children had been disregarded (KIND and Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova A.C., 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the best interests of the child are at the centre of international law on children’s rights. The “best interests of the child” principle is so widely recognized that many argue it has the force of customary international law. Although the United States has not ratified the CRC, it has signed it and thus may not undermine the treaty.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: KIND, 2018 and 2019.

<sup>4</sup> More information is available at [https://twitter.com/AndresRSilva\\_/status/1380130077959143425?s=20](https://twitter.com/AndresRSilva_/status/1380130077959143425?s=20).

In recent years, Mexico has strengthened its asylum system, by increasing the staff of its refugee agency – the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR). It has also reduced decision-making time. For children who have family in Mexico, or who feel safe in Mexico, asylum can be a viable option. However, for children with a parent or another close family member in the United States, or who do not feel safe in Mexico, seeking asylum there falls far short of safeguarding their best interests.

In 2018, KIND met with unaccompanied children in DIF and civil society shelters in Tijuana (a city on the United States–Mexico border). The children had travelled in the context of the migrant caravans that emerged as a community-based, collective form of migration aimed at reaching the United States–Mexico border safely as a group. Some of these children had been blocked from reaching the United States by either Mexican or United States officials. The children expressed frustration at being stuck in Tijuana, when they had parents or other close relatives in the United States. A number of these children told us of their plans to return to their respective countries of origin so that they could start their journey north again – hopefully, undetected. Many of these children had made it all the way to the border without getting kidnapped or trafficked and were planning to risk embarking on a journey again. Following requests to do better for unaccompanied children, both countries have since established a bilateral protocol to transfer children from DIF custody to CBP when doing so is found to be in their best interest. However, this protocol is carried out only at the Tijuana/San Ysidro port (IOM, 2020).

Three years later, unaccompanied children continue to face some of these same challenges, but a new opportunity is on the horizon. In November 2020, Mexico’s legislature approved legal reforms to align Mexico’s child protection and immigration laws to strengthen protection of migrant children. Mexico had enacted a general child protection law (*Ley General de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños, y Adolescentes*, LGDNNA) in 2014 that included provisions for migrant children. This law did not ultimately achieve the protections intended because of some conflicting provisions with the existing immigration law and the lack of clarity about which law applied in different circumstances. The 2020 reforms resolved these conflicts.

Key provisions in the new law include the following:

- (a) Migrant children, including those travelling unaccompanied, cannot be detained and must be placed in a DIF shelter or a care arrangement approved by DIF, such as a civil society shelter licensed to care for children or foster care.
- (b) Child Protection Authorities (Procuradurías de Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, PPNNA) must issue a BID for all unaccompanied children that come to the agency’s attention, as well as protection measures to ensure that all Mexican government agencies uphold unaccompanied children’s rights.
- (c) Unaccompanied children should receive a visa for humanitarian purposes to ensure that they have temporary protection from refoulment or return to persecution.
- (d) The reform clarifies that the agencies charged with care and custody of unaccompanied children are DIF and PPNNA, not Mexico’s immigration enforcement agency, Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM).

Robust implementation of these reforms will require significant commitment on the part of federal, State and local Mexican Government. The reforms have the potential to significantly shift the protection landscape for unaccompanied children in Mexico and to make the country a global leader in the protection of these children.

### Role of the United States

The Trafficking Victims Protections Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) sets out United States protections for unaccompanied children from the moment of detection at the border (United States Congress, 2008). TVPRA requires CBP to screen children to determine whether they are accompanied by a parent or a legal guardian, and to transfer all unaccompanied children from non-contiguous countries into the care and custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within 72 hours. Unaccompanied children from contiguous countries (Mexico and Canada) face immediate return to their respective countries unless CBP determines, through required screening, that they are at risk of trafficking or persecution, or are unable to make their

own decision to withdraw the application for admission. Alarming, despite documented risks of trafficking and persecution of Mexican children, not all children are screened under TVPRA, a dangerous pattern that has been well documented (GAO, 2015).

Irrespective of the TVPRA protections, unaccompanied children started facing challenges in accessing the United States territory, with efforts to “meter” or limit the number of migrants approaching ports of entry (Leutert et al., 2018). In addition to metering, the Trump Administration, in coordination with the Mexican Government, introduced tasks to counter the migration of unaccompanied children, including blocking access to ports, rejections and turning back of unaccompanied children by CBP officials on bridges, and forced family separation (Kaufka Walts et al., 2021).

Measures against COVID-19 were also used to reduce migration at the United States border. Relying on a rarely used public health law under Title 42 of the United States Code, the Trump Administration closed the border to all but “essential” travellers, then initiated immediate forced expulsions of arriving migrants, including unaccompanied children. Unaccompanied children and asylum seekers were not deemed essential travellers, leaving it to CBP’s discretion to determine whether a particular unaccompanied child should be granted access to a particular port under a humanitarian exception. Over 15,000 unaccompanied children were expelled under Title 42, meaning they were summarily returned to Mexico or their countries of origin without any safety check (Montoya-Galvez and Verdugo, 2021).

Upon his arrival to office, President Biden quickly exempted unaccompanied children from Title 42 expulsions. However, the policy continues to be applied against families and adults. The continued expulsion of families makes children vulnerable to family separation when parents make the difficult choice of sending their children on their own to reach safety (Herrera, 2021). Furthermore, despite Biden’s exemption, the ports of entry remain closed, forcing children to cross in more dangerous ways and leaving some stranded, on their own, in border towns where organized criminal activity abounds, and actors can target them and take advantage of the vulnerabilities they face.

KIND attorneys, based at the United States–Mexico border since February 2020, have successfully assisted 110 children to get processed into the United States

rather than expelled under Title 42, along with dozens of additional children assisted to avoid pushbacks or rejections. As expulsions and port closures persisted, KIND learned of an increase in reports of missing children and children taking greater risks to reach the United States undetected. The message is clear: efforts to encumber children’s access to the United States only place them in greater danger.

## Recommendations

With the number of children migrating again on the rise, Mexico’s recent legal reforms, and the Biden Administration’s stated commitment to unaccompanied children, the time has come for Mexico and the United States to do more to ensure comprehensive and effective protections for migrant children. Recommended actions are listed below.

### *United States and Mexican Governments collaboration*

The United States and Mexican Governments should recognize each other as partners that must work together to increase regional protections for migrants, including unaccompanied children. Collaboration should prioritize doing the following:

- (a) Shift immigration strategy from an enforcement and deterrence approach to one that prioritizes the protection of children’s rights and best interests throughout their journey, their stay in Mexico or their arrival to the United States.
- (b) Develop and expand bilateral coordination between Mexican and United States officials to ensure the safe transfer of unaccompanied children to the United States when it is determined that seeking United States protection is in their best interests.
- (c) Pursue binational and regional or transnational mechanisms that ensure the safety and well-being of migrant children throughout migration, and to achieve durable solutions in their best interests and those that consider all options – integration, resettlement, transfer to a third country or return to the country of origin.
- (d) Establish permanent and effective spaces for dialogue between government and civil society actors to discuss binational mechanisms, actions, and policies to strengthen and effectively respond to children’s needs, and to address security risks, smuggling, human trafficking and family separation.

- (e) Develop and implement mechanisms for resettlement of children recognized as refugees by Mexico to reunify them with family in the United States, as well as broader family reunification pathways in the United States and Mexico that are consistent with the best interests of migrant children.
- (f) Align repatriation policies and procedures with the best interests of the child, ensuring that returns only happen after a BID and will not result in refolement or violation of a child's rights.
- (g) Guarantee all migrant children access to ports of entry and border crossings where they can seek protection.

#### *To the Mexican Government*

The Mexican Government faces an important challenge: fully implementing Mexico's robust legislation to guarantee the rights and effective protection of migrant children and to promote their best interests over any other consideration. Achieving this historical goal will require doing the following:

- (a) Increase the budget of the child protection systems (Sistema Nacional de Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, SIPINNA), child welfare agencies (DIF), and child protection offices (Procuradurías de Protección) at the federal, local, and municipal levels to allow them to effectively fulfil their mandate of ensuring the protection and well-being of migrant children.
- (b) Revise or modify existing migration protocols and processes to ensure that they are consistent with the prohibition of the detention of migrant children and that appropriate alternative care models are put in place.
- (c) Implement measures to guarantee that migrant children are properly informed of their rights and have the opportunity to participate and be heard in decision-making processes. Ensure that BIDs consider access to protection, including all forms of international protection and family reunification, in Mexico, the United States or another third country.
- (d) Build the necessary coordination mechanisms for implementing decisions regarding family reunification and/or protection in a third country, including the United States.

- (e) Strengthen the capacity of Mexico's child protection offices to provide high-quality legal representation to unaccompanied children in their administrative and judicial immigration and asylum procedures.
- (f) Monitor compliance by immigration officials with children's rights and provide a remedy for practices by immigration officials that violate the rights of the children, such as blocking migrant children's access to Mexican or United States territory and allowing the unlawful expulsion of children from the United States.

#### *To the United States Government*

While the United States seeks to partner with Mexico to address the root causes of migration, it is important to recognize that this is a long-term goal. In the short term, children and other vulnerable people will continue to flee dangerous situations. These migrants have the right to access borders to seek protection, and the United States Government must work with Mexico and support the Mexican Government to ensure the safety of these children. The following actions are therefore recommended:

- (a) End the Title 42 policy of expelling migrants at the border without due process, open ports of entry to unaccompanied children and asylum seekers asking for protection, and reject continued pushbacks and other barriers to accessing borders.
- (b) End United States foreign assistance that supports immigration enforcement. United States assistance should not be used to deter or interdict asylum seekers, nor to prevent children from accessing the United States–Mexico border to ask for asylum.
- (c) The United States must recognize that Mexican children may be at risk of trafficking and persecution and must stop their near-automatic return. To help ensure appropriate screening of Mexican children, as well as unaccompanied children overall, the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should hire and base licensed child welfare professionals at all CBP facilities along the border. ■

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## Extracontinental migrant children in Mexico

Caitlyn Yates<sup>1</sup>

In April 2019, an estimated 700 migrant children were temporarily trapped in the southern Mexican city of Tapachula, about 1,200 km from Mexico City (*El Periódico*, 2019). While only a fraction of the more than 55,000 migrant children apprehended in Mexico that year, this particular group of children differed from most other migrant children transiting through Mexico. Rather than originating in Central American countries, they had travelled thousands of miles from countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola and Cameroon, travelling through Mexico towards the United States of America. These extracontinental (as their journeys are frequently called) migratory journeys remain starkly underexplored, with a particular lack of attention on the challenges that children confront along the way.

Since Mexico began disaggregating migrant child apprehension data in 2014, the statistics show that anywhere between 20 and 30 per cent of all migrant apprehensions involve children. Of those children, migrants from Central American countries constitute the majority of apprehensions. However, migrant children arrivals from African and Asian countries have significantly increased over this period as well. Between 2014 and 2019, Mexico recorded an increase in extracontinental migrant children apprehensions, growing from 15 to 1,318 – an increase larger than every other origin region during that time (UPMRIP, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). That said, these figures fell in 2020 to only 156 children following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this proportional increase, both policy and humanitarian interventions in Mexico continue to primarily focus on Central American migrant children. To date, there has not been a single survey, policy brief, or long-form journalistic report on the experiences of migrant children from African and Asian countries moving in and through Mexico.

This article offers an initial intervention in some of the data gaps concerning extracontinental migrant children in Mexico.

### Data and its limitations

Relying on disaggregated apprehension data from Mexico's Ministry of the Interior, this piece provides a comparative overview of the approximately 2,000 migrant children from 41 different African and Asian countries who were apprehended in Mexico between 2014 and 2020 (UPMRIP, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). While official apprehension data stands as the most comprehensive statistics available on extracontinental children migration trends in Mexico, it also poses significant limitations. For one, apprehension data only reflects the number of individuals who were apprehended. It does not capture those who may have avoided detection during their journeys through Mexico or those who entered Mexico with recognized travel documents.

Second, Mexico's apprehension data of minors is only disaggregated around four identifiers: country of origin, gender, age range, and status (meaning accompanied versus unaccompanied). Thus, details about migrants' specific experiences in Mexico both before and after apprehension are unknown. Even so, apprehension data offers a starting point from which to identify trends and future lines of research by providing a baseline to understand the demographic profiles of extracontinental migrant children who move in and through Mexico.

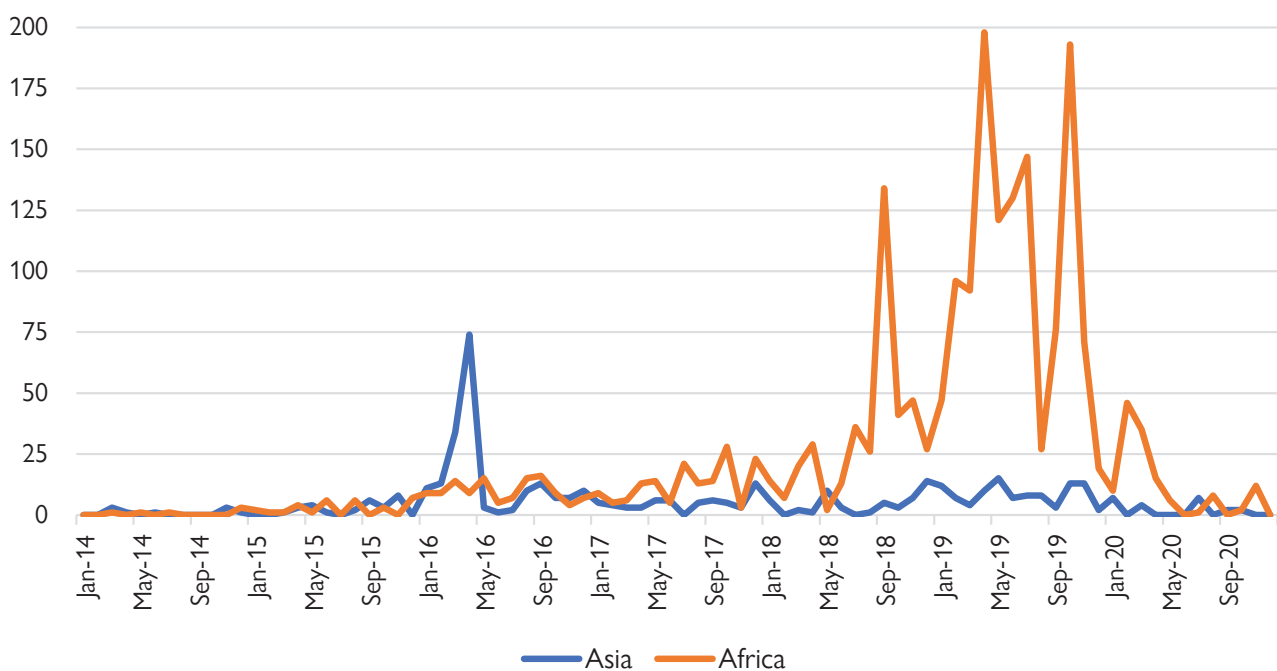
<sup>1</sup> Caitlyn Yates is a PhD student of the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.

## Findings

Between 2014 and 2020, Mexico apprehended a total of 2,058 extracontinental migrant children, representing about 1.2 per cent of all migrant children apprehensions in Mexico. The largest number of extracontinental migrant children apprehensions occurred in 2019 with 1,318, before plummeting in 2020 to 156 – likely as a result of the pandemic.

While a small percentage, the number of extracontinental migrant children consistently increased during each year surveyed in this article – from 0.1 per cent in 2014 to 2.6 per cent in 2019, before falling again to 1.4 per cent in 2020. While only a small fraction of the migrant children encountered by Mexican officials, these extracontinental migrant children originated in 41 different countries across the African and Asian continents.

**Figure 1. Extracontinental migrant children apprehended, by month and continent of origin**



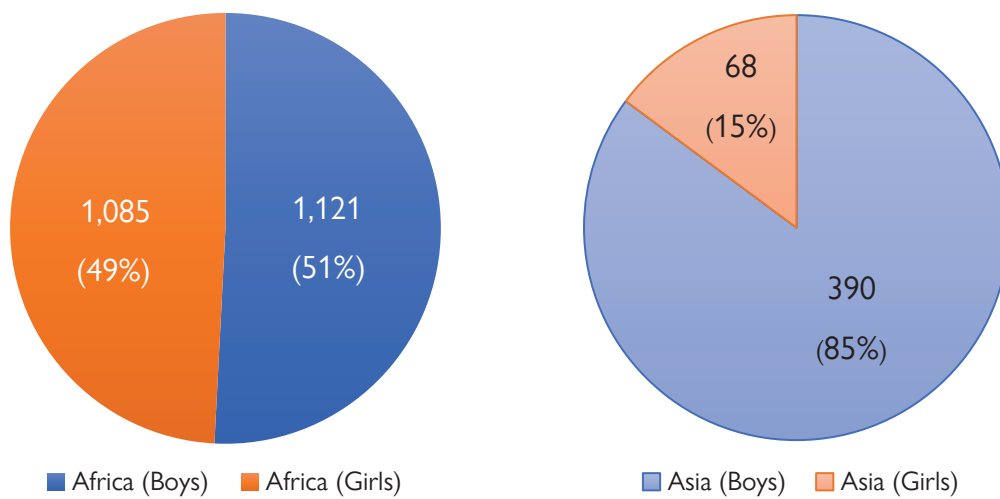
Source: Estimated by the author using data from Mexico's Ministry of the Interior.

Since Mexico's disaggregated migrant child apprehension data only dates back to 2014, the dynamics of extracontinental migrant children prior to that year are unknown. That said, it is expected that the numbers of child arrivals prior to 2014 were negligible. As Figure 1 shows, there was a spike of migrant children from Asian countries – most of whom were Indian – in 2016. That said, data suggests extracontinental migrant children began to arrive in

Mexico systematically starting in 2017. Despite these overall increases in apprehensions, it is important to note that between 2017 and 2019, the apprehensions of extracontinental migrant children primarily involved children from African countries. Additionally, among these children, there was a tendency of apprehensions to spike primarily during summer months.



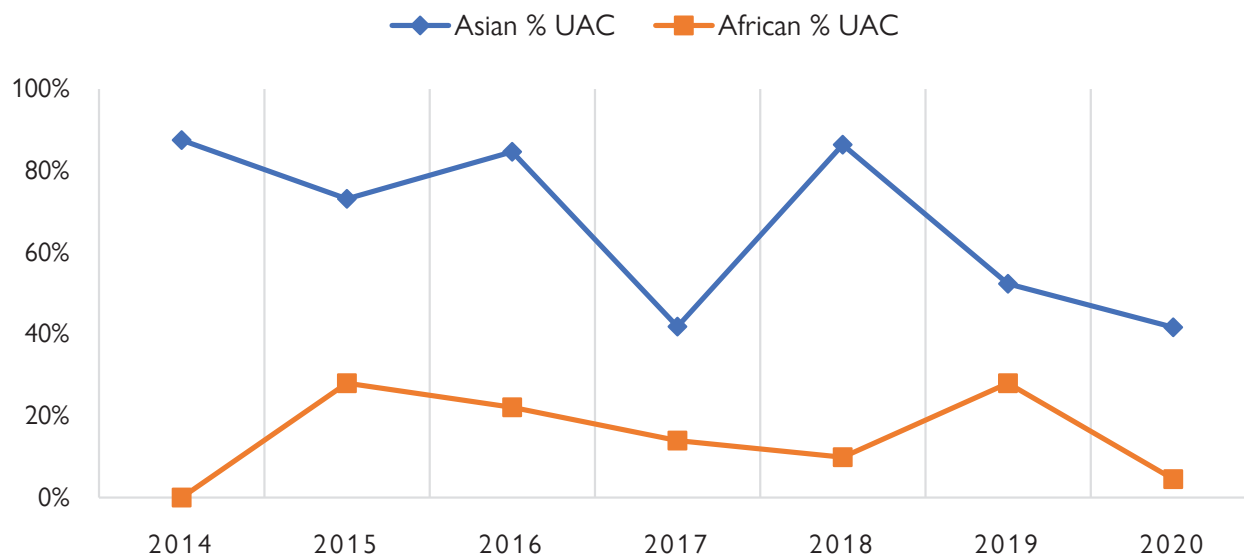
Figures 2 and 3. Sex of extracontinental migrant children by continent of origin



Source: Estimated by the author using data from Mexico’s Ministry of the Interior.

Figures 2 and 3 show both the frequency in apprehensions by continent as well as the sex of the apprehended extracontinental migrant children. About 83 per cent of those apprehended in Mexico between 2014 and 2020 were nationals of countries on the African continent. The split between boys and girls for African migrant children was almost even. By comparison, only 17 per cent of all extracontinental

migrant children apprehended in Mexico were from countries on the Asian continent. Eighty-five per cent of those Asian migrant apprehensions were boys. In sum, while most extracontinental migrant children apprehended were from African countries and evenly split between boys and girls, those from Asian countries were majority boys.

*Accompanied versus unaccompanied status***Figure 4. Percentage of extracontinental migrant children travelling unaccompanied**

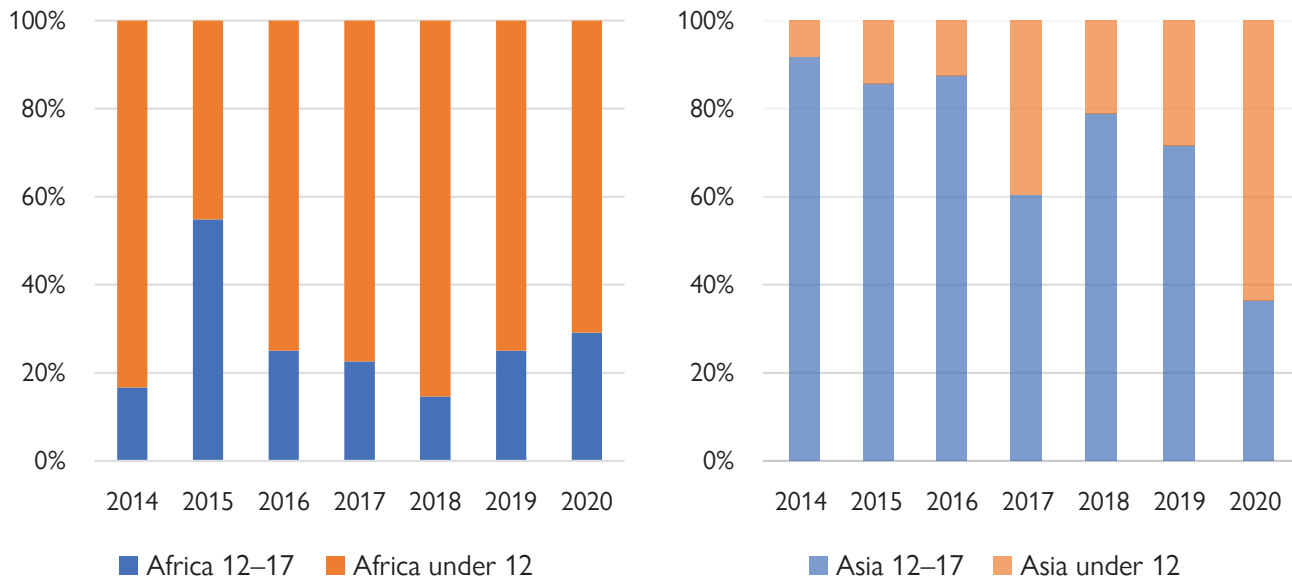
Source: Estimated by the author using data from Mexico's Ministry of the Interior.

In addition to the variations in the sex of extracontinental migrant children, there are also differences in the travel patterns. Figure 4 shows that Asian migrant children are significantly more likely to travel unaccompanied through Mexico (that is, without an adult family member) than African children. In the years 2014, 2016 and 2018, Asian migrant children were apprehended 85 per cent of the time or more while travelling without an adult family member. That said, during those same three years, 86 per cent (or 162) of migrant children from

Asia apprehended in Mexico were from India. As a result, the findings in Figure 3 may be more indicative of Indian migration patterns than of Asian children migration patterns at large. However, by comparison, from 2014 to 2020, 4 out of 5 (80%) African migrant children were apprehended while travelling with at least one family member. Thus, African and Asian migrant accompaniment rates are almost inverse, with most African migrant children apprehended in Mexico found travelling accompanied by a family member.

Age

Figures 5 and 6. Age distribution of extracontinental migrant children by continent of origin



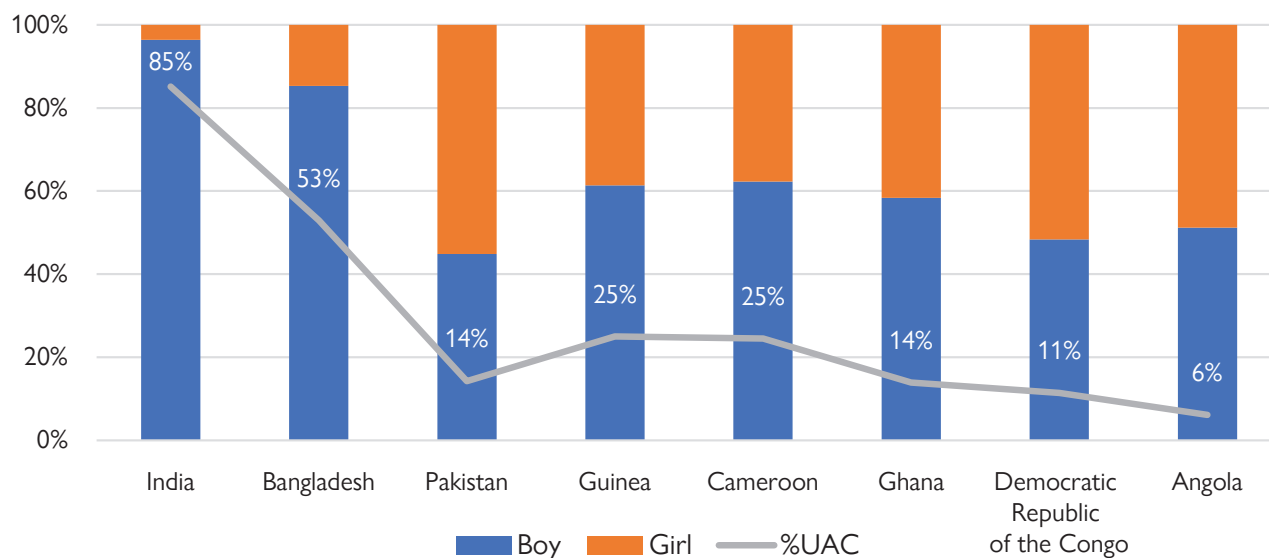
Source: Estimated by the author using data from Mexico’s Ministry of the Interior.

Another significant difference between African and Asian children’s migration through Mexico is age distribution. Mexico’s Ministry of the Interior data only disaggregates migrant children’s ages into two categories: “11 years and under” and “12 years to 17 years” – rather than by specific age. Even so, the two categories do provide some clear trends. First, migrant children from African countries are primarily under

the age of 12 and therefore are younger children. By comparison, migrant children from Asian countries are primarily adolescents and teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17. Again, migrant children’s age ranges are almost inverse, with children from African countries being, on average, significantly younger than children from Asian countries.

## Nationality

Figure 7. Most common extracontinental nationalities broken down by sex and per cent unaccompanied



Source: Estimated by the author using data from Mexico's Ministry of the Interior.

Finally, while more than 40 nationalities are represented in the official data, migrant children are mainly from just a handful of countries. The few migrant children from Asian countries who transit through Mexico are primarily from India, Bangladesh or Pakistan. They are mostly travelling without a family member. By contrast, migrant children from African countries are primarily from Guinea, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana and Angola. They are in their majority accompanied by adult family members. Overall, this data provides significant context on the demographic identifiers of extracontinental migrant children in Mexico and offers a descriptive starting place as to the specific needs and challenges that these migrant children may face.

### Known dynamics of extracontinental migration

The scant data about the journeys of extracontinental migrant children through Mexico should not come as a surprise when one considers the significant gaps concerning data for adult migrants from African and Asian countries transiting through Mexico – and in particular from Asian countries. That said, we do know that the Mexican Government has deployed particular enforcement responses towards extracontinental migrants, with their experiences with immigration enforcement authorities varying greatly compared to Central American migrants.

For one, extracontinental migrants are almost never deported. Between 2013 and 2018, only 3 per cent of all apprehended African and Asian migrants travelling irregularly through Mexico were deported to their countries of origin, in comparison to 96 per cent of migrants from Central American countries (Yates, 2019). The low number of returns is mainly the result of the high costs associated with extracontinental deportations and the bureaucratic difficulties associated with returns to countries where Mexico does not have a large diplomatic presence. Second, Mexico had traditionally issued exit permits (*oficios de salida*) to African and Asian migrants who entered Mexico, which allowed them to travel

quickly through the territory and reach the United States' southern border. However, Mexico stopped issuing these permits in the summer of 2019, causing extracontinental migrants to become trapped after they entered Mexico. In an attempt to resolve this issue, Mexico began to declare migrants – and particularly those from African countries – as stateless in 2019. This process provides migrants with a document that allows them to transit through Mexico, but it also strips them of the rights they have as nationals of their corresponding countries of origin. As a result, it is now common for extracontinental migrants to find themselves trapped for extended periods of time in Mexico all while navigating particular Mexican immigration enforcement policies.

In addition to these enforcement responses, extracontinental migrants face systematic racism and discrimination in Mexico. A recent study on African migrants in Mexico found that anti-Black racism consistently occurs in migrant detention centres, through police violence and its lack of action, or in everyday life with landlords refusing to rent rooms to Black migrants (Priya Morley et al., 2021). There are also language challenges as translators and interpreters are rarely available to non-Spanish-speaking migrants when interacting with immigration authorities, accessing health care, seeking to enrol their children in school or attempting to report a crime (Yates and Bolter, 2021). Additional challenges include a lack of established African and Asian migrant communities and a lack of religious centres – especially for Muslim migrants – in what has historically been a predominantly Catholic region.

These challenges are compounded by those faced by all irregular migrants in Mexico, including a lack of regular immigration status, insecurity, and a broader anti-immigrant climate. It is likely that these challenges are only amplified for extracontinental migrant children, though to date, there is no data that can provide insights into their experiences.

## Conclusions

This article presents an overview of extracontinental migrant children's demographic dynamics in Mexico. The author found that most migrant children from Asian countries are teenage boys travelling alone. By comparison, migrant children from African countries are primarily young children travelling with family members. The data available, however, does not address the challenges particular to extracontinental migrant children in Mexico. While some recent research has tracked Mexico's policy responses directed at extracontinental migrants and the particular challenges they face (Yates, 2019; Meyer and Isacson, 2019), research has so far neglected to particularly identify, let alone address, extracontinental migrant children's needs.

That said, there is currently an opportunity to draw more attention to these experiences. As the recent increase in the number of migrant children apprehensions in 2021 has turned attention once more to the United States' southern border, there is also a chance to shine the spotlight on the experiences of migrant children from outside of Central America and Mexico (UNICEF, 2021).

On the basis of the findings outlined above, the following recommendations are in order:

- (a) **End migrant children detention.** While Mexico has recently vowed to end the detention of children, Mexican authorities must also ensure the availability of practical and safe alternatives to detention for apprehended children.
- (b) **Provide translators and interpreters.** Extracontinental migrants attempting to interact with immigration authorities or access services must be able to do so in their spoken and preferred language.
- (c) **Implement anti-racism training.** The Mexican Government must ensure that authorities working with extracontinental migrants receive consistent anti-racism training.
- (d) **Recognize migrants' nationalities.** While often declared stateless, most apprehended migrants have nationalities. Mexican authorities must acknowledge these nationalities so that migrants can access the rights convened by their countries of origin.

- (e) **Commission a study on extracontinental migrant children.** There is an urgent need for research focusing exclusively on the experiences, needs and challenges that extracontinental migrant children face while transiting through Mexico.

Without closer collaboration between researchers, policymakers, activists and humanitarian workers in Mexico, it is unlikely that progress will be made to address the challenges facing extracontinental migrant children. However, the implementation of these recommendations can be a starting place to address the existing research and policy gaps. ■

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## Immigrant student resilience: Policy directions for a post-COVID-19 world\*

Louis Volante, Don A. Klinger and Melissa Siegel<sup>1</sup>

*Academic resilience is the general notion that students from disadvantaged households achieve favourable achievement outcomes despite coming from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Interest in this topic has been facilitated by national and international testing organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which quantify the relative percentage of academically resilient students within and across countries. Yet recent research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the growing necessity of broader notions of academic resilience that recognize important psychosocial and physical well-being issues that are typically not captured by large-scale assessment measures. This paper discusses the importance of social protection and education policies that help mediate achievement gaps as well as the prominent mental and physical health challenges disproportionately faced by immigrant students. The discussion outlines policy directions for a post-COVID-19 world.*

### Introduction

Given the current disruptions of human mobility, the OECD, and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in particular, has come to dominate global perspectives regarding the educational outcomes of children and the factors associated with these outcomes. And while the majority of the data and information collected by the OECD come from Western developed nations, it is a popular metric across a wide swathe of the global community. The OECD provides national profiles – which can also be further disaggregated – to capture regional and national differences in

educational outcomes across various education systems. Increasingly, the OECD has used PISA, and other measures, to not only look at broad international comparisons, but also compare international jurisdictions in terms of educational equity. In policy communities, academic resilience refers to students who achieve favourable achievement outcomes despite coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds, and it has been shown that some countries possess a higher relative share of low SES and immigrant student populations who demonstrate academic resilience (Klinger et al., 2018; Schnepf et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the necessity of moving to broader notions of academic resilience. Research conducted during the pandemic has made it clear that in addition to the significant learning losses attributed to school closures and the shift to online learning (OECD, 2020a; UNSDG, 2020), immigrant students are also at a greater risk of suffering physical and mental health challenges than their non-immigrant and more affluent peers (Gromada et al., 2020). It is worth noting that these ongoing challenges are not confined to low-income countries and have been observed across a host of middle- and high-income countries as well – as discussed in the previously mentioned OECD report. Thus, one may naturally query what are the most salient policy issues and options to address these disturbing trends so that immigrant student groups have a realistic opportunity to thrive in a post-COVID-19 world.

### Multilevel policy considerations

Before outlining a range of promising policies and programmes that are grounded in the emerging research literature, we need to acknowledge that the scope of our current analysis is primarily designed to explicate pivotal social protection<sup>2</sup> and

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2 Social protection consists of policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to manage economic and social risks, such as unemployment, exclusion, sickness, disability and old age (World Bank, 2001).

educational policy interventions. No doubt, building resilient schools and supporting immigrant student groups will intersect with other important economic, public health and cultural considerations. Indeed we have previously argued for the importance of multidimensional support and interventions to improve the educational outcomes of immigrant students (Volante et al., 2020). Although the pandemic has not diminished this important caveat, it has highlighted various school-, community- and national-level considerations that are especially important for immigrant students. Ultimately, our discussion is meant to assist policymakers as they seek to develop and enact evidence-based policies for vulnerable immigrant student populations.

### *School-level considerations*

The education of children is a public responsibility, and the vast majority of school systems across the globe rely on public funding. On average, public funding accounts for approximately 90 per cent of the money spent on primary, secondary, and post-secondary, non-tertiary education across OECD countries (OECD, 2020b). Private funding does increase to approximately 13 per cent at the secondary level. Typically, public funding is allocated on a per-student basis, with little if any differentiation in funding formulas due to school location or context. It is very common for additional funding to be provided to schools in support of students with learning disabilities, and the majority of Western developed education jurisdictions provide resources to help migrant second-language learners (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016). In contrast, few educational jurisdictions account for low socioeconomic contexts in the dispersal of educational funding, creating a possible double deficit for those schools in lower socioeconomic communities that also have a substantial number of second-language migrants and refugees. Thus, it seems vital that education systems utilize weighted funding formulas that allocate additional per-pupil funding to where it is needed most.

### *Community-level considerations*

The calls for differential school-funding models are not at all new, and there has been a long-standing recognition that certain communities struggle to provide adequate resources and educational opportunities for their students. Urban communities whose populations provide lower-paying essential services and rural communities have been shown

to be particularly at risk. Even in well-developed, industrialized nations, these communities struggle despite having access to additional educational and community funding programmes. Schools in these communities traditionally have difficulties attracting specialist and resource teachers and other highly trained professionals required to support children's educational needs (e.g. school psychologists, speech and auditory pathologists). Similar challenges exist for health services.

While the long-term educational impacts of COVID-19 have yet to be firmly established, it is clear that communities have been differentially impacted by the pandemic. COVID-19 has certainly exacerbated the health and educational disparities in the communities identified above (HRW, 2021; Tuyisenge and Goldenberg, 2021). In recognition of these disparities, there have been explicit policies and resources directed to support children and families in such communities. As an example, in response to COVID-19 and the shift to online learning during a nationwide lockdown, the Government of New Zealand announced an USD 88 million education package to create a "robust distance learning infrastructure" that provided computer resources (e.g. Chromebooks, enhanced Internet access) and educational television to support learning (Government of New Zealand, 2020).

Nationally, students in New Zealand lost only about five weeks of face-to-face learning time due to COVID-19. The Government of New Zealand moved quickly to support children's learning in the midst of the emerging pandemic, and by most accounts, COVID-19 has had minimal impact on children, families and communities in New Zealand. Nevertheless, these efforts further highlight the inequalities across communities and how the "rush" to temporarily address these inequities was insufficient. The communities near the Auckland Airport, which tend to have lower socioeconomic and migrant profiles, suffered further lockdowns due to additional COVID-19 outbreaks at the country's major point of entry in 2020 and 2021. Students in these communities switched from face-to-face to online learning on more than one occasion and continue to be ready to switch if needed.

Collectively, the challenges of remote learning have highlighted the significant disparities that exist across communities around the globe, and the inherent tensions between balancing centralized funding and support systems with more localized



community-based decision-making models. Ultimately, policymakers need to strike a delicate balance so that at-risk communities such as those with a high percentage of immigrant families – which traditionally lack cultural capital – are provided sufficient funding and are afforded a meaningful voice in the effective utilization of resources.

### *National-level considerations*

National policy interventions tend to be broad and, as we have described here and in previous research, can create inequities for students, families, schools and communities (Volante et al., 2018). Economic and migrant factors result in especially substantial inequities. The COVID-19 pandemic has had additional national and international impacts on migrant families. In the first instance, international travel and migration have been greatly reduced in an effort to prevent further COVID-19 outbreaks. As a result, national policies to support migrants, which are rarely at the forefront, became even less of a focus, creating additional challenges for those migrants and/or refugees who arrived just prior to the pandemic. As one example of the latter, the education funding package in New Zealand described above did not include any explicit funding to support migrant families.

In some national contexts, explicit anti-immigration policies were enacted. For example, non-citizens in the United States of America were excluded from much needed emergency funding, as illustrated by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), which prevented many immigrants from receiving COVID-19-related emergency assistance, or emergency funding for tertiary education students (Loweree et al., 2020). Both the lack of migrant-specific policies and explicit anti-immigrant policies resulted in countless examples of migrant family challenges and separations. Simultaneously, the pandemic continues to exacerbate xenophobia and racism, especially when new COVID-19 outbreaks or variants are discovered. Given the timing of the latest edition of the Migrant Integration Policy Index, policymakers will be able to take stock of the impact of the pandemic on education and anti-discrimination policies, by making comparisons between pre- and post-pandemic indicators (Solano and Huddleston, 2020).

In the 18 months that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our global society, there are a growing

number of examples that show how national governments have recognized the differential challenges it has brought. For example, some national governments are progressively illustrating the need to increase the migrant workforce. Canada, for example, expanded emergency funding policies to include non-residents and refugees whose incomes were impacted by the pandemic. There are also call surges across industrialized nations to address migrant concerns and issues that existed before the pandemic, along with those that have resulted due to the pandemic (Loweree et al., 2020). Overall, COVID-19 has highlighted the need for focused interventions, adapting social policies to provide additional resources to lower SES communities, to include non-citizens in their COVID-19 responses, and/or to implement specific policies to support migrant workers and families who have been at greater risk, financially and personally, due to the pandemic.

While promising, the additional resources and policies implemented during the pandemic will likely be insufficient, especially if they occur only while the pandemic is occurring. In terms of education, the pandemic required actions on the pre-existing and substantial inequities that have long existed. At the same time, the pandemic also exemplified the overall importance of children's physical health and well-being along with their academic progress. Recent Canadian studies during the pandemic have found that less than 5 per cent of children and youth are meeting daily physical exercise guidelines (Moore et al., 2020), along with a staggering 67–70 per cent of children/adolescents who experienced deterioration in at least one of six mental health domains: depression, anxiety, irritability, attention, hyperactivity and obsessions/compulsions (Cost et al., 2021). Collectively, the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to be realized, but it is certain that children from lower socioeconomic and/or second-language migrant families will be impacted the most. Hence it will be critical for policies to continue to be adapted to specifically address the needs of at-risk children in these communities.

### **Conclusion**

Stories abound in the global media regarding the differential impact of COVID-19 on lower socioeconomic and migrant communities. Not surprisingly, higher COVID-19 infection rates and mortality, larger economic losses, and reduced

educational opportunities figure prominently in these reports (HRW, 2021; Tuyisenge and Goldenberg, 2021). Yet in spite of the migration challenges that COVID-19 has created, the desire to migrate continues. Select industrialized nations (e.g. the United Kingdom, Germany) have even reported an increase in international student numbers during the COVID-19 outbreak. Although many of these students arrived prior to the pandemic, finding ways to ensure that they become valued and contributing members of their respective host societies remains a constant challenge. While the preceding discussion cannot do justice to the full range of policy options and international contexts that have enjoyed a degree of relative success in supporting their immigrant student populations, it has highlighted some of the more salient policy issues to consider moving forward. ■

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## Publications

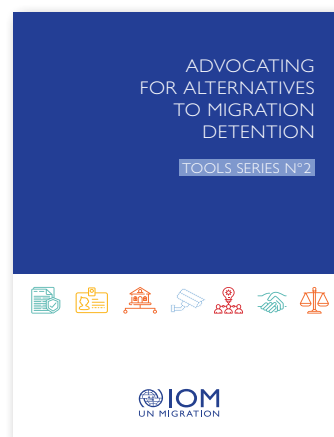


### Annual Report 2020

2021 | 71 pages | [English](#)

The Annual Report 2020 encapsulates the full range of IOM's operations during the year to support migrants, displaced populations and other people on the move, as well as continued work to realize the benefits of safe, orderly and regular migration.

The Annual Report is reflective of an extraordinary year, in which IOM adapted and responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused major disruption, including unprecedented restrictions to global mobility, and left many millions of migrants and displaced populations in a more vulnerable position. During the year, IOM implemented COVID-19-related operations in 140 countries to ensure that migrants, displaced populations and communities had access to COVID-19 services, and responded to the large number of migrants left stranded across the world, in addition to continuing existing humanitarian and relief programming. At the same time, IOM continued to invest in its own institutional development, and further strengthened United Nations cooperation across the world, including through coordination of the United Nations Network on Migration.



### Advocating for Alternatives to Migration Detention Tools Series N°2

2021 | 44 pages | E-ISBN: 978-92-9268-058-9  
[English](#)

The IOM ATD Series is a set of tools aimed at guiding IOM staff and other interested stakeholders in conceiving, developing, implementing and advocating alternatives to detention (ATD). This Guide is part of the IOM ATD Series, and it is intended to provide user-friendly guidance on how to conduct advocacy in the context of ATDs. It emphasizes the importance of well-informed, well-planned and context-specific advocacy efforts.

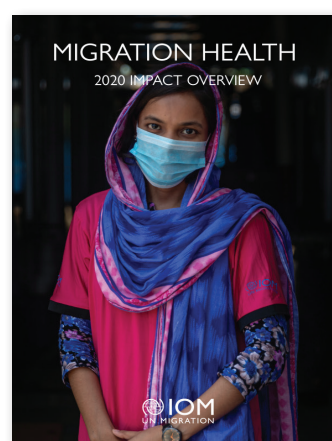
The ATD Advocacy Guide is primarily intended for use by IOM staff, but other stakeholders, including United Nations entities, NGOs, government officials, among others, may also find it useful for initiating and scaling up ATD advocacy, as well as strengthening partnerships, in support of ATDs.

IOM is committed to promoting ATDs under a rights-based approach (RBA), as a more humane way of managing irregular migration, compared to detention, in full respect of international standards, with preference for the use of community-based and non-custodial measures.



**Asia–Pacific Migration Data Report 2020**  
2021 | 161 pages | [English](#)

In a time of unprecedented social and economic changes, the Migration Data Report 2020 of the Asia–Pacific Regional Data Hub presents the latest evidence on the complex and multifaceted migration dynamics in Asia and the Pacific. The report analyses how COVID-19 altered the regional migration landscape in 2020 and identifies lessons learned and future goals to strengthen migration data collection. The report serves as a tool to monitor progress towards the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration as well as the Migration Governance Indicators and offers evidence-based recommendations to overcome challenges concerning data availability, comprehensiveness and comparability.



**Migration Health 2020 Impact Overview**  
2021 | 41 pages | E-ISBN: 978-92-9268-079-4  
[English](#)

This report is an annual overview of activities led and implemented by the Migration Health Division of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2020, in partnership with Member States, United Nations agencies and other partners in the international community, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, meet the operational challenges and advance understanding of migration health, encourage socioeconomic development through migration, and work towards ensuring respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants. The report illustrates the growing multidimensional migration health activities and partnerships of IOM in 2020, and demonstrates the Organization’s commitment to advancing the health of migrants and their families worldwide against all odds, as well as supporting Member States in addressing migration health challenges



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- Provide, as often as applicable, lessons that can be replicated or adapted by relevant public administrations, or civil society, in other countries.

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