

In Central America, child migrants now face perils alone

Youths are increasingly making the risky journey through Mexico to the US without parents.

The Christian Science Monitor

August 3, 2007

TAPACHULA, MEXICO - Roberto, Juan, and Angel are not even 16 yet. They flick rubber bands at one another in the main plaza of Tapachula in southern Mexico. They whisper and laugh. They lapse into their native indigenous language, and laugh harder.

But the boys are not in their local town square. They are Guatemalans who crossed illegally into Mexico. And they are not here to play. Two shine shoes; one sells gum and cigarettes.

Youths like these from across Central America are increasingly migrating by themselves to Mexico, hoping to connect with relatives and find jobs in the US.

"Five years ago, migrant children did not come [here] by themselves," says Fermina Rodriguez, a local human rights coordinator in Tapachula.

The trend concerns human rights advocates because they say that children are far less prepared to deal with the physical exhaustion, extortion, and violence that often greet the Central American migrants as they make their way through the back roads of Mexico to the US. And while many adult migrants quickly move north to the US border, children often linger before moving onward, creating local anger as they loiter in public spaces and, some say, contribute to crime.

'Rite of passage'

"It is such an ingrained solution [for a better life]. It's almost their duty. I've been calling it a rite of passage," says Betsy Wier, the manager of program development for Central America for Catholic Relief Services who oversaw a nine-month project on youths migrating alone that will be published soon. The study showed that unaccompanied migrants are often robbed, extorted, and intimidated – both during their journey and once in custody of immigration authorities.

"There aren't really people rallying for them," Ms. Wier says, "in part because it is such a new, and rapidly growing, phenomenon."

Her research, compiled from government figures documenting minors repatriated to their home countries, showed that the number of youths migrating alone has risen by about 1,000 children each year since 2004: from 3,000 to over 5,000 last year.

Mexico's National Migration Institute estimates that, on average, 30 minors are being sent back to their home country each day: there have been 4,577 cases from January through May. Three-quarters are boys.

The rise in child migration is driven in large part by the desire to reunite with family, say observers. Like their Mexican counterparts, many Central American children have been left with aging grandparents or distant relatives, while their parents work in the US.

When a parent's economic situation stabilizes in the US, he or she will often contract a smuggler to bring the child, sometimes as young as 4 or 5, from Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador – especially now that increased security along the US-Mexico border means that taking the trip is riskier.

But most of the migrants, according to advocates, tend to be teenage boys who travel without the help of a smuggler. "It's a subculture phenomenon of youth," says Nestor Rodriguez, who codirects the Center for Immigration Research at the University of Houston. "You migrate if you are unattached."

That's exactly how Alfredo ended up here. At age 14 he is already working from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. selling balloons on the central plaza here in Tapachula. He studied until sixth grade and knows how to read, but since he was 10 years old, he says, he has wanted to leave Guatemala, where he helped his parents raise animals on their farm. He crossed the river that separates Mexico and Guatemala six months ago, joining two older brothers who left before him.

"For me, this is more comfortable than working on the farm," he says.

Many kids do head straight to the US border on their own, but many others have ended up in towns like Tapachula. If a child was shepherded by a smuggler who's been caught by authorities, that child often gets left behind without the street smarts to continue north. Other children who've made their way into Mexico stay put for a while because their friends are there.

They often work as "little kangaroos," dubbed such because of the trays of the gum and candy they wear across their fronts. They also wash car windows in traffic, sell balloons, and do other odd jobs.

'Love-hate' relationship with locals

Rodolfo Casillas, an immigration expert at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Mexico City, says residents have a "love-hate" relationship with the migrant children. "The feelings are conflicted about them. On the one hand they ... dynamize the economy," he says. That includes eating at markets and renting rooms that five or 10 might share.

Alfredo, for example, says he earns about \$120 a month selling balloons, most of which goes to food and paying his share of the rent.

"But," adds Mr. Casillas, "they have also taken over the public space. And many feel they contribute to crime."

Migrants are more accepted now, say locals. But the perception that young migrants are making the region more violent lingers, says Carmen Fernandez, an immigration expert at the College of the Southern Border in Tapachula.

Of the migrants that the government agency Grupos Beta helps, local coordinator Francisco Aceves says that some 25 percent are children. Many are unruly. Some have escaped abusive situations, or been abused on their journeys. "There are things that come up with the minors that are very strong, very difficult," Mr. Aceves says. There is a shelter for unaccompanied minors caught in the region, for example. "But the boys that are 14 years old ... just escape."

In 2005, Mexico signed treaties with Guatemala and El Salvador to create procedures for repatriating undocumented children traveling alone to their home countries. But often a blind eye is turned, especially in Honduras where a treaty has yet to be signed, says Wier. Honduran children

are left at the Guatemala-Honduras border to fend for themselves and walk or hitch a ride to the nearest town, more than 18 miles away, she says.

Mexico's National Commission on Human Rights recently issued a release condemning the migration institute for not protecting unaccompanied minors working in the streets of Tapachula.

But for Ms. Rodriguez, the human rights activist, the repatriation of children is not a viable solution. Whether children cross alone or are left by a smuggler, they often set out on the journey again. "We have to understand their reality," she says. "They work to survive. If you take that away, what can you offer? Because behind each 'little kangaroo' there is a little brother or a home he is supporting."