

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

The migrant caravan

Jonathan (14) and his cousin Josue (15) left their homes in Honduras fleeing “barbaric crime and poverty” and joined the migrant caravan in October 2018 (Figure 1). They spent the next three months walking or hitching rides in trucks, on petrol tankers or in the trays of cars to the Mexico-US border.

Central Americans have been fleeing civil wars, economic hardship, gang violence, and political instability (much of which was caused by US political interference) for decades.¹ Mexican civil society groups estimate that every year more than 400,000 Central Americans travel through Mexico on their way north to the US.² The Mexican government has issued more conservative annual figures of 150,000.

These people are exposed to numerous risks on the way north: accidents, scams, detention, deportations, assaults, extortion, kidnapping and murder. Unaccompanied minors like Jonathan and Josue are particularly vulnerable. Jonathan and Jose had their mobile phones and wallets stolen, the police in Guatemala took their identity papers, and Jonathan was a victim of tear gas at the Mexico-US border. Worst of all, Jonathan saw a 3-month-old baby girl die. Between 2011 and 2016 the U.S. apprehended 178,825 children aged 17 and under from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, traveling unaccompanied without an adult relative or visa.³ Of that number, roughly one-third were girls (these numbers do not include those children who made it into the US undetected, nor those who did not reach the US border).

Because of the many and varied risks of travelling north to seek asylum, groups within Honduras called for people to leave together for their own protection. They believed there was safety in numbers. The resulting phenomena became known as “the migrant caravan”. When the caravan left the city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras in October 2018, there were slightly more than 100 members; but by the time the caravan reached the Mexico-Guatemala border more than 7,000 people from all over Central America had joined the exodus (Figures 2,3). This included groups of people who may not usually take such a risk.

There was single mother Mari and her 15-year-old son Javier. Javier has Down syndrome and was born with hydrocephalus. He easily became dizzy and complained of headaches. He suffered regular seizures because Mari couldn’t afford his anticonvulsant medication. Doctors told Mari that Javier needed surgery, but she never had the money. She was seeking medical treatment for Javier in the US.

Mari and her children lived in San Pedro Sula where their family was terrorised by gangs. Mari had to pay a tax to the gangs in the area. When she couldn’t pay, gang members burned down her

house and murdered her two brothers. She left Honduras to make a better life for her other children. She brought Javier with her on the journey and left the other two behind with family. She hopes to bring them to the US when she has more money.

Juan Antonio and his six-year-old daughter Lily who has severe cerebral palsy also joined the caravan. Lily was unable to speak or walk and was transported in an old stroller which was too small for her.

Eva is 18. Her daughter Madeline celebrated her first birthday while travelling with the caravan. Eva was worried for Madeline during the voyage because Madeline had been vomiting from a stomach bug. During the journey, Eva witnessed a pregnant woman and her unborn child die from sickness and heat.

Despite the hardships, the people of the caravan were imbued with hope. They were acting with agency, attempting to change their otherwise grim future. They weren't sure exactly how they would cross the US border but there was a sense of optimism in the group.

Of course, not everyone makes it north to the US. Of the more than 68.000 children detained in Mexico between 2016 and 2018, 91% were deported back to their home countries,⁴ but many do reach the US border where they can apply for asylum or try to cross undocumented.

In recent years, detention in the US has become something to be feared. In 2018, hundreds of parents and children who sought asylum in the United States were separated under the zero-tolerance policy that criminally prosecuted people crossing the border without a visa. Despite the executive order that President Donald Trump signed in June 2018 to end zero tolerance, federal data reveal as many as five migrant children per day continue to be separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border.⁵

According to US government statistics,⁴ more than 30,000 children from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador temporarily ended up in US detention centres in 2018. Children are held for days, sometimes weeks, in overcrowded facilities without enough food or toothbrushes, sometimes sleeping on the floor, going days without showering, often separated from their parents. Even more horrifying, six migrant children have died in federal custody since September.⁶

The United States is one of only three countries in the world that have not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the others being Somalia and South Sudan. However, Mexico is a signatory and is failing in its protection responsibilities by detaining and deporting migrant children. It is clear that better protection for child refugees is needed throughout the region.

Mark Isaacs (markjamesisaacs@gmail.com)
Sydney

[Mark Isaacs is a writer, an author, a refugee advocate and PhD student. He travelled with the migrant caravan for two months in 2018. The children and their parents gave permission for their stories to be told and their photographs shown, although names have been changed.]

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Figure 1: Josue and Jonathan



Figure 2: Hand-outs



Figure 3: Sleeping quarters