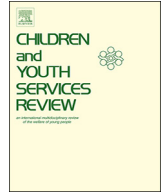




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Treacherous crossings, precarious arrivals: Responses to the influx of unaccompanied minors in the Hudson Valley

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A B S T R A C T

In June 2014 approximately 10,000 unaccompanied minors migrated to the United States from Central America. By the end of 2014 a total of 51,705 children crossed the southwest border of the Rio Grande. The initial influx of child migrants into the Hudson Valley created a humanitarian crisis. The overwhelming majority of kids spoke either Spanish or only their indigenous language and many were traumatized by the journey. There were no services in place for these minor children or for their sponsors. Service providers, educators, and immigration lawyers were caught off guard and scrambled desperately to find solutions to the complex problems associated with the unprecedented arrival of unaccompanied immigrant children. This research examines how federal immigration policy impacted child migrants at the local Hudson Valley level and the collective response by service providers, educators, activists, and immigration lawyers to effectively deal with the crisis. Through twenty-five qualitative interviews, obtained via snowball sample, we present the voices of those on-the-ground individuals who responded to the lack of support for these kids, and attempted to organize an interconnected web of local services, in the context of federal immigration policy. In addition, we present alternative policy recommendations formulated by service providers and immigration advocates based on their experiences working with unaccompanied minors and their family members. Finally, we present policy suggestions of our own, based on our fieldwork and our combined expertise.

1. Introduction

Beginning in October 2011, the United States government reported a dramatic rise in the number of unaccompanied minors¹ arriving in the United States from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. The initial influx of 3933 unaccompanied Central American children crossing the southwest border of the Rio Grande increased to 10,146 in 2012, rose to 20,805 in 2013, and surged to an all-time high of 51,705 in 2014. Although the following year saw a significant decrease in the number of unaccompanied children crossing the border (28,375), the humanitarian crisis was far from over. Despite never reaching the apex of 2014, children from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, referred to as the Northern Triangle, continued to cross the border in large numbers. In 2016 another 46,893 unaccompanied minors were apprehended at the border followed by 29,758 in 2017 (U.S. Customs and Border

Protection, 2017).

This dramatic increase in child migrants from the Northern Triangle was a humanitarian emergency that required immediate action. These kids were escaping the ravages of poverty and unimaginable violence at the hands of intimate partners, state actors, and drug cartels. Along the way, these children faced narco-traffickers, gang recruiters, labor and sex traffickers, and sexual predators. When these kids arrived in the United States they were picked up by Border Control agents on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security. Within seventy-two hours kids were sent to shelters and eventually were reunited with family members or family friends. Our research examines how people working with the Central American immigrant community in the Hudson Valley responded to the crisis and attempted to create an interconnected web of services. We interviewed the teachers, attorneys, service providers, and activists, who tirelessly worked together to respond to the crisis. The

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¹ We use the terms unaccompanied minor, unaccompanied child, and unaccompanied youth interchangeably to refer to a child migrant under the age of 18 who arrives to the United States without a parent or legal guardian or pre-approved immigration status. The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) refers to any foreign national who is not a citizen or national of the United States as an "alien." We do not use the official term unaccompanied alien children because we think it is dehumanizing and perpetuates xenophobia.

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focus of this research is not on the kids themselves because strict federal policies prevented us from gaining access to children housed in local shelters. In addition, as a result of the presidential election and subsequent vitriol aimed at immigrants, local sponsors of unaccompanied children became hesitant to participate in the research because many of them were undocumented. Therefore, this research is specifically on the response to the crisis by front-line workers in the Hudson Valley.

Before discussing the local response to this crisis, it is necessary to examine the context in which it occurred. A brief analysis of U.S. foreign policy in Central America and the role of related immigration policy are necessary to understand what precipitated the influx. United States intervention in Central America began in earnest at the height of the Cold War. In 1954 the U.S. government overthrew the democratically elected President Jacobo Árbenz Guzman of Guatemala in order to stem the tide of communism, and more importantly, to seize control of the burgeoning communication and travel infrastructure throughout the region (Immerman, 1982; Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1990). The U.S. owned United Fruit Company controlled almost 40,000 jobs in Guatemala and its investments totaled approximately sixty million dollars. In addition, the United Fruit Company controlled the Atlantic harbor, essentially monopolizing banana export. United Fruit also owned all of Guatemala's telegraph facilities as well as its subsidiary, International Railways of Central America, which owned 887 miles of railroad track in Guatemala, nearly every mile of track throughout the country. The election of Árbenz, who promised nationalized land reform, threatened United Fruit's hegemony in the region. As a result of the overthrow of Árbenz United Fruit maintained control of vast transportation networks in Central America and secured dominance in the international trade in bananas. Throughout this era and into the 1980s economic inequality in the region became more entrenched, with the vast majority of wealth concentrated among a small number of elite families and transnational corporations (Immerman, 1982; Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1990). The gap between rich and poor widened significantly and continued to intensify over the next three decades.

During the 1980s the United States government provided broad military and economic support to El Salvador and Guatemala to fight against leftist guerrillas and gave substantial economic resources to the Honduran government for supporting U.S. policy in the region (Grandin, Levenson, & Oglesby, 2011; Meyer, Margesson, Seelke, & Taft-Morales, 2016). Gendered and racialized violence during this period included rape and sexual mutilation of women, and kidnapping and forced inscription of young men into the military. During the 1980s systematic genocide and displacement of large numbers of union leaders, suspected guerilla sympathizers, students, activists, journalists, and indigenous people in Guatemala and El Salvador was perpetrated by government sanctioned military officials with the support of the Reagan administration (Gzesh, 2006; Menjivar, 2011; Sanford, 2003). As a result, the Northern Triangle was ravaged by years of civil war where it is estimated that 70,000 Salvadorans and 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or disappeared by government forces (Meyer et al., 2016). Many Central Americans left their homes and came to the United States in search of political asylum. The majority of the refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala were denied asylum because the Regan administration argued that these U.S. allies had not violated human rights, despite evidence of systematic genocide (Grandin et al., 2011; Interagency Court of Human Rights, 2012). In addition, the administration argued that Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees were "economic migrants" and therefore not eligible for asylum. Subsequently, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Central America were denied asylum and remained undocumented (Gzesh, 2006).

During the 1990s, peace accords were signed and as the Cold War wound down, U.S. economic support for Central American decreased. In addition, increased border enforcement made unauthorized entry into the U.S. much more difficult and expensive. Prior to this increased border enforcement, Central American migrants who worked in the U.S. returned periodically to their home countries to be with their families.

However, newly intensified border controls had the unintended consequence of forcing undocumented migrants to stay in the U.S. permanently, leaving their children behind.

The monopolization of capital that began in the 1950s and continued into the 1980s, the brutal civil war, intensified border controls, and the immigration policies of the 1990s all contributed to the large influx of unaccompanied minors that began in 2011. In fact, food insecurity, lack of educational opportunities, and high rates of unemployment associated with extreme poverty have all been identified as reasons for the recent surge of kids coming to the United States (UNCHR, 2014). In addition, childhood physical and sexual violence is rampant among poor communities in the Northern Triangle and is a major push factor, particularly for female migration (Menjivar, 2011). Unfortunately, political turmoil, widespread corruption, economic inequality, and an unwillingness to address social problems related to military and state sanctioned violence has contributed to the exodus of impoverished children from the Northern Triangle.

Another reason for the recent wave of unaccompanied children crossing into the U.S. is family reunification. As a result of past increased border controls, there are large numbers of immigrants from the Northern Triangle currently living in the U.S. In 2012, there were 1,254,501 Salvadorans, 535,725 Hondurans, and 880,869 Guatemalans residing in the U.S. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that of these 690,000 Salvadorans, 360,000 Hondurans, and 560,000 Guatemalans were undocumented (Baker & Rytina, 2013; Kandel et al., 2014). In addition, a large percentage of children from these three countries have at least one parent living in the U.S (Kandel et al., 2014). Many children crossing the border into the U.S. are desperately looking to reunite with their parents and other family members.

However, the most significant factor precipitating the influx of unaccompanied minors is the extremely high levels of gang and crime related violence in the Northern Triangle. In 1996, President Clinton passed the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). This legislation fast-tracked deportation of Central Americans, particularly those convicted of violent and drug related crimes. Nearly 46,000 convicts were deported between 1996 and 2005 including members of the Salvadoran Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18), contributing to the rampant spread of gang violence throughout the region (Arana, 2005; Meyer et al., 2016). Currently, the homicide rates in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are among the highest in the world. In fact, beginning at age fifteen, the risk of homicide in this region is "four times greater than the global average" (Ciaccia & John, 2016: 231). Forced recruitment of adolescents, intense neighborhood violence, kidnapping, extortion, femicide, and rape by gang members, are the primary reason unaccompanied minors are fleeing their homes. In addition, local police and military officials frequently collude with organized criminal actors out of fear of retaliatory violence or for money (Kandel et al., 2014; Rosenblum, 2015; UNHCR, 2014). Altogether, unaccompanied minors are escaping gang related and family violence, poverty, malnutrition, political turmoil, and the absence of parents; factors that can be tied to historical and contemporary U.S. foreign policy and immigration reform.

2. Methods and theory

2.1. Grounded theory: notes from the field

Our fieldwork consisted of participant observation and informal interviewing between 2014 and 2017. In New York's Hudson Valley we attended meetings at a variety of social service agencies, went to workshops on unaccompanied minors, and participated in immigration rights events, conferences, protests, and did volunteer work. We spoke with service providers, lawyers, filmmakers, and activists. Throughout this fieldwork we engaged in grounded theory; a methodological strategy for collecting and analyzing qualitative data that allows researchers to construct theories as they emerge from the data. Essentially

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