



ChildFund®
Alliance

EARLY LEARNINGS OF PICMCA:

A PROMISING NEW APPROACH TO
PREVENTING THE CRISIS OF
CHILD MIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

April 2019



ChildFund Alliance members Christian Children's Fund of Canada, Educo, and ChildFund International presented on the dangers and root causes of voluntary migration of unaccompanied children and the early progress of their joint project PICMCA: Preventing Irregular Child Migration in Central America. This paper reflects their insights on the crisis and the early findings of their joint PICMCA program as presented during a forum with civil society, UN agencies and government representatives at the Scandinavia House in New York on December 4, 2018.



PICMCA PREVENTING IRREGULAR CHILD MIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN AT RISK



As 2018 came to a close, the tragic deaths only ten days apart of two young migrant children in U.S. custody brought heightened awareness to the dangers faced by those who leave their homes due to violence, persecution, conflict or economic deprivation. While both children had made the arduous journey from Guatemala with a parent, an alarming number of children arrive at foreign borders without relatives or familiar adult supervision.

Forced displacement, particularly of children, due to violence and deprivation is a growing global crisis. In fact, according to Marta Santos Pais, UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, while children under the age of 18 comprise less than one-third of the global population, they account for more than half the world's refugees.¹

As of 2016, one in every 80 children in the world lived in forced displacement, including an estimated 12 million children seeking asylum and 16 million displaced inside their home-countries.² Every seven minutes, an adolescent is killed by an act of violence or conflict, says Cornelius Williams, Associate Director of Child Protection at UNICEF's (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) Programme Division.³

While the sheer numbers are overwhelming, the trend line is even more daunting. In the last decade, the number of child refugees registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has more than doubled.⁴

Children Migrating Alone

Voluntary migration, particularly of unaccompanied children, presents a formidable crisis throughout the world. UNICEF estimates that the number of unaccompanied child migrants increased five-fold between 2010-2011 and 2015-2016.⁵

The problem is especially acute at the southern border of the United States. Roughly one-third of the world's unaccompanied migrant children seeking asylum are apprehended along the Mexico-U.S. border.⁶ Moreover, the irregular migration of unaccompanied children from Central America to the U.S. has severely worsened over the last several years. Between 2010 and 2016, for example, the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol estimates that the number of unaccompanied children arriving at the country's southwest border more than tripled.⁷

History of Central American Migration

The flow of migrants from Central America has historical roots in western colonialism, when European markets staked claim to much of the region's resources and impoverished many of the landless indigenous people, contributing to economic inequality.⁸ These conditions sparked leftist uprisings during Central America's post-colonial era and invited both open and clandestine intervention to counter the spread of communism and ensure the cheap export of commodities like fruit and sugar to the U.S.⁹

Since the 2007 global recession, however, the number of immigrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle nations of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, as well as Nicaragua, has grown precipitously, outpacing the rise in immigration from any other region.¹⁰ While the total population migrating to the

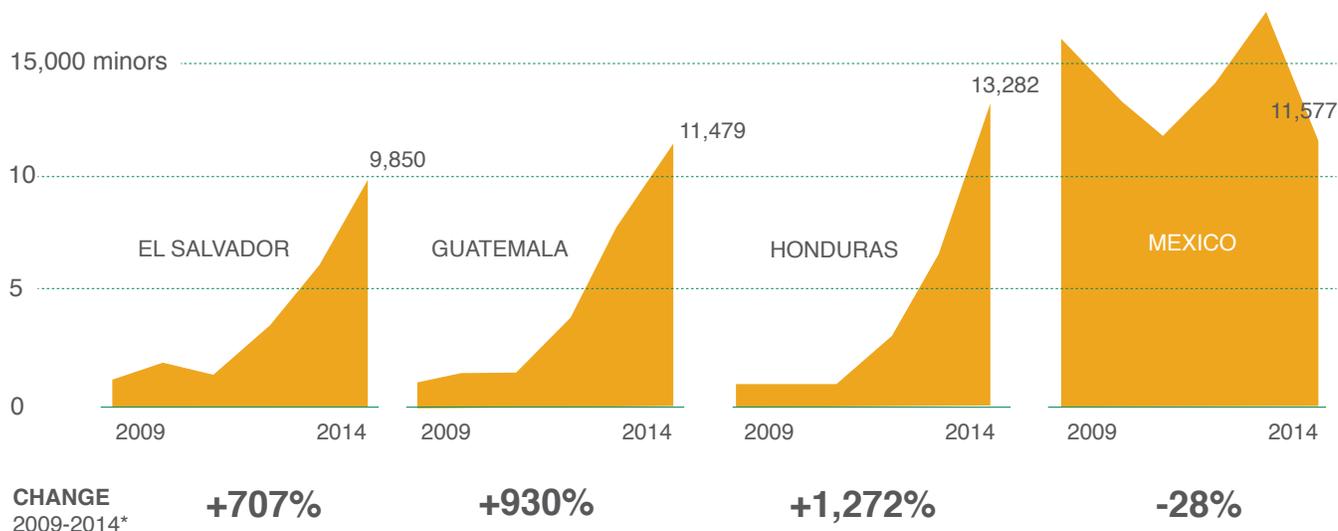
U.S. increased by 10% from 2007 to 2015, migration from the Northern Triangle nations grew by 25%, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.¹¹

In recent years, Northern Triangle nations have contributed a disproportionate and growing percentage of unaccompanied children arriving at U.S. borders. The number of unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras apprehended along the southwestern border, for example, grew more than seven-fold between 2009 and 2014.¹² By 2014, three out of every four unaccompanied children apprehended at the border were from a Northern Triangle nation.¹³

Researchers predict there could be a similar rise in unaccompanied migrant children from Nicaragua as anti-government uprisings give root to the same destabilizing conditions that historically have prompted Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran children to flee their homelands.¹⁵

The demographics of unaccompanied migrant children have shifted as well. Prior to 2011, the typical unaccompanied child arriving at the Mexico-U.S. border was in the mid-to-late teens and overwhelmingly male.¹⁶ Today, children under age 12 represent the fastest growing group of unaccompanied migrants and nearly half of them are female.¹⁷

Figure 1: Number of unaccompanied children apprehended at the U.S. southwest border, by country of origin (2009-2014) ¹⁴



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Minors are children ages 17 years or younger. Fiscal Years 2009-2013; Fiscal Year 2014 though May 31st. *Percent change for FY2014 includes apprehensions through May 31st.

The Dangers of Irregular Migration

Irregular migration subjects unaccompanied children to danger, abuse and exploitation along the entire 2,500-mile-journey (~4,000 km) to the U.S. border, where they endure additional trauma as they are apprehended, detained, and often deported.¹⁸

Perilous Conditions

The threats to Central American child migrants en route are well documented. By the time unaccompanied children from Central America reach the deserts of Coahuila, they have traveled more than 4,000 kilometers, some by dangerously hopping boxcars on slow-moving freight trains.¹⁹ Along the way, many are underfed, dehydrated and exhausted from dodging extortionists and would-be kidnappers.²⁰

But the real challenges are yet to come. Summer temperatures in the cactus-studded desert along the Arizona border regularly soar to 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 degrees Celsius).²¹ Water is scarce. Many smugglers do not take migrants to the border, but leave them along rarely-traveled desert roads (sometimes without any provisions), with instructions to turn themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents, should they come across them.²²

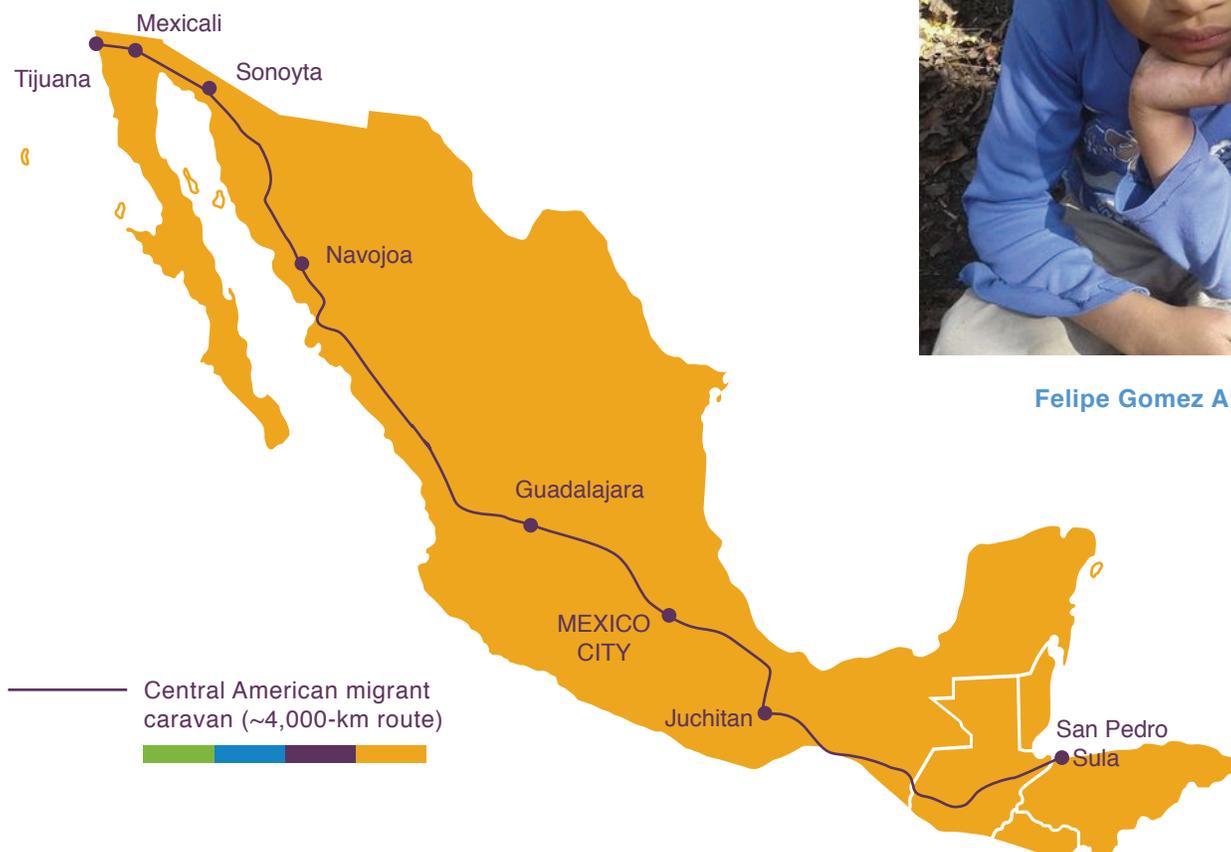
Between August and October 2018, more than 1,400 abandoned migrants from Central America were found wandering in the boiling desert along the U.S. southern border.²³ Border agents have raised concerns that the practice endangers children in particular. Such risks are all too real, as illustrated by the two recent, tragic deaths of Guatemalan children in the custody of Border Patrol. The first incident involved seven-year old Jakelin Caal Maquin who died of dehydration and exhaustion in early December 2018 after being apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol in a remote area of the New Mexico desert.²⁴ Ten days later, eight-year old Felipe Gomez Alonzo died on Christmas Eve after falling ill at a New Mexico Border Patrol station.²⁵



Jakelin Caal Maquin, age 7



Felipe Gomez Alonzo, age 8



Physical Abuse and Exploitation

Some smugglers offer unaccompanied children ‘pay as you go’ deals, asking little money up front, but eventually demanding sums they are unable to pay.²⁶ In a form of modern-day indentured servitude, the children are forced to work off their debt, often laboring in unsanitary or unsafe conditions.²⁷

Unaccompanied migrant children are also manipulated by criminal elements within caravans (or in the communities where caravans stop) to participate in illicit activities, often by acting as look-outs in areas where drugs or arms are trafficked, noted Marta Santos Pais.²⁸ Refusal invites a violent response, but participation risks capture, prosecution and a criminal record that could precipitate a lifetime of crime.

“Upon their return, children and youth are routinely subject to **social stigmatization**, making reintegration into the communities more difficult and contributing to even greater social exclusion.”

- Cornelius Williams
Associate Director and Global Chief of Child Protection for UNICEF’s Programme Division

Detention

Between 2016 and 2017, Mexico detained an estimated 60,000 Central American children, often for weeks or months.²⁹ For younger children in particular, detention can be severely traumatizing and may create health problems that persist for years. Psychologists have determined that extended institutionalization can increase the risk of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and attention-deficit disorder.³⁰ The U.S. National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners has warned that the traumatic life experiences children face in detention can cause a lifelong risk of cardiovascular disease and mental illness.³¹

Since the 1997 settlement of the Flores Supreme Court case, unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S. border are guaranteed an opportunity for an asylum hearing and are turned over to the care of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which is required to place the children “in the least restrictive setting that is in the interest of the child.”³² Flores limited the time migrant children can be kept in detention centers, after which they must be transferred to a facility licensed by a state welfare agency.³³

To house the growing number of children arriving from Central America, the Obama administration funded the construction of new detention centers and group shelters, but managed to place the majority in the homes of domestic sponsors (typically, extended family members who were already residing in the country).³⁴

The Trump administration announced new regulations that would permit the Department of Homeland Security to declare its own detention facilities in compliance with the Flores settlement and would ask the courts to terminate the settlement agreement altogether. This change could limit the ability of children—and the charitable groups that represent them—to petition the court if the children are subject to unfit or unsafe conditions in DHS detention facilities.³⁵

Deportation

Children on the move are often deported back to their home countries, despite their age. Of the 505,509 migrants returned to the Northern Triangle countries between January 2016 and September 2018, more than 13% were children or adolescents, according to ChildFund Alliance member Alicia Ávila de Parada, Country Director for Educo in El Salvador.³⁶ Upon their return, children and youth are routinely subject to social stigmatization, noted UNICEF’s Cornelius Williams, making reintegration into the communities more difficult and contributing to even greater social exclusion.³⁷

The Causes of Irregular Migration

Among U.S. policymakers, there is much debate over what has caused the recent spike in unaccompanied migrant children from Central America. Some blame lax border security laws and the Obama administration’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA permits undocumented children and youth to remain and work in the U.S. for two years before facing deportation, a policy some say signaled to Northern Triangle countries that migrant children would not be detained at the border.³⁸

Surveys of Central American immigrants and recently deported migrants, however, paint a more nuanced picture. Changes in U.S. border policy—which are often unknown to migrants until they arrive—likely did not spur recent waves of irregular migration. Indeed, most migrants appear to get their information about U.S. border policy from the human smugglers—known as ‘coyotes’—who shuttle them to the United States and who have an incentive to characterize U.S. immigration policy as unrealistically permissive.³⁹ Survey data suggests the cause for the spike in unaccompanied children migrating from Central America is more likely found by examining the circumstances in the Northern Triangle countries that are motivating so many unaccompanied children to leave.⁴⁰

“The traumatic life experiences children face in detention can cause a **lifelong risk of cardiovascular disease and mental illness**”

- U.S. National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners



Poverty

The Northern Triangle nations are among the poorest in Latin America. Roughly half the people in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras subsist on less than \$4 per day.⁴¹ In Honduras—the region’s largest economy—one in five live on \$1.90 per day.⁴² El Salvador does not fare much better, with nearly 30% of households living in poverty, including 42.5% of the country’s children and adolescents, according to Ávila.⁴³

Nicaragua is second only to Haiti as the most impoverished country in Latin America.⁴⁴ In 2014, some 68 percent of Nicaraguans subsisted on less than \$1 a day.⁴⁵ While Nicaragua has experienced record economic growth in the last four years, its GDP remains the lowest of all the nations of Central America, and the country’s instability following a violent crackdown against anti-government demonstrators has motivated many Nicaraguans to flee out of fear.⁴⁶

In 2016, nearly 73% of Mexico’s population—some 8.3 million indigenous people—lived in poverty, according to ConEVAL (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social).⁴⁷ The indigenous tend to be among Mexico’s most impoverished populations and are concentrated in the states of Chiapas, Mexico (state), Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz and Yucatan.⁴⁸ Not coincidentally, these central and southeastern states also account for a disproportionate number of irregular migrants to the U.S.⁴⁹

Lack of Opportunity

According to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey of Latinos in the U.S., Central American respondents (83% of whom were born in one of the Northern Triangle countries) were less likely than other Latino migrants (46% versus 58%) to cite economic opportunities as the primary reason for relocating to the U.S.⁵⁰ However, economics became a more primary motivating factor by 2016, when economic opportunity was cited as a primary reason for migrating, according to surveys of deported immigrants from the Northern Triangle countries.⁵¹ The more recent data also revealed that 91% of deported Guatemalans, 96% of deported Hondurans and 97% of deported Salvadorans cited job opportunities as a main reason for coming to the U.S.⁵²

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Figure 2: Honduras unemployment rates (2008-2017)⁵⁴

The shift in survey responses may be related to a recent spike in unemployment in the Northern Triangle nations. The unemployment rate in Honduras, for example, jumped more than 47% in 2014, and has remained nearly double previous rates every year since 2015.⁵³

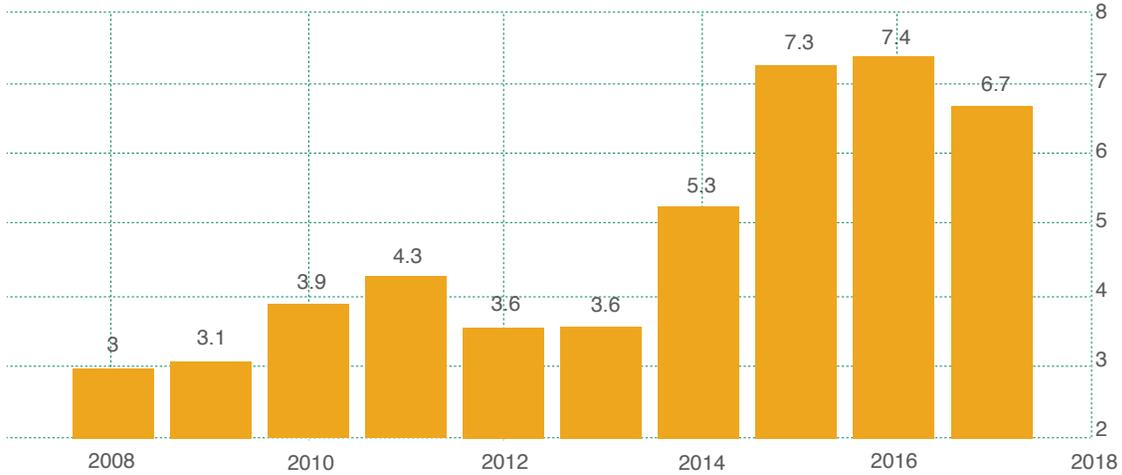
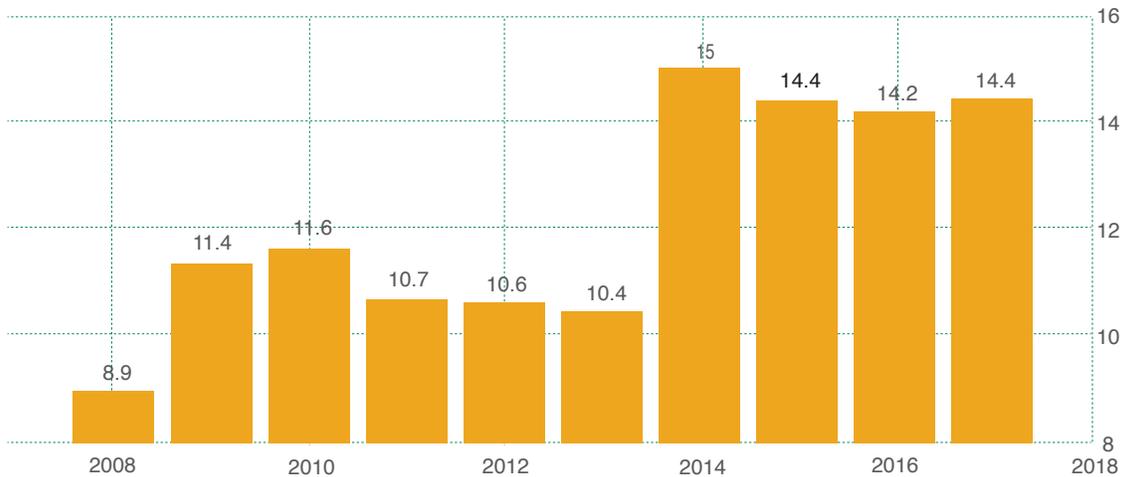


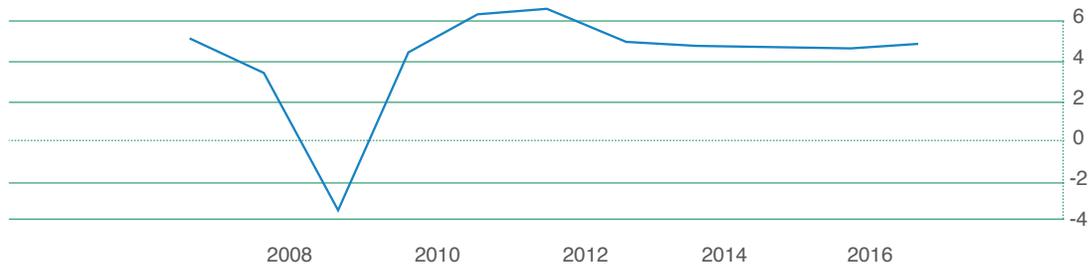
Figure 3: El Salvador youth unemployment rates (2008-2017)⁵⁷

While unemployment rates in El Salvador have been remarkably stable, youth unemployment rates have followed a pattern similar to the 2015 spike experienced by all workers in Honduras. El Salvador's youth unemployment rate grew nearly 50% in 2014 and has remained high every year since.⁵⁵ According to Ávila, more than 358,000 Salvadoran young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (roughly 27%) did not work or study in 2017.⁵⁶



In Nicaragua, recent student-led, anti-government uprisings have provoked a violent response and reversed a decade of steady economic growth, with predictable results on unemployment rates. According to the chief of Nicaragua's central bank, the country will have lost roughly 86,000 jobs in 2018.⁵⁸

Figure 4: Nicaragua GDP (2006-2018 forecast)⁵⁹



Over 24 months, the US-based Center for Global Development (CGD) analyzed employment data from nearly 900 Northern Triangle municipalities and confirmed that unaccompanied children were more likely to migrate from municipalities with the greatest level of persistently high unemployment.⁶⁰ In fact, the CGD data suggests that lack of gainful employment may motivate unaccompanied children to migrate as much as the level of municipal violence.⁶¹

Armed Conflict

The countries of the Northern Triangle have suffered decades of violent internal conflicts. El Salvador saw years of brutal fighting between the military-led government and leftist guerrillas.⁶² Guatemala experienced civil wars that killed as many as 200,000 civilians and spilled over into neighboring Honduras.

Nicaragua is facing a socio-political crisis that has left hundreds dead and thousands more affected by a ten-month long period of violence and instability that began in April 2018. The crisis was triggered by an initiative of the Government to reform the social security in the country, resulting in a call for the resignation of the president. The situation has deeply polarized the country, hampered its economy, and in July 2018 prompted the U.S. State Department to order all nonessential personnel to leave the country.⁶³

The crisis increased migration in Nicaragua because previously, people left only in search of employment. Now they are leaving because of lack of security too."

-Yahoska of Nicaragua
ChildFund Youth Interview

In 2017, Mexico surpassed Iraq and Afghanistan to become the world's deadliest combat zone (second only to Syria), according to the annual conflict survey compiled by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).⁶⁴ Although

Mexico gets far less press, by IISS estimates, more civilians have died from small arms fire between the Mexican government and the dozens of fragmented Mexican drug cartels than in the largest military theaters in the Middle East.⁶⁵

Peace may be obtained, but reconciliation among the various factions in Central America has been hard to achieve. Throughout the region, lack of proper reintegration programs has led many demobilized (but still armed) combatants to join criminal organizations to find the protection and support they lack once their political and revolutionary groups disband.⁶⁶ As criminal syndicates grow, so too does the rate of violent crime. One study found that armed conflict within a country during the previous five years was associated with a 51% increase in the log of homicides per 100,000 people.⁶⁷

Armed conflicts and the resulting increase in violent crime drive migrants northward to the relative stability of the U.S.

Gang Violence

As struggles within Central America subsided, scores of displaced, heavily-armed men remained and became the foundation for networks of organized crime syndicates.⁶⁸ Often, these native groups have been joined by gangs of expatriates who fled to the U.S., organized into gangs in U.S. cities, and then eventually were deported back to their home countries after conflict subsided.⁶⁹ These criminal networks gave rise to transnational gangs, drug cartels and clandestine security forces, which contribute to the alarming rates of violence Central Americans say is a primary factor driving irregular migration.⁷⁰

In a 2015 survey, 39% of migrants from the Northern Triangle cited threats to themselves or their family as the primary reason for leaving.⁷¹ More than 40% said a relative had been murdered in the previous two years and roughly one-third knew someone who had been kidnapped.⁷²

Philip Tanner, Senior Director for Policy & Government Relations at Christian Children's Fund of Canada (CCFC) reported that, "47 of the 50 highest homicide rates in the world are in the Americas," and noted how homicide rates are a bellwether for rates of violence in general.

In 2014, Honduras had the highest murder rate in the world, followed by El Salvador.⁷³ Guatemala was ranked ninth.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, the three municipalities contributing the largest number of unaccompanied migrant children showing up at the Mexico-U.S. border in 2014 included three of the most violent cities in Honduras, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS).



I have seen people get shot in their cars and on their motorcycles...”

- Child in Honduras
to a World Vision field operator

Between January 2015 and June 2018, El Salvador saw 17,709 homicides, nearly 4,000 (23%) of which were young men between the ages of 15 and 24, according to Ávila.⁷⁵ The country’s young women do not fare any better. Ávila noted that 92.4% of the more than 4,500 rapes, statutory rapes, harassments and sexual assaults reported to El Salvador’s Attorney General were filed by girls or adolescent women.⁷⁶

A ground-breaking study by the CGD determined that gang violence is a primary decision factor driving irregular migration, particularly from the Northern Triangle countries.⁷⁷

Researchers found a direct correlation between the intensity of regional violence and the number of unaccompanied migrant children: for every single increase in the annual homicide rate in a Northern Triangle nation, the U.S. apprehended an additional 3.7 unaccompanied children from the region at the border.⁷⁸



[Children and youth migrate] because of violence that people experience inside their country, the discrimination, the lack of opportunities, the economy and above all because they want a better future.”

- Laura from Mexico
ChildFund Youth Interview

Remarkably, the CGD data suggests that the homicide rate alone does not increase irregular migration of unaccompanied children from the poorest municipalities, presumably because parents in these poverty-stricken communities cannot afford to pay the smugglers to channel their children from Central America to the U.S. border.⁷⁹

While estimating future rates of migration is always problematic, unless comprehensive action is taken soon, violence, insecurity and political turmoil are projected to drive even more irregular migration of unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle in the foreseeable future.⁸⁰



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INTERNATIONAL LAW AND CHILD MIGRATION

The international community has taken significant steps since 2014 to address the problem of irregular migration and its impact particularly on migrant children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is approaching its 30th anniversary. The CRC provides a solid foundation for the international response to the child migration crisis by affirming that children have certain rights that State Parties to the Convention are obligated to protect, including the right to be free from all forms of violence, the right to be protected from all forms of exploitation and the right to remain with (or be returned to) their parents, if it is in the best interest of the child.⁸¹

In 2015, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the new global sustainable development agenda (Agenda 2030), which includes the first specific target to end all forms of violence against children and declares that the right of children to be free from violence is an international development priority.⁸²

At the end of last year (2018), the UN also adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, providing a groundwork for states and international agencies to coordinate efforts to protect the nearly 258 million individuals who migrate annually.⁸³ While the compact specifically addresses regular migration pathways, it affirms the human rights of all migrants regardless of status and includes two guiding principles that call for 'child-sensitive' migration policies.⁸⁴



The rights and obligations these global agreements afford all migrant children are echoed in the actions by some international bodies to address the child migration crisis in Central America specifically. In 2014, for example, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued an advisory opinion establishing the principle of non-deprivation of liberty for irregular child migrants, which declares that detention should be the last resort for unaccompanied children awaiting immigration proceedings.⁸⁵

As one of the premier international organizations devoted to helping children, UNICEF has also recognized the importance of international law in securing the rights of all children, including migrants. UNICEF recognizes the dangers and risks that irregular migration entails for children, and has called for six actions to protect all refugee and migrant children. UNICEF advocates that states guarantee the rights of migrant and refugee children at all times and in all places by intensifying efforts to address root causes, keeping families together, ending child immigration detention and promoting alternative care arrangements to ensure access to education, health, birth registration, social protection and other services, while addressing xenophobia and promoting non-discrimination in policy and practice.⁸⁶



ADDITIONAL RISK: POLICY RESPONSE OF GOVERNMENT

The current approaches to irregular migration focus on minimizing the harms to children in transit and promoting a less traumatic process for those seeking asylum once they have reached the border. In the Central American countries of greatest concern, some governments are beginning to make investments in short-term actions to deter irregular migration, but few are effectively addressing its root causes or implementing preventative measures for children at risk.⁸⁷ In El Salvador, for example, the government has adopted five public policy instruments designed to reduce irregular migration. But, according to Ávila, the current policies suffer from, a “disarticulation of their actions and are reduced in scope due to limited resources available to the State.”⁸⁸

U.S. policies toward the irregular migration of unaccompanied children suffer from a focus on the symptoms—rather than the causes—of irregular migration, according to Erin Kennedy, Director of Advocacy and Partnerships for ChildFund International.

“The heightened discourse, new policies proposed by the administration, threats to cut off aid to the Northern Triangle and the global attention to this issue are not addressing the underlying causes of migration, nor the needs of children,” she said. Kennedy noted how these sentiments have only been heightened with the deployment of thousands of armed troops along the Mexico-U.S. border and the use of tear gas on migrants.

Kennedy also noted three critical policy proposals that create significant and worrisome policy changes to the immigration system and will harm the well-being of children:⁸⁹

- **Flores Settlement Agreement:** The administration’s effort to overturn the Flores Settlement Agreement would allow indefinite detention of children and strip away decades-old critical child protection requirements and oversight in the facilities where children are being held.
- **Public Charge Rule:** Proposed changes to the public charge rule would create penalties for immigrants who access public benefits such as food stamps or housing assistance, which they are legally entitled to receive. If the administration’s proposed changes take effect, parents would be required to choose between feeding, clothing and housing the most vulnerable immigrants—children—or putting their efforts to obtain legal immigration status at risk.
- **Asylum:** Significant proposed changes to the asylum process would prevent victims of gang and domestic violence from seeking asylum. The restrictions also include limiting asylum claims to specific ports of entry; metering the number of asylum seekers, which will severely cut the number of claims considered; and, appealing to the Mexican government to keep asylum seekers in Mexico while they await immigration proceedings.



To counter the harmful proposed policy changes and ensure stakeholders are informed, ChildFund International participated in advocacy efforts with the federal rule-making process and educated members of Congress on symptoms that prompt people to flee their home countries.

In Washington, DC, ChildFund International has convened a working group comprising domestic and international child-focused partners, legal and policy experts, and direct service providers. The goal is to help participants understand the changing situations on family separation, reunification, detention and immigration—all of which add to the trauma migrant children experience. “By convening other INGO groups and analyzing and responding to proposed policy changes, we are able to educate and influence U.S. policy-makers about detrimental changes and better support our programmatic approach, which ultimately cultivates better outcomes for children,” said Kennedy.

According to Kennedy, ChildFund’s work in the impoverished Rio Grande Valley in Texas, where many families pass after crossing the border, focuses on strengthening programs to help children process heightened feelings of anxiety and fear. Working with a local respite center and churches, they provide healthcare items, books and toys and “safe spaces” for 3,000 children across eight elementary schools. In addition, ChildFund International is working to ensure child protection risks and concerns are central to any proposed changes to the U.S. immigration system.

PICMCA: A NEW PREVENTIVE APPROACH

Preventing Irregular Child Migration in Central America (PICMCA)

In the spring of 2017, ChildFund Alliance members Christian Children's Fund of Canada (CCFC), Educo (Spain), and ChildFund International (USA), jointly launched Preventing Irregular Child Migration in Central America (PICMCA). The \$15.2 million (CAD), four-year effort, is addressing the irregular migration of unaccompanied children, specifically from the three Northern Triangle nations—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—as well as Nicaragua and Mexico. The Alliance members chose to focus on these countries because they all are vulnerable to the root causes of irregular migration and have populations of children and youth who are at high risk of migrating.

“Children witness horrific scenes: the killing of their parents, the rape of their sisters, the forced disappearance of their friends... street crime and community violence... systematic extortion and harassment by gang members.”

- Marta Santos Pais
UN Special Representative of the
Secretary-General on Violence against Children

With \$12.6 million (CAD) from the Canadian government's foreign relations department, project leaders coordinated with Mexico's National System for the Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents, the Mexican National Council for Children and Adolescents (CONNA) and the Salvadoran Institute for Integral Development of Childhood and Adolescence (ISNA). The groups are exploring the devastating effects of irregular migration, helping identify its root causes and ways to keep children safe through preventive measures such as skills training, safe spaces and changes to government policies and programs.

PICMCA has targeted 129 communities in the most dangerous areas of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua and is partnering not only with national and provincial governments, but also with regional administrators and nonprofit networks to develop sustainable, positive change in the lives of at-risk children. PICMCA is expected to benefit almost a quarter of a million individuals—including 130,000 children and youth—when the project is completed in early 2021.

PICMCA identified several factors, which interact in complex ways at the municipal and regional level to drive children and youth toward irregular migration:

Crime and Violence

Violence in many Central American countries is pervasive, according to Santos Pais.⁹⁰ “Children witness horrific scenes: the killing of their parents, the rape of their sisters, the forced disappearance of their friends. They are exposed to street crime and community violence, to systematic extortion, and to harassment by gang members within their schools and in their neighborhoods,” she noted. “Thousands have left school to get away from gang threats, harassment and the risk of forced recruitment.”

A recent global survey conducted by UNICEF and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children captured the views of children and young people.⁹¹ Preliminary findings from Latin American respondents show that more than 35% believe violence is the main cause of children fleeing their country, half say violence, abuse and exploitation are the hardest challenges they face, and 24% list sexual violence as their top concern.⁹²

Social Exclusion

The inability of governments to provide effective protection from crime and violence, along with a general alienation from the decision-making processes of public institutions, has generated disaffection among children and youth, particularly in the poorest and most dangerous Central American neighborhoods.⁹³

PICMCA has targeted 129 communities in the most dangerous areas of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.

Limited Employment and Educational Opportunities

The Northern Triangle countries, along with Nicaragua, experience some of the highest school drop-out rates in Central America, as at-risk children either quit voluntarily or are pressured to leave school to support their families.⁹⁴ Youth who drop out early ultimately limit their employability and opportunities for higher education.⁹⁵

Low student retention rates in the Northern Triangle countries also can create a disconnection between drop-outs and their peers who stay in school, contributing to social exclusion and motivating some youth to organize into criminal elements to regain a sense of belonging.⁹⁶

Lack of Awareness of the Dangers of Irregular Migration

A UNICEF survey revealed that children considering migration are not informed of the difficulties they will face on their journey and are ill-informed of their opportunities for integration when they arrive at the U.S. border.⁹⁷



Children are exposed to a lot of dangers because they do not know which types of people they will encounter. They do not know what dangerous circumstances they can face."

- Laura from Mexico
ChildFund Youth Interview

Sexual Assault and Gender Stereotypes

Women and girls in the Northern Triangle face particular perils. Many are forcibly recruited into gangs to become the girlfriends (*novillas de pandillas*) of prominent members.⁹⁸ Social norms and archaic legal precedents also allow females in the Northern Triangle countries to suffer sexual assault, domestic abuse or other gender-based crimes without legal recourse, which signals to would-be perpetrators that they can commit these assaults and escape punishment.

For Central American girls fleeing domestic violence, moreover, deportation can mean returning to face retribution and a home life worse than if they never had left at all.⁹⁸

In many communities where PICMCA operates, children and youth have observed and internalized gender stereotypes that can encourage irregular migration. According to Angelica Trejo Leon, Project Lead at ChildFund Mexico, "migration is promoted by cultural factors such as the migratory history of the locality in which migrating becomes a 'traditional practice' and therefore a personal aspiration to be recognized in the community."⁹⁹

For some young women and girls, according to Trejo Leon, the motivation to migrate is saturated with the gendered restrictions of their communities and often keep females in their homes while restricting their access to the decision-making spaces within the community.

With the guidance of at-risk children themselves, and in consultation with national and municipal governments, PICMCA developed several strategies designed to help communities address these root causes of irregular migration.

Desired Outcomes

Typically, efforts to address the irregular migration of unaccompanied children from Central America entail reforming U.S. immigration rules or emphasizing the costs and dangers of irregular migration. PICMCA takes a different approach by focusing on improving the lives of at-risk children and removing many of the factors motivating them to leave their homes.

Strengthening Child Protection Services

The protection services available to at-risk children from the Northern Triangle region vary by country. El Salvador, for example, has adopted 15 national and 18 international laws related to the protection of children and adolescents, including the five public policy instruments noted by Ávila.¹⁰⁰ However, even where strong child protection laws are on the books, they are often paper tigers, never enforced at the local level and rarely providing the kind of social safety net that would deter frightened children from pursuing irregular migration.¹⁰¹

In some cases, state-provided child protection services are available in the more affluent inner-city neighborhoods, but are underfunded in rural and less-affluent areas.¹⁰² Where government child protection services are available, at-risk children are often unaware of their rights or have no idea how to exercise them. When World Vision asked children in Honduras, for example, to identify the people and institutions in their communities that constitute their "umbrella of care," none could name a single law or protection policy they could invoke.¹⁰³

In other cases, state child protection services exist, but may lack coordination or have such limited capacity they are incapable of providing protection at the local level.¹⁰⁴ In Guatemala, for example, the failure of state-provided protection services has led to universal reliance on non-governmental organizations and informal actors.¹⁰⁵

Since its launch, PICMCA has implemented more than **30 new, community-based violence prevention programs**, more than double the number initially planned.

With baseline findings showing that awareness of these services is generally low, PICMCA worked to improve the capacity of child protection services by strengthening referral systems to better link schools and communities with public and nonprofit service programs designed to provide safe spaces, promote community cohesion and intervene where necessary. The project also seeks to increase the number of children, youth and caregivers who receive direct, participatory training in violence prevention and to train hundreds of community members to support formal and informal referral systems.

As part of PICMCA's needs assessment, a Women's Safety Audit and stakeholder consultations helped identify and map the various actors involved in child protection services, their current state of development, and their capacity and areas that need further work. PICMCA's goal is to ensure there is an effective process in place for reporting and accessing information and resources among responsible stakeholders in schools and in government.

PICMCA Success:

Throughout the Northern Triangle, early indicators show that PICMCA is making advances in increasing the capacity of governments and other actors to ensure that existing child protection services can function at the local level to prevent violence, create safe spaces for children and encourage young people to stay in school.

Since its launch, PICMCA has implemented more than 30 new, community-based violence prevention programs, more than double the number initially planned.



Through trainings we are being shown that, if somebody is yelling at me or trying to look down on me I should ignore it and be the bigger person.”

- Alba in El Salvador
ChildFund Youth Interview

The project has trained more than 1,644 national and municipal decision-makers, community leaders and NGO personnel in child protection and violence prevention, surpassing more than eight-fold the expected participation levels at this point in the project. Moreover, in trainings for gender-responsive child protection and violence prevention, participation in PICMCA programs has already more than tripled the number anticipated.

Mid-way through the project, PICMCA is also achieving strong results in coordinating with existing child protection systems, with 75% of the targeted social service and child protection institutions already engaged.

Challenges remain, however, like ensuring that PICMCA's child protection and violence prevention efforts are more widely distributed among the targeted countries, particularly in the most vulnerable municipalities in El Salvador and Honduras.

Increasing Employment

An important goal for PICMCA is increasing the ability of youth to find long-term, gainful employment. The project pursues this goal by helping participants learn marketable proficiencies (particularly interpersonal soft skills) while they learn important life skills and by collaborating with private sector employers and encouraging youth entrepreneurship. CCFC's Philip Tanner noted that the project uniquely “brings together employability and prevention by providing youth with options other than migration.”

PICMCA Success:

PICMCA is providing training on demand-driven and vocational technical skills with an environmental approach and is establishing alternative education programs to provide additional options for children and youth who would otherwise drop out. The program has made large investments in continuing education, promoting entrepreneurship, seed funding for small businesses and mentorship programs that partner with existing enterprises.

PICMCA also helps identify sustainable economic activities at the municipal and provincial levels and provides specialized skills training and scholarships that encourage at-risk children and youth to pursue these growth opportunities rather than turn to crime as a source of income.

The project collaborates with the National Autonomous University of Mexico and FONABEC, which helps Mexican youth and adults with limited economic resources achieve their educational goals. PICMCA delivers alternative education programs (e.g., online or computer-based training or other models) for youth who are at risk of dropping out of school, or for youth who have already dropped out. In Mexico, program participants have been working on a proposal to install online high school training centers to provide pre-university training to at-risk youth.

By helping youth develop essential life skills in addition to job training, PICMCA ultimately helps build confidence and generates hope among program participants that they can transform their communities and can attain a brighter future for themselves by staying rather than fleeing.

“PICMCA uniquely brings together employability and prevention by providing youth with options other than migration.”

- Philip Tanner
Sr. Director Policy & Government Relations
Christian Children's Fund of Canada

Promoting Youth Empowerment

A unique aspect of PICMCA is the program's direct involvement of children and youth—including former child migrants—in the development of project initiatives. Migrant children who returned to their home countries say they would have benefited immensely from peer-to-peer communication, not only to learn the realities of irregular migration, but to trust the accuracy of the information they receive.¹⁰⁶ For example in Honduras, a Youth Advisory Committee coordinated plans for a youth conference with support from project staff, as required. This approach was critical to encouraging youth to design an agenda and identify key issues and themes for the conference. The 51 participants engaged in youth-led sessions on immigration and gender equality, in addition to presentations on entrepreneurship, parliamentary systems in Latin America, and municipal authorities.

An Annual Work plan meeting included 14 youth from the five target countries that are part of PICMCA. Each of the youth presented their recommendations and ideas to the project teams, a process that allowed staff to benefit from direct input from youth who are leading activities in the field. This process is of great importance to sustaining the project's achievements.

PICMCA Success:

Christian Children's Fund of Canada (CCFC) has had strong success with youth-oriented programs in the target countries and has transferred those efforts to PICMCA, with similar success.



Our parents often think we are going to have a better future elsewhere. But they do not give us a chance to develop our own opportunities in our own country and own communities."

- Alba from El Salvador
ChildFund Youth Interview

"PICMCA not only focuses on empowering young people, but also their families, so that they can make a social transformation from home, based on new models of upbringing."

- Alicia Ávila de Parada,
Country Director for Educo in El Salvador

PICMCA uses a similar "youth-teaching-youth" model to educate and encourage children to become leaders in their communities. The program then provides opportunities for youth leaders to directly influence decision-makers about the issues impacting their lives.

According to Ávila, "PICMCA not only focuses on empowering young people, but also their families, so that they can make a social transformation from home, based on new models of upbringing, positive discipline and a focus on rights that allows equal relationships."¹⁰⁷

By challenging children and youth to help transform their communities into places where they want to stay, PICMCA's approach fosters conditions on the ground that discourage children and youth from leaving.

Initial findings indicate that direct intervention by peer groups can have a remarkable impact on at-risk children and youth, creating opportunities that bring hope and possibility back to their lives and deter them from leaving home.

PICMCA also follows Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, which believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach to eradicating poverty and building a more peaceful, inclusive and prosperous world. PICMCA works to ensure that child protection services are gender-responsive and that women and girls have equal access to education and employment opportunities, equal participation, equal representation and equal decision-making power in program implementation.



I think that it is very important to keep on raising awareness, starting with the family, the home, not accepting the violent behavior. Because if children grow up surrounded by violence, they will think violence is acceptable in certain circumstances."

- Gladys from El Salvador
ChildFund Youth Interview

Conclusion: The Promise of Prevention

The countries of the Northern Triangle are privileged to have such large numbers of children and youth of productive age. Yet, according to Ávila, the governments of the Northern Triangle countries, as well as Nicaragua and Mexico, are not effectively using this “demographic bonus” for social and economic development.¹⁰⁸

Initial performance indicators show that PICMCA is an **effective framework** for translating discussions into concrete actions that **improve the lives of children at risk of migrating.**

“Irregular migration represents a significant loss of human capital because young people from our countries are contributing to boosting the economy of other nations,” Ávila noted.

The complex migratory process that afflicts El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua is multifaceted and demands a prolonged discussion by all stakeholders in the region, she noted.

“No matter how much the project surpasses its goals,” Ávila said, “PICMCA alone cannot transform the Central American countries contributing to the current irregular migration crisis. States must promote long-term social policies that result in permanent, comprehensive protection programs aimed at inclusion and equality.”



“We are facing an unrecognized humanitarian crisis, which is unfolding on the doorstep of the United States and Mexico,” said Ávila. “It requires coordinated attention and effective actions converged from governments and their institutions, as well as from civil society.”

Beyond the programmatic solutions, policy engagement in the U.S. is critical, as it further strengthens the understanding of the problem and solutions that public dialogue, advocacy and action can present. Ensuring that policymakers and other stakeholders are informed of pressing issues and changing situations involving children helps to better support the programmatic approach and leverage influence, which ultimately impacts policy decisions.

When civil society first started to address the crisis of the irregular migration of children, “we thought we did not have the solutions,” noted Williams. “But we have the solutions. We know what it takes to solve this problem.”¹⁰⁹

Initial performance indicators show that PICMCA is proving an effective mechanism for engaging governments, civil society and at-risk communities in a discussion over the root causes of irregular migration. By providing an effective framework for translating these discussions into concrete actions, however, PICMCA directly improves the lives of children at risk of migrating. By including children and youth in the design of programs, moreover, PICMCA is empowering them to take ownership over the improvement of their communities.

PICMCA’s unique focus on the root causes of irregular migration, as articulated by municipal and regional stakeholders themselves, manifests an organic, localized approach to addressing those causes. As the strong initial participation levels indicate, PICMCA is involving all members of a municipality in the difficult work of building community cohesion—from coaching parents on how to deescalate conflict, to training local leaders to support child protection referral systems, and teaching youth the kinds of soft skills demanded by regional employers.

PICMCA’s community rebuilding projects are part of a broader effort by ChildFund Alliance members and their partners to transform the continuum of violence and deprivation that shapes the lives of so many children and youth into a continuum of protection that secures their fundamental rights, noted Santos Pais.¹¹⁰

“Children must always be placed above politics and in all circumstances, the best interests of the child must be paramount,” she said.

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