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**Guatemalan Unaccompanied Children Migration: A Case Study of
Unaccompanied Children in Guatemala**

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**Guatemalan Unaccompanied Children Migration: A Case Study of
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by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the participants in this project. My research assistant and research consultant were instrumental in providing me support, their time, and friendship. I also dedicate this thesis to my wife, Leticia Mendoza, my daughters, Luiza Gonzalez-Mendoza and Carolina Gonzalez-Mendoza and my supporting network at UT. Special thanks to Nestor Rodriguez, Martha Menchaca, Natasha Saldana, and all the staff at MALS and CMAS for their assistance in finalizing this project. *Sin su ayuda nada de esto seria posible.*

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Abstract

Guatemalan Unaccompanied Children Migration: A Case Study of Unaccompanied Children in Guatemala

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This thesis examines the motives and conditions of migration of Guatemalan unaccompanied children through a case study. Unaccompanied children have been arriving in large numbers than in the past. According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in fiscal year 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol apprehended more than 68,000 unaccompanied children (DHS Statistical Yearbook 2014), and approximately 69,000 migrants traveling together as families. Based on ethnographic, semi-structure interviews with families, NGOs, lawyers, and community members I argue that new migration communities are emerging as a result of systemic legal violence. There is little consensus among analysts regarding why the number of Central American minors abandoning their homes in hope of entering the United States has increased so significantly. Nevertheless, structural conditions of high levels of poverty, unemployment, violence, and instability in the region has contributed to the influx of child migration.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the summer of 2014, the arrival of record numbers of Central American children and families traveling from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (the northern triangle countries of Central America) most unaccompanied children arrived at the Texas border with Mexico, and the southwestern border of the United States became the subject of major media coverage and intense political debate. In fiscal year 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol apprehended more than 68,000 unaccompanied children and approximately 69,000 migrants traveling together as families (DHS Southwestern Border Unaccompanied Alien Apprehensions FY2014). The Obama Administration called the increased migration of children across the U.S.-Mexico border an “urgent humanitarian situation” and took aggressive action to “stem the tide” of unaccompanied children minors traveling to the United States.¹

The factors causing child migration out of Central America are complex. Yet there is a broad consensus that increased levels of violence, gender-based violence, and deepening poverty cause many children to leave. The migration of Guatemalan children and minors is determined by a combination of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, family and climactic events.

Two studies released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

¹ The United States Department of Homeland Security opened emergency shelters in San Antonio, Texas, Oklahoma and Mexico implemented it’s Southern Border Enforcement Plan to stem the migration of unaccompanied children.(Associated Press 2015)

in 2014 found that approximately half of the children fleeing northern triangle countries showed signs of a need for international protection. Some scholars, religious organizations and NGOs have advocated for a humanitarian response to the massive migration of children while Border Patrol, some lawmakers, and security first advocates have pushed for more stringent enforcement of the border. When the Central American migration of children began in 2014, this vulnerable population brought to national attention the problem of unaccompanied child migrants this issue had been hidden from public scrutiny and absent from immigration debates. Suddenly the crisis became breaking news, when shocking pictures of children in detention centers began circulating in the media. However, despite these media reports, the topic of child immigration remains a highly polarized and divisive issue that on one hand creates support for humanitarian concerns but on the other hand also adds to the national security discourse in support of a strict immigration policy.

My purpose in this thesis is to provide a case study based on research in Guatemala giving a firsthand account about the surge of unaccompanied children and explaining how structural conditions in Guatemala (i.e. poverty, violence, unemployment, corruption), alongside weak political, judicial, and security institutions, have caused large number of Guatemalans to migrate.

Poverty in Guatemala is endemic where half of the population lives in destitute conditions. Violence is also widespread throughout the country and stimulates out-migration due to the people's sense of insecurity and weak law enforcement. Guatemala

has been characterized by scholars (e.g., Jonas and Rodriguez 2014) as a weak-state that is unable to develop sufficient jobs for the nation and has been plagued by serious forms of political corruption within the state bureaucracy which only benefits those in position of power and has created conditions that has led to a large-scale migration. The country's political leadership faces enormous and overlapping political challenges. Organized crime- increasingly tied to drug trafficking- has thoroughly penetrated the country, leading to the destabilization of Guatemala. The Guatemala Public Ministry (MP), working with the UN-sponsored International Commission against Impunity (CICIG), uncovered a widespread clandestine drug ring, labeled, La Linea, involving the secretary of the Vice-President (Washington Office on Latin American Affairs Report on the International Commission Against Impunity 2015). CICIG reported that former President and Vice-President are in jail on charges of being the leaders of this clandestine network. The Guatemalan Press, *Prensa Libre* is now alleging that widespread corruption exists within the presidency according to additional reporting from *The Associated Press*². (Press, 2015). The current president, is accused of benefiting from the corruption according to newspaper reports.

For this study I conducted a case study based on interviews, observations, and discussions with families, community leaders, NGO representatives, and religious leaders who have first-hand experience with and knowledge of the recent child migration. The

² The Associated Press, "Guatemalan Lawmakers Life President's Impunity. Accessed September 1,2015. Details the complex fraud scheme between the Guatemalan tax collection agency and government officials.

purpose of my study was to understand the societal structural conditions that have led to the emigration of unaccompanied children and over as in the summer of 2014 to the present. Some of my major findings indicate that outcomes result from poverty, government neglect of population and the uncontrolled growth of violence. In my study I protected the identity of my research subjects by creating pseudo-names of those interviewed.

Background

Guatemala, a country in Central America part of the northern triangle of the region (along with Honduras and El Salvador), with a population of approximately 15.8 millionⁱ according to the National Institute of Statistics of Guatemala, is home to multicultural, linguistic communities of Maya, Garifuna, and Ladinos. According to the Institute of Statistics, 39.8 percent of the population is indigenous and 60 percent are mestizo also known as ladino and "non-indigenous" population of Guatemala (Rodriguez and Jonas 2015). With approximately 23 indigenous languages, Guatemala is a multi-cultural and ethnically diverse country with large rural and urban populations with different religious beliefs, and lifestyles.



Figure 1: Map of North America

Source: University of Texas Library

Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America with a GDP of (3,673.1) per capita, roughly one- half of the average for Latin America and the Caribbean (World Bank 2015). The agricultural sector accounts for 13.7% of GDP and 32% of the labor force; key agricultural exports include sugar, coffee, bananas, and vegetables. The 1996 peace accords, which ended 36 years of civil war, removed a major obstacle to foreign investment, and since then Guatemala has pursued important reforms and macroeconomic stabilization. The Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) entered into force in July 2006, spurring increased investment and diversification of exports, with the largest increases in ethanol and non-traditional

agricultural exports. While CAFTA-DR has helped improve the investment climate, concerns over security, the lack of skilled workers, and poor infrastructure continue to hamper foreign direct investment. The distribution of income remains highly unequal with the richest 20% of the population accounting for more than 51% of Guatemala's overall consumption.

More than half of the Guatemalan population is below the national poverty line, and 13% of the population lives in extreme poverty (World Bank 2015). Poverty among indigenous groups, which make up more than 40% of the population, averages 73%, with 22% of the indigenous population living in extreme poverty (National Institute of Statistics Guatemala 2015). Nearly one-half of Guatemala's children under age five are chronically malnourished, which is one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world. Personal remittances received are 9.9 percent of GDP of Guatemala is the top remittance recipient in Central America as a result of Guatemala's large expatriate community in the United States (World Bank 2015). These inflows are a primary source of foreign income, equivalent to one-half of the country's exports or one-tenth of its GDP. In November 2014, along with his counterparts from El Salvador and Honduras, President Perez Molina announced the "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle." This plan sought to address the challenges facing the three Northern Triangle countries, including steps the governments will take to stimulate economic growth, increase transparency and fiscal responsibility, reduce violence, modernize the justice system, improve infrastructure, and promote educational opportunities over the next several years. For the purposes of my thesis, I will concentrate on the western highlands also

known as "los altos" due to high elevation of the Sierra Madre that runs from Chiapas, Mexico, to the western highlands of Guatemala. With its unique history being independent from the rest of Guatemala for a small period of time between 1838-1840, the population of the western highlands is approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. There exist strong transnational communities in the western highlands of Guatemala where over 60 percent of the population has at least one family member in the United States (Rodriguez and Hagan 2000: 40). High levels of poverty, very unequal income distribution, high unemployment, and high infant mortality rates create ripe conditions for emigration.

Trade agreements with regional partners such as the Dominican Republic and Central American (DR-CAFTA) agreement have created some economic opportunities but not enough for all Guatemalans. Low levels of education, illiteracy, lack of infrastructure (such as quality transportation, roads, and basic services), underdevelopment of capital and high distribution of wealth and income skewed in favor of the wealthiest 10 percent who receive one half of all income--all contribute to the marginal conditions that Guatemalans face every day are all incentives that promote migration.

Theories of Migration

Why do people migrate from their country of origin to a new destination? There is no comprehensive theory of migration. There exist multiple macro-and micro economic theories of migration along with various migration theories ranging from: neoclassical theory, new economics of migration theory, cumulative migration theory, social network

theory, transnational, world-systems, and autonomous migration theory (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Each migration theory has its limitations and uses various unit of analysis to understand the migration of people. There also exists various push-pull factors that motivate migrants to migrate however, it does not explain rationally why some migrants choose to stay in spite of the cost-benefit analysis that promotes migration. In the migration of children multiple migration theories may explain the migration flow, however, I want to focus my analysis on the cumulative causation theory.

The theory of cumulative causation of migration posits that as migratory experience grows within a sending community, the likelihood that other community members will initiate a migratory trip increases (Fussel 2010). Douglas Massey theorizes on the social structure of migration bases on the Mexico-U.S. migration, mainly from rural areas (Massey 1990; Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994; Massey and Zenteno 1999; Stark and Taylor 1989). However, there are limits based on the rural and urban context of cumulative migration theory due to the urbanization of migrant sending countries. The theory of cumulative causation of migration was developed by Myrdal (1957) and extended by Massey and his colleagues (Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1994; and Massey and Zenteno 1999) to understand the perpetuation of Mexico-U.S. migration. The primary mechanism underlying cumulative causation is the accumulation of social capital, by which members of a community gain migration-related knowledge and resources through family members and friends who have already traveled to the United States (Fussel and Massey 2004).

However, in Guatemala and Central America, other societal concerns such as insecurity and ineffective governance in rural and urban settings is not always indicative of a strong emigration to the United States. For example, there is a long history of migration from the Western Highlands of Guatemala since the late 1970s, however, recently growing numbers of Guatemalans are not only coming from the highlands of Guatemala but a new migration stream has been established in other part of Guatemala that had never migrated in large numbers in the past in spite of social strife.

A Look Ahead

The following chapters demonstrate the complexity of the migration of children. Chapter 2 is a literature review of previous research conducted on child migration. Chapter 3 analyzes the research methods and presents the research questions along with the scope of the research objectives. Chapter 4 presents the findings and analysis of unaccompanied children based on the fieldwork conducted in Guatemala. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, limitations of the case study and presents future directions of research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review concerning unaccompanied children coming to the United States has been extensive focusing on: government Congressional Research Service reports, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees publication, newspaper reports and not limited to books or working papers that reveal the complexities, challenges, legal, and social implications in the United States. In this section, I will highlight the most often cited published works on unaccompanied children. This literature review is not an exhaustive list of all published sources, but it is a selection of the most notable literature to date.

I begin my literature review with the earliest publication from 1990 Nestor Rodriguez and Ximena Urritia-Rojas, a monograph of “Undocumented and Unaccompanied: A Mental- Health Study of Unaccompanied, Immigrant Children from Central America”. The authors highlight the continued political and economic turmoil in Central America civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador. The focus on the study is in the mental health of children suffering from political violence, which includes: kidnapping, torture, murder of family members and friends, and widespread intimidation by government and insurgent groups. Facing economic misery, insufficient food, displacement from home, and homelessness are the overwhelming circumstances that not surprisingly motivate children to emigrate annually in search of a better life. Since the 1980s, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) has annually arrested two to five thousand unaccompanied children without visas for entering without as undocumented migrants. The authors

highlight the traumatic and stressful conditions not only of home but also in their journey to the United States where they must navigate through many difficulties such as: physical and sexual assaults, robberies, extortion (especially by unscrupulous police and smugglers), hunger, and health problems. The report presents findings of a mental health study of Central American children detained by the INS in two Texas sites. The study focused on potentially stressful or traumatic experiences in the communities of origin, the journey, and the United States. Based on results of a socio-demographic analysis of 260 randomly selected intake files of children under INS detention, 133 personal interviews to determine the children's experiences with potentially stressful and traumatic events and finally the findings of 60 interviews to identify suspect cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The ground-breaking study concludes that the children's migration may be a sub process of family migration, El Salvador and Nicaragua is where most of the children are coming from, and children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua experience similar numbers of different potentially traumatic events. A high percentage of children had potentially PTSD-like symptoms with frequency of at least once a week. The findings of multiple potentially stressful and traumatic experiences among the children are consistent with a population that emigrates from a potentially turbulent and violent region in Central America.

A second publication by Nestor Rodriguez and Ximena Urritia-Rojas (1997), based on the same data "Potentially Traumatic Events among Unaccompanied Migrant Children from Central America" chapter from the book, *Health and Social Services among International Labor Migrants: A Comparative Perspective*, Ximena Urritia-Rojas and

Nestor Rodriguez describe how political and economic turmoil caused severe hardships for many Central American children in the 1980s from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras. The overwhelming conditions were a major source of the massive emigration. Based on personal interviews, socio-demographic characteristics of children were used to understand the potential traumatic events that they had experienced. Political and economic problems in Central America took a heavy toll on the children migrating from Central America during the 1980s, experiencing war, economic deprivation, and social strife; the findings indicated that many unaccompanied Central American children have experienced some form of potential post-traumatic stress disorder-like situation, and there will be a need to properly address the persisting political and economic problems in Central America.

Ten years later, Cecilia Menjivar and Lilian Chavez, wrote "Children Without Borders: A Mapping of the Literature on Unaccompanied Migrant Children to the United States" (2010). This publication represents the first concerted attempt to do a literature review on the subject matter. Based on previous research and reports, the authors take a broad effort to shed light on the different factors of unaccompanied children migration. Mapping the migration process from the country of origin, transition, and final destination along with the integration in both Mexico and the United States.

First, the literature review by Menjivar and Chavez (2010) covers the migration flows from poor nations to relatively wealthy nations, noting a variety of scholars who have done extensive research on child migration in the past. Utilizing broad and

multidisciplinary lens to review empirical studies conducted in Mexico and the United States, the authors try to bridge the gap and focus on the final destination country as well as the sending or transit country. This is the first attempt of providing a comprehensive analysis from the sending country such as Mexico. While the authors provide a holistic assessment of the local, national, and international laws that protect children's rights during the migration experience. By analyzing the institutions such as detention centers, consulates and religious or secular shelters, the authors expand on previous research conducted at these sites. Children also have some sort of agency and autonomy in their decision to migrate and are considered "active social agents" that are not only passive dependent subjects but are able to be examined as transnational actors that contribute to shape global processes and cultural patterns through direct and indirect participation in the multiple communities to which they belong who make social economic contributions to their migration experience (Lopez Castro, 2007).

The journal publication, "Children Without Borders A Mapping of the Literature on Unaccompanied Migrant Children to the United States" (2010)" discusses some of the dangers unaccompanied children face during the northward journey, among them falling prey to smugglers both sex and labor traffickers, and other transnational organized criminal groups including gangs, and abuses by police or military forces (Menjivar, Chavez 2010). Menjivar and Chavez note that the "reasons for migration among unaccompanied have not been examined closely" based on their literature review. Menjivar and Chavez (2010) briefly discuss some of the reasons for child migration the literature under review identified, among them war or unrest, exploitative child labor or

sexual slavery as well as family reunification and employment opportunities. Even though this publication was one of the first to come out before the large influx of migrant children, many more publications have recently cited this review as one of the first leading publication to raise the issue of unaccompanied children. As transmigrants, children migrating alone are often abused by local police (Casillas, 2006; Seugling, 2004; Valdez-Gardea, 2007), as demonstrated in cases around the world. Central American children suffer abuses as they travel through Mexico and Central America (Casillas 2006).

The vulnerability of children is greater than adults due to their age, they lack protection from family or police, and because they are perceived as right less and defense-less, they are often "arrested and detained for months or even years for not having proper documentation" (Barraza, 2005:25; Ehrenreich, Tucker and Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project, 1997; Haddal, 2007). Bhabha and Schimidt (2006) argue that children should be treated as individuals who are agents of their lives and who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity because most are victims of forced labor, forced marriage, conscription, domestic abuse, and street or gang violence that should give them the right to apply for asylum or for a special immigrant juvenile status. Children not only face separation and trauma, but also must navigate the psychological stress in their developmental stage to the amount of trauma exposure and emotional well-being. The authors provide important insights into the complexities of their migration and call for further research into the children's psychological well being, which is not independent of their social and economic situation throughout the process and stressing for a bilateral

communication on the institutional systems that track the children's experiences.

Based on a human rights approach, the state fails to provide adequate protection for the child migrants as evident in the long history of child migration (Bhabha and Schmidt 2014). Bhabha and Schmidt in *Seeking Asylum Alone: Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Refugee Protection in the U.S.*, emphasizes that they have only begun to scratch the surface and much more work is needed in order to fully understand the scope of the problem.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has conducted substantial studies on immigrant children, and one of their most recent evaluation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) was on the recent migration trend of unaccompanied migrant children. This publication was published in 2015, "Unaccompanied Alien Children: Actions Needed to Ensure Children Receive Required Care in DHS Custody". The study concludes that within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) has issued policies and procedures to evaluate, or screen, unaccompanied alien children (UAC) – those under 18 years old with no lawful immigration status and no parent or legal guardian in the United States available to provide care and physical custody- as required by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008. However, CBP's Border Patrol agents and Office of Field Operations (OFO) officers who screen UAC have not consistently applied the required screening criteria or documented the rationales for decisions resulting from screening. Specifically, under TVPRA, DHS has to transfer

UAC's to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). As stated in the GAO report, DHS may allow UAC from Canada and Mexico to return to their home countries, that is, to be repatriated, if DHS determines UAC (1) are not victims of a seer form of trafficking in persons, (2) are not at risk of trafficking upon return, (3) do not have a fear of returning due to a credible fear of persecution, and (4) are able to make an independent decision about returning. GAO (2015) found that U.S. agents made inconsistent screening decisions, had varying levels of awareness about how they were to assess certain screening criteria, and did not consistently document the rationales for their decisions. For example, according to the GAO analysis of CBP data from fiscal years 2009 through year 2014, found that CBP repatriated about 93 percent of Mexican UAC without documenting the basis for decisions. The GAO concludes that "providing guidance on how CBP agents and officers are to assess UAC screening criteria could better position CBP to meet legal screening requirements, and ensure that agents document the rationales for decisions would better position CBP to review the appropriateness of these decisions" (GAO 2015 Highlights).

Policy Perspectives

The American Immigration Council published, "A Guide to Children Arriving at the Border: Laws, Policies and Responses Special Report 2014," to provide context and shape a rational conversation on immigration and immigrant integration. The short guide provides critical information regarding basic information of who, what, when, and where the child migrants are coming from and what has been the response of the U.S.

government in addition to the governments from the countries of origin. The publication provides general information of "unaccompanied children" from Central America and provides data from the Department of Homeland Security, between October 1, 2013 and September 30, 2014, which is the period of the mass influx of children from Central America's northern triangle. The publication provides a list of the most frequently asked questions and details how U.S. immigration law impacts the children adversely and the response of the United States government to combat the flow of "unaccompanied minors". The Obama administration has responded by prioritizing removal and detention policies by adding more processing centers and focusing on speeding the children's cases due to a large backlog of pending cases. According to the report by the Assessment of Capacities Project (ACAPS), citing the 2012 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime data (UNODC), homicide rates of the northern triangle of Central America are the leading factor of child migration from the region.

The report analyzes how immigration courts have responded to the increased volume of cases by petitioning to the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) for a new policy with respect to prioritizing cases for adjudication and for funds and resources to alleviate the backlog of cases.

Additionally, Congressional Research Service reports (R43599) such as, "Unaccompanied Alien Children: An Overview" (August 2015), provide research summaries for Congress regarding the most recent information about the migration of unaccompanied children. The reports provide background, scope of the problem, current

policy, and how the US government is treating, processing apprehended unaccompanied youths while detailing administrative and congressional action that has taken place in response to the humanitarian crisis. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) analyzes several migration-related factors, such as violent crime rates, economic conditions, rates of poverty, and the presence of transnational gangs. According to the CRS report, the US Border Patrol presents the scope of the problem through a statistical table from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) detailing the apprehensions from fiscal year 2008 through fiscal year 2015 to highlight the unprecedented apprehensions.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Children on the Run

The UN refugee agency, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Washington, DC, published "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection" (2014) as a call of concern regarding the increasing numbers of children forced from their homes and families, propelled by violence and crime, and to ensure their access to asylum and other forms of international protection. The report analyzes the humanitarian impact this insecurity has had on children, forcing them across international borders to seek safety on their own. Based on a 2013 study funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, "Children on the Run" unveils the humanitarian impact of the situation through interviews with more than 400 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico held in US federal custody. The report shows that the large majority of the children believed they would remain unsafe in their home countries

and, as a result, should generally be screened for international protection needs by authorities along the way. According to the report, the number of children who make the perilous journey alone and unaccompanied has doubled each year since 2010. Children also face specific forms of persecution that may give rise to a claim for refugee status. Many first-hand account interviews by children reveal the traumatic decision to leave their homes sometimes at the urgent of their immediate family members in their home countries. UNHCR's latest report, unveils the humanitarian impact of the situation by analyzing the reasons that 404 unaccompanied children gave to a team of researchers for why they left their homes and makes recommendations for a way forward. UNHCR's study unequivocally demonstrates that a significant proportion of displaced children, including over half of those interviewed, have potential international protection needs that must be addressed in a targeted, child sensitive manner. However, many gaps in protection persist in the current mechanisms in place for such children.

Other Reports on Unaccompanied and Separated Children from the Region

Since the recent surge, many major reports have been issued, both produced in the U.S., addressing the current dramatic increase in the arrival of unaccompanied and separated children to the US from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The first of these was prepared by KIND (Kids in Need of Defense), entitled "The Time is Now: Understanding and Addressing the Protection of Immigrant Children Who Come Alone to the United States", focuses on the treatment of the children upon their arrival to the United States.

Another report, prepared by the Women's Refugee Commission, entitled "Forced from Home: The Lost Boys and Girls of Central America", examines more closely the reasons for the migration of these children to the United States. In addition to these reports, one that is of significant interest to me is the report entitled, "Children Detained: The Human Rights of Migrant Children on the Mexico-Guatemala Border (Lanus Report)", prepared by the Center for Human Rights at the National University of Lanus in Argentina and the Fray Matias de Cordoba Center for Human Rights in Mexico, highlighting the effects of detention and deportation policies on unaccompanied and separated children in southern Mexico with a focus on the need for mechanisms and procedures that respect the best interest of the child and offers a brief discussion of the reasons children left their countries of origin.

The latest publication from the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies at the University of California Hastings in partnership with the National University of Lanus has published, "Childhood and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, Policies, Practices and Challenges" (February 2015) based on a two-year, multi-partner, multi-national and regional investigation into the treatment of Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Mexican, and United States citizen and permanent resident children affected by migration. The publication analyzes the root causes of children and family migration in the region and its recent spike, and explores whether conditions and policies in children's countries of origin, transit countries, and destination countries in the region protect the best interest and ensure children's rights.

According to the research literature there is a complex structural condition in Central America that is promoting the migration of unaccompanied children. However, the current migration of children presents new policy challenges between sending communities and receiving countries that are not well understood as described by the literature review above. This is the topic of my study that I describe below. While the role of transnational organized crime is viewed (White House National Security Council) as a result of powerful illicit commodities as a result of uneven development, a weak state, and highly profitable business venture for economically deprived migrants. I provide an alternate perspective with ethnographic interviews using a case study in the highlands of Guatemala to better understand the intricacies of a much deeper social issue with strong transnational communities that do not identify crime or violence as the number one reason for children leaving their communities.

As the first researcher to focus exclusively on the effects the migration of children has on their communities of origin, and not limiting my analysis to structural violence, poverty, and uneven development, I seek to explore three specific research questions germane to my literature review:

1. Why are children leaving now in larger numbers than in the past?
2. Are structural conditions of poverty, violence, unemployment, social exclusion the primary motives for children migrating?
3. What are the consequences for families, communities, and policy makers?

Chapter 3: Research Methods

In this section I elaborate on my research, specifically how I conducted my field research and my approach to this field of study. My first task was to go through the University of Texas at Austin institutional review board (IRB), because of human subjects and ethical concerns for research. My general methodological approach was that of a case study, defined by Orum et al. (1991, 2) as “an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon”. My main research method was ethnographic fieldwork through observation and open-ended semi structured interviews with a wide range of community members. I conducted a qualitative study based on ethnographic semi-structured interviews with twenty participants who have direct knowledge of child migration.

I relied on advice from a paid research consultant who is a legal professional in Guatemala who has direct knowledge of the day-to-day activities due to his job. I selected the western highlands of Guatemala because based on DHS apprehensions data (DHS 2015), which highlight the significant amount of Guatemalans that have left the region. I also hired a research assistant in Guatemala to assist me in talking to the research participants, some of whom spoke only the Mayan language of Quiche.

I interviewed a) local family members with first-hand knowledge of someone who had migrated, b) non-government organizations (NGOs) that assist return migrants (local/departmental authorities such as from the office of the indigenous women) c) professionals (school teachers, a psychiatrist, and social workers), and d) community

members who have first-hand knowledge of unaccompanied children migrants. I relied on the research assistant to set up the interviews and on the research consultant to provide insights on the research questions – (1) Why unaccompanied children migrate, (2) what is the effect or consequence on the community of origin as a result of children migrating, and (3) why children are migrating now in larger numbers than in the past.

I conducted twenty ethnographic interviews from June 1- June 22 2015, with the assistance of research consultant and research assistant. All interviews were scheduled at a predetermined location such as home, school, or worksite. Before I arrived to Guatemala, I sent my research assistant and consultant a description of my study so that they understood my project. I also gave them a list of questions that I planned to ask my research participants. This was done so that my assistants would be able to select the appropriate research participants needed for the interviews.

Each semi-structured interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour at a safe and secure location agreed upon by my research assistant and the interviewed member. I provide a more detailed description of my interview method in the data and methods section.

Background to Research Site

For my research, I examined a map of the geographic location where DHS Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) came from <http://adamisacson.com/files/dhsuacmap.pdf>, 2014 Location of Origin Map based on Border Patrol Apprehension Data: 1 January to 14 May 2014. Additionally, I used the

ethnographic data collected by Rodriguez (1990) and Hagan (1994) in Houston and Guatemala to finalize the location of my research. More generally, I decided to focus on the western highlands of Guatemala, because of its diverse cultural, linguistic, and mixed urban and rural landscapes that presented an appealing case study of unaccompanied children.

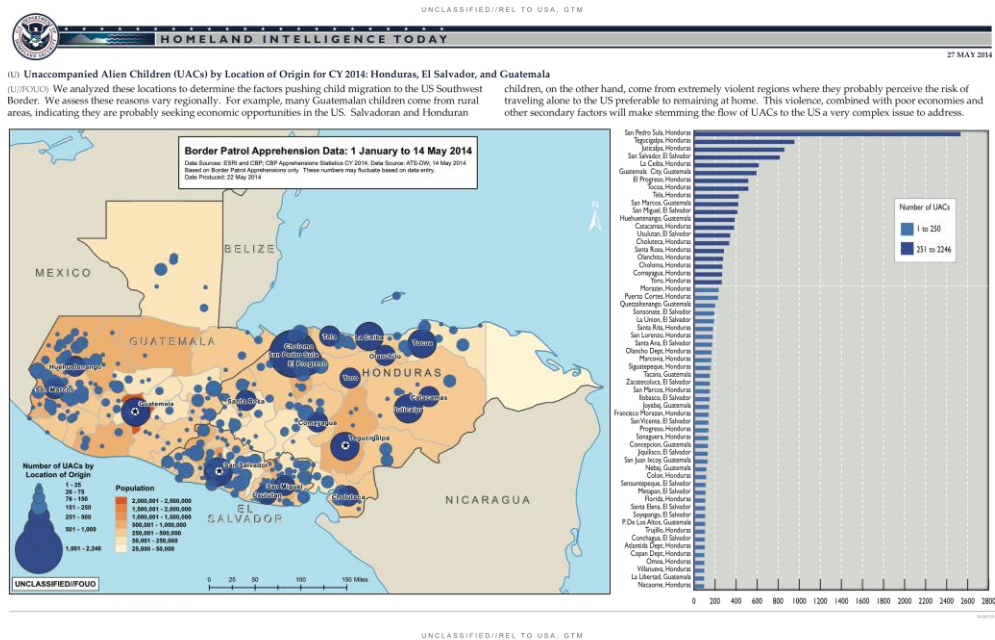


Figure 2: DHS Unaccompanied Children Apprehensions Illustration

Source: DHS Border Patrol Apprehensions from January 1- May 14 2014



Figure 3: Guatemala Regions Map

Source: Wikitravel Guatemala Regions Map Accessed 11/22/2015

Data and Methods

Data collection consisted of individual in-depth interviews with my research population. The field research was conducted based on interviews previously scheduled by my research assistant in consultation with my research consultant. Every day we scheduled a semi-structured open-ended interview in three different communities in the western highlands. I recorded notes on my notepad based on the conversations with the research participants and did not record the conversations because of privacy concerns from the research participants.

Qualitative research method was utilized to better understand the complexities of why people migrate. Social structures and networks are best analyzed through human interactions, which, quantitative research methods may not be able to capture. I acknowledge the potential bias and research limitations of qualitative research but also believe that for this particular case study it can provide extensive in-depth analysis of human behavior.

Survey Questions

For my fieldwork, I provided a set of survey questions to my participants to understand their perspective and the conditions that motivates children to migrate. The following survey questions were asked o the research participants. (1) Last year, approximately 60,000 unaccompanied children arrived to the US; please describe your perceptions of the recent surge of unaccompanied youth. Please describe in your own words why

Guatemalan boys, girls, and adolescents are migrating more now than in the past twenty years. (2) Please describe in your opinion the impact in your community (country of origin) of youth migrating to the United States. (3) Please describe from your point of view what can be done to help deter the migration of children to the United States. (4) Please describe why your local, departmental, and federal government are or are not doing sufficient to address the migration of children to the United States. My informants mainly responded to question 4, to explain why a substantial increase of migration of children, women, and adolescents occurred. The research findings support the hypothesis that migrants are coming from new migrant communities.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Based on my interviews I will first answer my three research questions, and then give an in-depth summary of my overall findings.

Research question one asked, what is causing the migration of children within the last five years? Many of my respondents identified the lack of employment, the country conditions of corruption, instability, and friends or family that were already present in the United States. Violence was not one of the main motives for migration, the destitute conditions in the communities were not being properly addressed by local governing officials. In my conversations with psychologists and social workers, they told me of their big workload and low support or lack of resources to help everyone in one. One of the major challenges was the centralization of funds within the federal government in Guatemala City and not enough funding or support was properly allocated to the department, which then was distributed to the local towns and communities. The families emotionally pleaded for my assistance in letting policy makers understand the hardship and untenable situation that is leading the migration of children. The fracturing of families because of migration and the emotional distress was causing children, women, and men to the difficult decision of migrating for family reunification purposes.

However, every interviewed individual had different perceptions of the causes of migration ranging from the unit of analysis of the household, to broader community level responses to the current unstable socio-political environment.

Research question two pertaining to if: structural conditions of poverty, violence, unemployment, and weak institutions was leading to the migration of children was analyzed within the context of a weak state. One of my research participants revealed the link of religious institutions and the migration industry, which includes the smuggler in a highly exploitative and lucrative business enterprise. Religion institutions are playing a prominent role in advocating for humane treatment and in defense of undocumented migrants. For example, the Catholic Church has various shelters for migrants, feed migrants, and promote social justice through Catholic Relief Services. Other non-profit religious organization is the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service who advocate for just policies and practices relating to immigration and detention. The migration industry composing of human smuggling networks, transportation, and safe houses is a very profitable enterprise in the absence of strong social institutions (Hernandez-Leon 2008, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013).

In the absence of a job that allows for a living wage and safety and security within their communities, individuals must take decisions that are best for them. School teachers and community members shared with me their struggles with children to conclude their basic level of education from elementary, middle school, and high school. Based on one interview with the director of a small rural elementary school Juan stated: “A small as 5 year-old migrated to the United States because the mother was in the United States and she considered that there is not an adequate investment in the education school system in Guatemala.” One of the challenges was the lack of funding that schools receive in rural communities to achieve a high quality education, the lack of access to computers, and the

continued task of encouraging students to succeed in an environment filled with adversity. Foundations in the past had provided economic support to purchase school supplies and assist in any capacity the underfunded schools throughout Guatemala. Also, through the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) alongside international and regional entities such as the Organization of American States (OAS), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and the U.N. Development Group for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNDH LAC) promote solutions to the region's social, economic, and political problems in the region (Congressional Research Service 2016).

Research question three asked the consequences of migration of unaccompanied children for the families, communities, and policy makers in Guatemala and the United States. My research respondents felt that one of the consequences of migration of unaccompanied children was the loss of social capital (individuals that are part of a larger community), which led to the disintegration of the family caused by the structural conditions of poverty, instability, and violence. While the consequences may be measured demographically, my respondents measured the community impact of emigration of unaccompanied children with an un-measurable loss of social capital. Various public awareness campaigns by the United States government in coordination with Central American government have sought to correct and disseminate misconceptions about U.S. immigration policies. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) launched a, "Dangers Awareness Campaign" which included extensive media outreach in metropolitan areas of the United States, as well as billboards and public service announcements in El Salvador,

Guatemala, and Honduras (Congressional Research Service 2016).

My case study in particular reveals that beyond the quantitative analysis of border apprehensions by Mexican and US border patrol officials, unaccompanied children are constantly adapting, challenging, and confronting social issues such as food insecurity, public safety, and unstable living conditions. Interviews revealed that the causes of migration are complex not only of structural violence of poverty, unemployment, violence, new economics labor migration, social transnational connections, rite of passage, and threat evasion as a motivation for migration (Massey 2015). My research participants reiterated the well- established migration stream. Constant migration within the last thirty years has built strong transnational ties, and I can only hypothesize that new emerging communities are developing, which in the past had relatively small documented transnational migrants. For example, in a community that I passed through on my way to a local school, local residents described the massive migration of residents that was described as recent because the community did not have a long history of international migration. Hollywood style letters on the hills of the highlands of Guatemala adorn this particular community, which engages in free-style fist-fights during holy week. Every person in the highlands of Guatemala now has a smartphone and is instantly connected through social media such as Facebook. These are only some of the new trends in a digital era, globalization, and free trade but also restrictive immigration policies to encourage legal migration.

I predominately talked to women, since men had already migrated to the United States or had migrated to Mexico in search of better work opportunities. Based on my discussions with school teachers, psychologists, social workers, and lawyers, the consensus was that Guatemala is very undeveloped in the rural communities and centralization of services has contributed to corruption, with weak judicial, police, and social institutions that are not conducive for a strong-state. During the time I was in the western highlands, I used public transportation interacting with the local population and was able to better understand their day-to-day activities. One of the women that I interview, stated, “I regret ever making the decision to migrate to the United States, my husband and one of my daughter is in the United States, while I am here with my other daughter”. A reoccurring theme was the disintegration of the nuclear families, with the men mostly now in the United States and grandparents taking on a bigger role parenting in the family.

Table 1. Responses given by respondents regarding causes and effects of child migration from the local community

| School Teachers (2) | Families (5) | NGOs (3) | Government Actors (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Low investment in Schools | Lack of steady employment | Lack of infrastructure and low investment in public services | Corruption at Federal, departmental level |
| Low Funding for school children | Rely on remittances | Food insecurity, systemic inequality | Impunity |
| Low-rates of higher education and completion of primary schooling | Because of disintegration of family, more probable to migrate | Weak governance, high poverty rates, and endemic violence prohibits human development | Lack of infrastructure |

The Disintegration of the Family

As I interviewed Ms. Norma Chaj, she repeated multiple times the hardships of being separated from her husband and children. This reoccurring theme was not exclusive to her as many community members, NGOs, lawyers, and respected friends recounted the numerous families that have at least one family member that is in the United States. I learned that international migration is significantly motivated by the current instability, poverty, unemployment, and well-established migration communities in the United States from Guatemala. Whereas in the United States, families have adapted, settled down and assimilated with employment, stability in their daily lives, in Guatemala separated families suffer with poverty, unemployment, and unstable conditions due to insecurity. During my interviews my respondents portrayed how the current restrictive policies in the U.S.-Mexico border has created a way of life where the consequence was the breaking of the nuclear family. Ms. Chaj stated, “How I do miss them, here there are no jobs and life is miserable.” The husband must send remittances to meet their basic needs. According to my interviews, the psychological distress and unstable emotional well-being affects every member of the family unit from the children to the parents. Not only does this create instability in the domestic sphere it also leads to the erosion of family structures and relationships with extended family members. The loss of stability due to the loss of social capital has greater cost for those left behind, who must adapt and fulfill the family obligations. Due to the highly restrictive and highly militarized immigration policies, the migrants stay permanently in their destination communities instead of the circular migration causing extended time without seeing their family members.

Migration is often considered a domestic survival strategy, in which one family member emigrates in order to guarantee the support for the whole family. Even though migration is viewed as an individual choice at the micro level it has bigger implications at the macro level with the cost of migration not an easy one to make. With better income and livelihood opportunities that provide security, women's empowerment, dignity, and increased human capital in the United States is the draw that incentivizes the need to migrate. With low levels of educational attainment, high levels of unemployment, and high levels of violence create destabilizing conditions that promote the need to migrate. These positions are supported by the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, United Nations Development Program, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, who argue for a reform and change to current unsustainable country conditions in Guatemala. There are proposals from domestic private corporations to create stability, safe, and more jobs for the marginalized communities. Additionally, the U.S. Department of State (US AID) is offering an international aid package to the northern triangle, Central American countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to fortify, strengthened, and stabilize each country's judicial, law enforcement and social institutions to deter further unauthorized migration.

Structural Violence

Structural violence refers to insecurity in wages, a chronic deficit in basic needs such as housing, and a constant, general uncertainty that effectuates a slow death for vulnerable communities prevented from thriving socioeconomically (Farmer 2004). Menjivar and Abrego (2012) provide a legal violence framework, which helps us understand the experiences of contemporary immigrants in the United States; however, I apply the concept to migrants in their country of origin.

The structural violence is concealed in social structures such as exploitative labor markets and discriminatory educational systems that produce inequality through standardized policies and practices rather than through individual decisions and behaviors. For example, in Guatemala, free trade agreements with the United States and neighboring countries have created depressed prices for agricultural products in Guatemala resulting in depressed profit margins which lead to the 2009 food crisis along with the global financial crisis. Guatemala cannot compete with cheaper US products. Other problems caused were the labor rights violations and promoted emigration due to increased competition for goods and services. Mexico and Central America are facing unprecedented wave of violence with homicide rates that are the highest in the Western Hemisphere. This is a result of numerous trends: the rise of illegal economies on a massive scale, including drug and human trafficking; increasing authoritarian governance, marked by militarization and corruption; near total impunity for violator of human and citizenship rights. Guatemala has passed tough new laws against smugglers in

a bid to stem the flow of undocumented migrants to the United States. However, the legislation does little to address the underlying causes of migration to the United States and may even lead to the development of more sophisticated criminal networks. On November 19, 2015, Guatemala's Congress approved harsher prison sentences for migrant smugglers, known as "coyotes" in an attempt to reduce undocumented migration in the country (Reuters, November 19, 2015). In spite of the anti-coyote law that protects men, women, and children against exploitation from human smugglers, the enforcement of the laws is weak.

The legal violence framework that Menjivar and Abrego (2012) espouse is useful in the analysis of the law and its relationship between the legitimacy of structural and symbolic protections against structural and symbolic violence. Weak institutions such as police, judicial, local governmental, and state-level agencies whose role is to provide safe, secure, and basic necessities to their citizens. With a long history of social strife, civil war, and marginalization at the hands of the ladino mestizo elites it should come as no surprise the migration in search of better opportunities elsewhere. According to Torres-Rivas (1998:49) structural violence is "rooted in the uncertainty of everyday life caused by the insecurity of wages or income, a chronic deficit in food, dress, housing, and healthcare, and uncertainty about the future which is translated into hunger and delinquency, and a barely conscious feeling of failure.... Structural violence is reproduced in the context of the market, exploitative labor relations, when income is precarious and it is concealed in underemployment or is the result of educational segmentation and of multiple inequalities that block the access to success." This shows

how structural violence is “exerted systematically, that is indirectly by everyone who belongs to a certain social order” (Farmer 2004: 307). I do not mean to pathologize communities or community members only to portray the institutional barriers they face to achieve a sustainable quality of life with dignity, free of violence, and respecting human rights. One recent example is the La Linea corruption scandal uncovered by the United Nations’ International Commission Against Impunity and Corruption (CICIG), a customs corruption ring with the help of high-ranking officials within the tax and customs administration. This event highlighted the need for oversight, blatant corruption, impunity, fraud, waste, and abuse that has been going on for a long time in Guatemala.

Lack of Opportunities

While I was in Guatemala, I visited several elementary schools to get a sense of what the educational system of Guatemala was like. I found that even though the literacy rate is growing in Guatemala, it is among the lowest literacy rates in Central America. Illiteracy rates are the highest among indigenous populations who have illiteracy rates of up to 60%. Schools are under-funded with very old classroom equipment, teaching materials, limited or non-existent water and sanitation services with low rates of higher education. Poverty in Guatemala is both widespread and severe, according to the World Bank an assessment of poverty in Guatemala affects more than half of the population, approximately 53.7 percent of the population who is estimated to live below the poverty line (World Bank Poverty Assessment 2014), which is defined as an income that is insufficient to purchase a basic basket of goods and services. Guatemala does not have

natural resources such as oil or gas that provide federal funds for the nation. Almost 58 percent of the population has income below the extreme poverty line, which is defined as the amount needed to purchase a basic basket of food. Poverty is especially prevalent in the North, Northwest, and Southwest and occurs primarily among the poorly educated and indigenous members of the population. More than 90 percent of the indigenous population lives on an income that is lower than the poverty line. Income inequality, social inequality and social exclusion are the biggest drivers of marginalization in Guatemala in the 21st century. Guatemala is a country-rich in natural resources and rich in culture, language, and heritage, yet it with significant poverty and vulnerability and high levels of inequality.

History has shown that inequality and corruption feed off one another: the existence of inequality creates conditions that enable corruption, while corruption exacerbates inequality. Its mining, hydroelectric plants, and private industry is a small source of economic growth into the economy, however, indigenous communities have denounced the exploitation and expropriation of their lands. Most manufacturing is light assembly and food processing, geared to the domestic, U.S. and Central American markets. While remittances is the largest avenue of GDP growth and “central to the economy” (Menjivar 2). Inequality and social exclusion according to the United Nations Human Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) demonstrates that only 3.8 percent of the country’s total income is earned by the poorest 20 percent of the population, compared with the 60.6 percent earned by the richest 20 percent of the population.

As Menjivar and Abrejo (2012) have previously used the concept of “structural violence” to situate the state of liminality of documented and undocumented migrants in the United States. I will apply the concept to the structural conditions in Guatemala with laws in place that leave no other option but to migrate. In my conversations with public advocates for rights of women and indigenous women, I will highlight the need for a more sustained investment in empowering women to achieve a sustainable living wage, access to health, education, and social benefits improving their lives. The centralization of funds, which do not get to reach their intended target population due to the corruption and siphoning of funds by public officials. The cost of basic goods such as bread, meat, milk, and vegetables has increased dramatically over the last two years. (Guatemalan Institute of National Statistics 2015).

According to the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Corruption, crime, poverty, and poor criminal justice capacity make Guatemala extremely vulnerable to organized crime. (UNODC 2010 Press Release). The press release highlights Guatemala’s geographical location as a “point of transit” which exacerbates the drug trade, human trafficking, and fire arms problem, as a country is caught in the crossfire between the world’s biggest producers of coca (Andean countries in South America) and the world’s biggest consumers of cocaine (North America) (UNODC 2010 Press Release). A growing share of 200 tons of cocaine that flow north every year is transiting Central America and sowing a path of death and destruction according to the press release. The press release analyzes how the same routes are also used to traffic irregular migrants and weapons. The UNODC states, “In 2009 15.7 tons of

cocaine was seized, including 10 tons found in a mini-submarine off the coast. The lucrative drug trade, estimated to be worth twice of Guatemala's GDP, is a major source of corruption, it undermines the rule of law and threatens security" (UNODC 2010 Press Release). While the United States government is directly involved in a Central American Regional Initiative (CARSI) through an integrated, collaborative regional security, and rule of law program where the objective is to create safe streets for citizens in the region, disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between nations in Central America (U.S. Department of State). However, the assistance to establish a safe, secure, and strong Central American region has been unmanageable to date, with high homicides rates, high poverty rates, high levels of emigration due to insecurity and untenable living conditions. Weak institutions, drug smuggling, gangs, poverty, inequality, impunity, corruption, and malnutrition have led to the current influx of Guatemalan migrants to leave their communities of origin.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America

According to the United States government (Congressional Research Service 2015), Central America is in a pivotal point in history where compared to the 1980s, the region is relatively free from armed conflict, politically stable, and benefiting from a free trade agreement with the United States. The whole-of government “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America” is designed to increase economic opportunity, reduce extreme violence, and strengthen the effectiveness of state institutions in the region (Congressional Research Service 2016). However, a combination of economic stagnation, weak governmental institutions, and insecurity has plagued Central America. The recent surge in migration to the United States and Mexico from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala is just one result of these challenges and the inability, to date, to find solutions to the challenges the region faces. Current efforts by Central American governments, the United States, and other regional governments have proven insufficient to achieve meaningful progress in addressing these challenges. The Obama Administration requested \$1 billion through the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to implement the strategy in FY2016, and it has requested more than \$770 million through those two agencies to continue implementation in FY2017. U.S. local-level programs such as USAID, CARSI have achieved some important successes, however, a broader, more comprehensive strategy and greater Central American government resource and political commitment is required to achieve systemic and

lasting success in the region. So the United States has implemented a National Security Strategy to work in equal partnership with the region to advance economic and social inclusion and safeguard citizen safety and security, among other objectives. The “Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle” represents an important effort to develop a unified, Central American-led plan that could be supported by the international community and be a starting point for a continued multilateral engagement with assistance of multilateral development banks to create sustainable societies. Given the geographic proximity of Central America, the United States historically has had close political, economically, and cultural ties with the region (Congressional Research Service Report 2016). Whereas U.S. Congress has expressed considerable concern about increased migration from Central America, with members of Congress holding numerous hearings, traveling to the region, and introducing legislation designed to address the situation. Although Congress opted not to appropriate supplemental funding for programs in Central America in FY2014, it appropriated more than \$570 million for the region in FY2015, which was more than what the Obama’s administration originally requested (Congressional Research Service 2016). The Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015 (P.L. 113-235), also directed the Obama administration to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the key factors contributing to the migration of unaccompanied children to the United States. These appropriations by U.S. Congress are intended to address the structural conditions leading to the large scale migration of children to the United States. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 (P.L. 114-113), appropriated \$750 million in support of the Obama administration’s Central America

strategy in FY2016. The act also placed a number of conditions on the assistance, requiring governments in the region to take steps to improve border security, combat corruption, increase revenues, and address human rights concerns, among other actions. U.S policymakers continue to face difficult decisions about to respond to the increase in unaccompanied children and other Central Americans attempting to enter the United States.

My research examined the challenges that children faced in their communities of origin. However, the greatest challenge lies in the hands of policy makers in Guatemala to provide adequate basic services such as food, shelter, safety, and employment to the marginalized communities, particularly the indigenous Maya who have suffered immensely from exclusionary policies. In the absence of strong institutions migrants recur to the informal economy of trade, exchange, and commercialization of goods on the black market and vulnerable to exploitation.

I was often asked for potential solutions to the current challenges that Guatemala faces in its day-to-day activities, but I reiterated the need for more empirically research based solutions with civil society, governing entities, and all sectors of society. There are no easy answers to the current “humanitarian”/political crisis that is sweeping Central America. Low and non-inclusive growth where large segments of the population live in poverty need to be properly address with a direct inclusive investment in human development

Child Migration and Restrictions

Child migration has a long history before the current surge of unaccompanied children migration. As chapter 2 showed, there are many concerns surrounding how the United States government is handling the issue. Many advocacy groups argue for the “best interest of the child” approach respecting the dignity and human rights of the child. However, the United States Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), must do their job and protect and secure the nation’s border from danger. My case study looks at country conditions in Guatemala as not a monolithic flow, but as a divergent flow that is complex and multi-casual in why children are migrating. My interviews demonstrate that violence is not the number one reason for migrating but overall structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, and insecurity are the dominant drivers of migration. The United States has responded with an international aid package to Central America through the “Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle” to combat the main drivers of unaccompanied child migration to the United States.

Research Limitations

I want to acknowledge the research limitations and possible bias that my research may have. Due to the sensitive implications of my research with a vulnerable population, ethical, and institutional review board (IRB) protections of research subjects led me to focus my research on adult populations who have intimate knowledge of child migration. I had to rely extensively on my research collaborators in Guatemala to determine who I could interview and understand the constraints of the research subjects. Additionally,

because of budget constraints, I had to be concise on how many, where, and when research subjects I could interview during my time in Guatemala. My qualitative research method of interviews is intended to portray the complex motives for children migrating that goes beyond the quantitative data that analyzes the apprehension rates.

My case study is not representative of all of Guatemala (east, south, or north) because of different variations of security, poverty, or socioeconomic opportunities that may illustrate other factors that lead to migration of children. I was only in the western highlands for three weeks and was able to talk to only the agreed upon interviews set up by my research collaborators. The setting and environment of the interview allowed for the freedom to express any of the concerns of the research participants, who questioned or understood that I may not be able to help them monetarily but with further research the migration could be better understood by the general public.

Directions for Future Research

While the claims made by this study are supported by empirical research, there is more that should be done in order to better understand the current migration of children. My research indicates that unless structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, and violence are not properly addressed to alleviate the people in need. Based on quantitative analysis with data from Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Enforcement (CBP), apprehensions of unaccompanied children continue to drop, however, the Southwest Border Family Unit Apprehensions are increasing at alarming rates especially in the Yuma sector. More research is needed to better understand the root

causes “pushing” people out of their countries of origin and also to what degree do gangs “rule” or “govern” in local, regional, and even country-wide communities (Request for Proposals for Border, Trade, and Immigration Research, University of Houston).

A special issue for the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies will address: children and the cumulative vulnerabilities among undocumented unaccompanied migrant children. I plan to co-author a journal publication on the “Social Differentials in the Unaccompanied Migration of Central American Minors to the United States” developing a conceptual model of the interplay of economic, public safety, family, and migrant network institutional arenas in the Northern Triangle countries of Central American (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). For my dissertation I plan to continue to analyze the current migration of unaccompanied children by conducting further research in Guatemala to better understand the conditions of migration.

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