

# Child immigrants flee violence and poverty in Central America

By Norisa Diaz  
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A slew of reports and commentaries in recent months document the catastrophic social conditions affecting millions of Central Americans. While the Obama administration seeks nearly double the initial budget proposal to further militarize the border, the empty politicking between Republicans and Democrats serves the purpose of concealing the real causes of the massive influx of unaccompanied minors and families fleeing violence and poverty in Central America.

With a high concentration of crossings along the Rio Grande border in Texas, more than 52,000 unaccompanied minors have been detained throughout the Southwest this year, and authorities estimate that between 60,000 and 80,000 children will cross by the end of 2014.

The Pew Research Center recently obtained a US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) document which found that: “many Guatemalan children come from rural areas, indicating they are probably seeking economic opportunities in the US. Salvadoran and Honduran children, on the other hand, come from extremely violent regions where they probably perceive the risk of traveling alone to the U.S. preferable to remaining at home.”

Last year a United Nations refugee agency reported that “many of these displaced children faced grave danger and hardship in their countries of origin,” while others sought only to be reunited with family in the US.

Most of the Central American immigrants are fleeing violence and extortion from gangs as a result of drug trafficking and the failed US led “War on Drugs,” which has had “devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world,” according to a 2011 report by the Global Commission on Drug Policies. The report concluded that the militarized repression of drugs increased the numbers of homicides and other violent crimes.

Hundreds of unaccompanied minors are fleeing Central

America daily. Five percent of the unaccompanied minors who cross the border come from the city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras. The city has the world’s highest murder rate, 187 murders per 100,000 in 2012, more than twice the country’s average of 90.4. The murder rates in El Salvador (41.2) and Guatemala (39.9) follow just behind Honduras amongst Latin American countries.

Citing World Bank figures, the Pew Research Center reported that “Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are among the poorest nations in Latin America with 30 percent, 26 percent, and 17 percent of their people living on less than \$2 a day.”

Per capita income for most of Central America is less than 10 percent that of the US. The region’s infant mortality rate is up to seven times higher than in northern Europe. Health facilities are generally poor, especially outside urban centers.

According to “2012 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor,” a report by the US Department of Labor: “Children in Honduras are engaged in the worst forms of child labor, including in hazardous activities in agriculture and commercial sexual exploitation. Children work in melon production and coffee fields. Limited evidence suggests they also work in the worst forms of child labor in the production of sugarcane. Children working in agriculture may use dangerous tools, carry heavy loads, and apply harmful pesticides...”

Resembling a feudal society, “Children, predominantly girls, also work as domestic servants. They may be required to work long hours, performing strenuous tasks, without sufficient food or shelter.” Similar reports appear for the other Central American countries.

Malnourishment throughout Central America is among the worst in the Americas. Fifty percent of children in Guatemala are malnourished, with the rate rising to nearly 75 percent in rural areas. The World Bank notes that approximately 75 percent live in poverty in Guatemala.

The World Food Bank reports that over 25 percent of children in Honduras suffer from chronic malnutrition, and in rural areas, 75 percent live in extreme poverty. Nearly a third of the economically active population in Honduras is still either unemployed or underemployed. The staggering poverty and unemployment in conjunction with the crime and instability brought about by the illegal drug trade create an unbearable social and economic climate for Central American workers.

American imperialism has maintained the conditions of impoverishment in these countries through the calculated and brutal policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Over the course of the 20th century, Washington backed one oppressive right-wing Latin American dictator after another through CIA-organized coups and its long history of training and funding death squads and paramilitary forces through the Pentagon-funded School of the Americas.

In Guatemala, a US-engineered coup overthrew elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in 1954. Honduras became the base and training camp for a CIA “rebel force” on Guatemala’s southern border. The US intervention in Guatemala provoked a series of civil wars claiming 200,000 lives over 30 years. The inauguration in 2012 of president Otto Pérez Molina, a former general implicated in war crimes carried out during the brutal civil war, took place under US auspices.

In the 1970s and 1980s, another 75,000 were killed in the bloody counterinsurgency campaign waged by Washington and the US-backed dictatorship in El Salvador, while in Honduras the working class and peasantry were ruthlessly repressed by death squads employing torture and assassinations.

In 2009, elected Honduran president Manuel Zelaya was overthrown in a military coup in reaction to his policy of meager increases in the minimum wage, limited constitutional reform and a tentative rapprochement with Venezuela. Defying the Foreign Assistance Act which bans US distribution of aid to countries whose elected governments have been overthrown in military coups, the US continued to provide \$43 million in aid to Honduras, materially supporting the coup.

Aiding US intervention in Central America, the 2003 CAFTA-DR or Central American Free Trade Agreement between the US, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and later the Dominican Republic, lessened commercial barriers and further opened the floodgates for US economic domination, devastating much of the local

economies.

Washington’s call to further militarize the border also follows the gruesome discovery in Texas of a mass grave into which the bodies of 51 immigrants were found dumped. Just last month, the decomposed body of 15-year-old Gilberto Francisco Ramos Juarez from Guatemala was found near the Texas/Mexico border. Ramos succumbed to heatstroke after traveling hundreds of miles with intentions to earn money to pay for his mother’s epilepsy treatment.

Promising over \$200 million in aid to Central American authorities, Washington hopes to curb northbound immigration by escalating oppressive police tactics in these countries.

Anti-trafficking policies passed under the Bush administration entitle immigrants from Central America to a full court hearing to determine their eligibility for asylum or refugee status. In a 2012 report, the non-profit Vera Institute of Justice found that nearly 40 percent of children in the custody were likely eligible to be granted refugee status to legally avoid removal. A key demand of the Obama administration is the gutting of these protections so that children entitled under international law to be protected as refugees can be shipped back to face death in the countries that they fled.

Despite Republican attempts to paint Obama as “soft” on illegal immigration, both sides of the aisle agree that the answer to the “humanitarian crisis” of migrant influx is an increasingly militarized border and the speeding up of mass deportations. Both parties are also responsible for utilizing these policies in an attempt to whip xenophobic sentiments as a means of diverting popular anger against the social conditions created by capitalism.

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