# Never Going to Get to Grow Up:
# An Exploration of the Motivations of
# Child Migrants From Central America

A Thesis
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Department of Sociology
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On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the motivations of unaccompanied child migrants who arrived in the United States from Central America in the spring and summer of 2014. There is a long history of migration from Central America to the United States for a variety of economic, political, and environmental reasons, many of which can be understood in the context of sociological theories of migration. However, the recent surge in migration from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala indicates a significant change in patterns of migration, particularly among children. Most children are fleeing violence from gangs and other criminal organizations, lack of economic or educational opportunity, or domestic abuse in their home countries. Once in the United States, however, many find themselves unable to regularize their legal status due to procedural and political concerns about accepting large numbers of immigrants. These findings have important implications for both this population of vulnerable children and for the United States' immigration system. This study draws on screenings conducted by a nonprofit organization with 1,349 children held in Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters and uses quantitative methods to examine the associations between children's reasons for migration and their age, gender, country of origin, and indigenous status.

In the spring and summer of 2014, tens of thousands of unaccompanied children, mostly from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, crossed the United States-Mexico border. The arrival of these children caused a political uproar in the United States, as some called for stricter border enforcement and immediate deportation, while others insisted on a humanitarian response and urged the public to see the children as refugees. While state and federal government agencies scrambled to provide resources like food, shelter, and medical care to migrants being held at the border, larger questions about the long-term fate of these children persist.

Long before the arrival of unaccompanied children in recent months and years, Central Americans have been migrating to the United States in large numbers. They have been driven by a variety of factors including changing economic conditions at home, economic or educational opportunity, family reunification, civil war, violence, and natural disaster. Like many other immigrant groups in the United States, Central Americans are a mixture of documented and undocumented migrants, both due to changing conditions in Central America and U.S. immigration policy responses to migration. The U.S. government has, on a few occasions, granted legal status to groups of Central Americans in order to address specific conditions in the region causing migration flows, which allowed millions to enter the United States legally. However, Central Americans in the United States continue to be characterized by a high level of undocumented status-- two out of every five Central Americans in the United States has irregular immigration status (Terrazas 2011).

Although there has been a long history of Central American migration to the United States, more recent conditions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are changing the face of migration, particularly among children. These conditions include exclusion from labor markets, lack of economic opportunity, rampant violence and an absence of government control. Street gangs, particularly Mara Salvatrucha 16 and the 18th Street Gang, have risen to power in the Northern Triangle, causing crime rates to skyrocket and people to fear for their lives. Governments in the region are largely powerless to stop these actors, as the police and judicial systems are characterized by corruption and lack of accountability. These more recent developments, combined with the long-term effects of pervasive poverty and lack of opportunity in the region, are now causing many children to embark upon the dangerous journey to the United States. Once here, however, the fate of most of these children is uncertain. The U.S. immigration system is not set up to

handle such large numbers of children, nor do most of the children's reasons for coming to the United States fit into existing frameworks of immigration law. This presents an immense challenge, both for these children's well being and for our immigration system.

Due to the recent nature of child migration from Central America to the United States, there is a lack of scholarship addressing this issue. As of the writing of this paper, only a few researchers have had the opportunity to investigate this topic. In this paper, I will use quantitative data obtained from a sample of children detained near the United States-Mexico border this summer to address a series of questions: What are the factors causing children to abandon their homes in Central America? How are these factors influenced by different characteristics, such as home country, age, gender, and indigenous status? I will then engage questions about how these factors influence children's ability to obtain legal status in the United States.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Below, I first review the theoretical literature on international migration, both in terms of push factors out of sending countries and pull factors to receiving countries, focusing on migration from Central America to the United States. I then discuss current conditions driving migration, particularly among children.

*Theories of International Migration*

Sociological theories and conceptual arguments about why people migrate internationally can be broken down into four main categories: the structural forces in developing societies that promote emigration, the structural forces in developed societies that attract migrants, the individual characteristics and life goals of the migrants who decide to move internationally, and the social networks that are born out of previous migration and spur further movement.

World systems theory, which gained traction among sociologists in the 1970s, asserts that international migration is caused by the increasingly dominant structure of global capitalism. This theory, developed mainly by Immanuel Wallerstein, is a helpful framework to understand the dynamics in the developing world that promote emigration. One of the most important aspects of the world-system that

Wallerstein describes is a hierarchy of power between core and periphery countries, where governments and corporations of powerful "core" nations dominate and exploit weak "periphery" countries for their own benefit (Wallerstein 1974). As the power of transnational corporations and neocolonial governments grows, the capitalist economy penetrates into noncapitalist societies in search of land, natural resources, human labor, and new consumer markets. This causes disruptions in local social and economic structures, including the displacement of traditional livelihoods like agriculture. These disruptions create a portion of the population that is prone to move abroad, looking for new ways of earning income and managing economic risk (Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo 1989; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1994; Massey 1999). According to Massey (1999:304), "international migration does not stem from a lack of economic development, but from development itself." In addition, world systems theory asserts that the actions governments of core economic countries have taken to protect access to markets and natural resources in the developing world have further spurred migration. These governments often pursue military and diplomatic actions to preserve favorable economic conditions in the developing world. When such interventions fail or have unintended consequences, they lead to new flows of migrants or refugees (Zolberg et al. 1989; Rumbaut 1991; Massey et al. 1993; Massey et al. 1994).

Dual labor market theory, as pioneered by Michael Piore in the 1970s, asserts that structural dynamics in the developed world also spur migration, due the nature of labor markets that rely on immigrant work (Piore 1971). As wealthy nations transitioned into a postindustrial economy, dual labor markets emerged—a primary labor market that provides high wages, steady pay, and opportunities for advancement, and a secondary labor market that is characterized by low pay and instability. As native workers of developed countries don't want to take low-wage jobs with few options for advancement, employers often turn to immigrants to fill these positions, sometimes through direct recruitment in developing countries (Massey 1999). This phenomenon is particularly notable in large cities in the developed world, as the high percentage of managerial and professional jobs in these cities creates a need for low-wage services provided by a mobile immigrant population.

World systems theory and dual labor market theory grew out of a movement among sociologists to reject neoclassical economic theories of migration, whose unit of focus was the individual rather than the

structural. According to neoclassical economists including Todaro (1969), international migration is caused by differences between countries in the supply of and demand for labor. People in developing countries seek to increase their income by migrating and selling their labor on the international market. Flows of labor move from places where capital is scarce and labor is plentiful (lower wages) to places where capital is plentiful and labor is scarce (higher wages), which can mean both rural to urban migration as well as international migration (Todaro 1980; Wood 1982; Massey et al. 1993). Migration flows, according to this theory, are thus the combined results of many rational individuals deciding to migrate (Wood 1982; Castles and Miller 1993). Although neoclassical economic theory has shaped much public policy and understanding of migration, it has also been criticized heavily for being overly simplistic and incapable of explaining actual movements (Castles and Miller 1993). One major critique is that this theory fails to explain why people migrate from certain areas and not others with similar economic conditions. Thus, sociologists largely rejected this theory, although other theories such as the new economics of labor migration were proposed in order to pay adequate attention to the individual agency, motivations, and actions of migrants (Wood 1982; Castles and Miller 1993).

The new economics of labor migration can be seen as mediating between the structural and individualistic dynamics of migration theory, though it is more closely aligned with neoclassical economics than with world systems or dual labor market theories (Abreu 2012). The household, rather than the individual, is the unit of analysis in the new economics of labor migration. This theory emphasizes the lack of access people in developing countries have to financial services that help them manage risk, such as insurance markets, credit, or retirement programs. In response to the lack of these services, households decide to send one or more members of the family to work abroad and send back remittances to the family. If local endeavors fail to provide economically, the household can rely on income from the migrant family member. This allows the household to diversify its income stream, thereby maximizing household income and minimizing risk. (Wallerstein, Martin, and Dickinson 1982; Wood 1982; Stark and Bloom 1985; Massey et al 1993).

While all of the theories discussed above provide a theoretical foundation about the initiation of international migration, it is also crucial to understand how and why migration continues over time. The existence of migrant social networks in the receiving country increase the likelihood of further international

movement because they lower the risks and increase the potential gain to migrants. Social ties in a

destination country, referred to in the literature as the "family and friend effect," can provide financial and

cultural capital to new migrants, like access to jobs or services, which facilitate their arrival and integration

into the new society (Castles and Miller 1993; Massey et al. 1993; Massey 1999). In addition, if large

numbers of migrants arrive to the same place, an enclave economy can develop, further increasing the

demand for immigrant workers (Massey 1999). All of these theoretical underpinnings can help to explain

past waves of Central American migration to the United States, particularly from the 1960s through the

early 2000s.

### *Economic Changes and Central American Migration to the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

While Central American migration to the United States has varied considerably throughout the

twentieth century, it began in response to economic changes in the region (Robinson 2003). According to

Hamilton and Chinchilla (1991), most of the Central American migrants who arrived in the United States

before 1975 likely came for economic reasons. Beginning in the early twentieth century, Central America's

economy was transformed from being mostly reliant on subsistence farming to becoming a major hub of

agricultural exports, particularly coffee and bananas, and to a lesser extent cotton, sugar, and other

products. The investments of multinational firms like the United Fruit Company in the early to mid-

twentieth century partly caused this shift as they pressed governments to establish capital-friendly reforms.

One such change was the implementation of land liberalization programs that created individual ownership

of private property, replacing the more flexible communal land use of the past. In response to being forced

off the land where they had traditionally lived and farmed, many workers migrated within their own

countries to find work, moving permanently to urban centers or seasonally to rural areas for agricultural

work. A smaller subset migrated internationally to other countries in Central or North America in response

to displacement from their land (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991). These early flows of migration can be

understood in the context of the world systems theory, as the penetration of capitalism into a previously

noncapitalist society caused massive economic disruptions and thus spurred migration, though mostly

within Central America (Zolberg et al. 1989; Massey et al 1993; Robinson 2003).

In addition, early Central American migration to the United States, especially from El Salvador, can be linked to labor recruitment from Central America during World War II. Companies from the United States who had supervised construction on the Panama Canal recruited heavily for immigrant labor to come to the United States to work in labor-scarce shipyards and other wartime industries (Menjívar 2007). Once these migrants had set up networks and communities in the United States, they paved the way for further migration during the 1970s and 1980s when hundreds of thousands of migrants left Central America. Both dual labor market theory and social network theory can be applied here to understand international migration growing out of labor recruitment (Castles and Miller 1993; Massey et al. 1993).

Major economic dislocations due to modernization continued to occur in Central America during the 1960s-1970s. In addition to disruptive conditions in Central America, the changing economy in the United States attracted migrant workers. The 1970s saw a decline in traditional manufacturing work and a rise in the informal, service-based economy in the United States, which largely relied upon low-wage immigrants as a labor force. This growing sector drew Central American immigrants to the United States for economic opportunity, which can be understood in the context of both dual labor market theory and the neoclassical economic model (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991). By the mid-1970s, however, many more Central Americans were migrating to the United States to escape repression, violence, and war.

### Conflicts in Central America and United States Involvement in the 1970s-1980s

The 1970s-1980s were a period of civil unrest and political upheaval for Central America. Inequality was at an all-time high, with just a few families in each country controlling the vast majority of all land (Robinson 2003). For example, in El Salvador a group of fourteen families controlled 60 percent of the farmland, the country's banking system, and most of the industry, and eight percent of the total population controlled half of the nation's income (García 2006). This left a large sector of the population poor and landless. Between 1951 and 1975 in El Salvador, the percentage of rural households that were landless rose from 11.8 percent to 40.9 percent, spurring mass migration to urban areas, where high unemployment remained an issue (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991). Governments in the region became increasingly repressive in response to groups seeking to organize around issues that had arisen from the rapid process of modernization. Death squads made up of military and police forces targeted groups like

peasant and indigenous communities seeking to take back their traditional land, labor unions demanding higher wages and improved working conditions, and demonstrators protesting high food prices in cities. Political upheaval across Central America, often complicated by U.S. involvement in the region, further destabilized conditions and spurred international migration.

The United States, seeking to both further its economic interests in the region and fight Communist-leaning political movements, intervened extensively in conflicts in Central America. The course of action that the United States took aligns with world systems theory, as these interventions were driven by economic and political motives to maintain regional power. The United States was highly involved in military conflicts in Nicaragua after a revolutionary leftist group, the Sandinistas, overthrew the U.S.-supported Somoza regime in 1979. The Reagan Administration framed intervention as "part of the East-West struggle, in which the United States had a moral duty to contain Cuban/Soviet expansionism" (García 2006:24). Following the belief that Nicaragua had become a base for Communism in Central America, Reagan redirected United States aid to the "Contras" (counter-revolutionaries on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border) to destabilize the Sandinista rule and to stop the flow of arms to leftist groups in El Salvador.

As in Nicaragua, civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala were a response to the unequal distribution of land and power in the country. A number of revolutionary groups rose to challenge social and political injustice during the late 1970s to early 1980s. These groups were met by violence and repression by a series of dictatorships and paramilitary governments, who arrested, beat, and brutally killed thousands of civilians. From 1978 to 1984, approximately 100,000 Guatemalans were killed and another 40,000 went missing due to government military action designed to stamp out rebel support. Indigenous Mayan communities were particularly targeted for extermination. US military aid to El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as the facilitation of corporate investments in these countries, continued despite the increasing evidence of human rights violations by these governments.

While the legacy of economic dislocations and massive shifts continued to influence migration patterns, the effects of civil wars and violence were a major cause of migration from Central America during this time period. By 1987, over 1 million Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans were believed to be in the United States (García 2006). A study conducted on the motivations of Salvadoran migrants

from 1979-1982 concludes that "the correlation between violence and migration is robust….the fear of political violence is probably the dominant motivation of these migrants" (Stanley 1987:147). Lopez, Popkin, and Telles (1996) also cite evidence to support this conclusion. One-quarter of all Salvadorans and one-sixth of all Guatemalans living in Los Angeles in 1990 arrived in a period of only two years, 1980 and 1981, two of the most violent years in Central America. Although many left Central America for fear of violence and repression, most found themselves unable to regularize their legal status once in the United States.

*Historical U.S. Policy Responses to Central American Migrants*

U.S. policy responses to Central Americans since the 1970s demonstrate the long history of exclusion of this group of people from obtaining legal status in the United States. Among other issues, foreign policy concerns during the Cold War had a significant impact on the low rates of success among Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (Fagen 1988). The deep involvement of the United States in Central America made it unlikely for the composition of asylum seekers to change in favor of Central Americans, because to accept large numbers of refugees from Central America would mean to accept that the governments of these nations were unable or unwilling to protect their citizens. Because the United States government maintained that the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala were becoming more democratic during this period, it could not admit that the population displacements were the result of political instability and violence (Zolberg et al. 1989). Those who were escaping countries where right-wing (often United States-backed) regimes were in power, such as Guatemala and El Salvador, had a much more difficult time being granted asylum than those from countries with Communist or left-leaning governments, like Nicaragua (Menjívar 2007). From 1984-1990, the US granted 26 percent of asylum claims from Nicaraguans, compared to just 2.6 percent of claims from Salvadorans and 1.8 percent from Guatemalans (McBride 1999). Due to the inability of many Central American migrants to gain legal status during this time, Central Americans remain one of the ethnic groups with the highest percentage of undocumented individuals.

Some Central Americans, including 200,000 who arrived in the United States before 1982, were granted legal status through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). This also allowed

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many Central Americans to legally bring family members to the United States through the IRCA's family reunification provisions. Another form of legal relief granted to Central Americans by the U.S. government was Temporary Protected Status or TPS, which is a form of relief granted to individuals from certain countries whose states are in ongoing armed conflict or have experienced a natural disaster. An estimated 280,000 Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans were all granted this form of legal relief after a series of natural disasters in Central America, including Hurricane Mitch in 1999 and two earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001. TPS has been renewed continuously for citizens of Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador because the U.S. government states that the governments of these countries are unable to accommodate the repatriation of its citizens (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014).

Despite official peace treaties and democratic elections following armed conflicts, Central American migration to the United States continued at high rates. The combination of economic devastation, wars, poverty and joblessness motivated many migrants to leave their home communities. Poverty rates and economic inequality grew across Central America during the 1980s and 1990s, but were especially alarming in Guatemala. According to Robinson (2003:116), the poverty rate rose from 70 percent of the population in 1980 to 87 percent in 1991, when over 72 percent of Guatemalans were unable to afford the "minimum diet." In addition to these increasingly dire economic conditions pushing Central Americans out of their homes, the social networks established in American cities by earlier migrants provided an easier path to migration for Central Americans seeking to enter the United States (Chinchilla and Hamilton 2007) From 1990 to 2000, the Central American-born population in the United States grew by over a million people (Stoney and Batalova 2013).

Although Central Americans have been migrating to the United States in large numbers since the 1960s, recent developments in Central America spurring massive migration, especially by unaccompanied children, are unprecedented. Since 2011, Customs and Border Patrol officials have recorded double and triple-digit percentage increases in the apprehensions of unaccompanied child migrants (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2014). In the following section, I will explore changing conditions in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala contributing to the current wave of migration. Though part of a legacy of migration from economic dislocations and civil conflicts, this wave of migration is quite different from

those of the past. Looking closely at current contexts in the Northern Triangle that have created sites of instability can help to reveal the reasons why children are migrating en masse out of Central America.

*Current Economic and Social Conditions in Central America*

Recent research conducted in Central America has brought attention to the phenomenon of social exclusion as a primary driving force of societal violence and instability throughout the region. Social exclusion, growing out of the legacy of economic inequality and lack of opportunity in the region, occurs when the majority of the population is excluded from basic land, capital, and other labor markets where income is generated. This leads to an extreme disempowerment throughout all aspects of people's lives. As many are excluded, especially from labor markets, people turn instead to more precarious forms of self-employment, which offer few opportunities for advancement (Perez Sainz 2014). Demographics in the Northern Triangle exacerbate the issue of social exclusion. About 50 percent of the population of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala today is under 25 years old, yet many of these young people are neither employed nor in school. Only 45 percent of Salvadorans, 26 percent of Guatemalans, and 36 percent of Hondurans finish high school. Meanwhile, underemployment rates are sky-high, with 46 percent of Salvadorans, 41 percent of Guatemalans, and 53 percent of Hondurans lacking minimum wage-level employment. The lack of basic state services to provide assistance to the unemployed or underemployed further contributes to the climate of exclusion in Central America (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014).

Violence both inside and outside the home can be linked to social exclusion experienced by many in the Northern Triangle, according to a recent study conducted by the Latin American Social Science Faculty. Feelings of frustration and inefficacy due to high rates of unemployment, especially among male heads of house, are often expressed through domestic violence towards women and children in the home. "That violence in turn is projected outward, toward other members of the community, as victims of violence within households become perpetrators of violence outside them" (Perez Sainz 2014). Guatemala in particular is experiencing high incidence of gender-based violence and ranks third in the world for the murder of women, with two women killed on an average day (Meacham and Forman 2013). The domestic sphere has become one where violence is commonplace, though many other aspects of daily life in the Northern Triangle are also influenced by violence and crime.

*Violence, Organized Crime, and Instability in Central America*

The Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala have some of the highest crime rates in the world. In 2012, Honduras had a homicide rate of 90.4 homicides per 100,000 residents, while El Salvador stood at 41.2 per 100,000 and Guatemala at 39.9 per 100,000 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2014). In contrast, the United States' homicide rate peaked at 10 per 100,000 residents in 1980 and stood around 4.2 per 100,000 in 2010 (Dudley 2012). In a recent poll of Central Americans, personal security and neighborhood safety are the most common concerns. Nearly 40 percent of surveyed citizens of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala report fearing they will become victims of crime in their neighborhood (Perez 2013). While various factors have contributed to increased crime, none is as important as the influence of street gangs or *maras,* which have their origins in the violence following civil wars in the 1980s, the deportation of gang members from the United States, and the drug trade.

While peace agreements officially ended conflicts in the region in the early-mid 1990s, widespread violence continued to dominate throughout the Northern Triangle. A significant sector of the population that had previously been involved in military action, both government and guerilla-backed, turn to illegal activities like kidnapping, arms trafficking, and drug trafficking. Thousands of trained fighters were suddenly without work, and the continued accessibility of weapons from the wars contributed to the ability of these groups to establish criminal networks throughout the region. In addition, the history of conflict in the region created a culture in which the use of violence became commonplace (Dudley 2012; Perez 2013). While criminal violence grew in Central America post-war, it didn't reach its current scale until later.

The exportation of gangs formed in the United States was another factor leading to the development of street gangs in Central America. Following the massive migration of Central Americans to large cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C., Central American youth joined existing gangs, like the Mexican-run Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang), or formed their own, Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13). While these gangs may have originally been formed to ensure protection and safety for new immigrants from other inner-city gangs, they quickly degenerated into criminal networks—trafficking drugs, racketeering, committing extortion, murder, and other violent crimes. As these gangs gained power in the 1990s, the United States government began several initiatives aimed at increasing incarceration and

deportation rates for gang members. The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act made it possible to deport non-citizens sentenced to more than a year in prison (Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers 2009). As a result of this law, 46,000 Central American convicts were deported from the United States between 1998 and 2005, including over 90 percent to the three Northern Triangle countries. Central American government officials often had no warning of when deportees would arrive and were not informed of their criminal histories, making it difficult to differentiate between convicted gang members and petty criminals (Arana 2005; Jütersonke et al. 2009). Once returned to Central America, deported gang members quickly founded local chapters of their gangs to continue their activities. The ready availability of weapons and recruits in the Northern Triangle allowed gangs to establish the networks that exist today (Jütersonke et al. 2009; Dudley 2012; Perez 2013). It is important to note that some reports, including two from the United Nations, cast doubt on whether United States deportation of gang members has been an integral factor in the development of gangs in Central America (Seelke 2009). However, it is likely that both criminal deportations and the pre-existing culture of violence in the region were contributing factors.

Once street gangs had risen to power in Central America, a number of factors allowed them to solidify their hold on the Northern Triangle. One of the most important has been the increase in drug trafficking throughout the region. Central America has become a point of transit for about 80 percent of all cocaine moved between the producing regions in South America and North America, where 36 percent of the world's cocaine is consumed (Jütersonke et al. 2009; Sohnen 2012). While the *maras* in Central America typically serve as a local security force for the larger drug cartels, there is increasing evidence that the drug trade is becoming more central to the Northern Triangle gangs' activities, engendering more violence. The flow of drugs into Central America has contributed to higher levels of drug consumption and addiction in the region, both because of the greater availability of product and the practice of paying gang members in drugs (Perez 2013). The drug trade has also caused increased inter-gang violence. As the Mexican government has increased efforts to target drug cartels, some of these groups have moved into the Northern Triangle, causing conflict between large Mexican criminal organizations and smaller Central American street gangs (Jütersonke et al. 2009; Dudley 2012).

Another factor contributing to the influence of street gangs is the sheer volume of membership, mainly due to the availability of new recruits. Estimates vary widely about how many gang members are

currently in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. A State Department official estimated in 2014 that there are over 85,000 MS-13 and 18th Street Gang members in the Northern Triangle countries, while the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime had a more modest 54,000 as an estimate (Seelke 2014). The extremely high incidence of gang membership, particularly among young males, must be understood as a "multi-dimensional problem, arising from domestic and international factors" that did not develop in a vacuum (Perez 2013:222). Gangs are the results of political, economic, and social conditions that the region has experienced in recent decades, including social exclusion, high levels of poverty and inequality, limited access to educational or job opportunities, and the average age of the population. Gangs can offer a means of social belonging, structure, and protection to marginalized youth, many of whom are neither in school nor working due to lack of opportunity (Perez 2013; Seelke 2014). In addition to socioeconomic issues contributing to gang membership in Central American youth, political and security decisions made to combat gang violence in the region have arguably exacerbated the issue.

### *Government Impunity and Lack of Control*

The governments of the Northern Triangle countries have struggled to combat the rising tide of crime and violence due to street gangs. Gangs, particularly MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang, control neighborhoods, particularly in urban areas though not exclusively, through extracting "rents" in the form of extortion, kidnapping, committing armed robbery, assault, rape, murder, and drug trafficking (Dudley 2012). In 2008, nearly one in six adults had been a victim of a violent crime in Guatemala and El Salvador, and nearly one in nine had in Honduras (Sohnen 2012). A military coup in Honduras in 2009 triggered increased violence and "a downward spiral from which the country has yet to recover" (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014:18).

Although government authorities have implemented *mano dura* (strong hand) policies to increase law enforcement and punishment of gangs, criminal activity has continued to grow. Gangs and other criminal networks have increased their technological sophistication and international presence to combat government interference (Seelke 2014). Some studies have shown that repressive tactics by governments such as *mano dura* have led to episodes of reactive violence among gangs in the Northern Triangle (Jütersonke et al. 2009). Increased incarceration and longer sentencing for gang members, which are the

backbone of *mano dura* policies, have also been shown to augment gangs' power and organizational structures. There is evidence that gangs have become larger, better organized, and more highly trained within prisons, and that members have been able to carry out illegal activities from behind bars due to lax security (Perez 2013; Seelke 2014).

A lack of effective governance has also severely limited the abilities of Central American governments to reduce gang violence. There is widespread corruption in police departments and the judicial system throughout the region. Officials are often known to accept bribes, or even to be part of criminal networks themselves, which leads to a lack of consequences for the vast majority of crimes. Police lack the necessary equipment, training, and personnel to effectively deal with gangs and other criminal activity. They rarely carry out long-term investigations, and often make arrests only if the perpetrator is caught during the act (Perez 2013). According to Sohnen (2012), 96 percent of homicides went unresolved in Guatemala in 2009. The justice system in Central America is similarly paralyzed. Judicial impunity is rampant, and conditions in detention facilities and jails are inadequate at best. Less than 10 percent of cases where a complaint is filed end in a conviction (Perez 2013). The result of this breakdown of law and order and effective governance is a culture of fear and instability throughout the region.

### *Children and Gang Violence*

Perez (2013) discusses the particular vulnerability of children to gang violence and recruitment, including forced conscription. One troubling trend in recent years has been the declining average age of gang recruits. Children as young as eight years old have joined gangs, and are performing low-level jobs such as lookouts or drug distributors. In addition to forced gang membership, gangs are increasingly targeting children for extortion, sexual assault, threats, and physical violence, contributing to the mass out-migration of youth. Stinchcomb and Hershberg (2014) describe the increasing peril young people in the Northern Triangle face. El Salvador's Institute of Legal Medicine has published data demonstrating that teenagers between 15 and 19 years old are the most at risk for violent death in El Salvador, and police in El Salvador report that murders of children under the age of 17 were up 77 percent during the first six months of 2014 compared to 2013. This is possibly due to the abrupt end of a gang truce between the 18th Street Gang and MS-16 that was brokered in 2012 (Gurney 2015). Studies also show that threats of violence and

forced gang recruitment are negatively impacting children's educational opportunities, as gangs will often

recruit directly in or near schools. The Honduran Secretariat of Education estimated in 2013 that over 2,000

children under the age of 14 were forced to leave school because of death threats from gangs in one city

alone, San Pedro Sula (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014). These conditions are making it impossible for

many children to achieve a safe and happy childhood in the Northern Triangle countries.


### *Current Trends in Child Migration to the United States*

It is within the context of these factors that the surge in migration, particularly among

unaccompanied children, from the Northern Triangle to the United States began in recent years. During

fiscal year 2014, Customs and Border Patrol apprehended over 68,000 unaccompanied minors near the

United States Mexico border. Of these, more than 51,000 of them were from the Northern Triangle

countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2014). Although

2014 saw the highest numbers of unaccompanied migrants, they have been increasing dramatically since

2011, which is considered to be the beginning of the current surge. While the United States remains a

primary destination for citizens leaving the Northern Triangle, other countries are also seeing record

increases in migration. According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (2014), Mexico,

Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize have all together documented a 432 percent increase in asylum

applications from citizens of the Northern Triangle since 2009. Nicaragua, which neighbors Honduras and

has similar rates of poverty, documented a 420 percent increase in asylum claims from 2012 to 2013 alone

(Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014). These increases suggest that citizens of the Northern Triangle are

seeking refuge wherever they can, although migration to the United States will be the focus of this paper.


### *Recent Research on Child Migration to the United States*

Because of the recent nature of the surge in child migration to the United States, only a few

researchers have published studies assessing child migrants' motivations and reasons for leaving their home

countries. Since 2011, two nonprofit organizations, the Women's Refugee Commission and Kids in Need

of Defense, have published independent reports on this topic. In June 2012, the Women's Refugee

Commission conducted interviews with 151 children being held at Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters

near the United States-Mexico border. Over 77 percent of the children interviewed said violence was the reason that more children were fleeing their home country. Children also referenced multiple other issues, with many Guatemalans describing poverty, poor harvests, and lack of employment as other reasons for migration. Girls interviewed also listed gender-based reasons for migration, including a fear of rape and domestic violence (Jones and Podkul 2012).

Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) also published a report in 2013 using data from 126 children referred to KIND by other legal service organizations from 2009-2011. 30 percent of children in this study reported that violence or intimidation by gangs made their communities unsafe and contributed to their decision to migrate. This was higher for children from El Salvador, of whom 58 percent reported violence or intimidation by gangs. Additionally, 26 percent of children reported abuse of some kind. The KIND report also listed other reasons for migration, such as abandonment by a caretaker, poverty, or being trafficked into the United States, but did not include statistics for the numbers of children listing these reasons. KIND later updated this report, using data from children referred to the organization from 2011-2013. The updated report found that among Salvadoran children, violence was the most common reason for migration to the United States, while among Guatemalan and Honduran children, most were fleeing domestic violence and abandonment. There was also a higher total percentage of girls in KIND's study from 2011-2013 than from 2009-2011, possibly indicating higher numbers of girls seeking protection (Kids in Need of Defense 2013).

Elizabeth Kennedy (2014), a Fulbright scholar in El Salvador, is another researcher who has recently contributed to this body of work. Her study, conducted between January and May of 2014 with over 300 Salvadoran minors deported from the United States, determined that crime, gang threats, and violence are the strongest factors on a child's decision to migrate. Of those Kennedy interviewed, 59 percent of Salvadoran boys and 61 percent of Salvadoran girls list these reasons, and many shared personal experiences of assault, rape, and threats. Kennedy also recorded other major factors that the children listed for migration, such as family reunification, lack of economic opportunity, and lack of trust in the Salvadoran government to improve their situation. However, her report makes it clear that gang-related violence is the most important factor for many of these children—over one-third of all interviewees listed violence as the sole factor in their decision to leave home.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published a report in the spring of 2014 based upon interviews conducted with 404 children in the custody of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement between May and August of 2013. The results of this study, which were meant to be representative of the surge of Central American children since 2011, show that 58 percent of children interviewed would raise concerns about international protection according to United Nations standards on refugee treatment. Looking at specific countries of origin, 72 percent of children from El Salvador, 57 percent from Honduras, and 38 percent from Guatemala would be of concern to the United Nations. In addition, 48 percent of children in this study shared experiences of violence by armed criminal actors, and 22 percent of children revealed abuse or abandonment by caretakers (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2014).

Recent studies make it clear the extent to which the reasons for migration, particularly among children, have shifted in recent years, making the need for more research on the topic imperative. These four studies are the body of work that I am utilizing most to inform my own research, and I hope to contribute to the small but growing community of scholars studying this issue. My relatively large sample size of 1,349 children as well as my use of statistical significance will build upon the work of these four studies in order to understand the reasons for child migration among Central Americans in the spring and summer of 2014. In the following sections of my paper, I will present data gathered from a sample of children held in detention facilities near the United States-Mexico border during the spring and summer of 2014, and use quantitative data analysis to assess the main factors behind child migration from Central America to the United States. The aim of this paper is to explore the following questions: What are the current factors causing children to abandon their homes in Central America? How do factors such as age, gender, country of origin, and indigenous status affect children's stated reason for migration?

**DATA AND METHODS**

*Access to Database of Information About Child Migrants*

For one month in the fall of 2014, I volunteered at a pro bono legal organization in the Southwestern United States near the United States-Mexico border. To protect the anonymity of the staff, I refer to this organization as ESPERAR. ESPERAR works with child immigrants who crossed the border,

were apprehended by Customs and Border Patrol, and are held in Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody in facilities near the border. Paralegals from the organization provide "Know Your Rights" trainings to groups of children and conduct individual screenings with each child. During these screenings, the paralegals ask the child a series of questions, including name, age, country of origin, family history and background, contacts the child has in his/her home country and the United States, and why the child decided to come to the United States[1]. The paralegal records the child's responses on an intake form, which attorneys at the organization then utilize as a primary screening tool to determine whether the child may be eligible for legal relief. The vast majority of these interviews are conducted in Spanish, with the exception of children whose preferred language is other than Spanish or English. When this is the case, the paralegal uses a translation service over the phone to conduct the screening.

The responses from each child's intake form, excluding specific identifying information such as the child's name and location or the names/locations of family members, were entered into a database at ESPERAR. I gained initial approval to utilize this database from the Colorado College Institutional Review Board, and then received permission from ESPERAR to do so in order to evaluate the reasons why children were migrating and explore patterns in child migration from Central America. As a result of time constraints, I used the existing responses gathered by paralegals between May 1 and July 15. The resulting sample included 1,349 unaccompanied children.

### Description of Sample

The vast majority of the children in my sample are from Central America, although this population may not be representative of all unaccompanied minors who were apprehended near the border this spring and summer. Due to a 2008 law, the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, any child not from a contiguous country (Canada or Mexico) who crosses the U.S. border alone must be turned over to the Office of Refugee Resettlement in order to explore whether or not that child has been a victim of trafficking. Those from contiguous countries like Mexico can be directly sent back across the border without screening (Manuel and Garcia 2014). Therefore, although there are significant numbers of Mexican youth crossing the border into the United States, most are not included in my sample. According

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[1] Intake questions included in appendix

to attorneys at ESPERAR, the Mexican children who are included in my sample were likely placed into custody either because they are suspected trafficking victims or suspected drug or human traffickers themselves. Unaccompanied minors who evaded apprehension by Customs and Border Patrol are not included in this study. The ages of children included in my sample vary from six to nineteen. Only children above the age of six were screened, due to the separate process for children under six when they are placed in ORR Custody. Migrants aged 18 and older are held in separate detention facilities, not in ORR custody. However, sometimes a child's age is erroneously recorded as 17 when he or she is actually older, which explains why there are a few migrants above age 17 in my sample.

*Limitations*

This study has a few important limitations. The first is that I did not conduct the qualitative screenings myself, so there may have been methodological issues that I am unaware of (such as asking leading questions) as well as differences in children's responses based on the individual interviewer's behavior. There may also be issues with children, particularly girls, under-reporting traumatic events. This may happen for a variety of reasons, including shame, fear, or lack of understanding about what happened to them. Therefore, some of my data reporting, particularly for reasons like violence or domestic abuse, may be less than the actual incidence of such violence.

Another limitation is that the data that I used for my research was only conducted in one specific geographic location. While this region is one where large numbers of Central Americans cross the United States-Mexico border, there are numerous other crossing places where children were not screened. Finally, I was only able to utilize data collected from May through July of 2014, which despite being part of the recent surge in child migration cannot give a complete picture of child migration from the Northern Triangle over the past year. Acknowledging these limitations of my data, I do believe that the sample of children is representative of the larger picture of unaccompanied child migration from Central America during the spring and summer of 2014, because of the thoroughness of ESPERAR's work and its status as the only legal service provider that conducts screenings with children who come through the ORR shelters in its region.

*Dependent and Independent Variables*

The primary dependent variable of concern in this study is reason for migration, or why the children decided to come to the United States. During the individual screenings, paralegals record between one and four reasons that each child listed as factors in his/her decision to migrate (no child listed more than four distinct reasons). Responses were recoded into the following categories: gangs/violence in home country; educational opportunity; economic opportunity; domestic issues in home country; seek a better life in the United States; family reunification in the United States; or other response. For example, I recoded related variables such as "abuse by family member/friend" and "family problems" into a "domestic issues" variable[2]. For the gangs/violence variable, I combined responses that indicated being personally targeted by gangs and responses indicating high crime rates and/or fear of gangs in order to gauge the more general impacts of societal violence on migration. I then created dichotomous variables for each of the seven "reason for migration" categories. Because each child had the opportunity to list multiple reasons, one child may account for data in more than one category.

This study assesses the relationship between children's stated reasons for migration and children's country of origin, gender, age, and indigenous status. As over 96% of my sample was from Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras, I only include analyses from these three countries. I introduced a dichotomous variable for indigenous language usage as a measure for membership in an indigenous group, which allows me to evaluate how indigenous status influences children's reasons for migration. I also included age and gender variables in my analysis. I ran descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses using Stata (StataCorp 2013) to determine the effects of country of origin, gender, age, and indigenous status on child migrants' reasons for migration.

**RESULTS**

In the following section, I present the results from analyses conducted to assess the associations between reasons for migration and age, indigenous status, gender, and country of origin. I then present a series of graphs in order to compare reasons for migration by gender and country of origin. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the sample. As the table illustrates, there are children represented across all ages,

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[2] The table of original responses is included in the appendix.

but older teens (16-19 year olds) make up almost half of the total sample. Males and females are fairly

equally represented, with males making up 53.9 percent of the total. In terms of country of origin, there are

significant numbers of children from each of the three Northern Triangle countries, although Guatemalans

are the smallest population, with 20.8 percent of the total, compared to Hondurans who make up 40.5

percent. Overall, there are very small numbers of indigenous-language speakers (58). In terms of the

reasons for migration listed by the children, over half of all children in the sample (50.7 percent) listed

gangs or violence as a reason for migration, the most common category of response. Family reunification in

the United States was almost as common, with 49.2 percent of all children mentioning this as a reason for

migration. Increased opportunities in terms of educational, economic, and general opportunity (seeking a

better life) are the next most frequently mentioned reasons for migration, followed by domestic issues. A

small percentage of children (1.9 percent) listed other reasons, such as discrimination or seeking medical

treatment in the United States.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

| Characteristic | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Age* | | |
| 6-9 | 104 | 7.7% |
| 10-12 | 285 | 21.2% |
| 13-15 | 319 | 23.7% |
| 16-19 | 639 | 47.4% |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 622 | 46.1% |
| Male | 727 | 53.9% |
| Country of origin | | |
| Honduras | 546 | 40.5% |
| El Salvador | 482 | 35.7% |
| Guatemala | 280 | 20.8% |
| Other | 41 | 3.0% |
| Language Spoken | | |
| Non-indigenous language | 1291 | 95.7% |
| Indigenous language | 58 | 4.3% |
| Reason for migration | | |
| Gangs/Violence | 684 | 50.7% |
| Family Reunification | 664 | 49.2% |
| Study/educational opportunity | 529 | 39.6% |
| Economic opportunity | 400 | 29.7% |
| Better future | 201 | 14.9% |
| Domestic issues | 194 | 14.4% |
| Other reason | 25 | 1.9% |

*Age missing for 2 respondents

To assess how age is associated with children's motivations for migration, I ran descriptive statistics of the mean ages of children who listed each reason for migration (listed in Table 2). The results of this table show that children who mentioned family reunification were 13.0 years old, compared to the average age of all children who are 14.2. This is to be expected, as younger children are more reliant on caretakers and are potentially less likely to be affected by other concerns like violence or economic opportunity. The reason for migration with the oldest average age was economic opportunity, at 15.8 years old, likely because some older teenagers are expected to send remittances to their family from working in the United States. Among other reasons, the average ages were fairly uniform, ranging from 14.5 for those mentioning domestic issue to 15.1 for those mentioning better life.

**Table 2: Mean age of children by reason for migration**

|                      | Frequency | Mean age | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Gangs/Violence       | 684       | 14.6     | 2.7                |
| Family reunification | 664       | 13.0     | 3.0                |
| Study                | 528       | 14.6     | 2.5                |
| Economic Opportunity | 399       | 15.8     | 1.8                |
| Better Life          | 201       | 15.1     | 2.2                |
| Domestic Issues      | 194       | 14.5     | 2.8                |

In order to assess how indigenous status (measured by indigenous language usage) relates to child migration, I ran a cross-tabulation and chi-square test of significance, whose results are shown in Table 3. There is a statistically significant relationship between indigenous language usage and whether or not a child mentioned gangs/violence, family reunification, and economic opportunity, though not for other reasons. The strength of all these relationships is substantively weak based on Cramer's V (0.13; 0.08; 0.12), which could be attributed to the small $n$ (58) of indigenous language speakers. Indigenous children were much more likely to list economic opportunity (55.2 percent did) than any other reason for migration, compared to only 28.5 percent of non-indigenous children who did so. Additionally, the percentage of indigenous children listing gangs or violence as factors in their decision to migrate was only 20.7 percent, compared to 52.1 percent of non-indigenous children. These differences demonstrate that indigenous children's reasons for migration are more likely to be economic in nature rather than a result of violence. This could be due to the rural locations of many indigenous groups, particularly in Guatemala, where violence such as gang activity and drug trafficking is less prevalent, but where poverty is often extreme.

**Table 3: Cross-tabulation of language spoken by % children who mentioned reason for migration**

|  | Non-indigenous language | Indigenous language | $X^2$ | Cramer's V |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gangs/Violence** | 52.1% | 20.7% | 21.84*** | 0.13 |
| **Family reunification** | 50.0% | 31.1% | 8.02** | 0.08 |
| **Study/education** | 39.4% | 36.2% | 0.23 | 0.01 |
| **Economic opportunity** | 28.5% | 55.2% | 18.92*** | 0.12 |
| **Better future** | 15.2% | 8.6% | 1.88 | 0.04 |
| **Domestic issues** | 14.1% | 20.7% | 1.95 | 0.04 |

*p<0.05, **p<.01, ***p<0.001

In order to better understand how reasons for migration may vary by gender, I ran a cross-tabulation to assess this relationship (results shown in Table 4). The two reasons for migration with the strongest relationships to gender are economic opportunity (37.0 percent of boys compared to 21.1 percent of girls: Cramer's V=0.17) and domestic issues (9.6 percent of boys as compared to 19.9 percent of girls: Cramer's V=0.15). The gender variation of those listing economic opportunity points to the societal expectation of boys to contribute to their family's income by migrating abroad. The significant difference in gender for children listing domestic violence aligns with past research on gender-based violence, as women and girls in the Northern Triangle are much more often victims of abuse in the home than men or boys are. Family reunification also varies significantly based on gender, with 43.2 percent of boys mentioning it compared with 56.3 percent for girls. This could potentially be due to different types of social networks for boys and girls in the destination country—while more girls are reunifying with a family member, more boys could be relying on broader social networks of friends or acquaintances in order to access employment in the United States.

**Table 4: Cross-tabulation of gender by % children who mentioned reason for migration**

|  | Female | Male | $X^2$ | Cramer's V |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gangs/Violence** | 47.8% | 53.2% | 4.03* | 0.05 |
| **Family reunification** | 56.3% | 43.2% | 22.94*** | 0.13 |
| **Study/education** | 41.8% | 37.0% | 3.24 | 0.05 |
| **Economic opportunity** | 21.1% | 37.0% | 40.83*** | 0.17 |
| **Better future** | 16.2% | 13.8% | 1.63 | 0.04 |
| **Domestic issues** | 19.9% | 9.6% | 28.92*** | 0.15 |

Statistically significant when *p<0.05, **p<.01, ***p<0.001

Table 5 contains the results of a cross-tabulation of country of origin and reason for migration, which demonstrate differences in sending contexts in each of the three Northern Triangle countries. Country of origin is significantly associated with reason for migration across all reasons for migration, with a weak to moderate strength of relationship. Children mentioning gangs/violence is especially varied among the three countries—71.0 percent of children from El Salvador listed gangs or violence, versus 46.7 percent from Honduras and only 27.1 percent from Guatemala, demonstrating the extreme incidence of gangs and societal violence in El Salvador. Economic opportunity also differs significantly across country of origin—50.0 percent of Guatemalans listed it as a reason for migration, compared to 29.7 percent of Hondurans and 18.1 percent of Salvadorans. These disparities suggest major differences in the political and economic contexts of these three countries, in particular poverty and lack of opportunity in Guatemala and rampant violence in El Salvador.

**Table 5: Cross-tabulation of country of origin by % children who mentioned reason for migration**

|  | Guatemala | El Salvador | Honduras | $X^2$ | Cramer's V |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gangs/Violence** | 27.1% | 71.0% | 46.7% | 154.11*** | 0.34 |
| **Family reunification** | 37.9% | 49.8% | 55.3% | 24.33*** | 0.13 |
| **Study/education** | 36.8% | 35.1% | 44.7% | 12.01** | 0.09 |
| **Economic opportunity** | 50.0% | 18.1% | 29.7% | 86.84*** | 0.25 |
| **Better future** | 14.3% | 12.2% | 18.3% | 11.04* | 0.09 |
| **Domestic issues** | 16.1% | 7.7% | 18.7% | 29.78*** | 0.15 |

Statistically significant when* $p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Having examined how both gender and country of origin are associated with reasons for migration, the bar graphs in Figure 1 present the most complete picture of child migrants' motivations for migration. These graphs show the breakdown of respondents across stated reasons for migration by both gender and country of origin. While gender and country of origin are both statistically significant factors on their own, it is important to consider the confluence of multiple factors leading to the recent surge in child migration. The three reasons for migration that show the biggest disparities by gender are family reunification, economic opportunity, and domestic issues. Overall, girls listed family reunification more than boys (56.3 percent compared to 43.2 percent), but this disparity is especially pronounced in Guatemala and El Salvador. Economic opportunity also varied widely by gender and country of origin. While boys were more likely than girls to list economic opportunity as a reason for migration in all three countries,

Guatemala had a particular gender gap, with 59.9 percent of boys mentioning economic opportunity and only 34.3 percent of girls doing so. These numbers help to tell a story about factors in Guatemala driving migration that weren't necessarily explained in the cross-tabulation above—a large majority of Guatemalan boys are likely coming to the United States to find work and send remittances back to their families. "Domestic issues" is another reason for migration that was mentioned much more frequently by girls than by boys across the three countries, likely due to domestic abuse targeting women and girls. Girls in all three countries listed domestic issues at more than twice the rate of boys, although Salvadorans as a whole mentioned domestic issues at a lower rate than children from other countries. For educational opportunity, better life, and gangs/violence, there were not major disparities between genders across the three countries, though there are noticeable differences between countries in terms of numbers of children mentioning these reasons, particularly for gangs/violence.

Overall, the results of my study demonstrate noticeable and significant links between age, gender, country of origin, and indigenous status with child migrants' stated reasons for migration. While each of these factors is important on their own, they must also be understood to be interdependent.

**Figure 1:**



Children Mentioning Reasons for Migration by Gender and Country of Origin
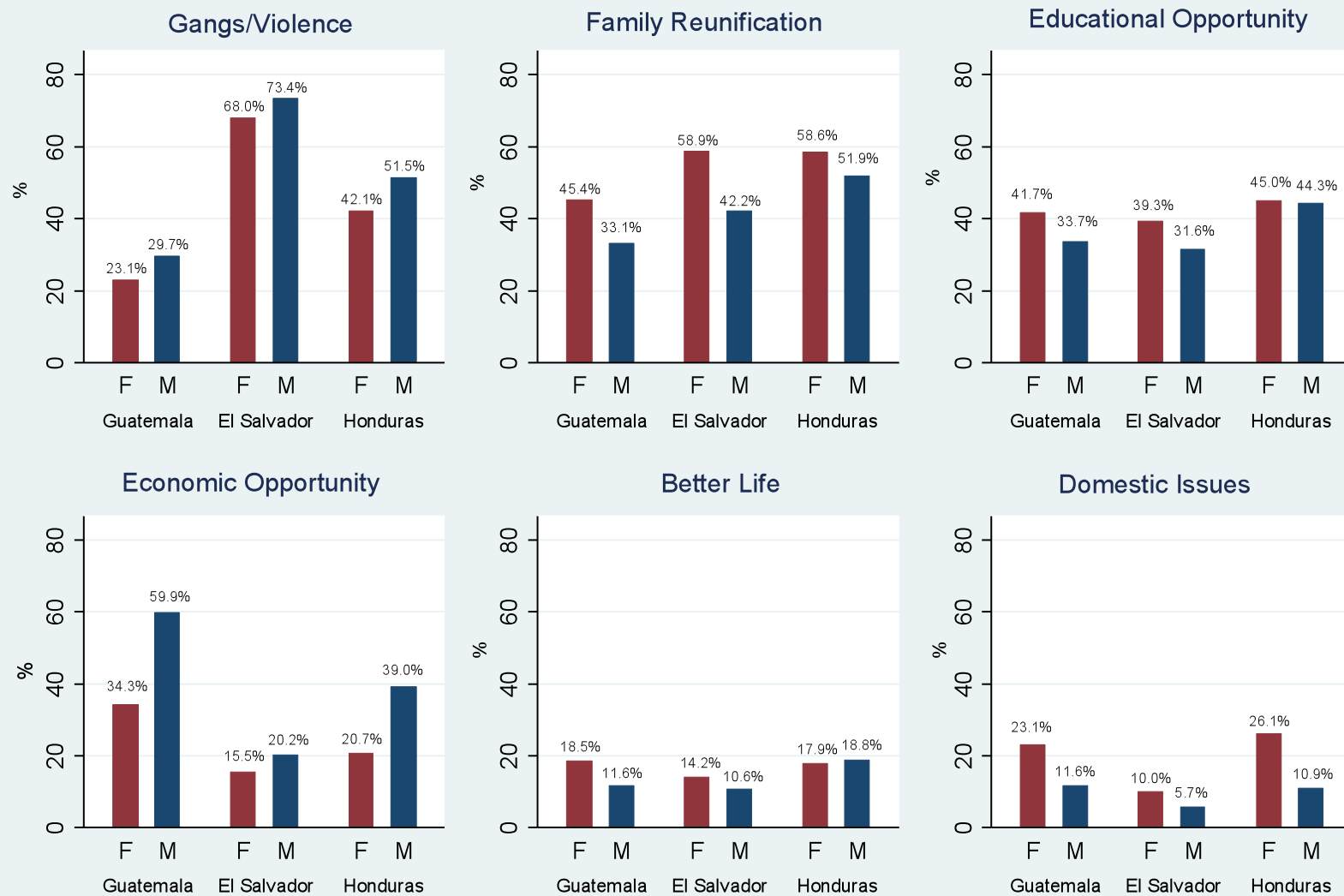
**DISCUSSION**

*Discussion of Results and Comparison to Previous Studies*

The data presented in this paper speaks to the mixture of factors driving child migration from Central America. Due to the large numbers of children migrating from different regions and with different motivations, it is impossible to create one single narrative about current child migration from the Northern Triangle. However, it is possible to see distinct patterns from the data, one of which is the extremely high percentage of children mentioning gangs and violence, which was the most common response when children were asked why they came to the United States. 50.7 percent of all children in my sample mentioned gangs or violence, including 71 percent of Salvadorans, 46.7 percent of Hondurans and 27.1 of Guatemalans. Males were slightly more likely to mention gangs or violence than females (53.2 percent of boys and 47.8 percent of girls did so), and non-indigenous children were much more likely to do so than indigenous children (52.1 percent compared to 20.7 percent). Additionally, children who listed gangs or violence were slightly older than children who did not, demonstrating that while gangs may also be recruiting younger children, middle to older teenagers remain the major target group for this type of violence.

My findings largely support previous research conducted on the connection between gang violence and child migration, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) study of child migrants who entered the United States in 2013 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2014). The numbers of children in my study who list gangs or violence as a reason for migration (50.7 percent) is slightly higher than those in the UNHCR study who do so (48 percent), indicating a possible escalation of violence and crime in the Northern Triangle from 2013 to 2014. This disparity was even more noticeable among children surveyed from El Salvador in the two studies. While 66 percent of Salvadorans in the UNHCR study listed gangs or violence, 71 percent in my study did so, which demonstrates even higher incidence of violence in El Salvador than has been previously discussed in the literature. Evidence gathered from conversations with attorneys and paralegals at ESPERAR supports the conclusions regarding the widespread nature of violence throughout the Northern Triangle. Daniela,[3] a paralegal at ESPERAR, describes her perceptions of the motivations of child migrants:

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[3] Pseudonym

> What the children describe…are communities where there is no law and order as the U.S. population is used to understanding it, a judicial system that is extremely weak, and where you are rarely held accountable for any act of violence or abuse or even criminal act that you conduct against another human being. And so the kids think and feel that their lives are in danger. Many of them have been through threats or attempts by different criminal organizations or individual criminals in the past, and they do not see their lives as reasonably attainable to have a normal life—to go to school, to have a job, to develop themselves as human beings in a normal context. And that's why they're coming to the U.S.

While there are a host of other reasons that children mention for coming to the United States, the data supports the conclusion that a large percentage of child migration from Central America is due to increased gang activity, societal violence, and lack of government ability to maintain law and order in the Northern Triangle.

Although I will focus on gangs and violence as driving forces of child migration, the data also shows that family reunification is an important factor in many children's decisions to migrate. This aligns with social network theory on the "family and friend effect" and is especially pertinent considering that the migrants in my sample are children in need of caretakers and familial support. Although family reunification was the second most common response among children in my study, children in my study mentioned it less frequently than those in the UNHCR study from 2013. 59 percent of children surveyed by the UNHCR listed family reunification in the United States as a top reason for migration (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2014), whereas 49.2 percent of those in my study did so. This could be explained by a variety of factors, although it is likely that increasing violence in the region in the past year is now pushing greater numbers of children out of Central America, rather than family reunification or other factors pulling them to the United States.

Increased opportunity, both educational and economic, is also a major factor listed by child migrants in my study. While children who listed educational opportunity were fairly evenly spread out among different countries, age groups, and genders, there were clear patterns to those who mentioned economic opportunity—older children, boys, Guatemalans, and indigenous children were much more likely to do so. This points to a few different conclusions. Firstly, boys and older teens from the Northern Triangle are likely expected to supplement family income more than girls or younger children. Additionally, these patterns demonstrate that economic factors like poverty and lack of opportunity in Guatemala, particularly in indigenous communities, are causing increased migration from the region.

Domestic issues, including abuse, were a small yet significant reason for migration among children in my sample. 14.4 percent of children disclosed some type of domestic issue during the screening. This response was heavily gendered, with 19.9 percent of girls and 9.6 percent of boys listing domestic issues. Interestingly, country of origin had a statistically significant association with mentioning domestic issues, with 18.7 percent of Hondurans, 16.1 percent of Guatemalans, and 7.7 percent of Salvadorans doing so. The low percentage of Salvadorans mentioning domestic issues could be due to other concerns such as violence taking precedence, or simply to less frequent incidence of such abuse. More research would have to be conducted on this topic to come to any specific conclusions. This data is reflective of the UNHCR study's results, although the percentage of children listing domestic abuse in the UNHCR study is higher for all three countries of origin. This is possibly because the researchers from the United Nations study were more experienced in interviewing traumatized children, and thus had more accurate reporting of abuse.

One way in which this study is quite different from past research is the high percentage of girls who are included in the sample—over 46 percent of children in my sample were female. This is in stark contrast to the percentage of girls in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' 2013 study, 22.5 percent, which was representative of the total gender breakdown of children in ORR custody at that time. This may indicate a large increase in the numbers of girls seeking protection in the United States from 2013 to 2014, possibly due to the escalation in gang violence or to increased domestic violence. While this is probable, the large disparity in gender breakdown between this study and the UNHCR study may simply be due to the fact that more girls cross the United States-Mexico border in the region where ESPERAR works.

While many of the aforementioned reasons for migration may influence child migrants' decisions to leave their home countries for the United States, it is clear that gangs and societal violence are increasingly important factors in driving child migration. While previous waves of migration from Central America driven were largely caused by economic opportunity, war, or natural disaster, many children from the Northern Triangle are now seeking refuge in the United States because of the violence in the region proliferated by non-state actors like gangs and drug traffickers.

*Issues With U.S. Asylum Law for Child Migrants*

   ***Historical and current policy responses to Central Americans.*** According to attorneys and paralegals at ESPERAR who represent unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle, the types of situations that many of their clients are facing (gangs, violence, lack of government accountability) don't align with existing forms of immigration relief in the United States. This leaves many children in a state of flux, with the choice to either return to a potentially dangerous situation in Central America or remain undocumented in the United States. While the current situation with respect to gang violence is relatively new, Central American immigrants' inability to gain legal status in the United States has a long history. The exclusion of Central Americans is rooted in United States intervention in the region over the past eighty years as well as the inclination of many in the United States to exclude "undesirable" immigrants from this country. This legacy lives on in the existence of immigration policies and procedures that make it inherently difficult for Central Americans to gain status. Jacqueline Bhabha, in her recent book "Child Migration and Human Rights in a Global Age" (2014:11) describes the ambivalence that exists in U.S. immigration policy in terms of our attitudes and actions towards these migrant children, and the larger effects of these actions. On the one hand, we expect the state to assume a protective and humanitarian role when vulnerable children are threatened. On the other hand, we want the state to protect us from "threatening, unruly, and uncontrolled outsiders, even if they are children," and thus want to limit immigration. According to Bhabha, this ambivalence causes us to neglect child migrants' rights in the United States in order to avoid the complex policy challenges that protecting these rights would present.

   ***Procedural challenges facing asylum-seekers.*** One way that this ambivalence manifests itself in U.S. immigration law is through the asylum process, which is prohibitively difficult for children and Central Americans, particularly those fleeing gangs or violence. The lack of right to legal representation in the asylum process puts many asylum-seekers, especially children, at a disadvantage. Access to legal representation in immigration proceedings has been proven to be an integral factor in a child's ability to win an asylum claim, but there is no right to counsel in immigration court, as there would be in civil or criminal court. A recent study on the success rates of children in deportation proceedings shows that only 10 percent of unrepresented children were granted legal status, compared to 47 percent of children with

legal representation (American Bar Association Commission on Immigration 2014). Daniela[4], a paralegal at ESPERAR, told me, "It is very hard to find an attorney, because the attorneys that are working for nonprofits or low-bono, which is paying a nominal fee, are overwhelmed."

In addition to lack of access to legal representation, the way that asylum law is written and interpreted by legal adjudicators prevents many child migrants from Central America from being successful in their claims. Asylum law requires individuals seeking protection in the United States to prove that they were persecuted or fear persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and that the government of their home country is unable or unwilling to protect them against this persecution. The law requires an applicant to prove that he or she is exceptional in being persecuted, rather than being a victim of generalized violence, as is the case for many Central American children. Carolina, an attorney at ESPERAR, said "I just talked to a kid's grandfather who said 'it's terrible, there's no rule of law, everyone is in the same position." And for asylum you have to be special." Many asylum applicants are found to have a credible fear of persecution, but their persecution is not based on one of the five protected categories, so their applications are rejected. In a number of recent cases, judges or tribunals have decided against recognizing "children being targeted by gangs" or "children who have resisted gang recruitment" as a particular social group, because these groups can be considered amorphous (Manuel and Garcia 2014). Due to this situation, according to Jessica, another attorney at ESPERAR, "there's a large majority of our clients that unfortunately would lose because their fear is solely based on the fact that they were being forced to join a gang or that they were extorted."

The attorneys with whom I discussed asylum law agreed that it "wasn't meant to be so discretionary" and that political concerns are influencing asylum acceptance rates from Central American children. The United States' ambivalence about accepting child migrants is reflected in recent case law that rejects gang violence or recruitment as grounds for asylum claims, which ESPERAR attorney Carolina described as "making it more difficult" for their clients. She continued, "The way things have been going, I see things changing for the worse." According to experts at ESPERAR, one factor contributing to the trend of recent case law denying Central Americans gang-based asylum claims is a lack of understanding by lawmakers and the public in the United States about current contexts in Central America. Because of the

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[4] All names are pseudonyms.

very recent increase in child migration to the United States, our laws have not adjusted to account for the types of situations many are now facing. Daniela, the paralegal, said:

> So what you're going to have is attorneys saying is 'Oh, but having a fear from gangs is not an asylum case because there's no case law…there's no trend that shows asylum cases that comes from fear of gangs are warranted in the U.S. system.' But the reason that is a trend, and the reason that is not a winnable case is because the U.S. as a system and the people that create the laws and adjudicate the trends are even more behind in understanding what is actually politically happening…in the Central American countries.

Because the law has not been updated to account for these types of violence, there is a mismatch between the experiences many migrants are describing in their home countries and existing forms of immigration relief in the United States.

***Political and social barriers to the acceptance of Central American asylum-seekers***. In addition to a lack of understanding of current contexts driving migration, there is a lack of willingness on behalf of the United States government to accept migrants from Central America, even those clearly fleeing persecution. Asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle continue to be accepted at much lower rates than nationals of other countries. According to the Executive Office for Immigration Review, in Fiscal Year 2013, 14 percent of asylum claims from nationals of the Northern Triangle countries were granted, compared to 53 percent of total asylum claims (American University 2014). This can be explained partially by path dependencies from the incredibly low rates of acceptance of Central America asylum seekers during the 1980s, as well as ongoing political concerns regarding growing numbers of migrants from Central America. Jessica told me:

> The conservative side will say that we can't grant people seeking asylum based on recruitment or extortion because…criminal activity is something different than persecution and everyone is a victim of criminal activity, but they're not understanding the level of harm that's committed. The persecutors, what they're doing…their actions are beyond criminal. They are acting as a quasi-government in Central America where their power is more extensive than the actual governments. So I feel like our U.S. government is intentionally ignoring those facts so that we don't have to grant asylum to a large group of people that clearly need help.

The staunch opposition of many in the general public and in the political sphere to "illegal alien" migration has led to the proliferation of various myths about immigrants, including that they don't pay taxes, they take resources from hardworking Americans, or they are bringing diseases across the border. These myths create a culture of xenophobia, racism, and exclusion in our society that have widespread effects on immigrants' abilities to gain legal status once in the United States. Public perceptions of immigrants,

particularly about poor people and people of color, affect the way our laws and policies are written to be less accommodating to these populations.

***Potential Forms of Immigration Relief for Unaccompanied Children***

   While the asylum process is currently unfavorable to child migrants, there are other forms of legal relief available, such as the Special Immigrant Juvenile Visa, the U-Visa for victims of violent crime in the United States, and the T-visa for victims of human trafficking. According to the attorneys and paralegals at ESPERAR, the Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) visa, for children who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected by their parents, has a much higher rate of success for this population of children than asylum does. In addition, according to Carolina, "SIJ is a much less traumatizing vehicle because the kid just has to tell you the story once, and tell it once to the judge, whereas the asylum process is a lot harder." Therefore, SIJ is a promising channel for children who have been victims of domestic violence to gain legal status in the United States. However, only a small portion of the total children leaving Central America would qualify for the Special Immigrant Juvenile Visa. As my data shows, only 14.4 percent of my sample listed domestic issues (not even necessarily domestic violence) as a reason for migration. Thus, while SIJ, U-Visa, and T-Visa are all useful tools for advocates of child migrants, these existing forms of immigration relief are inadequate to serve the immense need of this population.

   Some advocates have called for the granting of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Central Americans who are living without status in the United States, much like TPS was granted in the 1990s and early 2000s. This would allow Central Americans to get work authorization and support themselves while waiting for conditions to improve in their home countries. It would also take the burden off of the immigration court system that is currently backlogged with cases from Central Americans. Others have suggested creating a special humanitarian visa for children in danger in their home country to legally join family in the United States. However, thus far the United States government has not indicated that such actions will be pursued. In fact, recent changes made by the Executive Office of Immigration Review have raised "significant due process concerns" regarding the way children's cases are being handled (American Bar Association Commission on Immigration 2014:7). Immigration hearings for children are now expedited by being put on "rocket dockets," which require cases to be set for an initial hearing within 21

days of a child's release from a detention facility. This condensed time frame makes it much more difficult to secure legal representation and has resulted in confusion and uncertainty for children and families due to lack of prior notice about court appearances (American Bar Association Commission on Immigration 2014). The desire to speed up the immigration process and more quickly deport child migrants is reflective of the attitudes of suspicion and mistrust that many in this country and in our government hold towards immigrants in general. These attitudes and the actions emerging from them have the potential to be disastrous for migrant children seeking protection in the United States.

**CONCLUSION**

As the U.S. government continues to treat immigrant children with this ambivalent approach, the consequences for this population become more serious. Many children from the Northern Triangle who enter the United States seeking protection from gangs, violence, or abuse are deported back to their home countries, some to face danger and even death. A recent report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees describes the dangers that child migrants face after being deported from the United States, and details the "alarming toll of young Honduran males who are attacked, killed, or simply disappear after being deported from the United States or Mexico" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015). For those who remain in the United States but lack legal status, either due to their applications being denied or a decision to remain undocumented, there are also detrimental long-term effects. Roberto Gonzales describes the profound difficulties that undocumented children face as they move into adulthood without legal status. Gonzales (2011:605) writes, "unauthorized residency…is a defining feature of late adolescence and adulthood and can prevent these youth from following normative pathways to adulthood. Therefore, coupled with family poverty, illegal status places undocumented youth in a developmental limbo." Without the same educational and employment opportunities as their peers, undocumented children will struggle to achieve stability and will have their life choices severely constrained by their lack of legal status in the United States.

It is also important to keep in mind that these children only represent one flow of migrants seeking protection from violence and instability in Central America. The effects of past economic interventions,

lack of effective governance, and widespread violence in the Northern Triangle will continue to push people out of the region and towards the United States if we continue with our current course of action. In order to uphold these children's rights as well as stop the flow of undocumented migration to the United States, two main steps must be taken. The first is to reform immigration policies in the United States so that they can more effectively respond to changing conditions in the developing world and better protect the rights of those fleeing persecution. These policies must take into account the unique position of unaccompanied children, and create mechanisms by which these children can secure legal representation and have fair access to our immigration system. The second step is to support the governments in Central America as they invest in economic and social development, particularly in children. Only by addressing the root causes of migration in Central America can we hope to make El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras places where children can remain just that—children.

### *Future research*

This study found that child migrants from the Northern Triangle are increasingly citing gangs and violence as reasons for migration, and are continuing to list other reasons like family reunification, abuse in the home, or greater opportunity in the United States. This study also found particular patterns to the motivations of child migrants based upon gender, age, country of origin, and indigenous status. If future research were to be conducted on this topic, I would recommend that professional interviewers with experience working with traumatized children conduct the screenings with child migrants. This would increase the likelihood that children who have experienced trauma, particularly victims of abuse and domestic violence, would report these incidents as reasons for migration and ensure that the most accurate results can be ascertained from the study. Having professionally trained interviewers conduct the screenings would potentially mitigate some of the issues with the under-reporting of past trauma.

I would also recommend that future researchers gather a larger sample size of indigenous respondents so that broader conclusions could be reached about this crucial group of people. Although this study came to some preliminary conclusions about the effects of indigenous status on reasons for migration, the numbers in this study were too small to be able to come to definitive conclusions. I suggest that future researchers also focus on Guatemala as a potentially distinct case from Honduras and El

Salvador, as the results from my study and from previous research on the topic point to very specific

sending conditions in Guatemala: extreme poverty and lack of opportunity rather than the scale of societal

violence seen in other countries. Finally, I would recommend that researchers focus on what happens to

children once they arrive in the United States by tracking their pathways through the immigration system or

back to their home countries. The best way to evaluate the connections between motivations for migration

and outcomes once in the United States would be to conduct follow-up interviews or surveys with the same

population of children as were surveyed soon after arriving to this country. This would allow the research

that has been conducted on the motivations of child migrants from the Northern Triangle to be more

effectively linked with existing literature on the immigration system in the United States.

## APPENDIX

*Intake form from ESPERAR*

**WHY DID YOU COME TO THE U.S. |** Work; study; poverty; debt; family reunification; delinquency; past persecution/fear of future persecution; physical, sexual or psychological abuse; etc.

_____

_____

**SIJS |** Whom did you live with and where are your parents (status if in U.S.)? Were you abused, neglected or/and abandoned by parents/legal guardians or are parents deceased? Harmed by caretakers or without proper caretakers?

_____

_____

_____

_____

**ASYLUM |** Are you afraid to live again in your country? Why? Whom are you afraid of? Why are they targeting you? Could you return safely to your country? Was a police report done and what were the results? If not, why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

**TRAFFICKING |** Who paid your trip? How? Why? Do you have a job waiting for you? Do you have a large debt to pay off? How will you pay it off? **TRIP TO THE U.S.** Length of travel? Countries crossed? Kidnapped/robbed/ sexually attacked/held for ransom/worked? Deported from other country? Other sufferings?

_____

_____

_____

**U-VISA |** How long in the U.S. before apprehension? _____ Abuse by Border Patrol? ☐ Verbal ☐ Physical ☐ Other (*If so, attach translated affidavit.*) Did you suffer any other harm in the U.S.?

_____

_____

_____

*Expanded descriptive statistics tables*

**Table 6: Country of origin of children in sample**

| Country of origin | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Honduras | 546 | 40.47% |
| El Salvador | 482 | 35.73% |
| Guatemala | 280 | 20.76% |
| Ecuador | 17 | 1.26% |
| Mexico | 15 | 1.11% |
| Nicaragua | 8 | 0.59% |
| Cuba | 1 | 0.07% |
| **Total** | **1349** | **100.00%** |

**Table 7: Age of children in sample**

| Age | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | 11 | 0.82% |
| 7 | 23 | 1.71% |
| 8 | 31 | 2.30% |
| 9 | 39 | 2.90% |
| 10 | 90 | 6.68% |
| 11 | 111 | 8.24% |
| 12 | 84 | 6.24% |
| 13 | 93 | 6.90% |
| 14 | 97 | 7.20% |
| 15 | 129 | 9.58% |
| 16 | 217 | 16.11% |
| 17 | 417 | 30.96% |
| 18 | 4 | 0.30% |
| 19 | 1 | 0.07% |
| **Total** | **1347*** | |

*Age for 2 respondents was missing.*

**Table 8: Reasons for migration mentioned by children in sample**

| Reason for migration mentioned | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Family reunification | 664 | 49.22% |
| Study/education | 529 | 39.61% |
| Violence in home country | 448 | 33.21% |
| Work in the U.S. | 344 | 25.50% |
| Targeted by gangs in home country | 306 | 22.68% |
| Have a better future | 201 | 14.9% |
| Lack of opportunity in home country | 111 | 8.23% |
| Abused by family member/friend | 109 | 8.08% |
| No caretaker in home country | 75 | 5.56% |
| Family problems | 28 | 2.08% |
| Corruption in government | 5 | 0.37% |
| Natural disaster | 3 | 0.22% |
| Bring drugs into the U.S. | 3 | 0.22% |
| Guide people into the U.S. | 3 | 0.22% |
| Become a U.S. Citizen | 3 | 0.22% |
| Get medical treatment | 3 | 0.22% |
| Discrimination in home country (race, sexual orientation) | 2 | 0.15% |
| Political dissent | 2 | 0.15% |
| Was previously deported from U.S. | 1 | 0.07% |

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