



Children of Central American Turmoil and the U.S. Reform Impasse

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Many Americans are wondering how the current influx of unaccompanied immigrant children crossing the southern U.S. border is connected to the larger political impasse over immigration reform. A longer perspective is necessary to see the relationships.

The roots of the current crisis of Central American children at the border go back to the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, when a leftist political movement overthrew the corrupt and repressive government of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. Although the administration of then U.S. President Jimmy Carter sought to work with the Sandinista regime and provided aid to help reconstruct its battered economy, such efforts ceased in 1981 when newly elected President Ronald Reagan did an about face and turned Nicaragua into a Cold War battlefield.

From 1980 until the Tela Accords of 1989, the Reagan and Bush Administrations sponsored an opposition army known as the Contras in their efforts to overthrow the Sandinista regime. At the same time, money and military aid were also provided to the right-wing leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to prevent leftist revolutions from spreading. The resulting surge of violence across Central America destroyed the economies of all four nations, which shrank in real terms between 1980 and 1990.

Prior to 1980 there had been little emigration from Central America, but the combination of civil violence and economic stagnation predictably led to a wave of refugees headed toward the United States. Ordinary Central Americans were trying to save themselves and their families from violence and economic catastrophe alike – distinctions between economic and physical threats are moot. Whereas average annual immigration from the four troubled Central American nations to the United States averaged just 7,834 from 1970 to 1979, such immigration rose steadily thereafter to peak at 136,000 in 1990, before tailing off to 28,000 in 1995. Between those two dates, more than 681,000 Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans entered the United States as legal immigrants.

But, unfortunately, not all people fleeing violence and stagnation in Central America were treated equally. Nicaraguans fleeing a leftist regime were welcomed and granted an easy path to permanent residence; but Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans, who had the misfortune of fleeing right-wing regimes, were shunned and blocked from permanent residence. The large majority of migrants from those three countries entered the United States without authorization, creating a growing undocumented Central American population.

From 1980 through 1995 a net of 450,000 undocumented migrants are estimated to have entered from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, compared with just 331,000 documented immigrants. Following the end of political violence in the early 1990s the regional outflow moderated but never returned to the status quo ante. Because the economies of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were slow to recover from the devastation and political conflicts of the 1980s, rampant gang violence quickly took hold – and has remained a scourge down to the present day.

Ironically, many Central American gangs originated as re-imports from the United States back to countries of immigrant origin. Lacking legal status and seeing no way forward in the United States, many undocumented youths found solace and support in gangs. The most infamous, *Mara Salvatrucha*, was founded by Salvadorans in the Pico-Union neighborhood of Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. When undocumented gang members were apprehended and deported, gang violence was then exported to El Salvador. Transnational gang networks took hold.

Most recent and current migrants to the United States from Central America have been attempting to join family members already here. Since 1995, 871,000 legal immigrants have entered the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, 84% sponsored by a settled family member in the U.S. Undocumented migrants have also been crossing the border for purposes of family reunification. Since 1995, an estimated 1.1 million undocumented migrants have arrived from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and the Central American population of the United States therefore consists mostly of unauthorized immigrants. Roughly 60% of U.S. residents from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are estimated to be undocumented.

This brings us to the current border crisis. What we are seeing now are the sons and daughters of undocumented migrants who originally fled disorder and violence during the U.S. intervention of the 1980s. In the early years of their exile, undocumented migrants could return home periodically to visit their families, but with the militarization of the U.S. border during the 1990s return trips became very difficult and all but ceased. If Central Americans living and working in the United States want to see their families, they need to bring them to America.

Despite “crisis” rhetoric now gripping the U.S. media, in reality, the entry of Central American children seeking to reunite with undocumented families in the United States is not new. It has been going on since the political violence ended in the mid-1990s. But the numbers are now rising because children left behind are growing up and are taking matters into their own hands – or they are being sponsored by parents who, desperate to see their offspring removed from harm’s way, pay coyotes to smuggle them across the border. Central American young people and children also stand out now because they are the primary set of migrants seeking to cross the southern border without authorization. Undocumented migration from Mexico has been zero or negative since 2008.

In sum, the current border influx of Central American youths and children has three fundamental causes. Devastation in the region was furthered by past U.S. interventions in Central America, which spurred the massive out-migration of refugees to the United States during the 1980s and early nineties, thus dividing hundreds of thousands parents and children. Subsequently, the unwillingness of the U.S. government during the Cold War to accept Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans as refugees created conditions for the growth of a large undocumented population of Central Americans living north of the border. And most recently, new waves of illegal border crossings are happening because of the repeated inability of Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform. Such reform would give longtime undocumented Central American residents of the U.S. a pathway to legal permanent residence and a basis for ordered, legal reunification with children they left behind.

What needs to happen to solve the current round of difficulties with unaccompanied young immigrants at the border – and to address the needs of Central American immigrants and the communities hosting them across the country? It is too late for the United States to heal the harms done by military interventions and ill-advised policies toward Central American refugees and migrants in the past. But comprehensive immigration reform is still possible. The Senate passed a plausible bill in the summer of 2013, and the House of Representatives could bring it to a vote, putting the United States on a better path for dealing with millions of existing undocumented immigrants, including Central American families whose children seek entry now. Unfortunately, House action, however needed and sensible, seems a remote possibility as long as political posturing prevails.