

CHILDREN DON'T MIGRATE,
they flee



Children Don't Migrate, They Flee

is an exhibition of photographs and commissioned assignments by award-winning photojournalists Katie Orlinsky, Kirsten Luce, Meridith Kourt, Estaban Felix, and Moises Castillo.

In 2014, tens of thousands of unaccompanied children and families from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador arrived at the U.S. border. While their harrowing journeys were rife with violence, exploitation, and trafficking, the risks were more tolerable than what they'd been forced to endure in Central America's Northern Triangle. Today, the root causes of that mass exodus—violence, corruption, poverty, and a climate of impunity—remain unchanged and largely ignored by U.S. policymakers.

Out of Sight but not out of Danger

Rather than responding to the mass wave of unaccompanied children as a humanitarian crisis, the U.S. government tightened border controls, and supported Mexico's efforts to increase interdictions of fleeing women and children. Though they succeeded in reducing the number of people reaching the U.S. border, they failed to address the root causes of the influx.

The reality is that rates of violence in the Northern Triangle are among the highest in the world, and children commonly face gang and family violence that law enforcement either ignores or participates in. Even the U.S. State Department acknowledges the problem of impunity, noting that, "corruption, intimidation, and the poor functioning of the justice system were serious impediments to the protection of human rights."¹



Photo by Katie Orlinsky



Photo by Meridith Kourt

Girls at Risk

For women and girls in the Northern Triangle, the dangerous journey north is a calculated risk compared to living in fear of gang violence, which is compounded by high levels of domestic and sexual violence and coercion. Moreover, girls face gender discrimination in the justice system, along with weak rule of law, corruption, and lack of access to services—all of which pose tremendous barriers to their safety and security. In the words of 15-year-old Maritza, who came



to the U.S. to escape gang violence, “I am here because the gang threatened me...In El Salvador, they take young girls, rape them and throw them in plastic bags.”²

Obstacles at Every Turn

As conditions in the Northern Triangle deteriorate and Mexico intensifies border policing, fleeing children and families have been forced to take more treacherous routes farther away from shelters and humanitarian aid workers. As a result, they

are more likely to experience violence and abuse by criminal groups and unscrupulous officials. Shockingly, a 2014 report identified that public officials were directly involved in or tolerated abductions of migrants in transit through Mexico by organized crime groups. Government agents have also been implicated in human trafficking and other grave human rights crimes.³

United States Humanitarian Leadership Needed

With an additional 10,500 unaccompanied children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in October and November 2015, this humanitarian crisis shows no signs of abating. Instead of battling a perceived immigration crisis, the United States should employ the more sustainable and cost-effective solution of supporting approaches that address the root causes of forced migration. That means investing in stronger child protection systems, strengthening rule of law to reduce the climate of impunity for perpetrators of gang and family violence, and fostering regional solutions that address the root causes of violence and insecurity driving children from their homes. It is also critical that provisions of the Trafficking Victims Prevention Act designed to ensure legal protection for vulnerable unaccompanied children, who may have been trafficked into the United States, are not weakened or eliminated.

Such a response upholds the core American value of U.S. humanitarian leadership that dates back to the protection of religious minorities in the colonial era, of political dissidents during the Cold War, and of refugees fleeing the violence of Iraq and Afghanistan.

CHILDREN ARE FLEEING THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES

Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have seen nearly 63,000 children flee to the United States and other neighboring countries, and according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, asylum applications in neighboring countries – the United States, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize – have risen 712% since 2009.

Rates of violence in the Northern Triangle are among the highest in the world. Guatemala and El Salvador have a murder rate more than 800% higher than that of the United States. Meanwhile, Honduras's murder rate is close to 1,900% higher than that of the United States. Family violence is hidden or met with impunity. These forms of violence are key drivers for children and young people fleeing.⁴

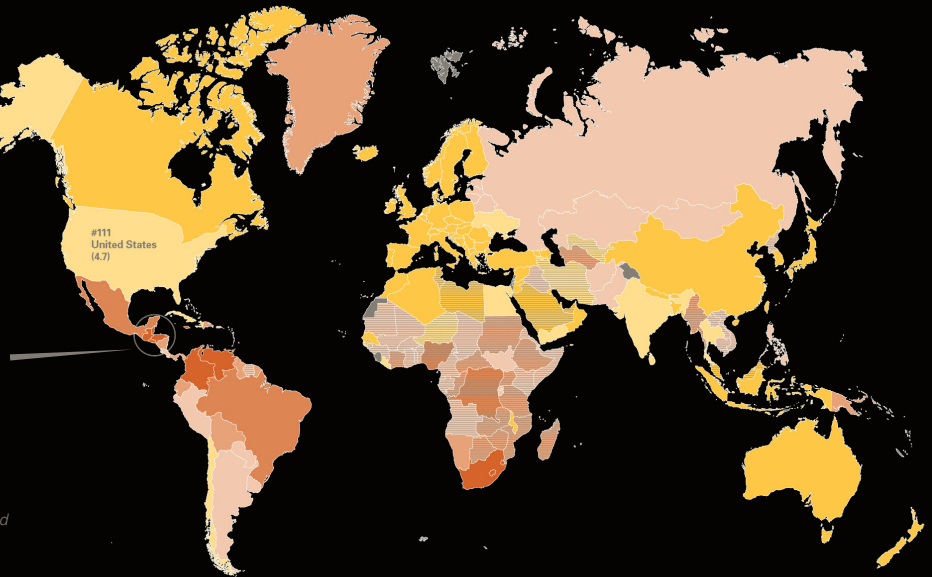
Northern Triangle

Homicide World Rankings

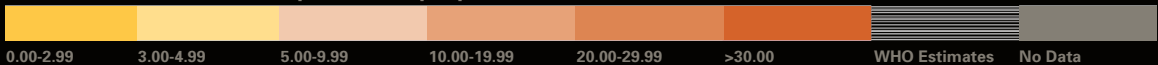
- #1 Honduras (90.4)
- #4 El Salvador (41.2)
- #5 Guatemala (39.9)



Homicide rates in Northern Triangle Countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), 2013



HOMICIDE RATE: Homicides per 100,000 people



Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dashed lines represent undetermined boundaries. Source: UNODC Homicide Statistics (2013)

Children Don't Migrate, They Flee is a project of the Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking (ATEST) and Too Young to Wed (TYTW).

The Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking is a U.S.-based coalition that advocates for solutions to prevent and end all forms of human trafficking and modern slavery around the world. ATEST is a project of Humanity United. Learn more at endslaveryandtrafficking.org.

By providing visual evidence of the human rights challenges faced by women and girls around the world Too Young to Wed aims to amplify their courageous voices and build a global community dedicated to ending child, early, and forced marriage and supporting positive change for these girls. Learn more at tooyoungtowed.org.

1. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, U.S. Department of State (2015)
2. *Children on the Run*, UNHCR (2014)
3. *A Challenging Moment for the Protection of Migrant Rights and Human Rights in the Northern Triangle of Central America & Across the Migrant Route*, Latin American Working Group Education Fund (2015)
4. *Children on the Run*, UNHCR (2014)