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# 8. Roots of juvenile migration from El Salvador

*Susan Bibler Coutin*

Since 2014, U.S. news has featured accounts of increased numbers of children and families migrating to the United States from Central America's northern triangle. For example, a 2015 article in *The Atlantic* told the story of Guillermo, a 16-year-old boy from El Salvador. Near his home in San Salvador, Guillermo had narrowly missed being shot by a gang member, and his father and brother-in-law had been badly injured in gang shootings. While riding the bus to his job at a local tennis club, Guillermo was beaten by gang members, who stole his cell phone and threatened to kill him if they saw him in their neighborhood again. Shortly after he turned 15, gang members forced him into their house, in an effort to recruit him. Though he escaped, they began following him, and threatened to kill him or his siblings if he didn't join the gang. For protection, Guillermo moved 30 minutes away, to live with his grandmother, but when his father learned that gang members still planned to murder him, he arranged for Guillermo to be smuggled into the United States, at a cost of $7,500. After crossing the Rio Grande, he turned himself in to a border patrol agent. He was transferred from one Office of Refugee Resettlement shelter to another, and eventually released to his mother, who had lived in the United States for two years. With the support of a Legal Aid Justice Center attorney, Guillermo applied for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), arguing that because his father had been unable to protect him from violence, he needed to remain in the United States.[1] The case was granted, and Guillermo became one of the less than 10 percent of applying unaccompanied children to be awarded SIJS that year (Phippen 2015).

Guillermo is not alone in having to flee El Salvador due to gang violence (Martínez 2016; UNHCR 2010, 2016). The number of unaccompanied children entering the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which had been in the 3,000–4,500 range in the early 2000s, rose to 51,705 in 2014 (Meyer et al. 2016:1). It dropped in 2015, but in 2016, rose again to 59,692 (Kandel 2017). The actual number of child migrants is likely much higher, as these figures do not include young people traveling with parents or going to destinations other than the United States. Who are these children? Why are they migrating? What are their future prospects? And how do the experiences of recent child migrants compare to those who migrated at earlier historical moments?

Answering these questions requires exploring the complex history of Salvadoran migration, with a focus on the perspectives and experiences of children and youth. Definitions of "youth" vary, but here, I include adults in their early-to-mid-twenties. Adopting a child- or youth-centered approach can help to avoid distortions introduced by focusing on the perspectives of established adults (Morrill et al. 2000; White et al. 2011). For example, Orellana et al. note that in much of the scholarly literature on immigration, children are defined "in effect, as luggage, as in phrases like 'the immigrant sent for his wife and children'" (2001:578). Likewise, it is important to be attentive to Salvadoran norms regarding childhood, in order to avoid imposing Westernized or U.S. categories on

the experiences of Salvadoran children and youth (Ní Laoire et al. 2010). To do so, this chapter includes excerpts of interviews with Salvadoran young adults who immigrated to the United States as children and who reflect on their past experiences. The history of child and youth migration from El Salvador cannot be understood without examining transnationalism, that is, the ways that families, communities, and nations transcend national borders (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995; Baker-Cristales 2004). Literary scholar Ana Patricia Rodriguez argues that literature produced by Central American migrants has produced a "*transisthmus* – an imaginary yet material space" that is configured through "texts produced in economic, political, and symbolic relationship to the physical geographic location of Central America" (2009:2). In the case of El Salvador, transnationalism includes both regional dynamics and U.S. economic and military intervention, particularly during the 1980–1992 Salvadoran civil war. The violence that Guillermo and other child migrants have experienced is rooted in these earlier historical moments and transnational dynamics.

## HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Child and youth migration, both within El Salvador and throughout the Central American region, is nothing new. For much of its history, El Salvador had an export-oriented agricultural economy, characterized by gross inequality, an oligarchic political structure, numerous coups, and a neocolonial relationship with the United States (Booth, Wade, and Walker 2006). Institutions that promoted more inclusive forms of governance were repeatedly repressed both by local elites and through foreign intervention, especially from the United States (Montgomery 1995). As families were displaced from their land, children and youth also moved throughout the country and region.

Hamilton and Chinchilla's influential 1991 article, "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis," dates regional migration to the 19th century, when Central American economies began producing coffee for the world market. Lands were expropriated for coffee production, and the displaced peasants followed the harvests. Salvadorans and other Central Americans also migrated to Panama in the late 1800s to work on the canal. In 1931, the price of coffee fell, fueling a peasant uprising that, in 1932, was brutally repressed. Known as the "matanza" or "slaughter," some 30,000 peasants were killed (DeLugan 2013).

By the 1940s, new cash crops were introduced, and agricultural labor became increasingly mechanized, further displacing workers (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991). Displaced *campesinos* migrated not only within the country but also to Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, to provide seasonal labor. In the 1950s, infrastructural development enhanced rural-to-urban migration, while in the 1960s and 1970s, foreign investment and import-substitution policies led to further dislocations, as multi-national companies established manufacturing operations in El Salvador. Peasant and labor movements were violently repressed, setting the stage for the civil wars that wracked the region during the 1980s (Montgomery 1995). By the late 1970s, as these conflicts escalated, migration to the United States increased as well. Children and youth moved with family members, were separated from caregivers who had to migrate, or migrated themselves as wage laborers.

## CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND CIVIL WAR

During a 2006 interview with the author, Marta Dominguez (pseudonym), who immigrated to the United States from El Salvador in 1986 at the age of eight, described how the Salvadoran civil war forced her family to flee the country:

> My mom was the first one to migrate to the United States, and I believe she came in 1980 . . . I was about 2 or 3 years old when she left . . . There was the death squads of El Salvador and some people when they didn't like you, like your neighbors or something like that, they would call, like, the government and say "This person is working with the guerrillas you know, you should come and investigate them." And I think that happened with my father, somebody called in saying that he was working for the other side, for the liberals, and, and the death squads came over and [were] looking for him like three times. So, . . . my mom sent for him. So he came in 1981, I believe.
>
> And, when my father left, he left my brother and myself with my aunt . . . And, then my mom sent for him because boys were always recruited for the war at an early age so he was about 14 or 15 when he was sent to come here to the U.S. . . . But in 1986, my mom sent for my sister and myself and that's when I came here to the U.S.

The war that forced Marta's family to move arose after government repression led leftist movements to take up armed struggle (Wood 2003). Between 1980, when the Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated by the government while conducting mass, and 1992, when peace accords were signed, the civilian population endured surveillance, bombings, battles, death squads, and massacres. From 1981 to 1984, the guerrilla forces attempted to secure an outright military victory and fought accordingly. When victory was not forthcoming, the insurgents turned to wearing away at the Salvadoran Armed Forces through prolonged war. To counter this effort, the Salvadoran military repeatedly bombed zones of guerrilla support, causing high levels of civilian casualties (Montgomery 1995; Byrne 1996). The U.S. government viewed the civil war as a battle between Western democracy and international communism and argued that a guerrilla victory would threaten U.S. security. During the 1980s, the U.S. government sent $6 billion in military and other aid to El Salvador (Schwarz 1991).

The war left deep scars on children (Martín Baró 1990). Children were combatants in the civil war (Dickson-Gómez 2003), non-combatant children were directly targeted or abducted during the conflict (Amnesty International 2008; Binford 1996), and many children, like Marta, experienced the war indirectly. They saw bodies, heard battles, hid from soldiers or guerrillas, witnessed the abduction of family members, and knew individuals who were killed. Young men were at risk of forced recruitment, so it was common for families to send teenage boys out of the country. Women and girls were combatants, others supported the popular moment, and still others were targets of sexual assault and violence, and so also had to flee (Silber 2011). Young people's studies were disrupted, due to school closures, dangers encountered while traveling from home to school, and the fact that university students were considered suspect. By 1984, "within El Salvador there were 468,000 displaced people (9.75 percent of the population), 244,000 in Mexico and elsewhere in Central America, and 500,000 more in the United States, for a total of more than 1.2 million displaced and refugees (25 percent of the population)" (Byrne 1996:115). Today, there are approximately 3 million Salvadorans living outside of the country, between 80–90 percent of whom are in the United States with the rest concentrated in

Canada, Mexico, Europe, Australia, and other Central American countries (Zong and Batalova 2015; Hayden 2003; Gilad 1990).

The children who were part of this mass movement traveled in multiple ways. Some accompanied their parents when they first emigrated, others (particularly teenagers) emigrated without their families, and still others were initially left behind and then rejoined parents later. Travel visas were available only to relatively elite individuals, so many had to travel clandestinely, at great risk and personal expense. Children often did so by using false papers. Marisol Sanabria (pseudonym), who entered the United States at age four or five, along with her older brother, provided a typical account: "It was easy because we only use[d] some people's birth certificates to get us over here . . . I remember we were passing the border line and when the people that was bringing us they were like, 'Oh, fall asleep, fall asleep. Pretend you're asleep.' And we did. And that's how we came here.'" Despite the widespread violence of the Salvadoran civil war, the U.S. government contended that Salvadorans were economic immigrants rather than political refugees. As a result, some 97 percent of the asylum applications filed by Salvadoran asylum seekers were denied (Silk 1986). Many attribute these low success rates to U.S. authorities' support for the Salvadoran government (Coutin 1993; Zolberg 1990). As Hamilton and Chinchilla (1991:106) conclude, "Overall, U.S. foreign policy appears to have been more effective in generating refugees than U.S. immigration and refugee policies have been in preventing their entry."

## FAMILY DYNAMICS

A key challenge associated with the migration of children and youth has been separation from family members. Marta, whose narrative appears above, had this experience. In El Salvador, after her parents left, Marta moved between two different households neither of which she considered adequate: "My aunt she was . . . physically abusive with us, so she would send us with my grandmother. And, then my grandmother she wasn't like, physically abusive but, she wouldn't take care of us the way she should. And, so she would send us with my aunt." Reuniting with her parents after a six-year absence was also challenging:

> I had no memory of them. You know, I had only seen pictures that they had sent. And, I would only talk to them, like, once a year, like during Christmas, or like birthdays. So, the day that I arrived to the U.S., it was funny because I knew I was going to meet my parents, so it was kind of like exciting, but at the same time, it was weird because they were strangers.

William Campos (pseudonym), who was interviewed by the author in 2008, had a different experience. His parents moved to the United States in 1980, at the onset of the Salvadoran civil war, and he and a brother were born in Southern California. Dissatisfied with their working conditions, William and his family then moved back to El Salvador. William recalled seeing bodies in the streets, and one of his brothers narrowly missed both being shot and being forcibly recruited. At the age of 15, William and his brother returned to the United States, to complete their studies, but without their parents. William described this period of his life as "a constant fight. Depression, sadness, loneliness. It was soooo hard! . . . I had to work because my brother and I had to support ourselves." Later,

when his younger brother came to the United States, but without legal status, William and an older brother became responsible for raising him as well.

As families have become dispersed, remittances from immigrants in the United States to their relatives in El Salvador have become key to the Salvadoran economy. In 2016 alone, migrants sent $4.58 billion in remittances, which makes up 17.1 percent of El Salvador's gross national product (Banco Central de Reserva El Salvador 2017). Though celebrated for their economic impact, remittances are produced through painful separations and economic sacrifice (Hernandez and Coutin 2006). In an important study of remitting behavior and the emotional costs of family separation, sociologist Leisy Abrego (2014) found that due to the cultural significance of motherhood in El Salvador, children whose mothers were in the United States suffered more than did those whose fathers were away. She also found that mothers were more reliable in sending remittances to their children in El Salvador than were fathers. In Abrego's study, the children who fared the best emotionally and financially were those whose parents had legal status in the United States and who therefore had greater earning power, the ability to visit their children in El Salvador, and the right to petition for visas for their children to immigrate.

These themes are also echoed in a study that Cecilia Menjívar (2012) conducted within Central American immigrant families in Phoenix, Arizona. Menjívar stresses that Central American family structures have been fluid for decades, due to labor migration and political displacement within Central American countries. Today, however, restrictive regularization opportunities and stiffened border enforcement prolong separations. Remittances have become "monetary transactions with deep emotional meaning" (Menjívar 2012:309), as they provide family members with material evidence of their relationships. Yet, legal uncertainty creates instability, as family members who are separated by national borders do not know when they will see each other. Some individuals form new families, which means that migrant children may acquire stepparents, and step- and half-siblings. Such familial reorganizations can be a source of tension (Menjívar 2000). Innovations in communications technology have nonetheless facilitated long-distanced parenting. Overall, Menjívar concludes, despite these challenges, Salvadoran families exhibit resilience.

Generational and other differences can also arise within families. Some child migrants, particularly young women, complained about parental restrictions. In an interview, Jessica, who immigrated to the United States at the age of five, described conflicts with her mother over dating:

> I'm like, "You're so Salvadoran." I remember telling her that . . . And she would be, "Yes I am. Yes I am, and you're going to have to deal with it. I'm your mother." . . . Another thing – I wasn't really allowed to go out at night. You know, I had a curfew. I wasn't allowed to go wherever I wanted. You know, and she would tell me, "You're not an American kid you can't do that." "And how come my friends can?" "Well that's – that's their parents, but you're not going to do that."

Some child migrants had parents who were very supportive of their educational goals. Julian, a child migrant to the United States who considered dropping out from high school, reported during an interview that his mother encouraged his studies: "She told me to like keep going to school. You know, always go to school." Through Herculean efforts and a supportive counselor, he succeeded, to his mother's relief: "At the end like when I told her I was going to graduate, she'd like get all happy." Cultural differences also became

apparent when child migrants were able to return to El Salvador to visit family there. Jessica, quoted above, described how her family members reacted when she returned to El Salvador to visit as a teenager: "I think there's a huge contrast between how they feel I should be as a Salvadoran woman and who I really am."

Not all Salvadoran child migrants are able to travel internationally. For those unable to obtain U.S. residency or naturalize, immigration laws imposed severe restrictions.

## U.S. IMMIGRATION LAW AND STUDENT/YOUTH ACTIVISM

During the Salvadoran civil war, Salvadoran child migrants who sought refuge in the United States encountered multiple obstacles. U.S. reluctance to grant asylum to Salvadorans left many vulnerable to deportation. Some Salvadoran families qualified for regularization through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), but many arrived after IRCA's January 1, 1982 deadline, and so were ineligible to apply. IRCA established sanctions on employers who hired undocumented workers, making it more difficult for unauthorized immigrants to find jobs. Applying for asylum generated a work permit which also served as an identity document, so Central American asylum seekers often sought work permits for their children. Work permits had to be renewed regularly, a tremendous expense for low-income families.

Given this legal intransigence, during the 1980s, a solidarity movement arose in the United States (Perla 2008). Initially focused on supporting popular struggles in El Salvador and opposing U.S. intervention, the solidarity movement also began to address the needs of refugees living in the United States. U.S. religious leaders began declaring their congregations "sanctuaries" for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees (Coutin 1993). U.S. authorities responded by infiltrating sanctuary communities, indicting sanctuary workers on alien-smuggling charges, and winning convictions in a highly publicized trial in Tucson, Arizona. The movement, in turn, sued the U.S. Government for discriminating against asylum seekers from El Salvador and Guatemala. This lawsuit, known as *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*, or "ABC" for short, was settled out of court in 1991, which allowed Salvadorans and Guatemalans to apply for asylum under special rules designed to ensure fair consideration of their cases. In 1990, Congress created Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and awarded Salvadorans who were already in the country 18 months of protection. Together, the ABC settlement and TPS gave hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans, including many children and youth, temporary legal protection and work authorization, but without the panoply of rights that come with residency or citizenship (Menjívar 2006). After peace accords were signed in El Salvador in 1992 and in Guatemala in 1996, and after more restrictive immigration measures were adopted in the United States in 1996, Congress passed the 1997 Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), which allowed ABC class members and TPS recipients to apply for lawful permanent residency. Due to delays in issuing the regulations that would govern NACARA, it was not until the early 2000s that NACARA cases began to move forward.

Salvadoran child migrants were caught up in this legal history in complex ways. On the one hand, given their ages, their own legal cases were dependent on the actions of their parents. For example, William Martinez (pseudonym) immigrated to the United

States from El Salvador in the late 1980s at the age of nine. His mother applied for TPS, but fearing that TPS recipients would be deported after their 18 months of status expired, she did not include William in her application. By 2008, William's mother had become a lawful permanent resident, through NACARA, whereas William remained undocumented until 2001, when, due to devastating earthquakes in El Salvador, a new TPS was issued. On the other hand, child migrants have exhibited agency in taking charge of their own immigration cases and in brokering immigration law for their parents. One such example is provided by Rosa Hernandez (pseudonym), who immigrated to the United States from El Salvador in 1984 at the age of one-and-a-half. Her father, who had immigrated earlier, obtained lawful permanent residency in 1986, seemingly through IRCA, and then petitioned for Rosa, who gained her residency in 1989. Her father was able to naturalize, and her family returned to El Salvador for a time, but Rosa returned to the United States, hoping to naturalize as well. At the age of 15, she approached U.S. Immigration authorities herself, for information about how to naturalize, and in 2003 she became a U.S. citizen.

Salvadoran child migrants, along with other immigrant youth, have also exhibited agency through the undocumented student movement. Undocumented students face unique challenges, as they have been raised in the United States, were educated in U.S. public schools, and may hope to pursue higher education. Yet due to their immigration status, these young people are often ineligible for financial aid, may lack work authorizations or the ability to obtain a driver's license, and are sometimes charged out-of-state tuition (Gonzales 2011; Abrego and Gonzales 2010). Even if they succeed in obtaining college degrees, they may be limited to working as house cleaners, nannies, or construction workers. These young people are deeply stigmatized by their immigration situation (Abrego 2011). Many have resorted to protests, vigils, and hunger strikes, calling for passage of the DREAM Act (which would have granted status to students), an end to deportations, and more inclusive policies more generally. Central Americans have advocated not only legalization, but also a "more expansive notion of citizenship from below that finds expression in the everyday lived experiences of Central Americans' participation and political agency" (Zimmerman 2015:40).

Although the U.S. Congress has not (to date) passed the DREAM Act, in 2012, President Obama responded to student pressure by announcing a new form of executive relief: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA. DACA was available to individuals who immigrated to the United States as children and met particular educational, entry date, and continuous presence requirements. DACA has provided work permits and temporary relief from deportation to some 750,000 young people, including 26,235 Salvadorans (USCIS 2016). Yet, DACA does not provide a pathway to citizenship or confer international travel privileges, and the entire program has been ordered rescinded by the Trump administration, though Trump's order has been placed under injunction. Because of the injunction, those who have already received DACA are eligible to renew their status, but, as of this writing, no new DACA requests are being considered, though in April 2018, a US federal court ruled that the Administration had to accept new DACA applications, but delayed this order for 90 days to give the Trump administration time to justify its decision to terminate DACA. DACA recipients' status therefore remains quite insecure.[2] Moreover, in November 2014, President Obama attempted to expand the eligibility requirements for DACA and to create a new program, "Deferred Action for Parents

of Americans," or DAPA, as a form of executive action. Both DAPA and the expansion of DACA were blocked after Texas and other states sued the federal government, arguing that President Obama had exceeded his authority. The Trump administration has declined to support the Obama administration's policies on these matters, so neither of these programs will be implemented.

## DEPORTATION

The legacy of the U.S. government's failure to award Central Americans asylum in a timely fashion and to create pathways to citizenship for the undocumented is that many child migrants, both from El Salvador and elsewhere, are vulnerable to deportation. Deportations have skyrocketed since the passage of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which expanded the range of criminal convictions leading to deportation, made detention mandatory for many who were in removal proceedings, and reduced judicial discretion to grant waivers to deportation (Kanstroom 2012; Morawetz 2000). In 1995, the year before these reforms, 50,924, individuals were removed; in 1996, the year of the reforms, this number grew to 69,680, and in 1997, one year later, it escalated further to 114,432 (USDHS 2006). By 2013, 368,644 individuals has been removed from the United States (USICE 2013), a figure that declined in 2015 to 235,413 as the United States set new enforcement priorities (USICE 2015). Programs such as "secure communities" have fostered collaboration between federal, state, and local law enforcement authorities in prioritizing the deportation of noncitizens who have been convicted of crimes (Chacón 2007). In response, cities and localities have sought to prohibit local law enforcement agencies from enforcing federal immigration law. Such "sanctuary" initiatives have gained notoriety, as President Trump has sought to cut off federal funding to these localities, a tactic that has been placed under permanent injunction, though the Trump administration is appealing this ruling.[3] Despite the current claim to focus deportation policies on serious criminals, a wide net is being cast. In 2012, 12 percent of deportees were serious offenders, 21.4 percent were convicted of drug-related offenses, 40.4 percent were convicted of other crimes (more than half of which were traffic offenses), and 23.8 percent had immigration offenses (Treyger, Chalfin, and Loeffler 2014; see also Kubrin 2014).

These policies have hit Salvadoran child migrants hard. Racial profiling, intensified policing of communities of color, and the criminalization of youth culture have led young Latino men – including Salvadorans – to be particularly targeted (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). In 2013, El Salvador was the fourth most common destination of deportees from the United States, with 21,602 individuals removed (USICE 2013).

## AFTER DEPORTATION

Child migrants who are deported to El Salvador face numerous challenges. Those who have grown up in the United States may speak limited or Mexicanized Spanish and be regarded by other Salvadorans as foreigners. If their family members are in the United States, then they may have little support in El Salvador. It is difficult to find work due

to widespread stigmatization of deportees and suspicion that they were gang members or criminals. Police and security guards sometimes subject them to bodily inspections, asking them to raise their shirts to reveal any tattoos that they might have. Gangs also threaten, recruit, or even kill deportees. Unaccompanied children who are deported are often returned to the same situations of violence that compelled them to leave in the first place.

Following deportation, child migrants have sought to recreate lives for themselves (Zilberg 2011). Some illicitly return to the United States, where they are at risk of apprehension, prosecution, incarceration, and being removed once more. Others remain in El Salvador, forming new families and attempting to find jobs. Those who have developed English skills sometimes find work in call centers (Rivas 2014). Those who have not been outside of the country for long and who still have ties there are likely to be the most successful at reintegrating into Salvadoran society (Dingeman-Cerda 2018). Yet exclusionary policies in both countries have likely placed many deportees in an underclass where they are unable to find work or reunite with family members. Salvadoran deportees are therefore part of what legal scholar Daniel Kanstroom (2012) has referred to as a new American diaspora.

## GANGS, VIOLENCE, AND BORDERS

The history of foreign intervention, displacement, civil war, social inequality, and repression within El Salvador has produced a post-war social environment in which gangs and crime have proliferated (Moodie 2011). The 1992 peace accords reconstituted the FMLN as a political party, replaced existing security forces with the Policía Nacional Civil (National Civilian Police), 20 percent of whom were to be former guerrilla combatants, established a Human Rights Ombudsman to guard against future abuses, formed a truth commission, and set out a plan for national reconstruction (Popkin 2000). Yet, an amnesty law that was passed in 1993 prevented prosecution of those responsible for abuses, thus creating a climate of impunity. In the years following the accords, crime grew as social inequality remained entrenched, security became privatized, and guns were easily available. When deportations escalated in the mid-1990s, the United States sent U.S.-based gang members to El Salvador, where they joined localized gangs there. Anti-gang policies adopted in El Salvador during the 1990s and 2000s focused primarily on repression rather than on creating viable alternatives for young people to pursue education and employment. In 2012, a truce was negotiated between the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang, the two largest gangs in the country, but it broke down 18 months later. In this destabilized situation, young people have continued to migrate in search of safety, reproducing patterns of movement from the war years. The many Salvadoran parents living in the United States without documentation or with only temporary legal status are not eligible to petition for their children to immigrate legally. Instead, recent child migrants have traveled without authorization, a dangerous endeavor (De León 2015).

In these circumstances, children and youth in El Salvador are highly at risk (UNHCR 2014; IDHUCA 2016). According to a 2015 United Nations Development Program report (UNDP 2015), 21 out of every 100 young people in El Salvador were neither working nor

studying, and the situation for young women was estimated to be three times worse than that for young men. An interconnected nexus of poverty, gender discrimination, lack of opportunity, and physical violence endangers children and youth (Musalo, Frydman and Ceriani Cernadas 2015). According to the 2015 UNDP report, from 2010 to 2013, those between 15 and 29 years old were most likely to be victims of homicide, and the homicide rate for El Salvador in 2013 was 77 per 100,000 for men and 6.5 per 10,000 for women. A coalition of Salvadoran civil society groups calculated that in 2015 the homicide rate was 90 per 100,000 (Mesa de Sociedad Civil 2015). Women were also victims of sexual aggression. The proliferation of gangs in El Salvador has created a situation in which young people are pressured to join and, if they refuse, must continually walk a fine line between offending gang members and appearing so close that they become a target of a rival gang. Employers sometimes reject job applicants from neighborhoods or communities where gangs are prevalent, whether or not applicants are gang members. The 2015 UNDP report concludes that young people "confront the fear caused by a violent environment and the mistrust of a society that stigmatizes them as dangerous" (p. 13, translation by author).

## U.S. RESPONSE TO THE "SURGE" OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

When the so-called surge in unaccompanied children began in 2014, the United States responded by increasing the capacity of family detention facilities, fast-tracking removal proceedings, working with Mexico to intensify enforcement along Mexico's southern border, and launching a publicity campaign warning Central American parents of the dangers of migrating (see also Terrio 2015). The number of unaccompanied children declined in 2015 as the "Programa Frontera Sur," a U.S. strategy for preventing migrant children from reaching the U.S.–Mexico border, went into full effect (Castillo 2016), but rose once more in 2016. Seemingly, the pressures that cause individuals to flee for their lives outweigh the risks – kidnapping, robbery, assault, dismemberment due to falling from a moving train, death – of traveling irregularly (Meyer et al. 2016). The U.S. government also created an in-country refugee processing program that would allow Salvadorans who are at risk of persecution to migrate to the United States legally. A 2016 report by the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman about this program identified numerous areas of concern, including overly long processing times, the need to protect applicants, restrictive eligibility criteria, high costs, widespread uncertainty, and lack of access to counsel (Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman 2016). Meanwhile, opportunities for legalization in the United States remain limited. In 2016, for example, only 15,101 applications for Special Immigrant Juvenile visas were approved (USCIS 2017), and in 2015, the Office of Refugee Resettlement received 33,726 referrals of unaccompanied children (USDHS 2016). A 2015 plan known as the Alliance for Prosperity ostensibly addresses the underlying causes of child migration, but some analysts have concluded that, due to "the emphasis on attracting foreign investment, the support it provides for the continuation of dubious security initiatives, and the Central American governments' lack of accountability," this plan may do more harm than good (Garcia 2016). The welfare and very lives of Central American children remain gravely at risk.

## CONCLUSION: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Salvadoran child and youth migrants have proven to be tremendously resilient. These young people have survived violence, navigated increasingly militarized border zones, withstood exclusionary policies, and forged lives for themselves wherever they currently reside. Many have become scholars, activists, and professionals, and are founding organizations that will shape the Salvadoran diaspora in the future. Work by such scholars as Leisy Abrego, Cecilia Menjívar, Ester Hernandez, Cecilia Rivas, Steven Osuna, Ana Patricia Rodriguez, Robin DeLugan, Alfonso Gonzalez, Mario Escobar, Karina Oliva Alvarado, Karen Tejada-Peña, and many others provides particular insight into these experiences. A central point made in this body of work is that the current circumstances of Central American youth and child migrants cannot be understood without investigating the histories of colonization, intervention, and exploitation that have given rise to migration. Furthermore, this work points out, the United States, which is now a key destination country for migrants, contributed to migration through its foreign policies. Basic notions of accountability would suggest that the United States should therefore adopt a more welcoming attitude toward child and youth migrants. Features of this more welcoming attitude could include an award of Temporary Protected Status to Salvadoran child and youth migrants who are already in the United States; a revision of border enforcement policies to promote migrants' well-being instead of attempting to force migrants into inhospitable terrain, where they are exposed to dehydration, heat stroke, animals, and criminal violence (De León 2015); and, most importantly, providing legal channels of migration for youth-at-risk. Such legal channels could include giving U.S. immigrant parents the ability to quickly obtain humanitarian visas to bring their children to the United States, granting Temporary Protected Status to unaccompanied children already in the country, evacuating children from areas of violence and risk, streamlining asylum procedures, and providing young people with the opportunity to work and study in the United States. The injustice and irrationality of deporting so-called criminal aliens who in fact are part of an American diaspora (Kanstroom 2012) should also be addressed by restoring eligibility to apply for waivers of removal on the basis of community ties, family relationships, and acculturation. Quite likely, solutions to the problems of citizen insecurity in El Salvador may be developed by these youth themselves – as occurred in the 1990s, when deported gang members from the United States founded the transnational gang violence prevention organization Homies Unidos (Homies United) (Zilberg 2011). The futures not only of individual migrants but also of the nation and the region are therefore in the hands of these young people.

## NOTES

1. Note that children are eligible for SIJS if they cannot be reunited with one of their parents due to abuse, abandonment or neglect. See https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/special-immigrant-juveniles/eligibility-sij-status/eligibility-status-sij. Accessed March 29, 2018.
2. For details, see https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-response-january-2018-preliminary-injunction. Accessed March 29, 2018.
3. See https://www.sccgov.org/sites/cco/overview/pages/fedlawsuit.aspx. Accessed March 29, 2018.

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## FIVE RECOMMENDED PUBLICATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Abrego, Leisy. 2014. *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love across Borders*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Coutin, Susan Bibler. 2016. *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
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