

“There Was So Much Violence Around. I Felt So Alone. I Wanted to See My Mother.”

Why are so many pregnant and parenting teens arriving at the U.S.–Mexico border?

By Sarah Salvadore



A pregnant immigrant (not the teen profiled in this story) stands next to a U.S. Border Patrol truck in 2015 near Rio Grande City, Texas.

John Moore/Getty Images

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On the afternoon of Nov. 9, 2015, 17-year-old Sofia* and her 3-year-old brother, Samuel, crossed the Rio Grande into Texas. Traveling with five other children, they were attempting to reach the United States from Mexico. Sofia's feet had swelled severely on the long journey from Honduras, her home country. She was also seven months pregnant at that time—and one among the growing number of pregnant and parenting teens appearing at the U.S.–Mexico border.

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The journey was tough on her. Around 5 feet tall and with a slight frame, Sofia was often exhausted after walking for hours, sometimes carrying her little brother. “We had to walk. Sometimes we had to run and hide ourselves. My biggest fear was that I would lose my baby,” she said. Samuel, meanwhile, was oblivious to everything. “He wasn’t scared because he had me.”

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Sofia's first attempt at crossing the border failed. "We were intercepted in Mexico. They tried to send us back [to Honduras], but we went to the [train] station and came back." The siblings managed to slip away and start their journey all over again. A month later, they were staring at the Rio Grande. In Sofia's mind, it was the only thing between them and their mother.

"When I crossed the river, there was immigration," Sofia recalled. "I was with my little brother, and when immigration detained us, they put us in the *hielera*." The *hielera*—the Spanish word for *icebox*—is the common term for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's holding cells, which are notorious for being extremely cold. Traveling without warm clothing, Sofia wasn't prepared for the conditions there. Her pregnancy did not deter the immigration authorities from holding her in the icebox, where she, like other migrants, was given only a Mylar space blanket to protect her from freezing temperatures. Then she was separated from her brother.

"I recall being transferred from the *hielera* to another cell crowded with women and children. It was strange. I distinctly remember it had green mattresses. The same night, I was transferred again, this time to *casa hogar*," said Sofia when we spoke recently at her home in Virginia. *Casa hogar* is how migrants refer to a shelter for unaccompanied minors that is funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, a federal agency that assists in the relocation process of refugees, victims of human trafficking, survivors of war and torture, and unaccompanied children.

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Cases of pregnant or parenting teens being apprehended at the U.S. border are not altogether new. Historically, most of the unaccompanied children, or UACs as they are often known, were adolescent males between the ages of 14 and 17. A February **report** by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found a "significant" increase in the detention of pregnant and parenting teenage girls between January 2014 to April 2015. This, along with alarming allegations that these girls are neglected and not provided with adequate medical, psychological, and reproductive care in detention, has largely gone unnoticed.

In 2014, 726 unaccompanied pregnant girls were placed in ORR care, followed by 456 in 2015. In 2016, the ORR saw 654 unaccompanied pregnant girls in its custody.

Escalating violence in Central America's northern triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has resulted in **more children leaving their homes for the United States**. "The truce between Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18—the two largest criminal gangs in Central America—was called off. The countries plunged into violence once again, resulting in more deaths," explained Adam Isacson, a regional policy expert at the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights research and advocacy organization focusing on the Americas.

The gangs are fighting for control over the drug trafficking business, which has expanded over the years, leading to an escalation in violence between gang members and police. In 2015, El Salvador saw a 70 percent spike in violent deaths. Bloodshed on this scale hasn't been seen since the country's civil war three decades ago. Meanwhile, in Honduras the homicide rate fell by 30 percent, but it remained the **second-deadliest country** in the world after El Salvador. This armed conflict, along with widespread corruption, poverty, and unemployment, has resulted in women and children leaving their country.

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Women and girls fleeing Central America have reported that they face extreme violence in their home countries. In "**Women on the Run**," a 2015 study conducted by the U.N High Commissioner for Refugees, women described being raped, assaulted, extorted, and threatened by gang members. Many were victims of domestic violence.

When Sofia was 13 years old, her mother left Honduras to come to the United States. Poverty, domestic violence, and an alcoholic husband prompted her to make the move. Sofia and her older brother, who has remained in Honduras, were left in the care of her father and grandmother. At that time, Samuel was just 6 months old.

"My dad felt very disillusioned, alone, after my mom [left]. He drank a lot. I started working so that I could help raise my little brother," Sofia recalled. She dropped out of school at age 14 and enrolled at a beauty academy. After graduating, she began working in a salon.

Sofia's grandmother had another child to look after and didn't pay much attention to the young siblings. "I had to look out for my little brother, buy the milk, buy the diapers, and make sure he got fed," Sofia said. While she was working at the salon, Sofia met a 20-year-old man, and they began dating. "I didn't really live that much time with him. I ended up getting pregnant, and then we separated," she said.

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Her job at the salon didn't last long, either. "I stopped working because I had an injury; I burned my arm, and this is the scar that remains," she said, pointing at a blemish on her left arm. Though her mother sent money regularly, it wasn't enough to take care of a pregnant girl and a young child. There were days when all Sofia had to eat was half an egg; the other half went to her brother.

"I was sick of living that life. There was so much violence around. I felt so alone. I wanted to see my mother. I decided to come to the United States when my friends were coming here. My mom didn't know I was planning to migrate with my brother. At that time, I was five months pregnant."

The pregnant girls apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border all have their own reasons for leaving home. Some girls in Border Patrol custody became pregnant as a result of sexual assault on the journey. In "Women on the Run," women describe horrific instances of sexual assault and rape in transit. Women interviewed by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees claimed that the journey to safety was "a journey through hell"; several reported taking contraceptives to reduce the risk of pregnancy if they were raped along the route. According to "**Invisible Victims**," a 2010 report by Amnesty International, as many as 6 in 10 women and girls reported sexual violence on the journey.

When Sofia left Honduras, she hoped to leave behind the poverty and violence. She was unprepared for the tremendous stress along the route. The responsibility for her brother and unborn child was too much to handle. Upon reaching Guatemala, she called her mother. "My mother was shocked. She told me I needed to find a coyote [to guide us to the border]. I got hold of [coyotes], and they spoke to her," she said.

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For the first time since she left Honduras, Sofia felt relief. Traveling with coyotes meant she didn't have to map out the route, worry about where to sleep at night, or what to eat. It was the coyotes' responsibility to get the siblings to the border. But she was still afraid. She was worried for her own safety as well as that of her brother and unborn child. Sofia was alert and observant—she remembers every single date and detail of her journey.

After completing a treacherous trek, minors apprehended at the U.S. border often find themselves struggling to cope with conditions in detention centers.

The impact of detention is especially hard on pregnant minors. The strain of the physically challenging trek, coupled with anxiety about being separated from her brother, took a toll on Sofia's health. "I was disturbed and emotionally distressed. ... [My brother] was sent to my mother, and I was left behind. I was so upset and stressed. I ended up giving birth early—at eight months," she said.

According to experts, when pregnant minors experience mental and physical trauma, they face an elevated risk of preterm birth. "Trauma also has a long-term impact on the development of the child, and in some cases, leads to substance abuse in the young mother," explained Julie Linton, a physician who is chairwoman of the Immigrant Health Special Interest Group of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"When young children are coming to the U.S., they come with certain expectations. These expectations also largely fueled by misinformation—that they will be welcomed and have access to care. ... Once these children are detained, an uncertainty enters the picture—will they be able to stay, or will they be sent back? This has a lasting effect on them," explained Michelle Silva, a member of the National Latina/o Psychological Association and assistant professor of psychiatry at Yale University.

During her time in ORR custody, Sofia worried about the future. Unaware of immigration rules, she had hoped to be reunited with her mother immediately after apprehension and was unprepared for the loneliness she experienced. She couldn't fully comprehend why she was being held. "When I came to the U.S., I was very hopeful that me and my brother would arrive together and go to our mom. It was difficult to be pulled apart. I was pregnant. I wanted to be with my mother," she recalled.

On June 8, 2015, the National Immigration Law Center, American Immigration Council, the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona, the law firm Morrison Foerster, and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law filed a lawsuit on behalf of three detainees and others who were confined to the *hieleras*. The lawsuit, filed in U.S. district court in Tucson, Arizona, alleged that the Border Patrol violated its own policies and the constitutional rights of the detainees by depriving them of sleep, sanitary conditions, medical care and screening, adequate food and water, and warmth.

Nora Preciado, staff attorney at the National Immigration Law Center, who filed the lawsuit, claimed Border Patrol was violating its own rules. "We have known for years and years, from scores of detainees, about the conditions they have been detained under. They are not provided adequate food and nutrition or medical attention or screening. There are specific set of standards that Border Patrol needs to

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follow with the 'risk population'—UACs, juveniles, and pregnant women—but they don't," she said.

UAC siblings are not to be separated while in detention, other than for safety reasons. Minors are supposed to be given clean bedding, clothing, and hygiene articles upon arrival. Sofia and Samuel received none of those things. Instead, they were separated, and Sofia was locked up in an overcrowded cell with "dirty green mattresses" on the floor.

Advocates claim that minors are being detained in such conditions for almost three days before the Department of Homeland Security transfers them to ORR custody. "The 72 hours of detention is absolutely unacceptable. The [detention centers of the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol] are not child-friendly, and no child should ever have to go through this," said the American Academy of Pediatrics' Linton, who witnessed the conditions during her visits to the CBP holding facilities.

Meanwhile, anti-immigration groups argue that pregnant teens show up at the border for the sole purpose of having "anchor babies," which will confer some kind of legal immigration status on them. The topic was brought back into mainstream debate during the 2016 presidential campaign by some **Republican candidates**. And now, as part of his immigration reform plans, President Donald Trump has said he wants to roll back President Barack Obama's **immigration executive actions**, which include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals—a program that provides temporary relief from deportation and a two-year work permit to qualifying immigrants who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children.

Advocates dismiss these accusations, saying pregnancy is not a choice for many teenage girls. "This notion that somehow you are strategically pregnant in order to make the incredibly dangerous trip to the United States, in order to have the baby on this side so you are allowed to remain is basically attributing a level of connivance to these young women and girls, which is so extraordinarily disconnected from the truth that it's unbelievable," said Wendy Young, president of Kids in Need of Defense, an advocacy group of pro-bono lawyers at various law firms, corporations, and law schools across the country that represent unaccompanied and refugee children in their deportation proceedings. "U.S. immigration law doesn't give [parents] status [as citizens] anyway. A child [born in the U.S.] can't petition for his/her parent until they are 21."

The immediate concern for advocates and health care professionals is the well-being of the mother and child. "These girls are highly traumatized—physically and mentally. But the Border Patrol is not sensitive, and they are locked in detention. Our system has to ensure better care for them," said Young.

During her time in ORR custody, Sofia received "some counseling" but not enough to assuage her fear of childbirth. The anxiety that engulfed her during the beginning of her journey grew stronger each day. "I was scared because I didn't know about the process of giving birth. I was among strangers and didn't speak English. I was sad and scared about my baby's well-being. But also because I couldn't be with my family," she said.

After Sofia's son was born, he was in the hospital for a whole month. Owing to the stressful journey his mother undertook, the child was extremely frail. Sofia's health wasn't much better. "I was depressed being surrounded by strangers. It was an extremely lonely experience for me," she said.

On Jan. 17, 2016, Sofia and her son were sent to live with her mother in Virginia. According to law, the ORR seeks to reunify unaccompanied minors with family members, on the grounds that the child's best interests are served by living with family. Most children are released from custody while their deportation proceedings are ongoing. After being released from ORR custody, Sofia's health improved dramatically, as did her son's. Today she is on the road to recovery.

"[My son] is healthy. I'm happy," said Sofia, who shares a sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment with her mother, brother, and son. Mentally, she is doing a lot better—she laughs easily and looks much younger than her documented age.

She has already begun high school and plans a career in business administration. "I want to graduate and be a role model for my son and Samuel," she said.

While Sofia nurses her baby, Samuel sits close by. The bond between the two siblings is more like mother and child. "I've been a mother to Samuel since he was 6 months old. He's like my child. I didn't have a good life in Honduras. Now I want a better life for me, my brother, and my baby."

**Sofia and Samuel are pseudonyms. We are not using their real names because their immigration status is still pending. (Return.)*

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New Jersey, the Finland of the Eastern Seaboard, Is Offering Baby Boxes to All New Parents

By L.V. Anderson



Finland's baby box from 2016, which is decorated with an illustration by Reeta Ek.

Annika Söderblom © Kela

On Thursday, New Jersey became **the first state to offer boxes full of essential items**, including a built-in baby mattress, to all residents with newborns. Government-distributed baby boxes that double as beds for young infants are a decades-long tradition in Finland, where they are **credited with reducing the country's infant mortality rate** to one of the lowest in the world. New Jersey's Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board hopes that the free boxes will make a dent in the state's incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) by providing infants with a safe place to sleep. The state will also require parents to complete an online education course on newborn safety before they can receive the box.

Since 1949, all parents of newborns in Finland have been offered a choice between a maternity box and a check for 140 euros from the government. The vast majority of parents choose the box. As of 2010, Finland's infant mortality rate was 2.3 deaths per 1,000 live births; the United State's was **more than two and a half times higher**, at 6.1 deaths per 1,000 live births. A few small-scale programs, including ones in **Philadelphia** and **San Antonio**, have attempted to bring the benefits of baby boxes stateside in recent years. New Jersey's program, which is funded by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is expected to provide 105,000 boxes from the **Baby Box Company** to new parents.

New Jersey's public health officials seem to see the box partially as a way to distribute important information about safe sleeping practices, but it also serves as a powerful symbol of support. It's hard to imagine a clearer message that the government values children and their parents than a gift box full of items that all new families need. The overwhelming popularity of Finland's box relative to the cash option is a testament to the joy and relief that parents derive from knowing someone else is looking out for their well-being. "This felt to me like evidence that someone cared, someone wanted our baby to have a good start in life," one beneficiary of the Finnish box told BBC News in 2013. "It strengthens that feeling that we are all in this together."

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