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# "They Need to Give Us a Voice":[1] Lessons from Listening to Unaccompanied Central American and Mexican Children on Helping Children Like Themselves

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## Executive Summary

Children make up half of the world's refugees, yet limited research documents the views of youth about migratory causes and recommendations. While there is wide recognition of migrant children's right to free expression, few opportunities exist to productively exercise that right and provide input about their views. This article analyzes the responses of Central American and Mexican migrant children to one interview question regarding how to help youth like themselves, and identifies several implied "no-win" situations as potential reasons for the migration decisions of unaccompanied children. Furthermore, the children's responses highlight the interconnected nature of economics, security, and education as migratory factors. Examination of children's political speech revealed primarily negative references regarding their home country's government, the president, and the police. The police were singled out more than any other public figures, with particular emphasis on police corruption and ineffectiveness. Additional analysis focused on children's comments regarding migration needs and family.

Recommendations for future action include:

- recognizing entwined motivations and no-win situations that may lead children to leave their countries of origin;

1 Quote from a 17-year-old Salvadoran girl: "Sometimes adults view children as lesser and they think we can't become anything or don't have an opinion. They don't ask for our view on things. They need to give us a voice."

2 The author acknowledges the invaluable contribution of the children quoted in this article, who shared their experiences and views as part of the original United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) study. The author would also like to thank UNHCR for granting access to the subset of interview data analyzed in this article, and for the specific assistance of Leslie Vélez and Nicole Boehner. The research and any errors reflect only the views and analysis of the author. Contributions from the following during the writing of this article are also greatly appreciated: Dr. Jessica Toft, University of St. Thomas; the editors and reviewers of the *Journal on Migration and Human Security*; and the participants in the Center for Migration Studies' conference, "Rethinking the Global Refugee Protection System" in July 2016.

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- promoting integrated approaches to home country economic, security, and education concerns for Central American and Mexican youth;
- acknowledging migrant children's political interests and concerns;
- providing youth with meaningful opportunities to contribute their views and suggestions.
- incorporating migrant children's input and concerns into spending plans for US aid appropriated for Central America; and
- emphasizing youth leadership development in efforts to address child migration.

## Introduction

In 2015, children[3] comprised 51 percent of the globe's 21.3 million refugees (UNHCR 2016a). Using a broader definition, UNICEF estimates that 65 million children are "on the move" due to global hostilities, poverty, climate events, or the pull of opportunities abroad (2016). Yet limited research documents the views of youth regarding migratory causes and recommendations (GRYC 2016). This omission of youth perspectives ignores young people's rights to have a say in matters affecting them. Furthermore, it risks misunderstanding and misrepresenting what young people think about their circumstances, and it overlooks young people as potential resources and leaders in seeking solutions to the problems that affect them and, by extension, their communities. This article considers the central research question, "What can we learn from the observations and recommendations of Central American and Mexican unaccompanied migrant children themselves?" by analyzing the responses of Central American and Mexican migrant children to a question regarding how to help youth like themselves, and then concludes with policy and programming recommendations.

The United States witnessed unprecedented levels of Central American unaccompanied child migration in 2014 (ORR 2015; USBP 2015), short-term decreases in 2015 (Rosenblum and Ball 2016), followed by a return to increased Central American apprehensions at the southern US Border that continue well above historical averages (USBP 2016; Burnett 2016). El Salvador and Honduras, with Guatemala close behind, trade positions at or near the top of lists of the world's most violent countries or the nations containing the most homicidal cities (The Economist 2016; Watts 2015; Instituto Igarapé n.d.). Persistent gang violence in this region, along with the push of economic strain and the pull of US opportunity (Donato and Sisk 2015; Rosenblum 2015; UNHCR 2014), seem to ensure that these migration patterns will continue for some time. This relentless violence, combined with high levels of criminal impunity, lead to mistrust of law enforcement to address security issues (OSJI 2016; Eguizábal et al. 2015).

Adding to existing literature reporting the reasons Central American and Mexican children leave home (UNHCR 2014; UNHCR and ACNUR 2014), this article examines previously

3 The terms children and youth are used here interchangeably to refer to individuals under age 18, although in practice the term "youth" is more nebulous. The UN Secretariat defines "youth" as young people between the ages of 15 and 24, however this is not universally observed across UN offices (UNDESA n.d.; UNHCR 2013).

unreported children's responses regarding how to help child migrants like themselves. In analyzing the children's own statements, this article also elevates the voices of youth as an important component in responding to migration crises globally, concluding that youth views can add nuance to understanding migration motivators and that in order to adequately respond to child migration and ultimately prevent — or at least reduce — the need to migrate, national and international policy makers must understand and integrate youth perspectives into the development of effective solutions.

To that end, this article engages in secondary analysis of interview data with 404 unaccompanied Central American and Mexican teens, previously reported on in the publication, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection* (UNHCR 2014). This earlier report focused largely on data regarding children's reasons for leaving their countries of origin, finding that at least 58 percent of the children interviewed were potentially in need of international protection from organized armed criminal actors or violence in the home (ibid.). Hickey-Moody (2016), discussing the Dewey-informed concept of "little public spheres" (58), asks "What if young people could be included in the public realm? What would they say and how would they say it?" (62). These 404 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico provide valuable insight into their assessment of the problems that lead to youth migration and potential responses. In an era of global migration crises, their views deserve our attention.

## Literature Review

A review of the relevant literature indicates both a recognition of migrant children's right to free expression, along with an acknowledgement of the limited practical opportunities to productively exercise that right and provide input about their views.

### *Youth Voice*

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the right of children to express their views on matters affecting them, while Article 13 ensures their right to free expression.[4] Together these articles establish the right of children to participate in circumstances in which they have an interest, while Article 3 clarifies that "the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration"[5] in all actions that concern children. Thus, children have the right to give their opinion and to have their best interests prioritized in decisions concerning them.

Yet a systematic review by UNHCR of its youth engagement activities concluded that youth remain invisible within UNHCR structures and beyond (UNHCR 2013), while the organization continues its commitment to full age, gender, and diversity inclusion (UNHCR 2011). In a recent effort to mitigate this inattention to the particular needs and input of youth, UNHCR and the Women's Refugee Commission coordinated a series of 56 Global Refugee

4 Convention on the Rights of the Child (New York, 20 Nov. 1989) 1577 U.N.T.S. 3, 28 I.L.M. 1448 (1989), *entered into force* 2 Sept. 1990.
5 Id.

Youth Consultations in 22 countries, culminating in a final global consultation at UNHCR headquarters in June 2016 (Gaynor 2016; GRYC 2016). Such efforts represent nascent steps towards incorporating the views of refugee youth into migration policymaking.

A very limited academic literature focuses on the voices of Central American children themselves, using narrative research with small sample sizes (Berman 2000; Bjørgo and Jensen 2015), anecdotal accounts (Georgopoulos 2005; Nazario 2014; Somers 2010), or grey literature reports (UNHCR 2014; UNHCR and ACNUR 2014; Rosenblum 2015). Anastario and coauthors contribute to such literature through secondary analysis of governmental interviews with deported youth in El Salvador, who indicated family reunification, economics, and insecurity as their primary reasons for migrating in 2013 and 2014 (Anastario et al. 2015). A separate study in El Salvador, which gathered data directly from active and at-risk gang-involved youth themselves, found that a low orientation towards the future, low levels of empathy, combined with educational problems and peer relations with other delinquent or gang-involved youth, presented significant risk factors for youth violence and misconduct (Olate, Salas-Wright and Vaughn 2012). While small in scope, these studies suggest multifactorial explanations for both youth who migrate, and for youth who become involved in the gangs that can cause other youth to migrate. Oversimplified descriptions misstate the inherent complexities for both young people who leave, and for young people who contribute to the dynamics causing others to leave.

### *Children and Migration*

Children's reasons for migration have been tied to their parents' migration patterns, suggesting generational or cyclical trends (Donato and Sisk 2015), while also demonstrating children's own agency within migration decisions (Khashu 2010; Somers 2010). Children's approaches to migration differ from adult expectations, as they undertake less preparation and undervalue migration risks (Khashu 2010), thus reminding policymakers that relying solely upon adult logic and priorities to understand youth behavior potentially overlooks the ways that maturity, age, experience, education, and access to resources, lead adults to understand things differently than young people.

US policy decisions may also influence children's migration. For example, a broad-based analysis of Mexican migration suggests that politically motivated militarization of the US-Mexico border inadvertently locked migrant laborers within the United States, so that family members had to migrate to the US to be reunited, thus initiating a "shift from sojourning to settlement" (Massey 2015, 286). Musalo and Lee (forthcoming) convincingly argue that US policy has focused too much on an enforcement-based response to assumed pull factors while ignoring the significant protection-oriented push factors. This article's analysis of the children's responses suggests that clear theoretical distinctions between push and pull factors may be difficult to recognize in reality due to the intertwined nature of migration dynamics. Simplistic explanations risk underestimating the multilayered migratory reasoning that leads children to leave their countries of origin. Understanding children's own views adds necessary nuance to these complex dynamics.

## Methods

### *Research Design*

This article analyzes previously unpublished data based on responses to one interview question from a larger 2014 UNHCR study examining the root causes of unaccompanied child migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. UNHCR secured US government cooperation to conduct 404 qualitative interviews with youth ages 12 to 17 held in US federal custody. Central American children were primarily interviewed in shelter care programs overseen by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and Mexican children were primarily interviewed in detention holding areas of US Border Patrol stations near the Texas-Mexico border. This dataset uniquely captures the perspectives of children for whom migration decisions and transit experiences were still quite recent. In 2014, UNHCR published the report, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*, focusing on children's reasons for migration.

### *Original Methodology*

Potential participants were randomly selected from those children meeting the designated nationality and age population characteristics. The gender breakdown averaged 77 percent male and 23 percent female (intentionally mirroring the gender composition of unaccompanied children in ORR custody), with nationality variations ranging from a low of 4 percent female among Mexican youth interviewed, to a high of 35 percent female among Salvadoran youth interviewed.[6]

To mimic the institutional review board process existing within academic institutions, UNHCR shared its research methodology and instruments with 14 external child migration experts and subsequently integrated their recommendations. In addition, UNHCR's headquarters-level offices for Child Protection, and for Policy Development and Evaluation Services, reviewed and commented on the research methodology and materials.

Potential participants received informed consent explanations in small groups and then individually, including the children's rights to: participate voluntarily, terminate the interview, decline to answer questions, speak with an on-site clinician following the interview, and expect confidential treatment of their responses. Interviewers also explained the limits of confidentiality in the event that a child reported that someone was harming him or her, that the child wanted to harm himself or herself, or that the child wanted to harm another person. Further, children were informed of the potential risks of and benefits from participation. Interviews were semi-structured, using a mix of closed ended and open-ended questions in a standard format. Interviewers were able to ask clarifying questions, or to modify the order of questions based upon how children wanted to tell their story.

6 The extreme gender imbalance among Mexican children present in the Border Patrol stations and federally funded shelters warrants further exploration but is beyond the scope of this article.

### *Secondary Analysis*

UNHCR granted this author access to several subsets of the *Children on the Run* interview data in order to consider the research question, "What can we learn from the observations and recommendations of Central American and Mexican unaccompanied migrant children for helping children like themselves?" Children's responses to the following question were analyzed: "¿Tienes ideas de cómo podemos mejor ayudar a otros jóvenes que salieron de sus países?" [Do you have ideas about how we can better help other youth who leave their countries?]. In some interviews, this question also included the variant, "What would have to be different for you to have stayed?" to help children consider what would have helped them, in order to also think about what would help others. Responses include a combination of particular and general observations and recommendations.

UNHCR requested and was granted permission to review this article's findings prior to publication, solely in order to ensure the data was used ethically and in a manner consistent with the consent forms signed by the children. For the analysis in this article, conducted independently of the UNHCR report, the Institutional Review Board of the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN) reviewed and approved the research plan.

Data was provided as an Excel spreadsheet and included 404 children's biographical data (gender, age, nationality) and responses to the question described above (access to the interviews in their entirety was not provided). Grounded theory data analysis involved an initial round of "elaborative coding" based on theoretical constructs familiar from the prior research (Saldaña 2009, 168), followed by axial coding to identify subthemes, and inter-related pattern coding focused on economics, security, and education, as well as politics, migration needs, and family references (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). A random selection of coded data was reviewed by a colleague for inter-rater reliability, resulting in coding agreement and confidence in coded themes.

## Findings

Children's responses to this one question incorporated a mix of their own needs and generalizations about the needs of others. An initial review for themes revealed recurring references to: economics, security, politics, education, migration needs, and family, along with several idiosyncratic comments. These responses were categorized and counted by gender and nationality for comparison purposes (see Table 1). Comments regarding the interaction of economics, security, and education (or more specifically work, gangs, and school) were extracted as pattern codes and analyzed separately.

In the abstract, the three elements of economics, security, and education, may be conceived of as different spheres of experience, but the interview results reveal that in the reality of these children's daily lives, they are inextricably linked. This is not uncommon. As Bhabha observes, "While human-rights instruments and discourse emphasize the importance of educational goals . . . most migrant adolescents aspire to employment opportunities as a precondition not a sequel to postprimary education. . . . These two issues are often intertwined in the life of adolescent migrants" (2014, 247-48).

## Table 1. Primary Themes from Children's Responses to the Question, "Do You Have Ideas about How We Can Better Help Other Youth That Leave Their Countries?"

| | Primary Themes* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Economics (Work / Poverty)** | **Security (Gangs / Cartels)** | **Politics (Government / Police / Corruption) **** | **Education (School / Scholarships)** | **Migration Needs (In transit / In US)** | **Family** |
| **Total References** | **166** | **125** | **114** | **83** | **82** | **39** |
| **By Country:** | | | | | | |
| • **El Salvador** | 37 | 52 | 31 | 19 | 19 | 11 |
| • **Guatemala** | 51 | 18 | 21 | 27 | 22 | 6 |
| • **Honduras** | 46 | 37 | 26 | 21 | 20 | 17 |
| • **Mexico** | 32 | 18 | 36 | 16 | 21 | 5 |
| | **By Gender (percentages as a portion of the total male or female population)** | | | | | |
| • **Female (n=91)** | 35 (38%) | 31 (34%) | 22 (24%) | 16 (18%) | 16 (18%) | 14(15%) |
| • **Male (n=313)** | 131 (42%) | 94 (30%) | 92 (29%) | 67 (21%) | 66 (21%) | 25 (8 %) |

*Children may have had responses in more than one category.

**Political comments are further broken down in Table 2.

The observations of migrant children analyzed in this article add a third issue — security — as a serious danger that appears to be intertwined with education and employment motives underlying migration choices for the Central American and Mexican migrant youth participating in this study. These three domains of education, security, and economics, were frequently mentioned together, revealing their interrelated nature. The following responses demonstrate instances in which children mentioned all three domains in the same response. For example:

- "They need better education. There aren't jobs that pay enough for someone to go to school.[7] Children don't go to school, instead they get involved with gangs and start robbing." (17-year-old Honduran male)
- "There you study, but there are no jobs. Because they can't get jobs, they think it's better to go to the street or the girls just start having children." (17-year-old Salvadoran male)
- "I don't know, if there were more police presence or more resources to create centers to help children to not get involved in gangs. Some kids say they don't want to study any more, or they don't want to work, they only work to earn money to buy cocaine or marijuana. Many young people, 17 years old, leave school so they can join the gangs. I think there should be some kind of center where they can go and get classes and have an option to not be involved in the gang." (17-year-old Salvadoran female)

7 Students may have to pay for a combination of tuition, textbooks, uniforms, community contributions, and/or other fees, as well as transportation (Bentaouett 2006).

- There are people who don't have money to enroll their children in school. And when children don't go to school they end up in the cartels." (17-year-old Mexican male)
- "Many young people would study if they had the opportunity to, but to do that their parents need to work. Many young people can't keep studying because their parents don't have work. The gangs — sometimes people that don't like to work or can't find work, most of them destroy their families and get used to being on the street." (17-year-old Guatemalan male)

To grasp the warp and weft of these three intertwining elements, they were treated as pattern codes and mapped as separate visual displays arranged by nationality. Images of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan displays are included below to represent the most significant contrast in these visual displays.

Pattern coding revealed that children frequently mentioned economics, security, and education issues in relation to one another. For the children from El Salvador, the relational comments focused more on the connections between economics and security, and education and security (see Figure 1). Guatemalan children placed greater emphasis on the relationship between education and economics (see Figure 2). The comments from Honduran and Mexican children were more evenly distributed among all three domains.

### *Implicit "No-Win" Situations*

When all of the children's comments were considered as a composite, several implicit no-win situations became evident, particularly related to economics, security, and education. Whether employed or unemployed, school enrolled or unenrolled, young people face risks from gangs and crime. Similarly, education necessitates employment, yet employment requires education. How does a young person get ahead in this rigged situation?

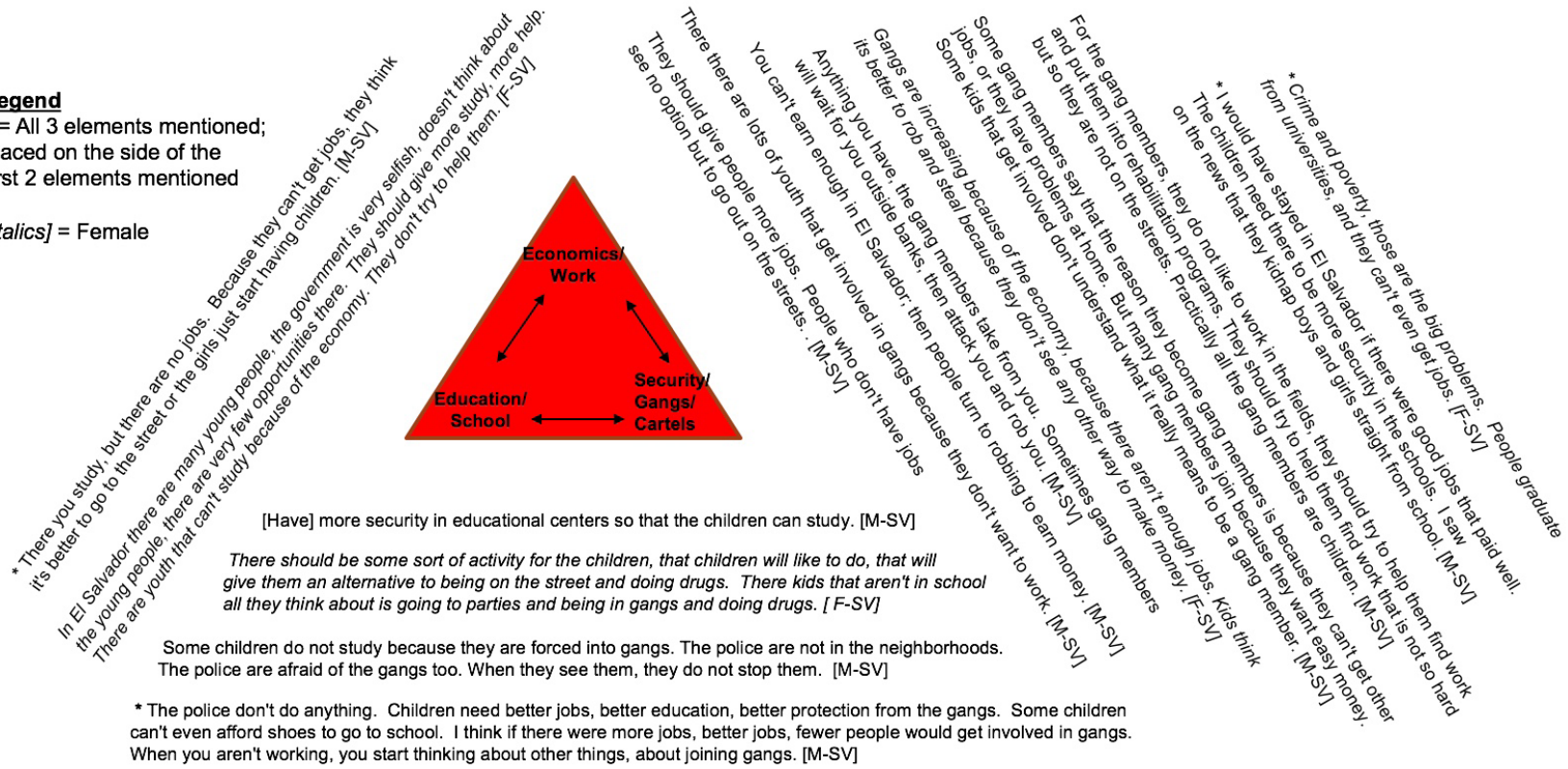
The children's comments below illustrate the no-win relationship between economics and security.

**Economics ←→ Security**

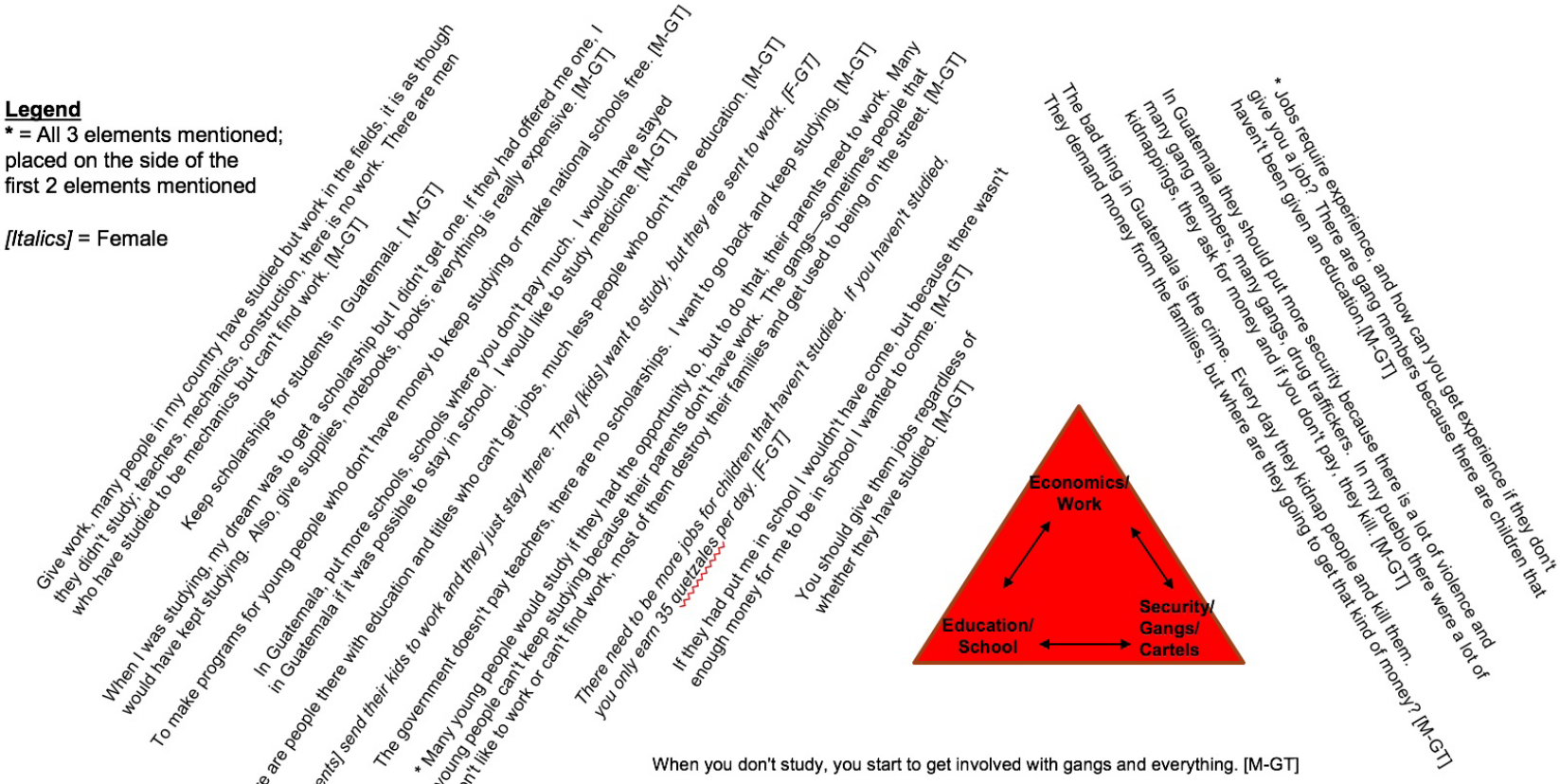
On the one hand, not working increases children's risks of joining or being forcibly recruited into a gang (due to idle or unsupervised time). On the other hand, working or having resources increases the risk of being targeted by a gang for theft or extortion. For example:

- "Gangs are increasing because of the economy, because there aren't enough jobs. Kids think it's better to rob and steal because they don't see any other way to make money." (17-year-old Salvadoran female)
- "Anything you have, the gang members take from you. Sometimes gang members will wait for you outside banks, then attack you and rob you." (16-year-old Salvadoran male)

## Figure 1. El Salvador
## Visual Display Mapping Salvadoran Children's Comments Connecting Economics, Security, and Education



## Figure 2. Guatemala
## Visual Display Mapping Guatemalan Children's Comments Connecting Economics, Security, and Education



### Security ←→ Education

Another, no-win situation surfaced in the relationship between security and education. Not attending school increases the risk of children being recruited into a gang (due to idle or unsupervised time). However, attending school increases the risk of being targeted by a gang (for harassment or recruitment by gang-connected individuals within, near, or on the way to school). These children's quotes further illustrate this predicament:

- "Children in Honduras don't have the education they need. Sometimes they end up in gangs because they don't study." (14-year-old Honduran male)
- "There you have to pay a lot just to be enrolled in school. Some kids go to school and they get kidnapped. Just because they want to study and get ahead in life, they get kidnapped and they get ransomed. There is so much insecurity in Honduras." (17-year-old Honduran male)

### Education ←→ Economics

Finally, there is a correlation in their responses between education and economics. On the one hand, well-paid work is necessary in order to pay for education (e.g., school fees, uniforms, supplies), while an education is necessary in order to obtain well-paid work. Indeed, even some youth with an education are not able to find meaningful work because of a lack of jobs in the overall economy. These quotes reveal a sense of frustration:

- "They need better education. There aren't jobs that pay enough for someone to go to school. Children don't go to school, instead they get involved with gangs and start robbing." (17-year-old Honduran male)
- "Jobs require experience, and how can you get experience if they don't give you a job? There are gang members because there are children that haven't been given an education." (16-year-old Guatemalan male)
- "I tried to get a job after I graduated, but there are no jobs. You also have to continue your education and get specialized. You can't do that if you don't have money." (17-year-old Honduran female)

These implied "no-win" scenarios reveal an underlying calculation that may be made by children and/or their families when making migration decisions. Because of the no-win analyses, children, and their families, may conclude that migration is the only choice the child has to get ahead, or, in many cases, merely to survive. Instead of decisions based on a child's best interests, this may lead to decisions based on the least worst options.

This migratory calculus is evident, for example, in response to a separate interview question by a 17-year-old Honduran male: "My grandmother wanted me to leave. She told me: 'If you don't join, the gang will shoot you. If you do join, the rival gang will shoot you — or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you.'" (UNHCR 2014, 10). In this Honduran young man's retelling — as in the "no-win" scenarios described above — migration was the only alternative to avoid being killed.

Recognizing the existence of "no-win" situations from which child migrants flee supports the observations of Musalo and Lee (forthcoming) that adopting solely a "pull" factor

assessment (e.g., that US factors draw migrants) to explain recent increases in Central American migration is misguided. From a global policy perspective, recognizing such no-win scenarios raises questions about how both to respond humanely in the short term to those who lack viable options to migration, and to also work over the longer term toward creating safe and appealing alternatives to migration and promoting self-determination by giving youth reasons to stay in their home countries.

### *Political Speech*

Children's responses regarding public officials was coded as "political speech,"[8] because of the references to those with public power. Given the differing contexts for children from four different countries, the recurring words "government," "police," "corrupt/ion," and "president" (along with their variants) were counted and analyzed as a common means of examining these children's references to those in positions of public power. Among these terms, references to *government* occurred most frequently overall (68 children), particularly from Mexican youth (25), followed by Guatemalan youth (15) and then Salvadoran and Honduran youth (14 references each). References to government were then coded for *pessimistic* comments, in which 41 children noted that the government cannot, will not, or does not help (including this 12-year-old boy: "In Mexico, they don't help us, the government is corrupt"). Comments indicating some belief in the government's potential to act in a positive way to help or protect children were coded as "possibility," including statements of what the government could, should or needs to do (e.g., "The [Guatemalan] government needs to control the extortions, robberies, and murders.")

A total of 38 children mentioned the *police*, with the most references from Salvadoran and Honduran children (15 and 13 respectively), followed by six references to police by Mexican children, and four by Guatemalan children. Police *corruption* was mentioned by 21 children, most often Hondurans, including this 15-year-old male: "They should have a law against corruption. There [in Honduras], a gang member goes to jail and is released the next day because the police are corrupt."

Sixteen children emphasized police *ineffectiveness*, including a 17-year-old Salvadoran female who noted: "They kill there in broad daylight and the police do nothing." In addition, eight children noted the need for *more or better* police, including this 17-year-old Honduran male: "If there were more police [in Honduras] everything would be calmer." A 17-year-old Salvadoran male was among six youth who commented on the *gangs being in control* — "There are cities [in El Salvador] where the police are too afraid to go in because the gangs are the ones in control" — while three children described situations of police *harming the innocent*, such as this 15-year-old Mexican male: "The [Mexican] police will stop you and steal your money and beat you."

Honduran and Mexican children mentioned *corruption* more than other children, with nine and eight references, respectively, compared to four references by Salvadoran children

8 This author limited coding of political speech to children's references to public officials, sometimes referred to as "state actors." The definition used in this article is narrower than that used by many legal scholars, which may also include references to both state actors and non-state actors as forms of political speech.

## Table 2. Children's Use of Specific Political Terms in Response to the Question, "Do You Have Ideas about How We Can Better Help Other Youth That Leave Their Countries?"

**Political Speech: References to Politicians and the Public Sector ****
**(Percentages refer only to this subset of responses)**

| Themes | "Government"* | "Police" | Word "Corrupt" Used in Relation to… | "President" |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total Mentions** | **68** | **38** | **23** | **18** |
| **Sub-Themes** | • *Pessimism*: (41)<br>– "The [Salvadoran] government is very selfish, it doesn't think about the young people."<br>– "The government in Guatemala can't do anything, they don't help people."<br>– "The [Honduran] authorities are involved with the gangs. They don't protect the community, they protect the maras."<br>– "In Mexico, they don't help us, the government is corrupt."<br>• *Possibility*: (19)<br>– "The [Salvadoran] government can help, they can send officers to provide security to the houses and the neighborhoods."<br>– "The [Guatemalan] government needs to control the extortions, robberies, and murders." "<br>– The [Honduran] government could help with school, for those who do not have the money."<br>– "The [Mexican] government can help people to have food."<br>• *Other*: "I am not sure if the government can help" (4); reference to US government (3), unclear response (1) | • *Corrupt:* (21)<br>– "The [Salvadoran] police are corrupt and they tell the gangs before there is a raid."<br>– "[In Honduras] the police sell themselves. They're corrupt. A criminal ends up in jail, and a few days later he is out because he buys off the police."<br>– "In Mexico, you see a police officer, and he isn't a police officer, he is a hit man."<br>• *Ineffective:* (16)<br>– "If you call the [Guatemalan] police, they don't come until two days later."<br>– "[In Honduras] a gang member goes to jail and is released the next day"<br>• *More/better PO needed*: (8)<br>– "If there were more police [in Honduras] everything would be calmer."<br>• *Gangs in control:* (6)<br>– "There are cities [in El Salvador] where the police are too afraid to go in because the gangs are the ones in control."<br>• *Harm the innocent*: (3)<br>– "The [Mexican] police will stop you and steal your money and beat you."<br>• *Other:* (4) | • Police (13)<br>• Government/ country in general (11)<br>• Other (2) | • *Ineffective:* "The president always says he will end the crime, but it's always the same—he does nothing." Or should do more (9)<br>• *Change needed:* (5) "I think we need to change the president. The presidents steal money and the people suffer."<br>• Other (4) |
| **El Salvador** | 14 (20.5%) | 15 (39%) | 4 (17%) | 4 (22%) |
| **Guatemala** | 15 (22%) | 4 (11%) | 2 (9%) | 4 (22%) |
| **Honduras** | 14 (20%) | 13 (34%) | 9 (39%) | 4 (22%) |
| **Mexico** | 25 (37%) | 6 (16%) | 8 (35%) | 6 (33%) |

*Government coding includes 49 explicit references to the term "government" as well as 16 other references to government, such as "the mayor," "politicians," "authorities," or government authorities implicitly referred to as "El Salvador," "Guatemala," "Honduras," or "Mexico." Other implicit references to the US government were counted within the category of "migration needs" in Table 3 (e.g., "In the US, give them papers and work.")
**Some children made multiple comments that fell under more than one subcategory.

and two by Guatemalan children. In addition to police references, the term corruption was used in relation to the government or country in general 11 times.

Mexican youth referred to the *president* six times, while the other three nationalities each made four uses of the term president. The primary theme related to presidents was their *ineffectiveness*, including this comment by a 15-year-old Honduran male: "The President always says he will end the crime, but it's always the same — he does nothing." Another five children stated that the president needs to *change or to be different*, with this appraisal from a 16-year-old Guatemalan male: "We need a good president in Guatemala; the presidents there only help the rich."

The political speech analyzed in response to this one question came more from males — 18 were female (18 percent) and 79 male, compared to 23 percent female for the entire sample — with an average age of 16.13, higher than the entire sample's overall average age of 15.83.

### *Migration Needs*

The 82 individual children whose ideas for helping other youth addressed migration needs largely focused on access to US territory and access to immigration benefits, as well as better treatment and protection. Within this overall group, 30 children made generalized requests to *let migrants enter* the United States; a 17-year-old Guatemalan female represented this response by saying, "Let them in, don't deport them." By contrast, five children demonstrated some migration *ambivalence*, such as this 17-year-old Honduran male: "It would be better to have work there and not have to come here."

Another 30 referenced a desire to *expand migration benefits* or protections, including this 16-year-old Guatemalan male: "Give work permission [in the US] so young people can work and help their families." Fourteen children noted a need for *better treatment* towards migrants, particularly towards children, as noted by this 17-year-old male from Mexico: "In the US, I wish they could help more children with refuge."

Finally, 11 children identified a need for more *protection or help in transit*, with some emphasizing the security needs en route, such as a 13-year-old Salvadoran female who commented: "They need more protection from the gangs in El Salvador and from the Zetas on the journey. They kidnapped two people in Mexico and had them hostage for 14 days." Others emphasized the need for help with basic needs such as goods and clothing, in addition to asking that officials not apprehend them, as this 17-year-old Honduran male pled: "Tell the trains to go slowly…tell immigration to not grab them so that they can pass. Give them food, clothing — some people don't even have clothing."

### *Family References*

Children's recommendations regarding relatives included 39 references to family or family members, with recurring themes of family reunification, helping family, and maltreatment in the home. Seventeen children made comments about the need for *family reunification* generally, such as the request of this 13-year-old Honduran female:

## Table 3. Children's Statements Regarding Migration Needs in Response to the Question, "Do You Have Ideas about How We Can Better Help Other Youth That Leave Their Countries?"

**Summary of Children's Statements Regarding Migration Needs ****

| | Let Migrants Enter | Expand Migration Benefits | Better Treatment | Protection/ Help in Transit | Migration Ambivalence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total Responses** | **30** | **30** | **14** | **11** | **5** |
| **Examples** | **Including:**<br>• "Let them in to look for a better future"<br>• "Let us pass"<br>• "Let us stay and only deport those who create disorder"<br>• "Give us the opportunity to study and work"<br>• "Take down the walls…at the border" | **Including:**<br>• Give "papers"<br>• Give "permiso"<br>• "Give us legal work like any other person"<br>• "Approve the immigration reform"<br>• "They can also bring us to help [the US], we can do this." | **Including:**<br>• "You can protect children by making sure immigration doesn't treat us badly…they treat us like animals"<br>• "Make more programs like this one [ORR shelter]"<br>• "Not to keep people here so long [in ORR shelter]"<br>• "Help us because we are minors, don't mistreat us"<br>• "That all kids have the same rights as the kids here, without discrimination, corruption"<br>• "Not put them in [immigration] jail" | **Protection:**<br>• "Children need protection against the cartels"<br>• "Get rid of the thieves on the route"<br>**Help:**<br>• "Tell the trains to go slowly…tell immigration to not grab them so that they can pass. Give them food, clothing some people don't even have clothing" | **Including:**<br>• "Better to…not have to come here"<br>• "The journey is hard"<br>• "Explain…difficulties they can face on the journey" |

**Some children made multiple comments that fell under more than one subcategory.

"Help them so they can be with their families. That is the most important." Some children referred to their desire to be reunited with a specific individual, primarily parents, such as this 13-year-old Honduran female: "I would like to stay here with my mom [in the United States]."

In contrast to the 17 children who mentioned the need for family reunion, 11 spoke of *problems in the home*, such as the need for parental support or the need to be protected from abuse or neglect. A few children spoke of their own experiences of maltreatment in response to this particular question, such as this 16-year-old Honduran female: "I would stay [in Honduras] if my grandmother would accept me with my baby and if she will take care of me. . ." More often they spoke in generalized terms, only hinting at their own possible abuse or neglect, such as this 14-year-old Mexican male: "Children in Mexico, children like me, need help. They need parents who support them. I have seen other families where they have a mother and a father and the children are supported. Every time I see that I feel sad because there are children that don't have that."

Eleven children talked about the desire to *help family members* remaining in the home country, with responses like this 17-year-old Salvadoran female: "Give us the ability to work and to help our families." Some children, like this 15-year-old male from Honduras,

expressed concerns about their families' economic well-being and safety: "I would have stayed if I had been able to make money and invest it so that I could help my family. I don't know how to protect them. There are lots of gangs." Others were motivated by helping a specific family member in a specific way, such as the 14-year-old Guatemalan female who stated: "I would have stayed if I had had a better paying job that would really let me help my little sisters." These children's responses demonstrate the varied roles that family relationships play in migration decisions: Family can be a pull factor drawing youth to the United States for reunification purposes; family can be a push factor in order to economically maintain the same family that one leaves behind; family, or lack thereof, can be a push factor giving children a reason to leave, such as the 13-year-old Honduran girl who stated, "Help the kids that are on the street, that do not have family and they look for a better life." For young people, the developmental need to love and be loved may outweigh any legal repercussions of migration.

## Table 4. Children's References to Family in Response to the Question, "Do You Have Ideas about How We Can Better Help Other Youth That Leave Their Countries?"

**Summary of Children's References to Family**

| Total Family References: 39 | Family Reunion (in US or Home Country) | Problems in the Home | Desire to Help Family in Home Country |
|---|---|---|---|
| **TOTALS** | **17** | **11** | **11** |
| | **Sub-themes**<br>• *Family reunion:* "I want all of my family to be together so we are not separated. This is what I hope for."<br>• *Reunion with a specific relative:* "I would like to stay here with my mom [in US]." "I would not have stayed for anything because my father isn't there." | **Sub-themes**<br>• *Need for supportive caregivers*: "The majority of children's parents don't care about them."<br>• *Protection from abuse:* "I would have stayed if my [abusive] uncle didn't come to where I was living anymore."<br>• *Neglect:* "Help parents and families especially when the parents don't take care of the families, for example if they drink alcohol." | **Sub-themes**<br>• *Economics, security:* "I would have stayed if I had been able to make money and invest it so that I could help my family. I don't know how to protect them. There are lots of gangs."<br>• *Relieve parents:* "I think that my mind would have changed if I had had money to help my mom, dad, and my family so that my father wouldn't have to work so hard just to feed the family."<br>• *Help siblings:* "I would have stayed if I had had a better paying job that would really let me help my little sisters" |

## Discussion

This secondary analysis of Central American and Mexican migrant children's interview responses documents the interconnected nature of economics, security, and education as migratory factors. In addition, certain "no-win" situations were implicit in the children's responses, suggesting no-win situations as potential reasons for the migration decisions of unaccompanied children and their families. Examination of children's political speech revealed that 97 children spoke in primarily negative terms of the government, the president,

the police, or corruption, revealing much greater pessimism than optimism regarding the potential for those in power to improve circumstances. The police were singled out more than any other public figures, with comments saying that the police were corrupt and ineffective, the country needed more or better police, the gangs were in control (rather than the police), and, in a few instances, the police harm the innocent.

Children's comments regarding migration indicate that these child migrants request and recommend more access to the United States and to legal migration, while a few disclose some migration ambivalence. Some children recommend better treatment of migrant children, and greater protection and concrete help for children and other migrants in transit. Finally, children's family references recognize their desires to be reunited with family, to be supported and protected in the home, and to help family members remaining in their home country.

These findings provide further support for UNHCR's earlier analysis of this same sample of children regarding their reasons for leaving home, which included "family or opportunity," "violence in society," "abuse in the home," "deprivation," and other idiosyncratic reasons (UNHCR 2014, 7). To that previous research, this article adds nuance to our understanding of children's perspectives regarding the inter-related nature of economic, security, and education issues, suggesting that these issues cannot be considered in isolation and that migrant children may have entwined motivations for migrating that defy simple categorization. Furthermore, this article contributes a more in-depth examination of data from one question, and begins to lay the groundwork for a theory of child migration based on "no-win" situations, suggesting that children and their families may choose migration when faced with dangerous or deficient options.

The practical implications of these findings include their application by refugee and asylum adjudicators in corroborating the conditions of violence, corruption, and deprivation (both economic and educational) experienced by young people in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Recognition of the interrelated nature of economics, security, and education for young people from these countries should encourage adjudicators to consider and inquire about related security issues when children mention economic or educational issues in isolation. For example, if child asylum seekers articulate educational reasons for coming to the United States, adjudicators (as well as legal service providers) should probe behind the reasons why children could not continue their education in the home country. Similarly, children interviewed for refugee or asylum status who indicate economic motivations for migration should be queried further regarding any specific reasons that the child or family could not economically support themselves.

These children's expressed concerns regarding police and government corruption are buttressed by other reports that identify corruption in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico as ongoing problems contributing to a lack of citizen security and undermining public confidence in the political system (UNHCR 2016b, 2016c; DOS 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Olson and Zaino 2015, 42). Cruz (2015) specifically connects police performance with overall political perceptions: "The police play a fundamental role in any political regime. Whether an authoritarian regime or a liberal democracy, police actions are intertwined with regime performance as they showcase the state's response to day-to-day issues" (252). One journalist quotes a Honduran police chief recognizing that up

to 20 percent of his own police force is "dirty," while community leaders living in the same area increase this estimate of corrupt law enforcement officers to half of the local force (Nazario 2016). Apart from educators, police may be the government actors with whom youth most interact; hence, police treatment of young people has direct relevance to refugee and asylum claims.

Analyzing children's political speech in response to this one question confirms the potential for youth to hold political views, whether burgeoning, sophisticated, or somewhere in-between. Adults at times presume political disinterest among young people, yet these children made comments suggesting political concern, and at times cynicism, regarding the corruption and perceived ineffectiveness of those in positions of power. The question posed to these children was not specifically political in nature, yet 97 children (24 percent of the total number interviewed) used terms indicating political speech (individual children may have used more than one of the terms counted in Table 2). Given this research, refugee and asylum adjudicators should recognize the ability of youth to hold political views, whether nascent or mature.

Serido and colleagues (2011) make a connection between youth voice and identity development, suggesting that giving youth "opportunities to put their voices into action" (56) can nurture the sense that they matter. The children's comments analyzed for this article indicate that they have relevant views about what would improve their circumstances and their societies. More explicit examination of Central American and Mexican migrant youths' sense of power within their home communities may reveal ways in which countries and communities of origin can empower youth by giving them a voice regarding their own futures. As stated by the 17-year-old Salvadoran girl cited in this article's title, "Sometimes adults view children as lesser and they think we can't become anything or don't have an opinion. They don't ask for our view on things. They need to give us a voice."

Taken together, these children's comments signal the need for holistic responses at national and international levels, in order to mitigate the "no-win" scenarios that appear to contribute to the migration of children. Such a holistic approach to addressing migration events fits with the ecological perspective in social work, which emphasizes the interdependence between people and their environments and the resulting reciprocal exchanges in which persons impact their environment at the same time that they are impacted by it (Gitterman and Germain 2008). As public and private actors work together to change the dynamics leading to migration, they must collaborate and recognize how their efforts impact the work of others and are impacted in return. In more concrete terms, efforts to create well-paying work must also consider educational requirements, internship and job training opportunities, and how such approaches can compete with, and be undermined by, the seduction and threats of gangs and cartels. Efforts to improve educational opportunities for young people must also practically consider the economic requirements for children and their families to afford school attendance, along with the ways that schools can simultaneously mitigate the lure of criminal activity, while unintentionally facilitating recruitment and harassment by gang-connected peers and adults. Efforts to address security issues, particularly in relation to gangs and cartels, must also address the economic, educational, and political environment that has made illicit activity attractive, unavoidable, or involuntary.

As international aid to this region increases, programmatic approaches should be coordinated and interconnected. Equally important, youth should be involved in the planning and implementation of these interventions, if there is to be hope of success. The Global Refugee Youth Consultations led by UNHCR and the Women's Refugee Commission (and described in the introduction) demonstrate one possible model for such youth engagement, particularly if these gatherings can be translated into concrete action. Programs that implement the principles of positive youth development, and youth community organizing or mobilization, provide a grassroots approach to harnessing young people's ideas around issues of importance to them in a manner that is sustainable and develops youth leadership capacity (WOLA 2008).

A segment of these children's interview responses reveals a palpable frustration and pessimism, even resignation, about the corruption, selfishness, and maltreatment they identify in the adults with responsibility for their protection (police, politicians, and sometimes caregivers). This sample of child participants represents a specific segment of the population — those who decided to leave their countries of origin. To the extent that they represent the views of at least some of their peers who have not or cannot leave, they signal a concerning sense of mistrust, particularly towards those in power. Christens and Dolan (2011) argue that youth community organizing can benefit the development of youth leadership and capacity, can improve community development, and can strengthen interactions between youth and adults. Such positive outcomes depend upon listening to youth views, developing youth leadership in order to effect change, and sharing power with youth in authentic ways through intergenerational collaboration (ibid.).

In December 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law the Consolidated Appropriations Act designating up to $750 million in aid and economic development funds for Central America. The Act requires that certain pre-conditions be met regarding border security, corruption, and human rights, before 75 percent of the funds are released (Meyer 2016; White House 2016; Beltrán 2015). The results of the research described in this article provide some broad suggestions for how youth themselves might allocate these funds, particularly in addressing economic, security, and educational issues. Concrete recommendations include prioritizing well-paying jobs, increasing protection from gangs and cartels, and supporting high-quality, accessible education. Hanson (2016) identifies a "lack of coordination" (12) as a regional handicap in promoting collaboration between government entities working on different aspects of youth opportunity programming in the Northern Triangle of Central America. These children identify the need for their nations to address issues of economics, security, and education in a coordinated manner that recognizes the intersecting nature of these domains. The record level of US government funding committed in 2016 presents an opportunity to intentionally nurture and develop future ethical leaders who can help create conditions in which the next generation will be able to remain and contribute to their homeland.

## Recommendations

In summary, concrete policy recommendations emerging from this research include the following:

1. **Recognizing entwined motivations and no-win situations that may lead children to leave their countries of origin.** Refugee and asylum adjudicators should recognize that migration motivators are interconnected, and that economic or educational motives do not preclude related security concerns. Furthermore, in-country policymakers and service providers should identify and seek solutions to perceived no-win situations.

2. **Promoting integrated approaches to home country economic, security, and education concerns for Central American and Mexican youth.** Refugee and asylum adjudicators should probe children's economic and educational reasons for leaving home to explore the possibility of interrelated security reasons leading to migration. For example, if a child mentions a desire to work or attend school in the United States, adjudicators should also inquire about circumstances impeding these options in the child's home country.

3. **Acknowledging migrant children's political interests and concerns.** Refugee and asylum adjudicators should recognize the ability of children to hold political views, even if these views are nascent or immature from an adult's perspective.

4. **Providing youth with meaningful opportunities to contribute their views and suggestions.** Adults working with migrant youth, in the United States, in transit, and in home countries, should proactively seek out means for youth to contribute their views and suggestions, as a means of empowering youth, and of better understanding youth perspectives that may differ from adults' views.

5. **Incorporating migrant children's input and concerns into spending plans for US aid appropriated for Central America.** US and international aid to Central America and Mexico should seek out practical collaborative ways to address the root causes of migration across economic, security, and educational spheres of practice. For example, law enforcement efforts focused on reducing gang and cartel violence should incorporate positive youth development approaches through skill-building and rehabilitative programming, such as partnering with education and training programs for at-risk youth.

6. **Emphasizing youth leadership development in efforts to address child migration.** International and domestic programmatic efforts to stem child migration should include youth leadership development, to nurture future ethical leaders who can create conditions in which the next generation will be able to remain and contribute to their families and homelands.

## Future Research

As an interviewer and researcher on the original study, this author is familiar with the full breadth of the children's responses. However, this article, which represents exclusively the author's own opinions, analyzes responses to only one question out of the entirety of each child's interview. Readers interested in a fuller picture of these children's interview responses should refer to the earlier findings of the UNHCR *Children on the Run* report (2014).

The participants in this study represent only those children who left their countries of origin. Additional research could analyze the views of children who remain in their countries of origin to examine how their views differ from those who left. UNHCR found that 36 percent of the children in its study had one or both parents in the United States (2014, 63). A complementary study could focus on those children with relatives in the United States who nonetheless chose to remain in their home countries. What factors in their lives counter the push and pull of migration? What efforts or circumstances are successful in giving children the security, or opportunity, needed to remain rooted in their home communities?

Future research could more specifically engage unaccompanied children in their perceived roles in relation to politics, political speech, public policy most relevant to youth, how migration impacts family relationships, and youth views on power (e.g., how age, gender, and diversity impact their perceived ability to create change in their lives and communities).

Ultimately, the analysis in this article provides a platform for the voices of these youths to be heard by those with the power to act and create positive changes in Central America and Mexico. These youth are asking for a say in their future. Who is listening?

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