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UPROOTED

(Arrancados de raíz)

ACNUR/A. Victoria

Executive Summary

Today, the cross-border movement of people from Central America into Mexico is characterized by individuals ultimately seeking entry into North America and is motivated by a multiplicity of causes. The factors behind the displacement of Central Americans include: the economic, political, and social constraints in their countries of origin, the potential for family reunification, and, markedly, widespread violence which undermines citizen safety and reveals the absence of adequate State protection. In the case of unaccompanied or separated children (UASCs), community and home environments are also a direct source of insecurity. Under these circumstances, the displacement of children becomes forced, and the involuntary return to their country of origin presents a serious risk to their life, integrity and security.

In this context, *Uprooted* highlights the worrying situation of the thousands of UASC, many in need of international protection, who enter Mexico undetected and unprotected, using routes and means invisible to the people and organizations that offer social and legal services, as well as to Mexican authorities. This trend is perhaps more evident in U.S. government statistics, which show an extraordinary increase in the number of children who have arrived at the Southern border of the United States in the last year. At the end of the U.S. fiscal year on September 30, 2014, for instance, 51,705 UASC from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras had been detected.

Uprooted is based on a mixed research methodology, involving group discussions with 200 UASC and, individual interviews with 72 UASC at detention centers (*Estaciones Migratorias*) in Mexico City and Tapachula, Chiapas, as well as shelters in the latter, from October to December 2013. Some children who participated for this study were selected by UNHCR, while others were referred by Mexican authorities.

The data obtained from the interviews with UASC reveals that the forced displacement of Central Americans is multi-causal and usually involves interrelated factors. For the purposes of this report, the various factors were grouped into three main causes of exit: violence, family separation, and economic deprivation.

Moreover, the findings and conclusions of this research confirm the trend observed in the *Children on the Run* report recently published by UNHCR, which unambiguously indicates that many of the displaced children have suffered serious danger and adversity in their countries of origin.

In *Uprooted*, 48.6% of UASC respondents identified specific incidences of beatings, intimidation, threats and insecurity as a cause of exit. Many more leave to escape the future threat of such violence. Together, these findings reflect the severe lack of protection afforded to children and adolescents from this region.

Violence in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras continues to push many UASC to flee in search of safety, often by reuniting with parents or other family members living abroad. Hence, during the study, UASC tended to identify severe violence as the main reason for their departure. Based on this observation, the investigation concludes that, in many cases, family reunification should be considered a consequence, and not a cause, of UASC leaving the region.

A further consequence is the normalization of violence experienced by UASC, which directly affects their capacity to fully identify the extent to which violence was the factor that caused them to leave their country of origin. The study found a clear pattern of sustained fundamental human rights violations, in which children described a permanent state of risk and threat to their person. Most children interviewed by UNHCR described their daily life in terms of constant poverty and violence, with violence becoming increasingly normalized for many children. For example, all Honduran UASC had witnessed or had been a victim of a severe crime. However, the same children did not always exhibit or articulate correlated fear or concern for their own welfare.

Additionally, the research explored the access that individuals in possible need

of international protection have to relevant protection mechanisms. Under international law, and Mexico's domestic legal framework, authorities are required to inform every individual subjected to immigration processes of the right to claim asylum in Mexico. Despite the clarity in Mexican law, the data collected for this report reveal a concerning implementation gap. While Mexican immigration authorities often provide some information, it is often inadequate, and the children interviewed did not fully understand the information received.

- 75% of the UASC who participated in the research reported that they did not receive information about deportation procedures and return to their country from the immigration authorities.
- 66.7% reported that they did not obtain information about their rights in Mexico.
- 27% reported being informed effectively and clearly about the right to seek and enjoy asylum in Mexico.

Finally, the research finds that prolonged migration detention discourages children in need of international protection from seeking asylum in Mexico. Faced with long-term confinement, some children fleeing violence distrust the asylum system entirely and avoid it, while others abandon their asylum claims in the hopes of seeking protection elsewhere. This not only diminishes access to asylum procedures in Mexico, but also leads to inefficiencies in the asylum system. Despite this, 28% of Central American UASC interviewed expressed interest in submitting an asylum claim in Mexico.

With a particular focus on the situation in Mexico, *Uprooted* adds to the body of research finding that a significant percentage of UASC leaving Central America's Northern Triangle have suffered serious harm and adversity in their countries of origin, and face elevated risk if returned without being allowed full access to relevant protection mechanisms, including asylum.



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