

What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border?

Nina Balmaceda

The ancient question of what it is that the Eternal requires from those who invoke his holy name is as relevant today as it was when the prophet Micah pronounced it roughly 2750 years ago. The answer is clear: the will of God is that men and women everywhere dedicate their lives to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God. In order to honor God's will, believers need to seriously consider both the individual and collective dimensions of what justice demands. While personal righteousness is essential to living a life that honors God, individual holiness is insufficient to respond to the complex demands of justice at the social level. Social problems require a collective and systemic approach, recognizing the primary causes of the issues and how they interact with each other. Some may be surprised to discover that at the root of most social problems are expressions of severe injustice. Therefore,

Vilma "Nina" Balmaceda, Ph.D., is Director of the Center for Scholarship and Global Engagement and Associate Professor of Political Science at Nyack College in New York.



85

Vol. 10, No. 1

Nina Balmaceda

a just response requires believers to first understand the problem and then to consider what can be done in light of the available evidence. Instead of focusing on dogmas, which will not solve social problems, Christians should work hard to identify better policies that privilege the well-being of human beings, who have all been created in the image of God.

A just response requires believers to first understand the problem and then to consider what can be done in light of the available evidence.

In this piece, I invite the reader to analyze the problem of the unaccompanied children that keep coming to the United States of America. The *New York Times* has reported that more than 68,000 Latin American minors were caught crossing the United States southern border alone in 2014.¹ This figure is double the number reported in 2013 and about ten times the number reported in 2009. About 73% of the minors come from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and 25% from Mexico.²

No One Wants to Leave Home... Why are Central American Children Leaving?

It is heartbreaking to see that so many thousands of children embark on such a dangerous journey attempting to enter the United States territory. Why would they be willing to leave home? What is the prevailing situation that explains such a daring decision? There are four predominant factors that must be considered when trying to

1. Haeyoun Park, "Children at the Border," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/15/us/questions-about-the-border-kids.html?_r=0.

2. Joachim Hagopian, "America's War on Drugs has Triggered a Humanitarian Crisis in Central America. Children Converging at the United States Border," Centre for Research on Globalization, July 9, 2014, <http://www.whenthebeststops.org/2014/07/americas-war-on-drugs-has-triggered.html>.

What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border

understand why so many children are willing to leave their home countries.

Family Reunification

The first factor to consider is the human need for family reunification. In many cases, the parents of these children migrated at an earlier date in search of work opportunities and freedom from violence, and now the children yearn to be reunited with them. Most Latin American migrant parents leave their children in the care of relatives, typically grandmothers or aunts, with the hope that once they are able to establish themselves in the new country, they will send for their children. Migrant parents are willing to make huge sacrifices, many times paying thousands of dollars to the *coyotes* to smuggle their children across the United States border, so that their family can be together once again.

Violence

The severe cycle of violence affecting Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico is a crucial factor in the surge in the number of young migrants in recent years. Unlike previous waves of undocumented migration to the United States, the most compelling factor currently driving youngsters northward is not civil war but the fear of a different but very real kind of violence, mainly related to drugs and gangs. According to information provided by lawyers from the Asociación para una Sociedad Más Justa (Association for a More Just Society) in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, many of the youngsters that try to migrate to the United States leave their homes because their relatives and/or friends have been killed or threatened by drug dealers or gangs.³

3. Author's interview with the legal team of the Association for a More Just Society, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, June 2, 2013.

The severity of the current cycle of violence affecting Mexico and Central America has intensified the already precarious living conditions of countless families in those countries. The first consequence of this type of violence is internal displacement, forcing families in rural areas, who have no means to defend themselves in a context where the state offers virtually no protection from drug-related violence, to escape to other communities seeking some kind of safety for their sons and daughters. According to Carlos Hernández, president of the Association for a More Just Society, most of those families have lost everything due to violence.⁴ Under such dire conditions, any parent or grandparent who knows someone who is already living in the United States tries to facilitate the children's escape. According to Hernández, many of the unaccompanied children and teens who try to come across the border are "literally running for their lives."⁵

The homicide statistics in most countries of Central America are bone-chilling. According to data published by the World Bank,⁶ in 2012, 40 and 41 homicides per 100,000 people took place in Guatemala and El Salvador, respectively; and 90 in Honduras, making Honduras the most violent country in the world, with an average of 20 people murdered every day.⁷

The substantial growth of drug dealing and other criminal activities in Central America and the effects of the war on drugs are fundamental factors in the intensification of the migrant phenomenon. Most of the minors attempting to enter the United States come

4. Author's interview with Carlos Hernández, president of the Association for a More Just Society (Honduras), New York, October 22, 2014.

5. Ibid.

6. The World Bank, "Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 people)," <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>.

7. Carrie Kahn, "Honduras Claims Unwanted Title of World's Murder Capital," NPR, June 12, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/06/13/190683502/honduras-claims-unwanted-title-of-worlds-murder-capital>.

What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border

precisely from places where drug dealing and gang violence is most intense.

In Honduras, for example, there is a corridor marked by the route drugs take to get from the Caribbean coast to the Western coast. The corridor is characterized by blood, death, and the destruction of communities. The “drug route,” from the moment the drugs enter Honduran territory until they leave the country, coincides with the places where most of the migrant youth and children come from. This northeastern territory in Honduras is known as *La Mosquitia*, a region characterized by the absence of state services and law enforcement. The economy in the region depends on drug dealing. Most young men find that their only way to escape from abject poverty is to become “mules” for drug dealers. According to testimonies collected by the Association for a More Just Society, “mules” start by receiving 30,000 lempiras (about \$1,500 USD) per month, compared to the \$200 USD that they would likely make *if* they were able to get an entry-level job at a legal enterprise.

Young people get involved in the drug trade thinking that that they will do it only for a few months while they save some money, and then they plan on getting out. But that is rarely possible. The fact is that most of the young men, already fathers, get killed, and the “mules” who survive, both men and women, head for the United States. These realities result in a crisis of neglected children who are left in the care of elderly grandmothers or other relatives. Under such conditions, these children most likely will not receive the appropriate loving discipline and emotional and material support they need. This leads to teenagers who are basically on their own, becoming easy prey for gangs and drug dealers, and thus the cycle repeats.

On top of the far-reaching effects of the drug economy, the presence and growth of gangs in Central America and Mexico has worsened the climate of violence that children are seeking to escape. The roots of the escalation of gang-related violence in these regions

dates back to the Cold War. In the final decades of the Cold War, a wave of immigration to the United States took place as a result of the Central American civil wars in which the United States was actively involved. As large numbers of Central American refugees were arriving in big cities of the United States, local gangs began harassing them. To defend themselves, the newcomers formed their own gangs.

These groups evolved into highly organized criminal organizations which are also tied inextricably to the drug trade and human trafficking. In 1996, the United States passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, because of which the number of criminal deportations to Central America skyrocketed. As Bruce Wydick has reported, “These individuals, with few ties to their home countries, except through the web of the criminal underworld, have become kingpins of gang activity and organized crime in Central America.”⁸ While the United States sought to solve one strain of illicit immigrant activity on its soil, the country simply deported the problem people who then reestablished their US-based criminal networks in their Central American homelands. These networks and gangs with ties to their mother organizations in the United States have worsened the already dire situation of locals in Central America. It is this climate of instability and violence that in turn motivates many unaccompanied minors to try their luck for a safer life north of the border.

Extreme Poverty

Another factor that cannot be ignored in explaining the surge in young migrants is the overall lack of opportunities at home. In the last three decades or so, corruption and the imposition of

8. Bruce Wydick, “Border Crisis = Church Opportunity,” *Christianity Today*, January 8, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/january-web-only/border-crisis-church-opportunity.html?paging=off>.

What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border

neoliberal economic policies have prevented the governments of the minors' home countries from investing in effective programs that could have confronted the root causes of this structural crisis. The precarious living conditions at home and the failure of the state in so many regards impede any hope of relative progress for people living in extreme poverty. With extremely few morally acceptable options for making enough money to live on, families are willing to risk the journey north for their children in the hope they will end up with a stable, livable situation.

Misinformation

Finally, we cannot ignore the role played by misinformation. There is no doubt that there has been a *before and after* in the surge of unaccompanied minors at the border, which has been determined by the discussions in the United States about the possibility of a much-needed immigration reform. While people in Central America are not unaware of these attempts in the United States Congress, the problem is that the message gets purposely distorted by those who want to take advantage of the people's despair. The *coyote* industry, made up of reckless individuals who smuggle Latin American people across the border against the law, constitutes big business. They are not amateurs; they work in an organized and strategic manner. The *coyotes* have presented a severely distorted message that there was a certain possibility that *all* underage undocumented immigrants would receive amnesty from the United States government. They encouraged hopeful families to hurry because the window of opportunity would be closing soon. This wrong information coincides with the hope of countless families who imagine migrating to the United States as the only viable way to escape the overwhelming poverty and violence around them. As a result, the children's relatives have gone

to unfathomable extremes to pay to send their kids to the United States.

Unfortunately, neither the United States government nor Central American governments have carried out any effective actions to counteract this distorted information. In fact, several Central American governments have managed the issue of undocumented migration in a very cynical manner. It is undeniable that the countries benefit from the remittances sent by their migrant population. In the case of Honduras and El Salvador, for example, remittances from the United States constitute the biggest source of foreign currency received by those countries. No matter how precarious the living conditions of the migrants and the negative impact of their absence on society, the governments of their home countries benefit from their sacrifice. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, from an estimated total of \$53.8 billion USD sent in remittances to Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America in 2013, El Salvador received remittances ascending to \$3.6 billion USD (16.5% of its GDP); Honduras received \$2.6 billion (15.7% of its GDP); Guatemala received \$4.4 billion (10% of its GDP); and Mexico \$23 billion (2% of its GDP).⁹

The Governments' Response to the Crisis

Despite the high-level meeting that took place on July 25, 2014 between Barack Obama, Salvador Sánchez, Otto Pérez, and Juan Hernández, presidents of the United States, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras respectively, in which they acknowledged the

9. D'Vera Cohn, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Danielle Cuddington, "Remittances to Latin America Recover—but Not to Mexico," Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project, November 15, 2103, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/11/15/remittances-to-latin-america-recover-but-not-to-mexico/>.

What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border

shared responsibility that exists concerning the crisis of the unaccompanied children, little or nothing has changed in terms of the root causes of the problem.

The government response in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico to the structural crisis that pushes so many people to migrate continues to be rather simplistic. With regard to the drug trade, the governments have mostly focused on trying to keep drugs out of the national territory at whatever cost. This means that law enforcement officers and military forces use even more violence, frequently in an indiscriminate manner and disregarding the fundamental rights of the people who living in the affected areas. And yet the war on drugs keeps failing.

The irony is that even when El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras do not *produce* drugs and their own drug *consumption* levels are relatively low, their people in poverty are the victims of the war on drugs led by the United States in those countries. As reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), there has been a “balloon effect” after Mexico increased its antidrug efforts in 2006. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador’s position for trafficking drugs to the United States grew in importance, intensifying a cycle of violence never seen before.¹⁰ Government institutions in the three countries are fragile and notably unprepared to face the enormous challenge of tackling the root issues driving the migration of unaccompanied minors. Their justice administration and law enforcement agencies are unable to confront the problems or protect the population. The prevailing corruption among government authorities affects particularly law enforcement and justice agencies, leading to impunity for the perpetrators, which enables

10. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean. A Threat Assessment,” (Vienna, September 2012), 18-20, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.

the perpetuation of a cycle of violence where those who have the least suffer the most.

A recent study by the Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia (Alliance for Peace and Justice), a coalition of Honduran nongovernmental organizations, found that in the cities of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and Comayagua, only 61% of all homicides had corresponding official proceedings of attestation and removal of the body; only 8% of the cases had an actual file registered in the prosecutor office's records; only 7% of the cases made it to trial; and no more than 1% of all cases had a conviction, underscoring the widespread impunity fostered by the country's dysfunctional criminal justice system. At a national level, the study found that of the 27,272 homicides that occurred between 2010 and 2013, only 3.7% (1,009 cases) resulted in convictions.¹¹ These appalling findings demonstrate the country's inability to carry out quality criminal investigations. The situation is not that different in El Salvador and Guatemala.

There has been no substantial effort on the part of the United States government nor the governments in Central America to strengthen the justice systems in those countries.

Despite how evident the problem is, there has been no substantial effort on the part of the United States government nor the governments in Central America to strengthen the justice systems in those countries. There is a desperate need for an adequate response to these complex problems. Public policies must be designed with a human approach, keeping in mind the real needs of the people and how government action will impact their safety. An adequate response must situate the protection of the people as a priority for government intervention.

11. *Revistazo*, "La investigación criminal está en detrimento: Fiscal Especial de Delitos contra la Vida," December 9, 2014, <http://www.revistazo.biz/web2/index.php/nacional/item/997-%E2%80%99Cla-investigaci%C3%B3n-criminal-est%C3%A1-en-detrimento>.

The Church's Role

Believers are wrong if they think that people from Central America need only charity. Short-term mission trips and other generous efforts might make travelers and donors feel good about themselves, but unless they are confronting some of the root issues that cause the crisis, they do very little to change the context of insecurity and deprivation that prevails in those countries.

People in Central America, like people in all countries of the world, need justice. If the church, both in the United States and in Central America, intends to play any role in the situation of the migrant children entering the United States illegally, it has to become active in demanding justice through better government policies oriented toward creating adequate living conditions for the people, especially for the poor who are the direct victims of the war on drugs and other government policies that ignore how human lives are negatively impacted.

It is interesting to note that evangelicals in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are numerically strong. According to data compiled by Latinobarómetro, evangelicals have reached 41% of the total population in Honduras; they represent 40% of the population in Guatemala; and 31% in El Salvador.¹² Among other important insights, these statistics indicate that evangelicals in those countries have great influence, electorally speaking. Evangelical Christians in Central America need to appreciate the heavy responsibility they have and work harder to use their influence to demand appropriate public policies that address the issues that affect the most vulnerable people in their societies. This requires Christian believers to become more engaged citizens, better informed and

12. Latinobarómetro, "Las religiones en tiempos del Papa Francisco," April 16, 2014, available for download at <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latNewsShow.jsp>, "LAS_RELIGIONES_EN_TIEMPOS_DEL_PAPA_FRANCISCO.pdf".

equipped to participate in the public arena through community organizations, justice advocacy, and political action.

At a macro level, the church in the United States should also call the government to seriously reconsider the merits of the war on drugs and redirect government efforts toward more effective ways of combating drug addiction and consumption and of defending the lives of those caught in the crossfire. A number of serious studies on the war on drugs from different political perspectives have concluded that the militarization of the issue has only made the problem worse.¹³ It is time that the billions of dollars invested in the war on drugs be redirected to better public policies that prioritize education, prevention, treatment, drug-demand reduction, and improvement in the access to justice in all countries involved.

Christians in the United States should demand that the billions of tax payers' dollars that their government invests in fighting drug dealers in Central America and Mexico be used in different ways: to strengthen state institutions, particularly the justice and law enforcement systems in those countries, and to create sustainable economic opportunities for the poor. Until living conditions for the common people in these countries improve, the flood of unaccompanied minors attempting to enter the United States under dangerous and illegal conditions will continue.

Beyond the holistic support that the immigrant children need while they are in the United States, the church needs to understand that focusing only on creating temporary homes for deported

13. Some of these studies include UNODC, "Transnational Organized Crime"; Dan Werb, et al., "The Temporal Relationship between Drug Supply Indicators: An Audit of International Government Surveillance Systems," *BMJ Open* (September 30, 2013), 10.1136/bmjopen-2013-003077; Global Commission on Drug Policy, "Taking Control: Pathways to Drug Policies that Work," September 8, 2014, <http://www.drugpolicy.org/resource/taking-control-pathways-drug-policies-work>; and Global Commission on Drug Policy, "The Negative Impact of the War on Drugs on Public Health," May 2013, http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/hepatitis/gcdp_hepatitis_english.pdf; among others.

What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border

children in their home countries does not solve any of the real issues. While they need attention as they arrive back in their countries, donations should be oriented to secure a permanent home and education for them, while strengthening local efforts to pursue justice and sustainable opportunities. A great majority of the children have relatives, and they will go back to them, to the same violent context they tried to escape the first time. They will try to leave again, risking their safety one more time. The real need is for justice through structural reform, not charity. This could be a great opportunity for the churches in the United States, Central America, and Mexico to join efforts to advocate for public policies oriented to guarantee human well-being.

Local Christian organizations such as the Association for a More Just Society in Honduras are leading the way in the pursuit of holistic justice and shalom. From exposing corruption and pressing against impunity, to serving the victims of violence, to strengthening public education, to implementing long-term peace-building initiatives, these brave Christians from different professions and denominations are responding to the crisis in very effective ways.¹⁴

Conclusion

Shalom can only be built on the foundation of justice. While humans will never be able to construct a perfect society, there is evidence that countries can develop societies where the value of human life and the rule of law are respected. Things can get better in Central America and Mexico. It can be done. But new peace-building strategies with a long-term focus are needed, particularly in the strengthening of the justice system, the development of

14. For more information on the Association for a More Just Society, visit <http://www.ajs-us.org/>.

Nina Balmaceda

Things can get better in Central America and Mexico. It can be done.

sustainable economic opportunities, and the opposition to corruption. Central American and Mexican minors keep trying to come across the US border because of the prevailing injustices they experience in their home countries, many of which are consequence of policies and events that take place in the United States. This problem does not pertain just to the sending countries or to the United States alone. It is a complex problem, and the answer requires a joint effort to address the real root causes that push children out of their homes.