

1-1-2016

## **Mexican and Central American Emigration: Exploring Recent Motivations and Challenges of the Migrant Child Arriving to the U.S**

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Mexican and Central American emigration: Exploring recent motivations and challenges  
of the migrant child arriving to the U.S.

By

Frank Edward Bradford III

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Political Science  
in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration

Mississippi State, Mississippi

December 2016

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2016

Mexican and Central American emigration: Exploring recent motivations  
and challenges of the migrant child arriving to the U.S.

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Pages in Study: 65

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This study examines several critical factors deemed to be important in examining why children from Mexico and Central America decide to take risks by traveling alone to unfamiliar places, such as the U.S., in such large numbers. An exploration of present day and historical backgrounds provide insight for social, political, and economic conditions that assist in shaping the landscape and outlook of Central Americans and Mexicans, particularly children on a daily basis.

## DEDICATION

Family and friends who provided support and advice through the years.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor and mentor Dr. Morrison for guiding me through this thesis completion process. In addition, thanks to fellow committee members, Dr. Chamberlain and Dr. Rush for their guidance and assistance as well. Also, Dr. Brian Davisson for helping peak my interest in Latin American migration throughout previous Spanish language courses. In addition, thanks to my former colleagues at the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security for providing me with an exceptional learning experience during my internship to learn more about U.S. immigration policy.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I have investigated why Mexican and Central American children have become compelled on leaving their home countries in order to reach the U.S. in recent years. I have accomplished that by utilizing descriptive research methods and applying Motivation, Grievance, and Assimilation theories to justify my explanations. My findings show that children are traveling to the U.S., no matter how difficult possible outcomes may be, because of a strong desire of family reunification, and because abnormally high levels of violence exist at home. This thesis will utilize the Grievance theory in explaining the historical significance behind violence in the region and establishing grounding for conflicts that exist today. This thesis will utilize the Motivation theory to reveal that child migrants are in search of needs that they want satisfied. In addition, the Assimilation theory will assist in guiding me on discovering how migrant youth are able to envision themselves living and adapting to a new place after arrival. My analysis is organized into five parts, including the Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Discussion, and Concluding remarks.

The occurrence of children migrating has not been an unfamiliar phenomenon, however, the spring and summer months of 2014 witnessed unprecedented amounts of children attempting to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. As a result, quite a new conundrum has formed for government officials and scholars to better understand the issues

surrounding child migration within the Americas today. Many of these children often lack the protection and direct guidance of a parent or guardian accompanying them on their journey. Why are parents willing to send their children on such dangerous journeys without knowing what might happen along the way?

Government policies and laws assist in shaping and influencing migration, especially with children. When immigrants, especially children who are alone, migrate to another country, they exchange a sense of familiarity for growing feelings of uncertainty on the journey. Children express similarities in motivations and methods to their adult counterparts. However, children often do not share the same mental and physical capacity, and should therefore be viewed differently. Children traveling hundreds, or even thousands of miles, should provide a good indication of how bad things have turned throughout communities across Central America and Mexico. Choosing to analyze the 2014 surge in child migrants arriving to the U.S. is important because, enough time has passed to uncover how those who were able to stay in the U.S., are faring.

This thesis analyzes four major contentions that reveal the critical factors that have contributed to recent child migration, and which will leave a lasting effect on societies in the U.S., Central America, and Mexico:

- #1 If aggressive measures against organized crime are implemented by authorities, then violence will grow at a higher rate throughout Mexico and Central America resulting in more child migrants escaping to the U.S.
- #2 If a lack of educational and familial support in a child's life exists, then child migrants will risk leaving to acquire additional resources or contribute to the violence that remains in Mexico and Central America.
- #3 If authorities in Mexico limit new efforts of migrants from passing through their country, then fewer migrants will decide to make their way to the U.S.
- #4 For a child migrant, the prospect of assimilation is easier because they are younger.

### **Geographical and Historical Background**

Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador will be the countries of general focus within Latin America. These countries prove to be essential in explaining similarities in critical factors shaping the region and migration among children today. The latter three countries make up an area within Central America called 'The Northern Triangle'. Although Mexico makes up the largest country of interest in this study, Mexican children are generally returned after U.S. apprehension and will not hold equal significance compared to the larger number of children who settle from Guatemala,

Honduras, and El Salvador. Nevertheless, Mexico has faced ongoing conflicts from the country's drug war.

Illegal drug activity figures prominently in child migration across the region. Government and law enforcement officials have faced uphill battles against drug cartels, while the cartels themselves battle each other and outsiders. The billions made each year from illegal drug sales result in many civilians being caught in the crossfire, increasing the death toll and endangering the safety of citizens. During the 1980s, large waves of Guatemalans and Salvadorans fled to Mexico and the U.S., but recently, this appears to have become more of an issue, particularly with children fleeing Central America.

Guatemala today holds a population of approximately 15 million citizens, the most populous country within Central America. The country sits below Mexico, providing access for Hondurans and Salvadorans to venture further north to Mexico and the U.S. Throughout the late 20th century, Guatemala experienced government control by both military and civilian leaders (Central Intelligence Agency: Guatemala, 2015). In addition, the country experienced chronic civil war between 1960 and 1996, resulting in over 200,000 deaths and approximately 1 million refugees (Central Intelligence Agency: Guatemala, 2015). To end the war, the government signed a peace agreement, although widespread violence still occurs.

Similarly, Honduras experienced years of military rule, followed by democratic civilian government administrations (Central Intelligence Agency: Honduras, 2015). Years of guerilla conflicts during the 1980s troubled the country as well. Since the conclusion of the country's civil conflicts, the government has often attempted to privatize many state-owned corporations, lessening many tax and tariff burdens to help

boost the economy (Central Intelligence Agency: Honduras, 2015). This has not always worked in the country's favor, and continuing economic instability still exists despite domestic reforms and assistance from the U.S. In addition, the country has held claim to having the world's highest murder rate in recent years and remains one of the least wealthy within Latin America (Meyer 2015, p. 6-8).

El Salvador maintains a population of more than 6 million citizens and is the smallest geographically and most densely populated in Central America. After experiencing its share of guerilla fighting throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, El Salvador also experienced conflicts and worsening economic conditions. This led many citizens to flee to other countries, such as the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. History appears to have repeated itself with even more violence today as the country witnesses its' highest levels of violence since the nation's civil war concluded in 1992 (Central Intelligence Agency: El Salvador, 2015).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Is there a widespread consensus behind Latin American child migration?**

Migration remains an integral part of life, from historical times to the present day. Why are children migrating? Essentially, this thesis attempts to broaden the existing literature on youth in Latin America by highlighting several critical factors influencing migrant youths' decision to migrate. Family reunification and violence appear to be the most common reasons for migrating children within the Americas today. Children are failed by family instability in their communities. High levels of violence, broken family structures, lack of educational support, and the inability of the state to protect citizens appear the most frequent. Winton argues that, "Guatemala has evolved from political violence during the country's civil war to social and economic violence" (Winton 2004, p. 83). To examine the lack of educational and familial support in a child's life, several works provide insight on this topic. De Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely (2016, p. 1) use the term '*ninis*' in their report to describe minors in Latin America who do not work or attend school. This literature highlights a growing number of children in Central America that lack opportunities to earn money or an education to succeed at home. This is a principal reason why many Latin American governments, and even the U.S. to some extent, should be further concerned about child migration flows today (De Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely

2016, p. 4). With such high numbers of children out of school and not working a correlation to the crime and violence occurring throughout the region may be made.

This literature also explores how the lack of opportunities promote inequality and limit social mobility (De Hoyos, Rodgers, and Székely 2016, p.4). It appears that there is a routinized system of inequality where countless poor remain poor through multiple generations, and the economic opportunity for younger generations is no better than it was for older generations, which will be departing the workforce in the coming years (De Hoyos, Rodgers, and Székely 2016, p. 1-2). Without great economic opportunity at home, it limits the positive societal impact youth can have. This could potentially pose a greater problem for child who decide to migrate. The first few years within a new host country, immigrants are believed to have greater difficulty finding work than natural born U.S. citizens, although this gap is believed to diminish over time (Tubergen 2006, p. 9). Attempting to work in the U.S., for a majority of migrant youth will prove to be even more challenging since it generally takes several months or years of going through U.S. courts. Consequently, children are not automatically entitled to legal status by simply reaching the U.S.

In addition, Cruz (2015, p. 253) explores the extent of abuse and corruption within Latin American societies to illustrate one aspect of the state's inability to protect its citizens. His argument is that weak political legitimacy is one of the major factors affecting child emigration from the region. Corruption is one example of how legitimacy is weakened. It strips away opportunities, exacerbating inequality within society. Cruz also used the perception of citizens regarding police misconduct as another means of measuring officer effectiveness. If indeed police are involved with organized crime, he



asks, how are they able to effectively maintain security and the well-being of citizens? Morris (2013, p. 50) provides further insight into the impact of previous government administrations' ambivalence with organized crime, and the increasing visibility of drug cartels throughout the country by examining data to gain a better grasp of recent corruption and insecurity. He finds that, "Mexican states with greater levels of drug-trafficking showed higher levels of corruption being present" (Morris 2013, p. 55).

Another problem that contributes to the problem of child migration is the prevalence of gangs in these countries. In order to grasp a greater understanding of gangs in the region, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, conducted a study examining the gang lifestyle mainly within El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. The study argued that, "Maras (gangs) constitute an urban sub-culture of a special kind, giving their members not only a sense of belonging but also of protection, pride and power" (Frühling 2008, p. 5). Discovering why individuals join gangs and what differences lie between them and others who do not within the same neighborhoods, under similar conditions, appear difficult to understand. The gang is seen as an influential body, membership of which provides identity and a sense of belonging for a higher purpose for adherents. This purpose provides members with a new family, which protects them from other authorities. "Being part of a gang, provides members autonomy, relieving them of the adult authority present in other spheres of their life, such as within their traditional families" (Frühling 2008, p. 10). Once one is in a gang, leaving it is no easy task for most, which commonly results in punishment and deprivation by other members. All of the social resources, which the gang provides, could also be stripped away. Individuals are left stigmatized and without the basic needs they once acquired

from the gang. Therefore, youth are turning to the gang, or making the alternative decision to flee.

In addition, Winton explores gang culture in post-conflict Guatemala using participatory research methods via snowball sampling. She sampled hundreds of minors in Guatemala City showing that gang violence was the most prevalent occurrence within their lives (Winton 2004, p. 84). This literature was interesting because youth were provided photo cameras to capture positive and negative features of their communities (Winton 2004, p. 84), which stimulated further discussion among participants<sup>1</sup>. Police officers and gangs were seen by youth as the negative features in their communities (Winton 2004, p. 91-92). Positive features were family and friends that youth felt to be important in their lives. Family and friends maintained social stability, and police officers were seen as inefficient in their ability to combat gangs throughout their communities, fueling dissatisfaction (Winton 2004, p. 91-92). Children in the study expressed a distrust of the state, which they saw as a contributor to further violence and political demonstrations (Winton 2004, p. 92). In addition, these features revealed the decisions they were often confronted with, having family and friends participating in gang activity. The lack of communication and understanding between these positive and negative features intersected, leaving many of the youth in a state of perplexity.

Friendships and social cohesion are important qualities for youth growing up (Winton 2004, p. 87). For those not participating in gang activity, violence was seen as stimulating their perception of danger and decreasing the level of social cohesion in their

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<sup>1</sup> Some respondents were not comfortable with divulging information within group settings. I found this method useful while obtaining information because some youth are more difficult to reach or open to talk than others.

communities (Winton 2004, p. 87). Positive social resources were viewed as the traditional family, although youth often felt the need to atone for their lack of positive occurrences in exchange for the means provided by the gang (Winton 2004, p. 88). Winton discovers that, “Youth often view the benefits of belonging to a gang as prevailing over the possibility of becoming a good citizen” (Winton 2004, p. 89). As long as communities in the region are deprived of proper social cohesion, youth will seek assistance for missing needs in places that affect their lives abnormally.

Understanding many other challenges children face along the way also became a crucial theme to uncover in this thesis, such as violence, poverty and despair. The landscape of Central American and Mexican life and millions of lives are ultimately shaped on a daily basis by these intertwined elements. They limit the ability of children to have a positive outlook. For example, a respondent in a Human Rights Watch study said he worried about, “losing his remaining adolescence and not being able to study if he had to continue avoiding the gangs in his home country” (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 1). Such emotional and psychological thoughts can contribute to uneasiness while negotiating the legal and social barriers to advancement.

Vogt believes that the liminality of a migrant’s journey holds great importance and recognizes that, “Much of the violence occurring across the region today has to be viewed within a deeper historical context of structural forms of violence that precipitate migration from Central America” (Vogt 2013, p. 766). Past struggles continually shape political, social, and economic inequalities that are faced by many citizens today. Migrants still seek to satisfy needs in a void that remains. Vogt argues that the structural violence in the past maintains a role in breaking the current family structure.

Consequently, such hardships force families to be separated, creating an ongoing stream of migrants seeking safety or love from elsewhere (Vogt 2013, p. 768).

During the middle 2014 peak of child migration, Kennedy (2014, p. 1-2) sought to discover why parents or guardians are continually putting their children in dangerous situations in trying to reach the U.S. While living in El Salvador, Kennedy searched for better answers to these questions by examining the effect deportation had on children who migrated. She interviewed 322 children, and discovered that poverty, violence, and family reunification were the major factors that caused children to leave home (Kennedy 2014, p. 2). The data from Kennedy's report provides a good indication about what respondents faced between January and May 2014 that led to the late spring and summer peak in child migration that year. Approximately 59% of Salvadoran boys and 61% of girls interviewed cited violence, poverty, and family reunification as the most prominent factors for leaving home (Kennedy 2014, p. 1).

Journalist Sonia Nazario previously published a revealing story detailing the journey of a Honduran teenager named Enrique. This personal story highlights many similar issues that continually trouble Central America and Mexico today, particularly the lack in parental guidance in these children's lives. Enrique decided to make the journey to the U.S., from Honduras, via trains to locate and reunite with his mother. The mother had migrated to the U.S. when Enrique was still a young child (Nazario, 2006) searching for better opportunities to provide her family. Nazario shares the choices made by Enrique as he grows up without his parents in Honduras, the dangers he and others face on their journey, and ultimately the determination despite the recurring challenges. Enrique's journey highlights the lengths of what children endure following the loss of

important family members in their daily lives. Enrique often rebelled and stayed in trouble with his remaining family in Honduras. Enrique never discovered the love with other relatives that he missed from his mother. He recognizes that his mother is the only one that can truly understand him. As a result, Enrique often found gratification in drugs until finally one day even that was not enough.

After multiple failed attempts of migrating to the U.S., he often was confronted with the choice of whether to continue the journey north or return home. Enrique faced struggles along the journey without food, shelter, security, and love; needs that he felt were often absent until he was able to find his mother. Resiliency allowed Enrique to temporarily work odd jobs along the journey, which temporarily fulfilled some of his needs. While traveling, Enrique discovered kindness from others, often unknowingly. Enrique initially was too young to fully understand his mother's decision to leave for the U.S. At last, Enrique arrived to the U.S. and made his way to North Carolina where his mother resided. After more than a decade apart, Enrique informs his mother about life in Honduras, and the details of his journey north. This caused her to express guilt for leaving him and his sister in Honduras. Shortly after reuniting, Enrique and his mother drift apart. Enrique rebels by not sharing the same dreams she had for him. His mother wanted him to obtain an education, which would make a good job one day possible. Finally, Enrique realizes that she just wants to do what is best for him and allow for him to have opportunities that were not available in Honduras.

Similarly, Goździak discovered that the majority of child migrants were attempting to reunite with family that resided within the U.S. After such a family reunification occurred, Goździak discovered that there were rather complicated

relationships among family members, particularly financial and emotional (Goździak 2015, p. 13). There were often conflicting expectations between children and their sponsor or relative. While the idea of reuniting with family may have appeared glamorous initially, resentment often occurred because of the time spent apart. After arrival, Goździak saw social groups and community organizations as being generally accommodating for migrant youth, often in spite of a lack of proper resources in schools and communities for doing so. Yet, family reunification and welcoming communities were key aspects for child migrants to have a positive transition into U.S. culture and life.

The Motivation theories provide further grounding to understanding possible psychological effects that children encounter. Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal (2014, p. 111) examine links between emotional distress and the resilience of children on their journey. Within shelters in Mexico, the authors conducted interviews with minors and distributed a questionnaire to obtain a greater grasp on the impact migration has on the psychological well-being of migrant youth. There were 53 respondents to the questionnaire. Most were between 14 and 17 years old and male; approximately a fifth of the children were still pursuing their education when they left home, and nearly half had been employed<sup>2</sup>. The majority of the children also experienced family separation lasting between 3 and 14 years (Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal 2014, p. 119). Meanwhile, many maintained regular contact via phone, but still lacked many basic needs for proper nurture and development. Approximately 88 percent of the children interviewed said they had previously attempted three or more crossings of the U.S. border

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of children in this study claimed employment as their rationale for emigrating rather than family reunification (Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal 2014, p. 119). This was surprising considering that responses from the children showed that nearly 70 percent had siblings or parents residing in the U.S.

(Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal 2014, p. 119). This is particularly consequential considering that these children were from Mexico and if apprehended would not be allowed to stay in the U.S.

With regards to family reunification, Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal (2014, p. 116) saw that the physical distance between a child and a parent increased exponentially when the latter migrated. For example, it was a major distraction in school for the many children left behind. Children often had to take on more responsibility by looking after siblings, and often eventually left school to seek work (Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal 2014, p. 116). This often ultimately shaped the decision of many children to make the journey north. Many of the children interviewed in this study believed that while their material well-being was provided by their communities, yet there remained a large void from parental emotional and psychological nurture (Sotomayor-Peterson and Montiel-Carbajal 2014: p. 116-117).

*Children on the Run*, a study conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) between May and August 2013 also provides a good indication of some of the same issues occurring a year before the child migrant crisis reached its peak in 2014. The survey involved 404 children, nearly 100 each from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. All of the 404 children interviewed arrived to the U.S. during October 2011 or shortly afterwards (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 15). Data from this report provide a sampling of many dangers children across the region are facing. The report highlighted the perspectives from youth about the problems they faced at home. The study shows that many Central American and Mexican youths faced common problems. It appears that there may also be a higher number of

boys migrating than girls to the U.S. In the UNHCR study, for example, there were 313 boys in the sample compared to just 91 girls. All were between the ages of 12-17 and at least 58% reported they were forcibly displaced due to previous harm or suffering (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 17). The 58% of youth increased significantly from a 2006 UNHCR report showing that only 13 % of the study’s 75 children warranted screening for international protection (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 25).

In addition, 21% of the children stated that they had been subject to violence or abuse within their own home. Although more boys reported abuse, the percentage among girls was higher, at 40 % and 16 % respectively (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 28). Previous work from Frühling (2008, p. 23-24) and Winton (2004, p. 88) show that youth suffering abuse at home were more likely to participate in gang activity or possibly to migrate. Children share rather complex and interrelated reasons impacting their decision to migrate (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 11).

The 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) requires that migrant youth be screened for possible signs of human trafficking or abuse after apprehension. In addition, this Act allows children to be placed with a “sponsor” or relatives in the U.S., while their immigration cases are being processed (Roth and Grace 2015, p. 244). This Act provides children support services for easier acclimation to their new environment. However, because of previous political agreements this Act does not grant those same privileges to children from Mexico. Consequently, even though Central American child migrants still go through the legal process after U.S. apprehension, because they are allowed to stay and seek family reunification and education, they are privileged vis-à-vis Mexican children.



Mexican child migration to the U.S. has declined, while Central American children reaching the U.S. has increased significantly since the peak in 2014. Between 2009 and 2013, more child migrants derived from Mexico to the U.S., until it was surpassed by Honduras in 2014 and Guatemala in 2015 (U.S. Border Patrol, 2016). Since 2009, El Salvador and Guatemala have each remained near the top of child migrant producing countries. So far in 2016, that trend continues with Guatemala and El Salvador contributing to the most child migrants that are apprehended at the border (U.S. Border Patrol, 2016).

**Does the possibility exist for newly arrived children to understand their new environment?**

Goździak examined previous waves of Central American immigrants in the 1980s who escaped civil conflict. She argued that they were able to successfully adjust and assimilate to U.S. society by learning English and participating in the labor force and civic organizations (Goździak 2015, p. 6). These Central American children generally deal with similar challenges like children from other regions in the world. Nevertheless, the author saw that there may be a greater need of commitment expended on these children because of prolonged gaps in their previous educational experiences at home and trauma from the violence and hardships that they have been confronted with. As a result, Goździak questions if migrant youth will become contributors in their communities after arrival, which is seen as an important aspect to examine integration. Goździak notes that, “Integration is not a one-way street or even a two-way street, but a highway with many intersections and smaller roads” (Goździak 2015, p. 12). There will be challenges for newly arrived children, as well as for the communities that welcome them.

Menjívar (2002, p. 534) provides inquiry into children of Guatemalan-origin living in the Los Angeles area during the 1990s. I chose this literature because it details some aspects of the life of immigrant children after settling into a new place and examining their experiences. Guatemala represents an interesting case because of the contrast in indigenous and non-indigenous citizens in the country. Indigenous Guatemalans were believed to be more likely to retain their cultural identity in a new host society. This is of note because the number of children fleeing Guatemala increased heavily since 2014. During the 2015 fiscal year, and so far in 2016, Guatemalans outnumber unaccompanied minors from the other countries of origin (U.S. Border Patrol, 2016).

Menjívar believed that because the distinct ethnic groups inside Guatemala vary in customs, social identity, and traditions, they differ in their views of their homeland. This becomes important in determining possible assimilation outcomes. The timing of Menjívar's 1995 study is also compelling by exploring how immigrants that fled during the country's previous civil war were challenged as a product of that journey. Many similar characteristics of the country during its civil war have recurred throughout recent years- widespread violence and intimidation from armed groups creating almost mirror images to surroundings there today (Menjívar 2002, p. 535). During the country's civil war, children were forcibly recruited to join the conflict, much like gang recruitment as of late.

In relation to social identity, Menjívar discusses the role of the church for many immigrants in a new place. The church generally helps serve as a medium between the immigrants' communities of origin and the new communities they enter, particularly

among adults (Menjívar 2002, p. 539). The church is able to provide resources to youth that may otherwise be unavailable, essentially serving as another means for identity for those who seek it. However, some youth are indifferent to the church and do not see the value in maintaining ties to home, or its relevance to their new life in the U.S. (Menjívar 2002, p. 541). One respondent noted that, indigenous Guatemalans had more opportunities once in the U.S. than they experienced back in Guatemala (Menjívar 2002, p. 541). She was more interested in being able to further her education in the U.S. than focusing on problems that existed back in Guatemala, believing her own ethnicity helped shape her impression of life. The greater time spent away from home, decreases the familiarity with ties back home.

Kivisto and Faist (2010) explore literature by Mayo-Smith (1894, pp. 652-669) helping identify two major factors contributing to assimilation for new immigrants. Mayo-Smith believed that education and exercise of citizenship rights to be those two factors and that within assimilation, immigrants have to be able to transform themselves after arriving (Kivisto and Faist 2010, p. 95). This idea accompanies Gordon's "Anglo-conformity" concluding the assimilation process as something seamless, unidirectional, and relatively easy (Gordon 1964). Mayo-Smith viewed assimilation as an occurrence bound to happen, inviting a natural feeling because of the capacity a nation has in socializing new members into its society and on the presumed willingness of immigrants to be re-socialized (Kivisto and Faist 2010, p. 95). Contrary to popular belief, immigrants do not automatically adopt U.S. culture by simply crossing the border (Segal and Mayadas 2005). Segal and Mayadas argue, "Immigrants come here to the U.S. of their own volition and that the conditions in one's home country, status in the home country,

and experience in the home country are each key aspects to look at when providing better framework for the immigrant experience” (Menjívar 2002, p. 564). In addition, “Despite the many difficulties that appear, such as institutionalized discrimination and fewer apparent resources compared to citizens that most immigrants eventually stay in the U.S., if allowed and establish new lives that continue through future generations” (Menjívar 2002, p. 567).

Tubergen (2006, p. 10) notes how the proficiency of immigrants in using the destination-language decreases with the age at the time of migration (Carliner 2000, Chiswick and Miller 1995, 1998; Dustmann 1994, 1997; Stevens 1999). Tubergen (2006, p. 10) argues with there being increases through a greater length of residence in the destination country (Chiswick and Miller 1994, 1995, 1998, 2001; Evans 1986) and increases throughout successive generations by Veltman (1983). Being labeled as “illegal” for many children invites uneasy feelings, which make children question their behavior, belonging, and possible future employment (Roth and Grace 2015, p. 245). Roth and Grace conducted a study to test the effectiveness of ‘post-release services’, which can assist in making integration smoother. The authors believed that adjusting well into society is linked with the possible obtainment of legal relief after completing immigration proceedings. Possible deportation, or uncertainty about legal status is often seen as limiting the feelings a child may endure to be able to fully assimilate within society.

Heidbrink (2014) suggests that the entire experience unaccompanied minors go through in the U.S. is difficult. Heidbrink argues that, “The relationship between the state, the family, and the child is a fundamental unit of analysis in society” (Heidbrink

2014, p. 3). Heidbrink continues that “Immigration law consistently frames children as variables or liminal figures and not as actors in or involved contributors to migration decisions” (Heidbrink 2014, p. 15). Children have to have their well-being and best interests looked after to ensure their protection and safety. Heidbrink’s work (2014) argues that integration goes beyond simply learning or improving upon a host country’s language. The challenges child immigrants face in order to integrate into U.S. society are not simple, but how do individuals address others if they are unfamiliar with the language of the host country and unaware of the new environment?

The number of children fleeing home remains high, but the number who actually make it to the U.S.-Mexico border is fewer, and those who end up uniting with family or who receive legal and social services are fewer still. However, the risk for migrants making the journey and being apprehended is often deemed to be worth it given the past they are escaping.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Utilizing descriptive research methods allow me to analyze the critical factors I identified as relevant to explain why children have emigrated from Central America and Mexico. Descriptive research describes situations or some phenomena being studied. This research method is helpful in learning more about the problem of child migration, factors contributing to child migration, and gathering information on what attempts have been contributed to solving the problem of child migration. Descriptive research provides a greater understanding of these factors. One aspect of descriptive research involves the observational method. The observational method provides insight on children that have been observed closely in recent years to establish reasoning for their decision to migrate<sup>3</sup>. Another major aspect of descriptive research is the survey method, which involves interviews or discussion with individuals about youth migration. The survey method provide child migrants the opportunity to talk about themselves and tell their story.

#### **Establishing theoretical framework around child migration**

Motivation theory assisted by providing a model of basic needs that help motivate individuals. The theory simply means that everyone has needs that they want satisfied.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the data collected by this observational method, such as that collected via interviews may have taken place in situations and surroundings that were not comfortable for some children. A disadvantage to this method could be probable issues surrounding clarity of the questions asked and what exactly is expected? Does the child understand what is fully being asked, because the way some questions are asked might affect its reliability.

Motivation theory developed by Abraham Maslow (1943) provides a hierarchy of needs defined as a physiological or psychological deficiency that individuals feel the desire to satisfy. Maslow uses this hierarchy to justify individuals' ability to become motivated by multiple needs; and, that those needs exist in a hierarchical order whereby only an unsatisfied need can help influence behavior. By this reasoning, a need that is already satisfied does not contribute to motivation at that point. There is a set of primary needs such as food, water, and sleep, as well as, secondary needs such as the desire for achievement. Maslow's hierarchy from bottom to top includes: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. These needs grow more complex after each is generally met. Physiological needs are the most basic needs to survival. After physiological needs are met, others for safety and security should be met to satisfy trauma and stress that individuals endure. The need for belonging should be met following safety needs, to include the need to feel loved or accepted by others. Esteem is the need that follows, according to Maslow. Lastly, the need for self-actualization occurs when an individual realizes full potential in life. These needs are viewed as fundamental for individuals to grow and develop.

Motivation theory helps explain how everyone has certain needs that cause behavior, which in turns leads to the desire for satisfaction. The premise of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory could be applied throughout nearly every facet of the journey of a migrant child as used in this study.

In addition, McClelland's acquired needs theory (1961, p. 43) helps in explaining behavior and how individuals often prioritize needs in different ways. McClelland later identified motivators that he believed everyone has, no matter of the age, gender, or the

culture of origin. He believed that these motivators are learned throughout life: the need for achievement, the need for power, and the need for affiliation (McClelland 1961, p. 43). Some of the qualities he believed to make up the need for achievement were one's ability to take risks, to accomplish goals or having a strong need to go out and accomplish those goals (McClelland 1961, p. 36-39). I believe that children will take risks to accomplish their goals, and that the goal of making their way to the U.S. by dangerous means, highlights their determination to fulfill this need.

Some of the qualities that made up the need for affiliation were the desire of belonging to the group, or the want to be liked which led one to follow the lead of others, sometimes maybe even carelessly (McClelland 1961, p.159-163). Children want to belong to something, particularly within groups where a need of being accepted or well-liked. These appear to be important qualities that relate to better understanding behavior and thoughts surrounding the issue of child migration.

McClelland's Need theory expands on Maslow's previous hierarchy of needs model. McClelland sought to express needs for power, affiliation, and achievement (McClelland 1961, p. 43). The motivation of an individual pertained to one's own experiences in life and thoughts of their surroundings. These needs are learned in one's life. McClelland believed that one of these needs was a dominant trait among individuals and that everyone expresses at least one of these needs in some form. It is important to know what motivates individuals, particularly children who travel great distances to reach something. That is why I used these motivation theories to equate to the journey of a migrant child.



Grievance theory, in relation to past civil wars, highlights similarities with conflicts today. Grievance brings another aspect that derives from motivation and provides additional framework to understanding child migration. Gurr establishes grievance by examining relative deprivation, referring to “A perceived lack of resources between men’s value expectations and their value capabilities” (Gurr 1970, p. 13). Gurr defines value capabilities as “Goods and conditions one believe that they are capable of attaining and value expectations as the goods and conditions of life where people believe they have entitlement to” (Gurr 1970, p. 13). This leads him to believe that deprivation occurs as a result of dissatisfaction, which spurs people into action. Three types of value opportunities are available via action: personal, political, and societal (Gurr 1970, p. 13).

Gurr defines personal opportunities as being acquired through normal distribution, and share little relevance to a theory of collective violence. Societal opportunities help members’ economic value attainment and those resources help those who are engaged. Political opportunities are the courses of action Gurr defines as being political actions, and he sees these as means rather than ends.

Kriesberg also utilizes Grievance theory explaining that, “A sense of grievance does not solely depend on a feeling of dissatisfaction” (Kriesberg 1973, p. 61). He believes that the sense of grievance must depend on the legitimacy accorded existing inequality -- the extent people feel that the class, status, or power inequalities reach the threshold of being fair and just. Kriesberg makes use of Grievance theory, believing that “For a social conflict to exist, the adversaries must not only have a sense of identity, they must also feel they have a grievance, which they believe their conditions are not satisfactory and can lead to improvement” (Kriesberg 1973, p. 62). Kriesberg believed

that these members in a group must be able to view their circumstances as “unjust” and “unfair” (Kriesberg 1973, p. 67) in addition to believe that a social remedy can be found for their difficulties.

This led me to examine the use of Assimilation theory when examining if migrants possess the ability to successfully integrate into society after arrival. The use of Assimilation theory guides my understanding of how child migrants adjust to new cultural norms and language barriers. We are surrounded by many different cultures in the U.S. today, where elements of immigration appear on a daily basis without being fully realized. After arrival in the U.S., school often ends up being the most common outcome for child migrants. The access to education helps migrants interact with others in a native language<sup>4</sup>. Because child migrants are at a younger age, they may have to become engaged in elements of assimilation where older generations may not have to do so.

Sociologist Robert Park defined assimilation as, “A process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of others, through shared history and experiences” (Tubergen 2006, p. 8). Park believes that over the course of one’s life, immigrants gradually assimilate to the overarching culture within the host society (Tubergen 2006, p.8). Milton Gordon argued against this view of assimilation by Park as being highly one dimensional and flat, suggesting that a new seven dimensional view of assimilation should be used instead (Tubergen 2006, p. 9).

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<sup>4</sup> The pressure for many older children who migrate to find work in a new place is a real occurrence as well. This often takes the place of their pursuit of an education after arrival (Goździak 2015, p. 19).

## CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION

### **Hypothesis 1**

Political violence is defined as, “All collective attacks within a political community against the political regime, its actors, or policies” (Gurr 1970, p. 3-4). Participants in political violence justify their actions by opposing undesirable policies; which in this thesis is often the state vs. organized crime, gangs, and citizens. My first hypothesis argues that aggressive policies, implemented by authorities against gangs and cartels, have increased the amount of children migrating to the U.S. The effect of these policies has created a culture enabling recurring violence, often creating more victims that ultimately decide to migrate as a result. Police forces are in place to maintain order and security of the public, although such high levels of violence should question their effectiveness against gangs and cartels. Their actions reflect the state and weakens the credibility of the state in the eyes of the public. When crime and violence occur at such high rates, the police and state are seen as not protecting the security of citizens.

Two particular occurrences that have assisted in the shaping of current violence in the region are Mexico’s efforts, beginning in 2006, to confront the ongoing drug war and El Salvador’s efforts of battling gangs within the country. In addition, a 2009 presidential coup d’état in Honduras could be seen as a catalyst for some of the problems that have grown to exist there recently. These occurrences coincide with the political violence as

explained by Gurr falling into the three following categories: turmoil, conspiracy, and internal war (Gurr 1970, p. 11). Turmoil was believed to include “Unorganized political violence that remains spontaneous and maintaining the backing of popular participation” (Gurr 1970, p. 11). Conspiracy includes, “Organized political violence that has limited participation” (Gurr 1970, p. 11) and internal war maintains, “Highly organized political violence with substantial popular participation that attempts to disrupt the state by extreme violence” (Gurr 1970, p. 11). Each of these forms of political violence has often appeared to some extent throughout the region. For example, Guatemalans regularly protested the presidency of former President Otto Pérez Molina, leading to his 2015 resignation due to charges of corruption and fraud (Luhnnow, 2015).

In Mexico, the beginning of the war against drugs, led by the country’s former President Felipe Calderón, allowed criminal organizations to evolve into a migrant smuggling, kidnapping, and extortion business (Wolf 2016, p. 146). These crimes took place before, but not as much, as in the years following the actions by Calderón’s administration. Many of the drug-related problems existed before, although the amplified response by the government intensified the war and created more deaths in its wake. Police and governments have become more open to aggressive policies against criminal organizations, such as cartels and gangs in Mexico and Central America, respectively. How governments respond to acts of violence and crime contributes to the outcome of emigration occurring throughout the region. The overuse of force or lack of involvement leaves an impact, contributing to recent waves of child migrants arriving to the U.S.

Many citizens in Mexico, and the Northern Triangle, have grown to express less faith in the state’s ability to come to their aid in a time of need. Morris believes that,

“Mexico suffers from a rule of law deficit from their efforts of combating organized crime that made it not capable to face the insecurity and violence that has transformed as a result” (Morris 2012, p. 39). Similarly, it could be said of the role of the state throughout Central America, greed vs. grievance affects the government, organized crime, and the citizens caught in the middle.

At the state level, the Mexican states that have higher levels of corruption and insecurity tend to be those more involved in the war against the cartels and organized crime (Morris 2013, p.55). After former President Calderón took office, he dispatched tens of thousands of the military and federal police to certain areas throughout the country that exhibited the most elements of crime. This occurred ten years ago in 2006 and the violence that followed the actions of Calderón in the following years grew quite steadily; an increase from 2,120 drug-related murders in 2006 to more than 11,000 in 2010 (Morris 2013, p. 43). As a result, this placed unwanted public scrutiny and attention on his administration. Violence is viewed as an inevitable consequence in the cartel business, since the cartels do not typically utilize and abide by normal legal and law enforcement means to settle disputes like the rest of society (Morris 2013, p. 44). The lack of impunity for acts of violence and crime appears to be out of control. Violence had previously been viewed as harmful for business because of the unwanted attention that accompanies it as a result. Citizens have grown to hold government officials to higher standards, although the same problems still exist throughout the country and there remains the assumption of corruption and drug trafficking being connected:

“Organizations provide goods and services, which cannot function properly without some form of corruption present” (Morris 2012, p. 30). The inability of the state to effectively

combat cartels and organized crime limits the reach of the state, and further inhibits the trust of the people, causing citizens to migrate to better opportunities. Morris notes, “A multiple front war is what the state has battled in recent years, fighting itself because of such corruption and fighting the criminal elements that have contributed to the chaos in the country and further perpetuates the discontent among public by the government not properly keeping citizens safe” (Morris 2012, p. 38). To truly measure corruption appears difficult at times, because often the distrust between citizens and the government leaves room for false perceptions to exist whether they happen to be true or not.

Bohn (2012, p. 68) examines the relationship between the perception of corruption among citizens. She argues that after citizens lose faith in the government’s ability to stop or prevent corruption, the perception of corruption is almost as dangerous as the corruption itself. This often results in the notion of a lack in grievance resolution for many citizens, contributing to their decision to migrate elsewhere.

A perceived impunity remains in regards to law enforcement and government, which increases the likelihood of the rule of law being undermined. In the case of Mexico and Central America it leads to widespread acts of violence and crime. If citizens do not have faith in government institutions and the rule of law, it creates a deteriorating stability of the regime. The arrests of government officials (from essentially every level of law enforcement, legislative branch, military, judicial branch, and even the executive branch), provides citizens with insecure feelings (Morris 2012, p. 30).

A previous study conducted by the National Conference of Secretaries of Public Security in Mexico estimated nearly 94 percent of municipal police officers at one point were enticed by corruption to help supplement their salaries, which they perceived as too

low (Morris 2012, p. 31). Many of the government and security officials arrested, or who have faced allegations, are supposed to be representatives in place to fight the crime, not take part in it. Corruption promotes the daily practice of the criminal enterprise and allows officials and leaders to have certain positions in office, essentially receiving payments or being coerced to remain silent (Morris 2012, p. 32). Corruption in Mexico also allows many members of law enforcement and government to serve as allies in the battle against other criminal organizations and the Mexican state. Morris notes, “State officials move between simple noncompliance into targeted compliance by remaining complicit in these acts of corruption” (Morris 2012, p. 32).

El Salvador and Guatemala’s past civil wars share traits regarding Gurr’s analysis of the greed versus grievance theory. The violence between state actors and non-state actors has created a vacuum leaving chaos and uncertainty behind. A culture of fear and violence remain instilled in the region, similar to the previous civil wars. Winton argues, “Violence becomes a form of expression for obtaining social and economic power” (Winton 2004, p. 86) and gangs and cartels have become increasingly influential non-state actors.

The impact of these non-state actors has caused citizens to flee at alarming rates, particularly children. The lack of protection provided by the state establishes justification of Grievance theory. Governments are remaining negligent or unwilling to fully protect children from the harm that is occurring throughout the Northern Triangle and Mexico. The Greed versus grievance theory involves the self-interests that “rebels” seek and the resulting resource deprivation (Gurr 1970, p. 126). Individuals often feel the need to rebel because the social, economic, and political conditions that promote equality and security

are difficult to achieve. Conflict weakens political institutions, and while the typical ‘civil war’ does not currently take place today in the Northern Triangle, high levels of violence have surpassed or mirrored such conditions. “Fears of victimization have resulted in large population movement throughout the region, after coercion and corruption have already weakened the security and judicial systems” (Wolf 2016, p. 147).

Militarized police and the use of countries’ armed forces have maintained a heavy presence through the years and suspected gang members are often arrested, whether they belong in a gang or not in El Salvador because of such stringent policies. These policies enforced by the state to crack down on organized criminal activity have been referred to as *mano dura* (iron fist) (Wolf 2016, p. 147). Despite the implementation of these policies, crime and homicides remain alarmingly high. “The authoritarian past of many Central American countries enforces systematic forms of abuse under the justification of combating crime” (Cruz 2015, p. 257-258). This appears to create unnecessary policing of youth and the proliferation of gangs in the region has contributed to violence, as well as media sensationalism, causing violence to appear almost normal in the lives of Central American youth (Winton 2005, p. 170).

Security forces have also become more willing to neglect duties for greed at a higher rate, which often leaves citizens seeking grievance resolution elsewhere. An argument which Cruz makes regarding police misconduct is that it may play a greater role in influencing political legitimacy than levels of crime and insecurity (Cruz 2015, p. 257). In regards to migration, I believe that the roles are often reversed with the impact of insecurity causing more children to leave.



There is evidence of the support of citizens diminishing from police misconduct or their unwillingness to combat crime. “The expectations of citizens, their direct experiences with government organizations and demographic variables, such as education and social status, have been proven to shape the legitimacy of regimes” (Cruz 2015, p. 6). Cruz highlight the extent of corruption in Guatemala regarding the arrest of multiple police chiefs for being linked to extra-judicial killings and drug-trafficking (Cruz 2015, p. 251-252).

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang) are two of the largest gangs in the region. After the 2012 truce that was negotiated between the Salvadoran government and gang leaders, the violence and murder decreased, although has increased again, which could be attributed to the tensions between the state and gangs. Since the truce has slowly broken down, it has placed further pressure and criticism on security and government leaders (“Rivers of Blood”, 2015). Extortion of businesses and citizens is visible and used as a means for additional financial support and most of the country has become destabilized to some extent.

July 2015 saw many of the bus drivers of El Salvador’s capital city, San Salvador, going on strike after several drivers were targeted and murdered as a result of gang violence in the city (Renteria, 2015). The bus drivers sought more security and citizens were essentially forced out of using one of the most widely used modes of transport in the city. In addition, soldiers and members of law enforcement recently were called upon to provide security and protection to medical workers in some Latin American countries because of the recent outbreak of the Zika virus that has begun threatening lives, adding woes to the crime that remains rampant (Sherman, 2016). Gangs are patrolling

neighborhoods in countries such as El Salvador, blocking access to medical assistance for citizens (Sherman, 2016). The government continues to remain constrained in ongoing battles for control from gangs in the country. Consequently, the environment where government remains negligent in its duty of providing basic needs such as healthcare and safety to its citizens (Sherman, 2016). This may be an important development to follow in the upcoming months in regards to further increased migration from Central America and Mexico, considering the declaration of the Zika virus as a public health emergency throughout Latin America (Sherman, 2016).

Honduras and El Salvador over the past decade have steadily remained near the top of countries not at war with the highest amount of homicides. On the other hand, Honduras's murder rate has declined, which could help explain some of the decline in child migrant apprehensions there. However, El Salvador reached a record 635 homicides during the month of May 2015, which was believed to be the most homicides in a month since the days of widespread bloodshed during the country's civil war that ended in 1992 (Alberto, 2015). Up until, the month of August in 2015, El Salvador experienced more than 900 homicides ("El Salvador Gang Violence", 2015) and in all of 2015, El Salvador endured 6,657 murders, which was a nearly 70 percent increase from 2014 (Stillman, 2016), which is very alarming for such a small country and is a murder rate of approximately 103 homicides per 100,000 people in 2015 ("Five Facts about Migration", 2016).

In El Salvador and Honduras, the problems with gangs became more problematic because members were derived from the youthful populations. The gangs may acquire a recruitment bonus as a consequence of the misery citizens face. Over 400 children, under

the age of 18, were killed during the first half of 2014 in Honduras (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 19). Citizens have become afraid and are prisoners in their own homes and neighborhoods. In Honduras, the homicide rate was 57 murders for every 100,000 people in 2015, which was a drop from 69 homicides per 100,000 people in 2014, although this rate remains among the world’s worst (“Five Facts about Migration”, 2016).

Similarly, Guatemala’s homicide rate slightly decreased in 2015 from 32 to 29.5 violent deaths per 100,000 people (“Five Facts about Migration”, 2016). Additionally, Guatemala averaged an estimated 13 murders per day and 4,778 total homicides in 2015. Emigrating for many is the last chance at survival and peace of mind, and often seems to risk everything just to make it across the border, many times stumbling into more problems without truly understanding what lies ahead.

Grievance theory assists in revealing a relationship between violent behavior, expressed in Central America and Mexico, and ongoing struggles of deprivation. The violence becomes a way of acting out or rebelling against current conditions. Gangs have learned to become more sophisticated in their work as a result of these aggressive policies.

With the increases of more murders and crime occurring, citizens likely feel more insecure about their lives and surroundings. A recent UN report emphasized the importance and duty of each country - Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to have to keep their citizens safe. 48% of displaced children interviewed in this report shared experiences of how they had been personally affected by violence in the region from organized, armed criminal actors, including drug cartels and gangs or by state actors (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 6). For example in the UNHCR survey, nearly 66% of

respondents in El Salvador, cited violence as a leading factor in their decision to leave. In Honduras, nearly 44% cited violence, followed by nearly 59% in Mexico (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 6). In Guatemala, violence was cited as less of a concern, with only about 20% of respondents claiming it as a major factor in their decision to emigrate (“Children on the Run” 2015, p. 6). This may be partially explained by the fact that Guatemala, shares a history of civil war conflict, but has not experienced the same extent of criminal organizations and widespread violence that exists in Honduras and El Salvador. However, there is still reason to confirm the belief that as long as extreme violence levels exist, increased emigration will follow as a result.

In a survey conducted by the American Immigration Council, respondents were more likely to decide to migrate if they had been a victim of a crime in the previous year, compared to those who were not a victim (Hiskey, Córdova, Orcés, and Malone 2016, p. 6). In an additional survey, a majority of respondents in Honduras remained aware of how dangerous it was to migrate, although the most common rationale related to the high levels of crime and violence occurring (Hiskey, Córdova, Orcés, and Malone 2016, p. 6). Only 25% of Salvadorans, who were not victims, planned to migrate compared to 44 % of those who had been a victim of crime within the country. In Honduras, 56 % of respondents who had been a victim of crime thought of migrating compared to 28 % of those who were not victims. This contrasted with Guatemalans expressing no significant differences between non-victims and victims of crime on the decision to migrate. A majority of respondents from Honduras decided that 2014 was the most ideal time to attempt migrating north because of common belief that the journey was becoming more difficult (Hiskey, Córdova, Orcés, and Malone 2016, p. 6). This created a reason to

believe that citizens will continue to migrate to the U.S. no matter of the danger along the journey because it is still viewed as more attractive than remaining home.

In addition, Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Diaz (2010, p. 4) say they believed that crime victimization increased the probability of people expressing a desire to migrate elsewhere. Their look at how emigration among families in Latin America is important to consider. Consequently, I believe similarities with children, that have been migrating to the U.S. in recent years, to exist because of the importance in the number of homicides as a tool, which correlates with crime increases (Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Diaz 2010, p. 6).

Although, Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Diaz noted difficulties in the ability to truly measure crime victimization across Latin American countries, they utilized surveys and polling data to effectively draw close comparisons. Some estimates provided by the *Latinobarómetro* polling database show that in a 3-year span from 2002 to 2004, nearly 39% of survey respondents claimed that they or a family member had been a victim of crime over the previous year. In these figures, data from Mexico illustrated the highest amount of crime victimization (Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Díaz 2010, p. 4).

In an additional 2006 survey, respondents indicated that safety and security was the biggest problem their country faced, even more so than poverty and unemployment (Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Díaz 2010, p. 4). The authors agree with previous research that argues that citizens fear for their personal safety weakens the legitimacy of the state (Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Díaz 2010, p. 4). “Victimization was seen as a regressing effect in relation to the promotion of law enforcement behavior that might

be viewed as repressive” (Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Díaz 2010, p. 5). This had a significant effect in intensifying the bond between violence, crime, and migration.

Previous civil wars in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador are used as examples highlighting ongoing Latin American emigration because of violence and the reasoning has not shifted much from the days of civil war to now. Violence and crime will continually cause widespread migration of citizens within Central America and Mexico. Compared to other Latin American countries, citizens of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala expressed rather high intentions to migrate to the U.S. to avoid crime victimization (Wood, Gibson, Ribeiro, and Hamsho-Díaz 2010, p. 10). Therefore, the violence and instability that surround these children, assist in shaping their potential outlook on life.

## **Hypothesis 2**

Social identity and social structure are important themes for youth. I argue that educational and familial instability in a child’s life shapes how children survive surrounded by conflicts in their communities. I believe that the relationships and experiences of children who remain separated from parents or close relatives can have a significant impact on their development as productive citizens. Winton argues that a link exists between social resources, social exclusion, and the well-being of youth in the region (Winton 2004, p. 84). I believe that the surge in child migration has formed because of this. Many parents across the Northern Triangle region and Mexico have left children behind in order to better the family’s situation.

Although, these occurrences disrupt the family structure, and harm the psychological well-being of those involved, it helps to better explain what these

transnational families look like across the Americas. Transnational families vary in complexity since parents and children do not have the ability to care for each other given the distances separating them. Youth are lacking physical and human interactions, negatively affecting their growth and development in a world of hardship during their more impressionable early years.

While reading *Enrique's Journey*, I am able to understand how simple things, such as talking on the phone or exchanging letters, only mean so much. Similarly, remittances and gifts can only go so far due to the long-distance communication (Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis 2013, p. 50).

With such disruption, the need for achievement and affiliation is paramount in the child migrants this study. McClelland's 'needs' are learned over the duration of one's lifetime. Although, all individuals can experience the need for affiliation, there often remains a need and desire of reuniting with relatives that reside in the U.S. Children are left with the thought of whether their parents and close relatives still love them or question why they were left behind. This fuels the "need for belonging" resonating with migrant youth as they grow. The time spent apart often assists with shaping a child's life while the parent remains away. Moreover, as Nazario (2006) suggests sometimes living with an extended family does match the love of a parent. And, "The weakened socialization of the family, tensions provoked by an accumulation of shortages, and the increased material and emotional responsibility of women" is also seen as having a major impact on the decision that many youth have to join gangs (Winton 2004, p. 87).

Parents are the emotional staple within the traditional family structure. After large numbers of parents leave children behind, it raises a question of how children are able to

develop effectively and remain healthy in a society with such psychological and emotional scars. Parents often express feelings of guilt and sadness for having to leave their children (Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis 2013, p. 49). The current state of laws surrounding child migration to the U.S. may be a contributing factor to the choice to leave children because of the prospect of reunification. In the past, parents have been able to migrate to the U.S., and to plan to make money to bring their children at a later time. There are risks, of course. If the parent remains unauthorized in the U.S., he or she may not be able to return for their children.

Parents believe that separation is a sacrifice that benefits their children (Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis 2013, p. 57). Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis (2013, p. 57) suggest that their children may agree. Those from the Northern Triangle were more likely to be proud of the sacrifice of their parents' decision to move. They saw this as a means of improving the family's financial situation and security. At the same time the state and family are less accommodating for these youth, thwarting their ability to achieve proper social identity in the society.

Meanwhile, Central American youth are at prime ages for being recruited by organized crime and street gangs. With limited education and work at home, children remain caught in the middle of ongoing battles between state and non-state actors controlling their neighborhoods. The lack of educational and labor opportunities increases their vulnerability to crime involvement. "A lack of education, unemployment, drugs, and a general lack of understanding from society and family were seen as problems correlating with the reason children provided to explain their reasoning for joining a gang" (Winton 2004, p. 88). Approximately 59% of Salvadoran boys and 61%



of girls interviewed cited violence, poverty, and family reunification as the most prominent factors for leaving home (Kennedy 2014, p. 1). As long as governments limit investment in education, youth development remains inadequate. Large populations of youth will be deterred from becoming productive members in society.

*Out of School and Out of Work* (De Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016, p. 2) highlights some of the challenges youth face regarding labor and education problems in Central America and Mexico today. An estimated 18 million youth, between the ages of 15 and 24, are neither working nor in school across Latin America (De Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016, p. 8). Out of the 18 million youth not working or attending school, two-thirds are female. This could be attributed to males being able to find more labor related work than females, correlating with higher number of girls trying to reach the U.S. (Wasem and Morris 2014, p. 6-7). Moreover, in recent years it has become increasingly difficult for all youth to find work within urban areas (De Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016, p. 9).

Approximately 20 percent of Latin American youth not working or enrolled in school remains slightly less than the global average of 22.4 percent (De Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016, p. 14). Although, there are fewer work opportunities for youth in general, this is a particular problem in Central American and Mexico since they make up such a large portion of the population. When they leave school early that exacerbates the problem. The dynamic of thousands of children departing on a yearly basis may ultimately have an increasing impact. I believe this further limits the ability to fulfill basic needs such as achieving a sense of belonging and self-esteem. These are important

qualities for children to have and prime years where they are most vulnerable and may not reach their full potential because of conflicts faced.

Gang culture serves as a welcoming alternative for youth in Central America and provides enough reasons for youth to turn to social acceptance. Gangs provide “Identity and belonging often representing emotive communities covering affective needs for young people to join” (Frühling 2008, p. 10). Youth have become shunned from obtaining adequate education and must work to be able to succeed. When school and normal daily activities are difficult, youth decide to leave their home countries or possibly fill their social need of belonging with gangs.

Inequality and despair can be exploited by the gangs in order to try and recruit more members. Children are at great risk, and the government’s inability to handle these problems, further amplifies the decision whether to join the criminal element to try and survive or to make the journey north to the U.S. Gangs are not only recruiting males, but also targeting females who are more subject to being sexually assaulted. Gangs have the ability to provide many of the needs that children lack at home.

The youth in Mexico makes up nearly 46% of their population of more than 120 million citizens (Central Intelligence Agency: Mexico, 2015) and around 27.9% of the population, 14 years of age, and under and 18.1% of those are between the ages of 15 and 24. Guatemala holds claim to having the youngest population in Central America, with nearly half under nineteen years of age (Central Intelligence Agency: Mexico, 2015). In addition, nearly half of Hondurans live in poverty and education holds poor quality where high rates of dropout and repeated grades are prevalent (Central Intelligence Agency: Honduras, 2015). This remains highly troublesome considering approximately 55 percent

of the population is 24 years of age and under. Similarly, nearly half of El Salvador's population today is 24 years of age and under as well (Central Intelligence Agency: El Salvador, 2015).

Family reunification was the major factor for leaving for nearly a third of respondents for Kennedy (2014, p. 3). More than 90 percent of respondents had at least one family member in the U.S. already, and more than half had at least one parent in the U.S. (Kennedy 2014, p. 3). In Guatemala, nearly 84% cited family and better opportunities in the U.S. as a primary factor in their decision to migrate ("Children On the Run" 2015, p. 10) followed by nearly 83% in El Salvador, 80 % in Honduras, and 82% in Mexico. The children in the study did not believe that violence had affected them as much before and also they did not want to prolong their decision any further because of the risk by remaining home.

Yet, nearly half of respondents noted a gang presence within their community and approximately a fifth of the children reported they had not attended school anymore because of this gang presence (Kennedy 2014, p. 2). Violence was not only recurring in major urban areas, but spreading into smaller towns and rural areas across El Salvador as well. These areas already appear to share difficulties with a lack of resources that major cities have. Kennedy believed that many children and households decided that migrating to the U.S., no matter how dangerous, would be a better decision long-term than remaining behind. Some children even moved to different areas within the country in order to elude gang members, although some of them were eventually found.

In an additional report, approximately half of child respondents claimed to have left their homes because of violence and gang intimidation, especially girls ("Closed

Doors” 2016, p. 19). In this report, only one of every five children interviewed felt gang intimidation to be the sole primary factor for them to migrate elsewhere (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 21). A common occurrence between studies expresses accounts of girls, mostly teenagers, being targeted throughout communities for sexual assault. This admission adds to previous studies showing more girls migrating in recent years. This study provides accounts of extortion being common by gangs to threaten children and families and these are actions that have grown common and can justify individuals’ decision to migrate for safety.

Winton explores how youth deal with violence within their community (2005, p. 176). Avoidance, compliance and engagement are the responses that youth generally discover as solutions (Winton 2005, p. 176). Avoidance is seen as the most logical response that youth have, followed by compliance and engagement to the influence of the gang to fulfill missing needs (Winton 2005, p. 176). Winton also argues that, “Even after years of civil war within Guatemala, violence has shifted into more of a social or economic form of violence, differentiating from the political violence occurring during the previous civil war” (Winton 2004, p. 83). Winton highlights how youth often embrace the gang culture and express the need for belonging with other groups in society. “Gang membership is not motivated by a desire to become involved in violence, but rather to belong to a cohesive social group” (Winton 2004, p. 87).

The importance of affiliation, pertaining to the desire individuals have to establish or maintain social relationships, brings a willingness to be accepted among others. In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory, safety needs were highly important within the hierarchy of needs. Individuals were seeking protection against such high levels of crime

and violence, enabling a fight or die attitude, which ultimately resulted in emigration to a new life elsewhere or remaining in the country of origin where death and violence might still remain.

Another aspect worth considering is the occurrence of elderly relatives who often assume the responsibility of looking after children across Central America. These children are sometimes cared for by their grandparents, and the older those guardians become, the more common it might become for children to leave, maybe in hopes of reuniting with a parent or other relative (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 33). As the elderly in several Latin American countries continue to age, it may continue to force children to migrate.

### **Hypothesis 3**

I question whether the crucial factors surrounding Central American child migration have improved since the peak months of 2014. Data show that children continue to migrate (U.S. Border Patrol, 2016). Since 2014, U.S. apprehensions of child migrants have declined, while Mexico’s amount of apprehensions have heavily increased due to such large numbers of migrants. Recently, Mexico began limiting migrants, including children, from navigating through the country via train systems, known as “La Bestia,” or the beast (Villegas, 2014). This method had previously been one of the most used modes of transportation for migrants, who rode atop cargo trains risking their lives and limbs for survival. Mexico, with the help of the U.S., has implemented more stringent border strategies and increased immigration authorities’ presence throughout the country. With such widespread corruption, I question whether Mexico is a state capable of handling large numbers of child migrants. Even so, Mexico as a country of transit for

many Central American children to reach the U.S., has instituted more stringent controls. Many migrants have now begun embarking on different, often more hazardous routes than before, because of the crackdowns by Mexican and U.S. authorities (Villegas, 2014). Even with a new heavy deterrence at the Mexican southern border, and U.S. border, and with decreasing numbers of unaccompanied minors arriving, children are continuing to risk their lives to make the journey north.

An examination of previous fieldwork highlights Central American's migration transformation into a business within Mexico (Vogt 2013). Basic needs such as water, shelter, sleep, food, clothing, and security are often difficult to obtain along the journey. Simple things, such as lack of sleep, may cause migrants to drop their guard making it more likely to be apprehended by authorities or others (Nazario 2006). The journey to the U.S. can often be long and tiring from the hardships that migrants face and migrants often remain at the mercy of law enforcement and organized crime in order to safely travel throughout Mexico. Smuggling and kidnapping often run rampant, introducing a coexistence between migrants, the state, and organized crime yielding a profit-driven business. Vogt argues that, "Migration has become crucial to capital accumulation" (Vogt 2013, p. 765). The value of lives has been diminished by those who seek profit and violence as a form of expression within everyday life.

Increased enforcement, along previously popular routes for migrants, since the migration peaked in 2014, has decreased opportunities to make it to the U.S. Examining Mexico's apprehension of unaccompanied minors reveals an increase since 2014. These apprehensions in 2015 increased nearly every month (Isacson, Meyer, and Smith, 2015). Mexico's Secretariat of Government (SEGOB) removed more than 104,000 migrants that

were from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Seelke 2015, p. 1), and approximately 17% were children.

Mexican authorities deported 67 percent more child migrants from Central America in 2015, than the previous year (Isacson, Meyer, and Smith 2015, p. 3). A recent report, (2015, p. 7) conducted by the Washington Office on Latin America, involving shelters and organizations handling migrant cases, examined the issue of possible human rights violations migrants attempting to venture through Mexico. While analyzing the recent enforcement of the ‘Southern Border Program’, there was a belief that Mexican authorities were failing in their duties to properly investigate and hold organized crime and security forces, and immigration agents accountable for neglect against migrants. “Between July 2014 and June 2015, child migrant apprehensions rose 61% compared to July 2013 to June 2014, the previous year” (Knippen, Boggs, and Meyer 2015, p. 8). In addition, deportations of child migrants in Mexico rose 58% during that same time period.

A recent Human Rights Watch (2016, p. 9) report conducted interviews with those from Central America deemed as refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants. Sixty-one interviews were conducted involving children between 11 and 17 years old. It revealed that children were being misinformed about their rights and placed in Mexican detention centers before being sent back home. Immigration officials in Mexico deported Central American children back to the dangers that remained at home and less than 1% of children detained were formally accepted as refugees by Mexican authorities. Only 52 unaccompanied minors were granted protection by Mexican authorities last year. Mexico

apprehended approximately 36,000 Central American children in 2015, which was 55% more than the previous year and 270% more than in 2013 (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 3).

Returning children to their home country appears not be the most effective or safe and for the children. The methodology of the Human Rights Watch report (2016, p. 9) was based on field research involving individual, detailed interviews in Mexico and Honduras between April and December 2015 involving 49 boys and 12 girls (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 10) and 46 of the 61 children were unaccompanied.

I believe it is crucial to cover children from a range of ages and even adults to compare and contrast their experiences migrating. Those Central American children, who were fleeing because of safety concerns, under Mexico’s refugee law should be eligible to receive international protection (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 16). The National Institute of Migration (INM) in Mexico apprehended nearly 36,000 minors between January and December 2015 (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 17) approximately half of which were unaccompanied. This is up from 23,000 in 2014 and 9,600 in 2013. Mexico is now being viewed as a country of destination for many migrants rather than simply a transit country (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 36). Apprehensions of child migrants dropped in the U.S. after the 2014 peak in 2015, whereas apprehensions in Mexico have continually risen (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 39).

Nearly half of the Central Americans apprehended by Mexico were eligible for asylum, although only 52 children received international protection (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 48), which was up from 25 in 2014. This is hard to fathom considering that tens of thousands of children are fleeing their home countries alone to seek safety or family reunification, yet less than 1% of them qualify for protection by Mexican authorities. The



authors suggested, “that is not completely because of inadequate laws, but the inadequate implementation of those laws” (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 48). Children were not being properly informed of their rights by authorities. Children are having to navigate international laws and policies that they might not comprehend. It is difficult to imagine children traveling hundreds or thousands of miles, interacting with strangers, and ultimately depending on or entrusting others for guidance and protection.

Immigrant detention has become the new norm for child migrants over the years, particularly within Mexico and the U.S. Time spent detained assists in shaping the journey of a migrant child, so it is an important interval within their life. Detention impacts the mental and physical health of child migrants (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 81). Anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms can stem from the time migrant children spent held in detention and this may produce problems behaviorally and developmentally in a child’s life (“Closed Doors” 2016, p. 94). This is an important concept to consider in how the state’s inability to provide protection can result in children being detained by the state, which negatively affects their well-being; and, before ultimately being sent back home by Mexican authorities or navigating through the U.S. immigration process if they successfully reach that point.

Detention and deportation appear to be the simple answer to often complex problems that continue to confront individuals and these governments. Many authority figures that children interact with are not capable or qualified to properly provide adequate assistance, which commonly conflicts with the mission of immigration authorities in the U.S. and Mexico. How can governments continue to face high numbers of child migrants, while maintaining secure borders?

How are children capable of understanding a variety of international immigration laws and procedures as they choose to try to reach the U.S.? Yet children seem capable to ultimately make a decision to migrate on their own accord or by relatives. The Human Rights Watch report (2016, p. 38) noted that the intended destination of a migrant child is largely influenced by where they have relatives. “If children had more family relatives in other Central American countries, instead of the U.S., more child migrants emigrating to those countries might appear instead” (Kennedy 2014, p. 6). This plays a crucial aspect into why children are fleeing to the U.S. rather than other countries that are closer in distance.

#### **Hypothesis 4**

The need for assimilation appears challenging to satisfy, though after fulfilling the goal of reaching the U.S., Central American children still seek to adjust to a new school or community. This introduces Assimilation theory, allowing me to analyze the nature of identities that form after arrival in a new host country. Assimilation is defined as, “An adaptation of one ethnic or social group to another, involving the inclusion of language, traditions, values, and behaviors” (International Organization for Migration, 2015). This final hypothesis examines the use of assimilation within society, arguing that newly arrived children have greater opportunities to assimilate than adults. Children are at an age where social inclusion, rather than exclusion becomes paramount.

After arrival to the U.S., the majority of minors generally face one of two eventual outcomes: deportation back to their country of origin or fighting through the legal process to start a new life in the U.S. Once across the border, adjusting to rule of

law and finding a place in the U.S. is challenging, but often the scope of the challenge is not realized until formal processes begin.

Child migrants who stay after arrival are affected by the trauma faced on the journey to the U.S. This can be crucial for their development and social interaction with others throughout life. “Migrating children experience an often extreme climatic and cultural change, as they leave behind a society where they are in the racial and cultural majority and join one where they are part of a racial minority that is treated as inferior” (Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis 2013, p. 58).

One previous study conducted by the Latino Adolescent Migration Health and Adaptation Project, showed that children who suffered from trauma during their attempt to migrate did recover (Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis 2013, p. 59). Their mental health symptoms faded as their time in the U.S. increased (Schapiro, Kools, Weiss, and Brindis 2013, p. 59). The data showed that an adjustment phase should be expected, although there was reason to believe that the duration of that adjustment period varied.

Although, the U.S. is becoming more diverse, particularly with the Latino and Hispanic communities the importance of maintaining bilingual abilities has grown. Most of the major destinations for newly arrived child migrants are in communities where large groups that resemble them currently exist. According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, the states that have received the greatest amount of children placed with sponsors are California, Florida, Maryland, New York, Texas, and Virginia. Identity is an important concept to obtain and maintain during assimilation. Children are crossing cultural barriers and physical barriers on their journey and integration and assimilation allows for a greater sense of belonging.

It may also prove difficult to have children in an environment where hardly anyone resembles them, which could unintentionally push social exclusion. This makes it interesting to see what happens if incoming unaccompanied minors who settle in areas where a sizeable Hispanic population may not exist.

Gordon (1964) argues immigrants, who arrive to the U.S., start slowly assimilating to mainstream culture by not recognizing their previous cultural background. While examining child immigrants from Guatemala during the 1990s, Menjívar notes that, “Without regular physical contact with their communities of origin, there would be very little, if any potential for children to establish or continue ties with the communities left behind in Guatemala” (Menjívar 2002, p. 537). The same could be argued for child immigrants of today. Cognitive ability, language barriers, cross-cultural communication, and time become important variables for children’s ability to obtain new information in a new place. Children who migrate differ from adults in this perspective in the sense that adults have spent more time within their communities in Central America, becoming more enriched in its customs and traditions. Menjívar stresses the importance of learning English for immigrants to effectively participate in a new society. Maintaining the native language appears to be a more difficult concept for children, more so than for adults and this generally allows for adults to feel less assimilated within a new society. Normal daily activities, such as conversing within a household, often reflect this in which some youth saw the importance of retaining their native language as relatively low compared to adults (Menjívar 2002, p. 545).

Children in the study expressed difficulties conversing in both English and Spanish at times, which was seen as a disadvantage for future employment opportunities;

possibility limiting social mobility (Menjívar 2002, p. 545). Menjívar also notes, “Guatemalan children’s transformation into becoming ‘ethnic Americans’ is difficult because they remain at the margins of society” (Menjívar 2002, p. 548). Menjívar continues to argue that, “Immigrant children being at the margins of American society and their home culture places them at risk and leads to ‘dissonant acculturation’, which occurs when immigrants become limited in their language abilities” (Menjívar 2002, p. 549). The schools they frequently attended and neighborhoods may place them in less desirable circumstances than what might be required to fully assimilate and integrate into mainstream society.

There is reason to believe that the migration peak in 2014 caught many off guard and unprepared, although now more resources have been expended towards dealing with child migrants arriving to the U.S. in the following years. Schools in the U.S. are obligated to host unaccompanied minors that are in the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The 1982 “*Plyer v. Doe*” Supreme Court decision, guarantees public education for all children, even those who may be unaccompanied minors coming from Latin America (Goździak 2015, p. 14). The Court in *Plyer v. Doe* noted education as being key for succeeding in life, as well as, practicing self-reliance and self-sufficiency within their communities (Goździak 2015, p. 14).

Some children may have been away from a school setting for many months or possibly even years, and adjusting and potentially making up lost time from school can be a crucial issue for many unaccompanied minors. Schools have limits on the age students are eligible to attend and if an unaccompanied minor is older and behind, there may be future problems. Many children as newly arrived students have distinct language

needs once enrolled in school and achieving education in the U.S. is an important component of assimilation. Children are able to attend schools in their communities with children of other cultures and origins, in hopes of one day being able to graduate and go off to college or obtain employment.

Education provides opportunities for children to become more involved in extracurricular activities alongside other children and share similar interests with their peers. Although, some research shows that some children who attended U.S. schools generally between the ages of 12 and 15 and without a general knowledge of English, share a greater chance of struggling than others (Goździak 2015, p. 15).

Being placed in English as a second language classes was seen as unfortunate because of the children's ability to grasp enough knowledge to graduate on schedule. It might limit their time socializing with other students. Across the country, approximately 40% of unauthorized young adults between 18 and 24 years old had not completed high school (Goździak 2015, p. 17). Children at an age earlier than 14 years, however, were viewed as having the ability to finish high school at a 72 percent rate (Goździak 2015, p. 17).

How will children face life in new schools if they face resentment from citizens and possibly other children? Being able to survive the conditions at home and along the journey often requires determination and creativity to be able to make it. This shows that child migrants may be able to share success if a welcoming environment exists. Goździak saw children reuniting with relatives once in the U.S. as a positive experience for the majority of them, easing some challenges after arrival (Goździak 2015, p. 5). Since child

migrants are given access to shelter, food, water, and education once in the U.S., these basic needs are fulfilled and assist in the development of the ability to succeed.

Youth face variances in their academic and language acquisition abilities as well as in their behavior in a new setting. Learning new things, such as English, may not be the only difficulties students face. Something unique that most unaccompanied minors bring with them are adult-like life experiences. These past experiences may complicate their relationships and learning experiences with teachers and other students. Classroom environments are increasingly diverse, creating contrasts and similarities in the perspectives students may have. Lack of adequate English skills, and inadequate assistance from teachers can limit a migrant child's ability to blossom in a new environment. Many children may be frightened to use English because of a possible lack of proper knowledge or express shame for using native languages while other children in classrooms utilize English.

An interesting dynamic that Goździak sees impacting assimilation are intra-Latino group discriminations, such as negative sentiments towards Guatemalan Mayan students and Afro-Latinos (Goździak 2015, p. 12). She felt reason to believe there was a lack of 'mutual respect and understanding' between different groups of immigrants (Goździak 2015, p.12). Previously it was assumed that the only discrimination and difficulties affecting children were acceptance from mainstream cultures, (Caucasians, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans), but not within the Latino Community (Goździak 2015, p. 12). This raises another set of issues in seeking to understand how assimilation theory may apply. Goździak poses questions about how these internal conflict may

exacerbate employment and education opportunities for migrant children who experience this “double” discrimination (Goździak 2015, p. 13).

A Vera Institute study further elaborated the implications of isolation. It suggested that: “A lack of social support of close family and community, may make migrant children susceptible to the stresses of isolation, exploitation, human trafficking, discrimination, and poverty” (Simich and Mallozzi 2015, p. 13). In addition, it causes problems with “self-image and self-esteem during important developmental periods and life-changing transitions; and, damage to self-esteem can cause immigrants measurable psychological distress” (Simich and Mallozzi 2015, p. 21). The authors illustrate how the use of terms such as “unaccompanied immigrant child,” and similar terms, have an impact on the identity of newly arrived children. They discovered from their participants that identity was often confused as children struggled to maintain a self image in the face of all the changes attendant to their relocation (Simich and Mallozzi 2015, p. 22). Consequently, many children felt they were being forced to adapt to a different identity. The use of the term “immigrant” helped to sustain negative misconceptions and bigotry from others within society (Simich and Mallozzi 2015, p. 22). Some children interviewed felt as if they were isolated in school because they were not like other students. Stereotyping and discrimination appeared to be important issues that participants in the study faced (Simich and Mallozzi 2015, p. 23).

Access to social programs and services from organizations in their communities proved to be supportive for many youths. Some children in the study felt they had to grow up faster to adapt to the U.S. Recreational activities, such as playing sports that were seen as positive for youth and helped to relieve stress and trauma (Goździak 2015,



p. 21). The program ‘Soccer without Borders,’ founded in 2006 as a way for immigrant and refugee children to become involved, was viewed as a catalyst for them to reach growth and personal success. This can relate to the final step within the hierarchy of needs theory.

Within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the need for belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization are common among newly arrived children settling in the U.S. Friendships, relationships, respect, and realizing personal growth and potential can ultimately prove to be a great factor as children move forward. Self-resiliency was a major trait which some participants expressed, similar to that of many children in previous studies. The Vera Institute’s study focused on unaccompanied youth who recently settled in the New York City metro area. For many respondents, obtaining shelter and entering the workforce, were two primary goals once in the U.S.

The experiences that migrant youth have in schools here in the U.S. can be difficult, but not impossible to overcome. Their minds are not fully developed yet, and that provides the opportunity for growth. This is important because in most cases the cognitive skills of these children can be assumed to reflect those of counterparts around them, notwithstanding what they have witnessed on their journeys from their homelands.

According to the U.S. Education Department, approximately 80,000 unauthorized minors in the U.S. turn 18 each year, and approximately 65,000 graduate from high school. However, less than 10% enroll in college, and even fewer eventually graduate college (Sheehy, 2014). These figures give some indication of how unauthorized minors fare in U.S. schools. Yet success is relative. For many children who complete their journey to the U.S. that may be seen as a success. Yet the integration of immigrants

within a new host society is vital to understand. The ability to speak English remains a key asset to have success in the new society. School attendance and performance are two important aspects to examine in order to determine how successfully children acclimate to their new surroundings. Access to schooling can be the base for an education and for advancement in social and economic status; in a word, to properly adjust to life in the U.S. Meanwhile, the constant flow of immigrants also continues to shape the U.S. by creating a more diverse and multicultural society.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Children are important resources for countries in this study because they represent the future of a country by representing an invaluable investment that often becomes underappreciated and undervalued. These unaccompanied children ultimately have social, demographic, economic, and national security ramifications that may not be fully realized. Children are having to make calculations about their fate and the rationale behind that is troublesome; to face a journey of uncertainties to reach the U.S. rather than continuing their way of life at home. Children are taking a stand to improve their own outlook by migrating elsewhere. Many of the problems will remain if governments continue failing to provide basic needs to citizens. Widespread inequality and poverty continue to plague the region along with high homicide rates, greed and suffering continue.

Government lack of transparency and the weakening of democratic institutions throughout the region, remain a constant. Necessity sometimes forces individuals to flee in order to survive. Many migrants do not want to leave their homes, but often feel they have no alternatives. For example, conditions in El Salvador have eroded to the point that the U.S. has suspended its Peace Corps operations throughout the country (Markon, 2016). Dozens of volunteers who have spent time working towards youth development and economic development in the country have been placed on hold because of the

security situation in the country. The problems with immigration, corruption, and inequality even inspired Pope Francis comment on them during a recent trip to Mexico (“Immigration at center”, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to examine why Mexican and Central American children have decided on leaving their home countries to reach the U.S. in recent years. I made an analysis of Grievance, Motivation, and Assimilation theories to carry out this purpose. I found that aggressive measures against organized crime by authorities has increased the level of violence in the region. I found that child migrants have left Mexico and Central America because of the high levels of violence and for family reunification. I found that child migrants continue to make their way to the U.S. despite the amount of border enforcement implemented by Mexico and the U.S. I found that child migrants have an easier transition to life in the U.S. because they are younger. Studying migrant children is important because it has implications for their integration; their regularization in the society, and understanding negative influences which exist in their home countries.

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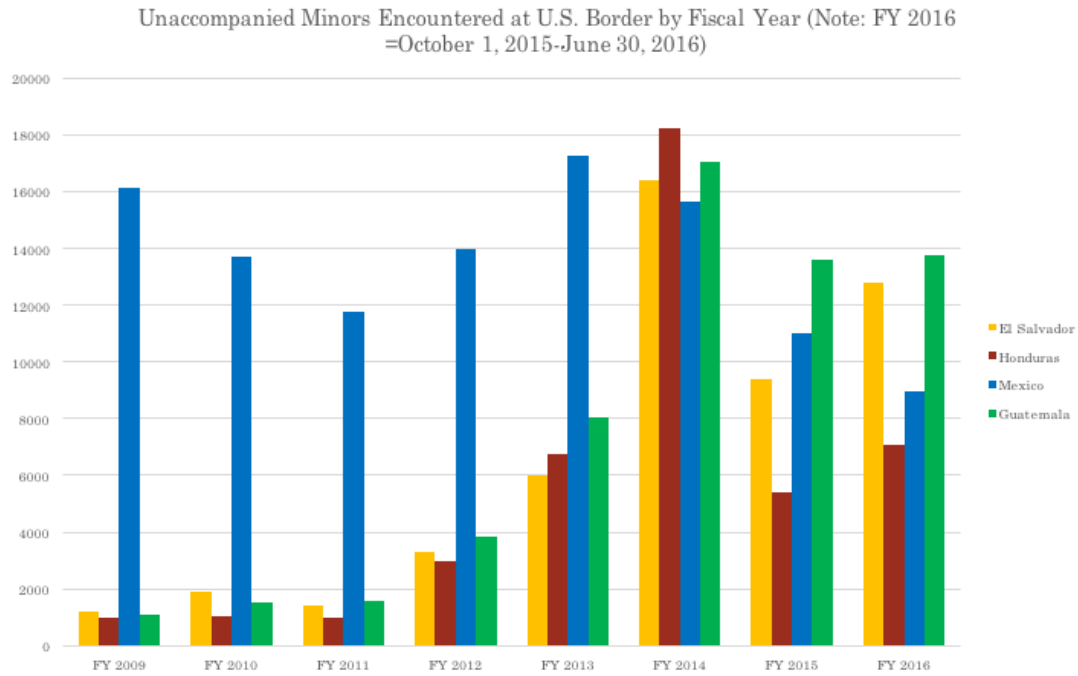


Figure 5.1 Unaccompanied minors encountered by U.S. authorities

Source: U.S. Border Patrol

<http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>

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