

Sabiduría



Palm Beach Gardens Campus

Dear Readers,

We are pleased to present the fall 2013 edition of *Sabiduría*: The Dr. Floyd F. Koch Honors College Peer-Reviewed Journal. The selection process was rigorous, and the standard was high, but after a long process, we selected a manuscript worthy of publication. We congratulate **Aida Rodriguez** on being the selected author.

We thank the writers who submitted their work and the peer-reviewers for their tireless work in reviewing the submissions. It is the Honors College students who make *Sabiduría* possible by getting involved in the peer-review process.

Our gratitude is also extended to Marcella Montesinos, Dr. Matthew Klauza, Dr. Regina M. Dilgen, and Dr. Ginger L. Pedersen for their dedication and support.

As each issue of *Sabiduría* is published, we hope the publication continues to grow, improve, and represent the best that the Honors College has to offer. More importantly, we hope more students take advantage of this opportunity in the future.

Sincerely,

Patricia Medina, Editor
Paul Lovelady, Editor



Fall 2013

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In keeping with the mission of Palm Beach State College, the purpose of the Dr. Floyd F. Koch Honors College is to provide a challenging and supportive academic environment in which students are encouraged to think critically, demonstrate leadership, and develop ethical standards. The Honors College pursues an interactive learning experience where students acquire a creative and comprehensive understanding of concepts in an interdisciplinary and global context. Palm Beach State Honors students and faculty share a commitment and civic responsibility that extends beyond the classroom to local, national, and international communities.

The Migration of Unaccompanied Children from Central America to the United States: Social Causes and Psychological Effects

Aida Rodriguez

“In El Salvador, there is a wrong—it’s being young,” said a boy identified as Carlos in an interview by Jennifer Podkul, one of the writers of the report *Forced from Home: The Lost Boys and Girls of Central America* published by the Women’s Refugee Commission in 2012 (7). The boy continued to say, “You’re stalked by gangs, authorities beat and follow kids because they don’t trust them; they think they’re gang members. There are no jobs for young people because employers don’t trust the kids either . . . it is better to be old.” The circumstances that Carlos described are the desperate conditions that force thousands of Central American children to risk the uncertain dangers of migrating alone to the United States. Starting in October 2011, an unprecedented increase in the number of unaccompanied minors from the Central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras began migrating to the United States (Jones and Podkul 1). The migration of Central American unaccompanied minors by way of Mexico includes young children and adolescents who are fleeing poverty, violent gangs, and drug cartels. In general, younger children seek to reunite with parents living in the U.S. without legal status who have paid smugglers to help their children cross the border and adolescents travel alone, running away from poverty and violence and seeking work and safety. For these reasons, children embark on the dangerous journey north and are exposed to many traumatic experiences.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296) created the term “unaccompanied alien children” (UAC) to refer to children under the age of 18 who lack lawful U.S. immigration status and who do not have a parent or guardian who can care for them (Carlson, Cacciatore, and Klimek 260). According to Jones and Podkul, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the agency responsible for the care and custody of these children, had a record number of 10,005 in its care by April 2012 (1). Out of the 10,005 unaccompanied child migrants, 8,719 were from the countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The recent increases in poverty and violence in these countries have caused the

migration of children. Jones and Podkul interviewed 151 detained minors and almost all of the children’s migration was forced by longstanding, complex problems in their home countries related to poverty and violence (1).

Poverty and violence in Guatemala are a result of poor harvests, lack of employment opportunities, and organized criminal activities. As cited by Jones and Podkul, a report from the grassroots organization Groundswell, Guatemala is facing a food crisis caused by “longstanding poverty and inequality, the worldwide financial recession and a degraded natural resource base that is deteriorating at an accelerated rate due to demographic pressures and a series of natural disasters, including repeated droughts in vulnerable areas of the country” (11). The food crisis has greatly affected indigenous populations and unskilled agricultural laborers. Young people who belong to these groups find it especially difficult to support themselves and their families. They are unable to find work and struggle to feed their families. This makes them vulnerable to the recruitment by street gangs and the influence of the Mexican drug cartels that are moving their operations into Central America (Jones and Podkul 11). Guatemala’s food crisis, poor labor market, and organized crime force young children and adolescents to flee to the United States in search of work and safety. Jones and Podkul conclude that given the inequalities within the Guatemalan economy, the country’s vulnerability to droughts and natural disasters, and the large percentage of the work force engaged in agricultural labor, the surge in the numbers of children migrating from Guatemala is likely to be a long-term issue (8).

Children from El Salvador and Honduras who were interviewed by Jones and Podkul described how the worsening conditions of crime and gang violence in their home countries have escalated to such a degree that the lives of children are virtually unbearable (7). In 2011, El Salvador had a homicide rate of 66 killings for every 100,000 inhabitants and Honduras had the highest murder rate in the world with 86 people killed for every 100,000 (Jones and Podkul 10). The violence is a result of the collaboration between street gangs and Mexican drug cartels that have increased their illegal operations in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Children and adolescents have become the primary targets of organized criminal groups as they are recruited by the gangs to carry out kidnappings, extortion, and murder (Jones and Podkul 9-10). The children are intimidated by the gangs, and if they refuse to join their ranks, they are threaten with death. Jones and Podkul state that the children

interviewed also expressed that, while the police in El Salvador and Honduras have always been corrupt, they are now effectively controlled by the gangs in varying degrees (8). In El Salvador for example, the gangs have influence over prison guards, security forces, and the judicial system (Jones and Podkul 10). Instead of protecting the children, the police accuse and harass them of being gang-affiliated. Young people reason that if they stay in their home countries, death is inevitable, but that if they make the dangerous journey to the U.S. they might have an opportunity to live free of violence. If nothing is done by the state to reduce the violence, children will continue to risk their lives in the journey north.

Unaccompanied child migrants from Central America are especially vulnerable to physical harm and abuse during the journey. As cited by Lilian Chavez and Cecilia Menjivar in the journal article titled, "Children without Borders: A Mapping of the Literature on Unaccompanied Migrant Children to the United States," children under 12 years of age tend to migrate for family reunification. Parents who lack a lawful U.S. immigration status often pay smugglers to bring their young children. It is often the case that smugglers mistreat children who are under their supervision. Children interviewed by Jones and Podkul revealed being denied access to food and water, being locked in rat-infested warehouses for days, and girls being raped (8). Additionally, children who travel with smugglers are in constant threat of being killed, kidnapped, and abused by criminal organizations. In the book titled, "Traffick: The Illicit Movement of People and Things," Gargi Bhattacharyya explains that although human trafficking is considered to be the abduction and transportation of people against their will, another example is when traffickers are paid to help people cross borders illegally. The people moving want to move but are constrained by immigration policies that make them vulnerable to trafficking. Unfortunately, Central American children often become victims of the industry based on the exploitation of people who want to migrate.

Furthermore, older children tend to travel alone by bus or train and are exposed to similar dangers. Through a telephone interview with an adult migrant from Chiapas, Mexico, who made the journey to the U.S. in late 2012, it was learned that most Central American migrants do not travel on bus because they would have to bribe the corrupt Mexican immigration agents at every stop in order to continue their journey towards the border. Since migrants have very little money, they have no other choice but to

travel atop the freight train known as La Bestia (The Beast). The 2009 documentary *Which Way Home* directed and produced by Rebecca Cammisia presents the gripping stories of several unaccompanied child migrants who are traveling across Mexico on top of the freight train. The film centers on the stories of 14-year-old Kevin and 13-year-old Fito. Kevin and Fito are childhood friends who decide to leave Honduras to embark on the journey north together. The boys like to play and stand on the roof of the freight cars, laughing and waving their arms they pretend to fly like birds. Among play and laughter, Kevin and Fito witness how fellow riders lose their limbs or lives to The Beast.

The traumatic experiences lived by unaccompanied child migrants in their journey can lead to psychological disorders. There is a lack of research specifically on the psychological effects of the migration of unaccompanied children from Central America, but the literature available about the mental health of unaccompanied refugee minors is relevant. The two major subgroups of unaccompanied minors are undocumented children who arrive in the U.S. unlawfully and refugee children (Carlson et al. 259). Psychological disorders prevalent among refugee children currently living in the U.S. include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), other anxiety, personality, and behavioral disorders, and depression (Carlson et al. 261). Depression is frequently comorbid with PTSD. In 1991 Espino found a relationship between exposure to violence and PTSD among Central American children and concluded that the more dramatic the trauma is, particularly when combined with the absence of a parent, the more devastating its effects are on children (as cited in Carlson et. al 261). Because the traumatic experiences of both unaccompanied child migrants and refugee children are similar the research regarding refugee children can be applied to unaccompanied child migrants however, the research does not reflect the recent migration patterns from Central America or the current socioeconomics and politics specifically in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. According to Mary Bartholomew, a senior program manager at Lutheran Social Services in Worcester, MA, who has been working with unaccompanied child migrants for nearly a decade, "Over the years, I've seen children coming who are more and more troubled, more and more traumatized" ("Poverty and fear of gangs").

The recent increases in poverty and violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have caused the migration of children from these

countries to the U.S. in record numbers. The desperate conditions are a culmination of several longstanding trends in Central America, including economic inequality, rising crime, and state corruption. Children have been forced to leave their home countries because of the growing influence of gangs and drug cartels. Not only are they violently attacked by gangs, they are also targeted by police who assume that all children are gang-affiliated. Social, economic, and political issues cause children to embark on the dangerous journey north where they are exposed to neglect, physical harm and abuse, rape, human trafficking, and death. The traumatic experiences lived by children in their home countries and throughout the journey to the U.S. can lead to anxiety and mood disorders (most often PTSD and depression). To learn more about the psychological effects of the experiences of unaccompanied child migrants, additional research is needed. Despite the dangers and consequences of the journey, as long as there is poverty and violence in Central America children will keep risking their lives in hopes of a better life in the U.S. In the words of a child, "If you stay you will die, if you leave, you might . . . either way it's better to try" (Jones and Podkul 9).

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Biography:

Aida Rodriguez



Aida Rodriguez graduated from Palm Beach State College in spring 2013 and transferred to the University of Pennsylvania the following fall. She is majoring in sociology with a concentration in global and international studies. Her immigrant rights activism work led her to study and research immigration and migration patterns.

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Sabiduría Staff

Patricia Medina, Editor



Patricia Medina will graduate from Palm Beach State College in fall 2014 and transfer to a 4-year university in the spring. She will major in Mass Communication and Political Science with an ultimate goal of attending graduate school to earn a

Doctorate in Communications. She is also Editor-in-Chief of Beachcomber, the student newspaper of Palm Beach State College, on the SSS TRiO Debate Team, and a member of the Human Trafficking Committee.

Paul Lovelady, Editor



After graduating from Palm Beach State College, Paul Lovelady intends to transfer to FAU where he will pursue Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Economics, with a minor in English/ESL. His long-term goal is to teach Economics at the Gabriele

D'Annunzio University in Pescara, Italy.

