

# How Trump's immigration policies are making unaccompanied migrant youth even more vulnerable

March 15 2017, by Stephanie Canizales

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The Trump administration has released a series of executive orders targeting immigration at the U.S. southern border. Central American families and children traveling alone [represent](#) nearly half of all unauthorized migrants apprehended by Customs and Border Protection. The criminalization of immigrants at the U.S. southern border disproportionately affects Central American children and youth.

Nearly 153,000 unaccompanied Mexican and Central American [children](#) have been apprehended at the U.S. southern border since 2014. Of those detained by Customs and Border Protection and processed by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, 60 percent have been reunited with a sponsor, typically a parent. The other 40 percent are placed with a nonparent sponsor.

With the guidance of a parent or guardian, these youths might obtain financial, legal, health and social support. Others who enter without detection and remain unaccompanied when they arrive in the U.S. are financially independent and may never gain access to formal resettlement services. Recent [orders](#) by the Trump administration that prioritize unaccompanied child migrants for deportation heighten the vulnerability of immigrant children in the U.S.

Since 2012, I have conducted in-depth observations and interviews with undocumented immigrant youth who arrived in Los Angeles, California

as unaccompanied minors and have remained without a parent throughout their settlement in the U.S. I use pseudonyms for confidentiality as research participants are migrant youth living and working in the U.S. without authorization.

Pundits and scholars tend to frame immigrant youth as students and adult migrants as workers. However, being unaccompanied at settlement requires youth to become [financially independent](#) and take up low-wage occupations to make ends meet.

My ongoing research shows that unaccompanied migrant youth face labor exploitation and suggests that Trump's orders exacerbate the precarious work conditions of unaccompanied immigrant youth workers in the U.S.

## **Workplace violence**

Undocumented working youth migrate to Los Angeles in hopes of working to support their families who remain in their home countries. They come to the U.S. with low levels of education and English language fluency.

Romero arrived in Los Angeles from Guatemala at the age of 15 and immediately began looking for work in downtown LA garment factories. In an interview, he recalled:

"The bosses would tell me, 'do you have experience?' I would say yes. And they would say, 'you are a child still. Go to school.' But I thought, 'yes I would like to go to school but no one is going to [financially] support me. Just me. Who else? It's me by myself.'"

Unaccompanied minors like him enter industries such as garment production, service, construction and domestic work. Youth working in

the garment industry often [make](#) a median of US\$350 in wages per week for more than 60 hours of work.

Undocumented youth garment workers spend hours in dimly lit factories where shop owners often leave doors and windows locked throughout the work day to remain discreet and avoid workplace inspection. The [lack of ventilation](#), heat and loud noises from factory machines, and strenuous work schedules physically and mentally exhaust youth who are then unable to attend school due to [headaches, eye tension and back pain](#).

Much like with their [adult coworkers](#), economic necessity and fear of removal from the workplace and the country keep undocumented migrant youth workers quiet in cases of exploitation, and docile and efficient on the job. For example, three young workers at the same factory told me the story of a young Salvadoran woman who was pushed to the shop floor by the factory manager for incorrectly sewing the seams on a batch of dresses. They sorrowfully recalled their inability to help her out of fear of losing their jobs.

In early February 2017, the [Department of Homeland Security](#) conducted "a series of targeted enforcement operations" in workplaces and neighborhoods across 12 states that led to the arrest of 680 immigrants. Raids in today's immigrant destinations, including Los Angeles, increase the hostility that workers must navigate in already precarious occupations. Research shows that deportation can have [detrimental mental health effects](#) on children and lead to [financial hardship](#) among families. In 2008, the largest workplace immigration raid [in U.S. history](#) impacted hundreds of Central American workers, including minors. These actions can further mental health and financial instability in the lives of child migrants.

## **Overcoming and giving back**

In the last four years, I have encountered youth who have been entangled with drug and alcohol addictions, experienced bouts of homelessness or toiled in depression and anxiety as they searched for ways to cope. Far from being the "bad hombres" Trump describes, youths' desires to overcome these circumstances permeated our conversations and organized their daily lives.

In fact, many see their tenacity in enduring workplace violence as a marker of their commitment to their families and communities. "I didn't come here with a bad intention. I didn't come here to be a burden," says 22-year-old Berenice who arrived from El Salvador at the age of 17. A 19-year-old Salvadoran man explained,

"People say Central Americans are gang bangers but we all come here with a dream. We want to help our families. There aren't jobs over there and we come here to work. We are not selfish. We want to help."

These young people participate in various community organizations such as [churches](#), book clubs, [support groups](#) and recreational sports teams.

A 25-year-old Guatemalan man who has lived in the U.S. for nine years said:

"What is important here is that we stay united and we support each other. We all want to be helped and to also help. Like in my case, the way someone lent me a hand, I want to lend it to others. That's how I overcame [my trauma]."

Young people construct moral identities based on work, participating in the local economy, giving back to their local community via organizational involvement and community service. They also demonstrate a commitment to their transnational community. A 24-year-old man who arrived in Los Angeles at age 16 gave up attending English

classes at an adult language school to remit a few extra dollars to his family abroad after his youngest brother expressed a desire to migrate to the U.S. to attend school. "No quiero que venga a sufrir aca," he said, "I do not want him to come here to suffer."

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