

## Life for children in Central America

*Editor's note: The following editorial appeared in the Quad City Times. It is reprinted with permission.*

One of my lasting memories of Central America is its beautiful and fertile land. Gardens grow on hillsides too steep for me to climb. Virtually any fruit and vegetable can be grown there. Fence posts carved out of tree limbs grow back into trees in the volcanic soil.



**Ebener**

The beauty of the land is second only to the beauty and strength of the Central American people. The work is hard. Long days are spent bending over crops, scrubbing the laundry in creek beds and taking fresh produce to the marketplace. But for the most part, what I saw was work being done with the joy that exudes from warm family ties and strong community life.

These memories flood back as I hear the stories of the 200+ unaccompanied children arriving at our border each day from Central America. The question I would like to pose here is: Why is this happening?

I posed this question to a friend, John Donaghy, who has been in Honduras 10 years, working as a missionary and outreach worker. John tells me that the young people in his village live happily until about the age of 13. At that point, school ends and they are expected to get a job to support their families.

Changes in the agricultural system have left many of these teenagers unemployed. The jobs in the ag sector have gone away. Corn is one example. John says the price of corn has grown so high that they can no longer afford this staple. The price of

corn tortillas has doubled. John attributes much of this change to the corn market in the U.S., especially our subsidies for ethanol.

Changes here cause changes there.

Unable to find work in the rural communities, many young people in John's area are moving to the urban centers like San Pedro Sula, which is the world's most violent city. Its murder rate is 11 times higher than Chicago. It is also home to the largest number of child migrants taken by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Gang violence is another factor causing the increasing number of youth migrating north to our border. Rural teenagers are fleeing recruitment into urban gangs. Three-fourths of the minors held by the Border Patrol are from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world. El Salvador ranks second and Guatemala is fifth.

Coyotes who make large profits for transporting these youngsters to the border are seizing on this opportunity and recruiting heavily with the promise that these minors will be able to stay permanently in the U.S.

There may be an element of truth to that promise. Since Jan. 1, about 30,000 minors from Central America have been placed with U.S. sponsors, usually relatives.

In 2008, Congress with bipartisan support passed an anti-trafficking bill stating that minors from non-contiguous countries (which includes Central America but excludes Mexico) cannot be deported immediately and must be given a court hearing. The law's intention was to protect children who are victims of human trafficking.

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Some confuse this law with the Obama policy which was enacted in 2012, assuring non-deportation of minors who arrived in the US before 2007. The Obama mandate does not apply to anyone arriving after 2007 — and therefore is not a cause of the surge of children at the border.

The seeming contradiction is this: While the Border Patrol has reached record high numbers of deportations and record low numbers of illegal crossings for the past three years, the number of unaccompanied minors has doubled each year over the same period. The combination of making it harder for adults to cross the border and easier for unaccompanied minors to cross has led to this unintended consequence: 70,000 children from Central America arriving at our border in the past year.

To get at the causes of this issue:

1. Reform trade agreements to help this region recover its agricultural sector.
2. Provide assistance to police forces to control the street gangs.
3. Press for more comprehensive immigration reform.

When children arrive on your doorstep, the right thing to do is to care for them. It is also important to ask why. Wouldn't it be better for everyone if these minors could find meaningful work and safe neighborhoods at home where they have strong family and community ties? Solving the root of the problem might be in the best interest of all parties.

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