

# Mexico's migration crackdown escalates dangers for Central Americans

Last year's wave of unaccompanied children migrating to the US helped spark a crackdown in Mexico, forcing people to take alternative routes north as they face armed robbers, corrupt officials and sexual violence

[Jo Tuckman](#) in Ixtapepec Tuesday 13 October 2015 08.30 EDT Last modified on Tuesday 13 October 2015 09.51 EDT

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Jennifer Ramírez knows it would be suicide to remain in [El Salvador](#).

A former member of the Barrio 18 street gang, she spent two years as a protected witness, testifying against her former associates. When the trials came to an end, she was released from protective custody to the mercy of the streets.

Even the judge told her to run.

Ramírez, now 24, was adopted into the gang as an eight-year-old orphan, but said that she decided to testify against her former associates when she became pregnant.

“Now I just want to find a safe place where I can work and send money home for my daughter so she can have a different life than me,” she said.

Last year, Ramírez made it to the United States twice, only to be caught and deported each time. When she set out again this year, she discovered that it has now become as hard to enter [Mexico](#) as it is to cross the heavily policed US border.

On her previous attempts, she said, it took three days to reach the migrant shelter in Ixtepec, about 150 miles into Mexico. This time she had spent nearly a month, walking most of the way, sleeping rough most nights – and one occasion only just escaping Mexican immigration officials who shot her with a Taser.

“It has got really difficult to move even a few kilometers,” Ramirez said.

Across southern Mexico, Central American migrants fleeing violence, poverty and institutional collapse have over recent months found that well-trodden – if risky – routes north have been blocked by a government crackdown.

This has forced travelers to divert their journey through more remote and more perilous regions, where they face a heightened risk of robbery, rape, abduction and death.

Migrants interviewed in three separate church-run shelters on Mexico's sweltering Pacific coastal plain, described taking lengthy detours – by land or even by sea – to avoid checkpoints and police raids.

They spoke of violent encounters with armed robbers and corrupt police – and the constant threat of sexual violence against female migrants. Female migrants described how they were forced to sleep with people smugglers or *coyotes* in exchange for their “protection”.

At a shelter in the town of Chahuities, several migrants told the story of a Honduran migrant called Beverly who had disappeared a few days earlier: a people smuggler had kidnapped and raped her younger sister, Fatima, whom he was holding prisoner in a nearby town. Beverly had set out to find her sister, but neither woman had been heard from since.

The roots of the current crackdown lie in the political furore unleashed last year by the arrival in the US of a wave of [unaccompanied Central American children](#) and undocumented families.

The Mexican crackdown has clearly been devised in tandem with the US government. Thomas Shannon, counselor to US secretary of state John Kerry, told the Senate appropriations committee in July what the US government planned to do to prevent a repeat of the surge. [One of the main planks of the strategy](#) was “improving the ability of Mexico to interdict migrants before they cross into Mexico”.

Migrants can still cross Mexico's southern border itself relatively easily, but inside the country, they find that traditional routes are all but shut down.

Many more checkpoints have been set up along roads in the southern states of Tabasco, Veracruz, Chiapas and Oaxaca, making travel by bus much harder, too.

Police raids mean few now dare ride the infamous freight train, known as La Bestia, that had long been the [main mode of transport for the poorest migrants](#).

The train now trundles through silent stations, its wagons free of the crowds of men, women and children who once clung to roofs and ladders.

President Enrique Peña Nieto announced the crackdown in July 2014, within a broader policy package called the Southern Frontier Programme. Hundreds of migration agents were redeployed to the country's southern states.

Mexican officials said the programme was designed to protect migrants and promised to go after people-smugglers and the criminal gangs that regularly preyed on travellers. They also promised justice for any migrants abused by officials.

“The government believes that all these actions have had important, though insufficient, results,” the office of the president said in a written statement to the Guardian.

“The government will continue to evaluate the strategies and redouble its efforts in these areas, with the objective of guaranteeing the human rights and security of migrants moving through our country.”

But the most obvious impact of the programme has been a vast increase in [deportations from Mexico](#), significantly reducing the pressure on the US border.

Mexico deported 92,889 Central Americans between October 2014 and April 2015, almost double the 49,893 in the same period the year before.

The US authorities, meanwhile, detained 70,226 people “other than Mexicans” – mostly from [Guatemala](#), Honduras and El Salvador – between October 2014 and April 2015. The year before, it apprehended 159,103.

Such efforts may have [driven down the number of migrants reaching the US border](#), but, human rights activists charge, it has done nothing to address the desperate poverty and rampant violence in countries like Honduras and El Salvador, and risks creating a new humanitarian crisis in Mexico as well.

“The Obama administration has found a way to hide the so-called crisis of Central American migrants at the border,” said Maureen Meyer, of the Washington Office on Latin America. “But at what cost?”

In the Guatemalan border post of El Carmen, just over the Suchiate river, migration officials said that up to 15 buses filled with deportees pass through every night on their way to [Honduras](#) and El Salvador.

Once migrants get back to those countries, however, few are likely to remain there for long. Most cities in the two countries are currently [controlled by gangs or maras](#), such as the Barrio 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha, and many migrants leave to escape imminent physical danger.

Hitching a lift northward from the border, one Salvadoran teenager described his journey as a sequence of near-death encounters.

Stefhans, 19, fled his home after his father refused to pay a protection fee to a local gang. In retaliation, the gang ordered his death.

He was caught in Mexico and sent back home, where his mother and siblings met him as he got off the bus. The reunion was sweet, he said, but short: after lunch, the family put him on another bus heading north.

Back in Mexico, Stefhans managed to avoid the battery of checkpoints by trudging along train tracks.

But while he eluded migration officials, he walked straight into an ambush by armed robbers. “They had guns and machetes and there was nowhere to run to because they had us surrounded,” he said. “They took everything we had.”

Robbers come in all guises on the road north, and some wear uniforms.

A 34-year-old Salvadoran taxi driver called Walter Acosta described how federal police had demanded 500 pesos (about \$30 or £20). He gave them considerably less, which was all he had, and they let him go.

Encouraged by activists at the shelters, Stefhans and Acosta decided to file legal suits, and hoped to obtain a special visa, given to migrants in Mexico who have been victims of crimes, that would allow them to remain in the country until their cases are resolved.

But many migrants distrust the authorities too much, or are under too much pressure to start earning money, to follow this path. Instead, they seek to slip ever deeper into the shadows.

At one stage in his journey, Walter took a boat through mangroves to avoid a checkpoint. Activists have reported that migrants are increasingly using new sea routes between northern Guatemala and Mexico’s Pacific coast.

Several migrants in the shelters said that when planning the journey, they had already factored in the \$4,000 fee for a smuggler to get them across the US frontier.

Now, however, they were facing the realisation that they would have to pay about the same amount again to get them through Mexico.

“It looks like it is the only way,” said 17-year-old Margarita, in the town of Chahuities. Just a day before, she had been robbed and sexually molested as she headed north, but was saved from rape by her older brother, who had appealed to the assailants’ consciences.

Soon after, he was detained and deported by Mexican officials. Margarita was left alone with her younger brother. “I don’t know what we are going to do,” she said. “I never thought it was going to be this bad.”

*Additional reporting by Ed Pilkington in New York*

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## The migrants who fled violence for the US only to be sent back to their deaths

Every year thousands of Hondurans come to the US in search of a better life and safety – yet for a growing number of young men, the return home makes them prime targets for gang retaliations as murder rate surges

[Sibylla Brodzinsky](#) in San Pedro Sula Monday 12 October 2015 08.34 EDT Last modified on Tuesday 13 October 2015 10.50 EDT

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When Antonio Díaz’s 26-year-old son Oscar was kidnapped, beaten and left for dead by gang members, the Honduran father decided to send Oscar and his three brothers to the United States, fearing that any one of them could be the next victim of the country’s swelling wave of violence.

“I sent them away for their safety,” says Díaz, sitting in a comfortable and well-furnished three-bedroom home in a town outside San Pedro Sula, where he owns a fleet of minibuses. “We’re not bad off here, economically, but I couldn’t bear the thought of my sons getting killed,” he says.

A year and a half after Antonio paid the \$6,000 coyote fee for each of his sons to make the perilous overland journey to the United States as undocumented migrants, one of the young men – Ángel – was deported back to [Honduras](#).

A month later he was dead, gunned down on one of his father’s buses by suspected gang members.

“After he was sent back here, I was afraid whenever he left the house,” says Antonio, who asked that his real name not be used for fear of retaliation from the gangs, known here as *maras*. “And they killed Ángel just as I’d feared,” he says.

Every year hundreds of thousands of Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans flee poverty and violence at home in search of a better life in the United States. And every year tens of thousands of undocumented migrants are sent home.

In the 2015 fiscal year, which ended in September, 231,000 undocumented immigrants in the United States were reportedly deported, according to the Associated Press. In the year to 27 July, 10,333 of those had arrived in Honduras.

For deportees such as Ángel who fled their country out of fear for their lives, returning home can mean death.

No one keeps an official record of how many returnees have been murdered in Honduras. But a review of news reports of killings in the country compiled by researcher Elizabeth Kennedy at the San Diego State University shows that at least 35 people who were deported from the United States between January 2014 and July 2015 were murdered within months – or even days – of their arrival in Honduras.

One homicide detective in San Pedro Sula told the Guardian he estimated that deportees accounted for 10 to 15% of the cases he investigates in the city, which for the past three years has been [the most violent in the world](#).

The Guardian tracked down the families of three men killed in the past year shortly after being deported from the United States and also documented the murder of one 14-year-old boy forcibly returned from Mexico.

Their stories highlight the risks many deportees face on their return.

## ‘They killed Ángel’

Despite fleeing that violence, neither Ángel Díaz, 26, nor his brothers requested asylum when they arrived in the United States, preferring to keep their heads down. Ángel found a job in construction and was settling into his new life. But in April 2015 he was arrested following a domestic dispute with his girlfriend and – since he had no residency papers – he was sent to a detention centre for deportees.

After three months in detention, he was back in the violence-plagued town he had fled.

Resigned to his forced repatriation, he asked his father, Antonio, to give him a job driving one of his minibuses. Antonio says he feared that Ángel was taking a risk. “I didn’t want him to expose himself like that but he needed to work,” he says.

Antonio had been paying the *maras* 300 lempiras (about \$13) per bus each week, so he hoped there would be no problems.

There was no warning. On July 13, just days after his return, Ángel was gunned down in the driver’s seat of his bus.

A few days after Ángel’s funeral, Antonio dropped off his son Oscar, who had returned home for a visit; his daughter-in-law; and four grandchildren at the border with Guatemala, paying a coyote to get them safely to the United States.

“We are all going. We realized we can’t stay here anymore,” he says, adding that he and his wife hoped to join the rest of the family as soon as he could sell his business.

Armed with the records documenting his brother’s murder, Oscar and his wife requested asylum at the Texas border. Oscar’s wife and her three children were given a one-year permit to stay, while Oscar was taken to a detention centre in Miami, he says. Antonio’s other grandchild, the nine-year-old boy of another son, was taken to New York for processing.

A review by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) of intake interviews of deportees to Honduras in the second half of 2013 found that only 5.3% stated “threats” or “insecurity” as their reason for leaving Honduras. However, UNHCR reckons the number may be underreported given limitations of the interview process, underscoring that the decision to migrate is based on multiple factors.

## **‘The gang they escaped will kill them’**

José Marvin Martínez, known to friends, neighbors and family as El Chele, which means “blondie”, probably wouldn’t have cited insecurity as his reason for leaving San Manuel, a town near San Pedro Sula, in 2012. He told his oldest brother, Hipólito Díaz, that he was tired of being poor and wanted to find work in the States.

But the decision came just a few months after another of their brothers, Rigoberto, was gunned down by suspected gang members near their parents’ home in 2012. “I think it had something to do with that,” says Díaz, sitting in a tattered hammock in the back of his home made of rusty sheet metal.

El Chele, who migrated at the age of 16, found a job as a mason’s assistant in Houston. By the time he was deported in August 2014, he’d managed to save some money and, on returning to live with his brother, bought a motorcycle.

Neighbours say they believed that once he was back in Honduras, El Chele had gotten involved with the *maras* that control the area. “I don’t know if he was mixed up in something bad but I wonder what he did on the street all the time,” Díaz says.

Díaz had tried to convince El Chele to go back to the family farm in Lempira province to try to keep him out of trouble. El Chele promised he would go after the Christmas holidays.

But on 14 December 2014, El Chele was sitting in front of a corner store chatting with a friend when gunmen in a red truck opened fire on him, killing him instantly. “I got there a half hour after he’d been killed. He was lying face down in the street,” says Díaz. Police told him they found 20 bullet casings at the scene.

For young people in Honduras, joining local gangs – either by choice or by force – is one of few life options they have. Detective Jaime Coto says many of the minors who leave for the States are trying to escape being forcibly recruited into the gangs, or if they’ve already started working with the *maras*, leaving the country may be their only way out .

“When they are deported back here, it’s dangerous for them to go back to where they left because the gang they escaped will kill them.

“If a deportee can’t find a place to feel safe, surely he’ll be killed,” says Coto, one of an overstretched and underfunded team of investigators who police most of Cortés province, which includes San Pedro Sula. Twenty-six detectives share one vehicle to police the region, which has a population of around 1.3 million. Between four and eight murders are reported on their patch every day.

## Gredis gunned down

Fewer than 2% of murders in Honduras result in conviction. But in the case of Gredis Alexander Hernández – a 14-year-old boy who was gunned down just days after being deported from Mexico – police can claim a rare victory.

Hernández had fled Honduras with his 16-year-old sister after witnessing the murder of his sister's boyfriend, according to police. They were both deported days after leaving and initially placed in a home for returned minors.

Hernández persuaded authorities to allow him back with his family; two days later he was shot twice in the head as he lay in his bed. After his murder, his sister escaped the group home and once again left the country, police say.

In mid-September, police captured three gunmen accused of Hernández's murder. A fourth is still at large.

## 'The evil there is tremendous'

Juan Francisco Díaz was also planning to leave Honduras again, after having been deported from the United States to the town of Choloma in March. He'd lived undocumented for three years in the US before being picked up for drunk and disorderly conduct, according to his father, who asked to be identified as Héctor.

Juan Francisco, 34, had trouble finding work after being returned to Honduras and had already made arrangements to make the harrowing overland journey back to the United States in mid-July. On 5 July, he was found dead in an alleyway of his parents' neighborhood. "Neighbors knocked on my door to say they had recognized the body as my son," Héctor says.

After burying their son, he and his wife fled to another part of Honduras, out of fear. "The evil there is tremendous. We are afraid to go back," Héctor says in a telephone interview.

At least twice a week, every week, a planeload of new deportees arrives at the San Pedro Sula Airport's Centre for the Attention to Returned Migrants (CAMR) where all adults sent from the United States are processed on their return to Honduras.

As they file off the plane and into the reception centre they are handed a coffee and a bean-filled wheat flour tortilla, a popular local treat called *baleada* which translates roughly as "one who's been shot".

There, banners in English greet the men and women whose lives have just been upturned offering opportunities to start over. "You can also live your American dream in Honduras", reads one sign, offering them jobs in call centres for US companies.

Volunteers at the centre pile up red mesh bags with the few belongings that the deportees bring with them. Some come with a several changes of clothes while others have nothing but a few scraps of paper, a comb and some plastic containers.

On recovering their personal effects, they begin tying their shoes with newly recovered laces and looping belts through their sagging pants.

Dora Melara, a legal adviser who works with the recently arrived deportees, says most of them will turn right around and go back to the lives they left behind in the States. "It's hard to tell someone who migrated because of threats to stay," she says.

And for those who have been away for a long time, learning to navigate the social and criminal landscape of the country can be just as perilous as the overland journey to the US border.

On a recent afternoon, Alberto García, 20, seemed a bit stunned at being back in a country he barely knew: his mother took him to the United States when he was just five years old. But the tattoo on his neck proclaimed his motto – “Never lose hope” – and García said he was planning to put his fluent English to use at a call centre.

García, who worked as a forklift driver in California, said he’s aware of the dangers in Honduras, but intends to keep his head down and wait until his mother is granted citizenship in the US, so that she can request a green card for him as part of a family reunification plan.

But most who have made their lives in the States just want to get back.

Carlos Fonseca was only six when he left Honduras for the United States with his mother. Now the 31-year-old, who speaks perfect English and slightly accented Spanish, only has some distant relatives left in San Pedro Sula. His wife and children are in the US.

When he was detained in California in February, he requested asylum, but after six months in a detention centre he decided to accept deportation. “I was sick of being locked up,” he says.

Outside the returned migrant centre, he looked nervously for a taxi. “Let’s get an old man driver,” he told his companion. “Someone who won’t mess with me.

“The minute I can arrange things, I’m headed back home,” Fonseca said. “I’ve heard it’s dangerous here, man.”

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# US government deporting Central American migrants to their deaths

Guardian investigation into consequences of Obama’s migration crackdown reveals US deportees have been murdered shortly after return to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, with study saying as many as 83 killed since 2014

[Sibylla Brodzinsky](#) in San Pedro Sula and [Ed Pilkington](#) in New York Monday 12 October 2015 08.57 EDT

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The US government is deporting undocumented immigrants back to Central America to face the imminent threat of violence, with several individuals being murdered just days or months after their return, a Guardian investigation has found.

The Guardian has confirmed three separate cases of Honduran men who have been gunned down shortly after being deported by the US government. Each was murdered in their hometowns, soon after their return – one just a few days after he was expelled from the US.

Immigration experts believe that the Guardian's findings represent just the tip of the iceberg. A forthcoming academic study based on local newspaper reports has identified as many as 83 US deportees who have been murdered on their return to [El Salvador](#), Guatemala and Honduras since January 2014.

Human rights groups warn that deterrent measures taken by the Obama administration after last year's "[surge](#)" in [arrivals at the border of unaccompanied children](#) from Central America have triggered a series of powerful unintended consequences across the region.

The number of migrants crossing the US border with Mexico unlawfully has declined sharply this year. But the increasingly militarized surveillance and patrol of the southern frontier has forced migrants to take ever greater risks in the routes they choose. And although fewer people are attempting to enter from Mexico, the death rate among those trying has gone up, activists say.

Side effects of the crackdown can also be seen in Mexico, where authorities have also [stepped up security across the](#) across the south of the country.

This has caused migrants to make lengthy detours, making journeys to ever more remote and perilous routes where they face a heightened risk of robbery, rape, abduction and death.

Human rights experts warn that in its haste to expel or deter undocumented immigrants, the US government is scrimping on its obligation to provide asylum to those genuinely in peril in violation of international law.

The collateral damage of America's increasingly unforgiving deportation process is that people are being returned to extremely dangerous situations in Central America, which has some of the [highest murder rates in the world](#).

Based on reporting from northern [Honduras](#) and freedom of information requests in the US, the Guardian has compiled the stories of three young Honduran men who were all killed soon after deportation. Two of them had originally fled to the US after their brothers were violently attacked by gangs, one of them fatally.

### **WATCH VIDEO:**

[Watch The Guardian's film 'Migrants, Minutemen and dead bodies on the Mexico-Arizona border'](#)

José Marvin Martínez was 16 when he fled from the town of San Manuel in the north of Honduras to the US. A few months earlier his brother Rigoberto had been shot and killed by suspected gang members, relatives said.

Deportation papers obtained under freedom of information rules show that Martínez was apprehended in Laredo, Texas in May 2013 having worked for a while as a masons' assistant in Houston. A border patrol agent had come across him in a Dairy Ranch store.

In April 2014 he was ordered to appear before an immigration review court but failed to show. He was then issued with a [deportation notice](#) and was eventually tracked down and sent back to Honduras in August of that year.

On 14 December – four months after he was deported – Martínez, who was known locally as El Chele or “Blondie”, was sitting outside a corner shop back in San Manuel when a gunman opened fire from a drive-by truck, killing him. “If a deportee can’t find a place to feel safe, surely he’ll be killed,” said Jaime Coto, a Honduran detective.

Another of the cases tracked down by the Guardian was that of Ángel Díaz, 26, who was sent away to the US by his father after his brother was kidnapped by a Honduran gang and beaten almost to death. In April this year Díaz was arrested by police following a domestic dispute and – with no visa papers to show – was sent directly to a detention center for deportees.

## **WATCH VIDEO:**

[The Killing Fields of Texas: Beyond the Border Pt.1](#)

He was removed to Honduras in July. Days later was shot dead on a local bus, it is assumed by local gang members.

In the third case, Juan Francisco Díaz was deported back to his hometown Choloma in Honduras in March, having lived under the radar in the US for three years. Four months after deportation he was found lying dead in an alleyway in his parents’ neighborhood.

Elizabeth Kennedy, a social scientist at San Diego state university, has compiled a comprehensive estimate of US deportees who have been murdered on their return to Central America since January 2014 based on local newspaper reports. Her forthcoming research identified 45 such cases in El Salvador, three in [Guatemala](#) and 35 in Honduras.

“These figures tell us that the US is returning people to their deaths in violation of national and international law. Most of the individuals reported to have been murdered lived in some of the most violent towns in some of the most violent countries in the world – suggesting strongly that is why they fled,” Kennedy said.

Government officials told the Guardian that they could not comment on individual cases. But a Department of Homeland Security spokesman, SY Lee, said that the US offers protection for those who fear harm in their home countries through a variety of channels. “Each year, thousands are admitted to this country as part of the overseas refugee program or granted asylum by the DHS or by the Department of Justice.”

Lee pointed out that criminal activity back home was not sufficient grounds to claim asylum, unless it were connected to five specific grounds for fear of harm - race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Those facing deportation – including expedited removal – “are permitted the opportunity to seek asylum and/or other forms of protection”.

The reality that undocumented immigrants are being returned to danger in Central America stands in stark contrast to the heightened rhetoric around migration in the US – stoked in part by Republican presidential hopefuls. Led by Donald Trump, the contestants have focused almost exclusively on the need to evict more “illegal immigrants” – [Trump wants to deport all 11 million of them](#) – or to [build a wall](#) all along the Mexican border.

But the statistics paint a very different picture. [According to the latest figures from US Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\)](#) the number of unaccompanied children apprehended at the Southwest border so far this year is steeply down from the high of 66,000 in last summer’s surge.

Clara Long, an immigration researcher for Human Rights Watch, said that in the wake of the 2014 surge there had been a “generalized crackdown” across the immigration service. “Detention has been expanded and people are

increasingly being put into fast-track deportation procedures in which their claims for asylum are not being properly considered.”

[A recent Human Rights Watch report](#) concluded that the increasing use of so-called “expedited removals” of people picked up by US officials along the Mexican border was returning many to potential danger even though they had expressed fears of returning home. “This comes down to our regard for the dignity and lives of others,” Long said. “Part of the identity of the US is that we adhere to international law, and that says that when people flee for their lives, states are obligated to provide them with protection. We are putting people through an increasingly criminalized detention-based system that risks returning people to their deaths.”

Mexican authorities are also returning migrants in immediate danger, the Guardian has found. Gredis Alexander Hernández fled Honduras with his sister after witnessing the murder of her boyfriend. Fearing for their own lives, the two siblings crossed into Guatemala heading for the US, but were apprehended as they tried to enter Mexico.

Two days after they were returned to their home town, Hernández was shot twice in the head while he lay in his bed. He was 14 years old.

Human rights groups contest that, as architects of the crackdown, the US government must share some of the responsibility for such tragedies.

As Maureen Meyer of the Washington Office of Latin America put it: “The [Obama administration](#) has found a way to hide the so-called crisis of Central American migrants at the border. But at what cost?”

*Additional reporting by Jo Tuckman in Ixtepec and Rory Carroll in Altar*