

Author copy – accepted version: Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing? What Central American Unaccompanied Minors Know About Crossing the US-Mexico Border

Chiara Galli, Comparative Human Development Department, University of Chicago

cgalli@uchicago.edu

Twitter: @CG_ChiaraGalli

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9393-888X>

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Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing? What Central American Unaccompanied Minors Know About Crossing the US-Mexico Border

Keywords: unaccompanied minors; migrant networks, migration industry; smuggling; information; asylum.

Abstract

This paper asks, what do Central American unaccompanied minors know about the unauthorized journey to the US and protective US immigration laws? I find that, contrary to policymakers’ assumptions, children know little about US immigration laws, but they are well aware of the dangers of the journey. I argue that the composition of migrant networks and the strength of ties shape how children acquire the information and resources indispensable to plan unauthorized trips to the US, for which most respondents relied on smugglers. Unaccompanied minors who had “strong” ties to parents in the US had more access to information and resources than those with “weak” ties to non-parent relatives. Yet even “strong” ties deteriorated after years of family separation imposed by US immigration policy, undermining communication in families across borders, with implications for how trips were organized and what children knew. These findings extend adult-centric migration theories by centering the experiences of children.

Introduction

Trump’s Attorney General Jeff Sessions criminalized Central American unaccompanied minors as “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” threatening teenagers who cheat their way into the country by taking advantage of protective US immigration laws that allow unaccompanied children to enter the country more easily than adults. Politicians simultaneously, and contradictorily, portray their parents as calculating people smugglers and ignorant caretakers who irresponsibly allow children to embark on dangerous migrations alone. Findings from ethnographic research and interviews with unaccompanied minors and their family members dispel both these notions. Unaccompanied minors and their caretakers were well-aware of the dangers of the journey and decided to migrate in spite of these. This should come as no surprise given the risks involved in staying in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, countries that among the highest murder rates in the world, where teenagers are especially at risk of being targeted and victimized by gangs (Galli 2023). Conversely, most children knew little or nothing about protective US immigration laws that ostensibly serve as pull factors. This paper asks: what kinds of information and resources flow through migrant networks, and how do these facilitate the independent migration of children from Central America?

Migrant network theory posits (Massey et al. 1990) that resources and information –about the journey and life in the receiving country– flowing between immigrants in the US and potential emigrants in the sending country facilitate future migration by lowering its costs. Despite what the legal label suggests, “unaccompanied” minors are embedded in migrant networks. The vast majority have ties to family members in the US at the time of their migration (Galli 2023). I find that what and how much children knew about the journey and how they would be treated upon their arrival in the US depended on the composition of their migrant networks and the strength of network ties: “strong” ties to immediate family (mainly, parents) in the US were most important. While adult family members knew little about US laws protecting unaccompanied minors that they could share with their children, they possessed detailed information about the smuggling services offered by the “migration industry” (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013). Families facilitated the migration of their children using smugglers precisely because they knew about and wanted to mitigate the risks of the journey.

This paper extends research on migratory mechanisms in two ways. First, migrant networks theory was initially developed in the case of Mexico to US migration at a time when border control was lax, circular migration was prevalent, and information could hence flow more easily within migrant networks. Conversely, restrictive US immigration policy today does not allow most Central Americans to obtain legal status or travel home to visit children left behind. Bolstering findings by prior research on the effects of the law on immigrant families, I find that years of family separation imposed by these policies led to both physical and emotional distance that deteriorated relationships within families and hence undermined the strength of ties within migrant networks (Dreby 2010, 2015). While migrant networks theory has focused on information flows from the receiving to the sending country, I find that to ease constraints on Central American child

migration, it is crucial for information to flow in *both directions*. US-based relatives could only help plan and fund migration if they knew how violence was affecting their children's lives in the home country, but children left behind did not always feel at ease sharing information about the threats and abuse they were enduring with parents with whom they had lost familiarity and other relatives they barely knew. This has important implications because children who lacked the help of family members and smugglers faced longer and more dangerous trips to reach the US.

Second, theories on migrant networks and the migration industry were developed based on the experiences of adults, while largely ignoring the experiences of children. This paper calls for revising adult-centric migration theories and provides a point of departure for doing so by showing how migration facilitation mechanisms differ for children, compared to adults whose experiences are captured in existing literature, because of their age, stage in the life cycle, and gender. The paper thus contributes to a burgeoning scholarship at the intersection of migration and childhood studies that takes seriously the agency and communication strategies of children on the move.

Background

A protected category in US immigration law, unaccompanied minors –children under 18 who migrate without their parents or legal guardians– are exempted from aspects of immigration enforcement that target adults at the US-Mexico border, in detention facilities, and in removal proceedings. Most unaccompanied minors migrate from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, at the following ages: 0-12 (16%); 13-14 (13%); 15-16 (37%); and 17 (35%) (ORR 2020). According to the UNHCR (2014), most have valid claims for asylum because they escape child abuse and gang violence. Under the 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Act, unaccompanied minors from non-contiguous countries are admitted at the US-Mexico border and placed in the

custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which then releases them to parents (in 60% of cases) or other family (in 30% of cases) (ORR 2016). Children are placed in removal proceedings in immigration court, where many qualify and apply for asylum and/or special immigrant juvenile status (SIS), a form of deportation relief for children abandoned, abused, or neglected by their parent(s). If they win their cases, they are allowed to remain in the US, with legal status and a path to citizenship.

The US is increasingly providing funding to Mexico to make it more difficult for Central Americans to reach its territory and access these protections. By 2015, Mexico was deporting twice as many Central Americans as the US by controlling its territory through a “vertical border” of checkpoints along migrant routes across the country (Rosenblum 2015, FitzGerald 2019). The US has also pressured local governments to limit the mobility of children: since 2014, minors traveling without parents must have a visa to enter Mexico and written parental permission to cross any Central American border. This policy has made children even more reliant on smuggling services since they are unable to legally cross borders alone (Escamilla Garcia 2019), and efforts to create safe and legal travel options to the US for children through in-country refugee processing programs have largely failed (Galli 2021).

Migrant networks and the case of children

Migrant networks theory (Massey et. al. 1987) posits that contacts with immigrants in the receiving country in the form of “weak” (friends and extended family) and “strong” (immediate family) ties lower the costs of future migration by providing resources to fund trips and information about the migratory process and life in the receiving country (Wilson 1998). As out-migration becomes prevalent in sending communities, a “culture of migration” develops as former migrants return, showing off their wealth and success, thus further fueling aspirations to migrate (Kandel

and Massey 2002; Massey et. al. 1990). Information about favorable conditions in the receiving country like job opportunities and higher wages serve as “pull factors” for potential migrants.

Policymakers insist that favorable immigration policies also serve as pull factors, promoting what are often perceived as excessive levels of immigration. Research on this topic is limited and results are mixed. Jimenez (2003) found that Moroccan children in Spain shared information through their peer networks about policies granting legal status, access to housing, and job training to unaccompanied minors until age 18, thus motivating other children to migrate. Conversely, quantitative research on the recent Central American exodus to the US has shown that information about protective policies did not attract migrants, nor did information about punitive laws deter potential migrants; instead, push factors related to violence were the main drivers of migration (Hiskey, Cordova, and Orces 2018; Wong 2014). Empirically, I build on the latter scholarship by moving the analysis to the micro-level of migration strategies through a child-centered approach, asking: what kinds of information and resources flow through migrant networks, and how do these facilitate the independent migration of children from Central America?

Scholars have identified gendered differences in how individuals use migrant networks, finding that women’s roles in the family, gender norms, and the gendered labor market all shape migratory behaviors and strategies; females are generally more reliant than males on resources and family ties for migration and settlement (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; De Jong 2000; Kanaiapuni 2000; Pessar 1999; Morokvasic 1984, Danneker 2005, Hagan 1998, 2008). Feminist scholars thus extended migration theory developed based on male experiences to account for gendered patterns and more accurately explain real-world migration flows. Just as gender norms shape migratory behavior, so too do norms about the life course and children’s roles in families. Yet our migration theories continue to be largely based on the experiences of adults, raising the

need to assess to what extent they adequately explain children's experiences. This is important because child migration is on the rise, and more children than ever are now crossing international borders alone to seek asylum in rich democracies in the Global North (Galli 2023). Examining how children use information and resources provided by migrant networks, this paper makes a theoretical contribution by extending adult-centric migration scholarship.

The migration industry and the case of children

Scholars agree that immigration enforcement policies drive demand for the services of entrepreneurial brokers in the migration industry like smugglers, –or as migrants call them, *coyotes*— who help immigrants circumvent migration control (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013, Hernández-León 2005, 2013). Research on the unauthorized journeys of adults has demonstrated that less experienced migrants and women are generally more reliant on smugglers to make the trip (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014, Hagan 2008). We should thus expect that children, most of whom never left the towns where they were born, will be more reliant on the help of adults –both in their migrant networks and the migration industry– to make the journey. A recent survey of Salvadoran and Guatemalan unaccompanied children deported from the US to Mexico found that girls and younger children (ages 12 to 14) were more likely than boys or adolescents (ages 15 to 17) to cross with smugglers or family members and less likely to cross with their peers (Hernandez 2019). Since this survey was conducted with children who made *unsuccessful* attempts to reach the US, it likely underestimates the use of smuggling services— 31% for females; 18% for males— since those traveling with smugglers are more likely to evade migration control.

Existing scholarship has documented the harm that smugglers inflict on vulnerable immigrants reliant on their services (Slack and Whiteford 2021, Hagan 2008). Yet it has also been shown that migrants view smugglers as trusted guides and allies who help them defy state control, reach safety, and achieve their aspirations (Belloni 2020, Tinti and Reitano 2017, Crawley et al. 2017, Sanchez 2018, Hagan 2008). Migrants share information about the quality and trustworthiness of smugglers, for whom future business depends on maintaining their reputations (Belloni 2020, Sanchez and Natividad 2017). Smugglers offer different services to meet client needs, including specialized services for women, children, and elderly or ill migrants that promise safer and quicker journeys for an added cost (Sanchez 2015). Smugglers are often former migrants themselves, and even children work in the migration industry as “lookouts” and local guides, a risky occupation that nonetheless provides opportunities to earn money and gain prestige (Frank Vitale 2022; Sanchez and Natividad 2017, Sanchez 2018). During dangerous unauthorized journeys to the US, the migrant children I interviewed were undeniably vulnerable. Yet the information they acquired from *coyotes*, family members, and fellow travelers allowed them to exercise agency and adopt strategies to cope.

The agency of migrant children

The agency of migrant children is a central topic of interest in childhood studies (Huijismans 2011). Scholars have challenged the assumption that children are “luggage” passively transported across borders (Orellana et. al. 2001) by documenting the ingenious strategies they adopt during their journeys, like seeking protection by traveling in groups (Frank-Vitale and Martinez D’Aubuisson 2020) or “passing” as adults, as Mexican nationals, or even as gang members to avoid police detection and deter adults who may want to hurt them (Escamilla Garcia 2019, Yates

2021). Teenagers share information about migration routes with their peers to migrate independently and emancipate themselves from adult control (Hernandez Leon 1999, Timera 2018). Despite what policymakers suggest, research has shown that migrant children are well-aware of the danger of unauthorized journeys (Heidbrink 2020); girls know they face added risks of sexual violence and cope by taking birth control to prevent pregnancy in case of rape (Swanson and Torres 2016, Hagan 2008). In agreement with the burgeoning scholarship on children on the move, I take the migratory agency of children seriously, showing how they tap into information and resources provided by different actors in their migrant networks. At the same time, however, I also resist romanticizing the agency of migrant children. Instead, I pay close attention to the power imbalances that constrain their choices as they exit contexts of violence, navigate dangerous journeys, and encounter punitive state actors in the US, where the rights of unaccompanied minors are all too often violated.

Data and Methods

This paper is based on interviews conducted as part of a larger ethnographic study. From January 2015 to April 2019, I shadowed immigration attorneys and other staff in non-profit legal aid organizations in Los Angeles as they helped nearly 80 Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran unaccompanied minors ages 12 and older apply for asylum and SIJS. I was also a volunteer legal assistant and Spanish-English interpreter, helping attorneys prepare applications. I obtained verbal informed consent from attorneys and immigrants in the field and took field notes in Spanish. In legal aid organizations, conversations about journeys and what youths knew about US laws before migrating often emerged naturally, but I could not ask about these topics systematically. Two years into the ethnographic research, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with unaccompanied

minors to collect additional information, including retrospective data on migration planning and the journey to the US-Mexico border.

Between October 2016 and March 2019, I recruited 45 unaccompanied minors from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador through referrals from nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles. Interviewees had arrived in the US as unaccompanied minors between 2012 and 2018. They had been released from detention facilities to their families, having spent between six months and six years in the US (two years on average). I also interviewed the US-based adult family members of 10 of these youths (9 parents and one aunt), all of whom had played a role in facilitating their migration. Table 1 describes the characteristics of youth interviewees, including age at migration (ranging from age 11 to age 17), gender (25 males and 20 females), and whether they were joining parents (n= 25) or other relatives (n=19) in the US. Some of my respondents who entered the US as unaccompanied minors had become adults by the time of our interview.

I interviewed youths in a location of their choosing (e.g., neighborhood parks, coffee shops, their homes). Like the ethnographic study component, I obtained verbal informed consent from interviewees, and when respondents were minors, I also obtained consent from their parents or other adult caretakers. Interviewees received a \$30 gift certificate for their participation. Interviews were audio recorded, lasting between 40 minutes and three hours, and focused on the following themes: pre-migration knowledge about the US; migration decision-making; perceptions of interactions with US immigration bureaucracies; experiences of school, work, and family life in the US; future goals.

I coded interview data with the software Atlas.ti and using an abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), which involves several rounds of iterative coding, looking both to the literature and themes that emerge inductively to generate categories of analysis. The findings I

present here draw mainly on examples from interviews, but some are accounts that transpired during my ethnographic fieldwork. Because I could not systematically ask all ethnography participants questions about travel strategies and information acquisition that I examine in this paper, Tables 2 and 3 systematizing research results and patterns focus only on interviewees.

This study design was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California Los Angeles. To protect the identity of respondents, all names in this paper are pseudonyms. In separate work, I write extensively about ethical considerations when conducting research with vulnerable groups like children and asylum-seekers (Galli 2023).

Table 1. Youth Interviewee Characteristics (n=45)

Origin country	Gender	Age (entry)	Age (interview)	Family in US	Applied for relief
El Salvador	17 Male	25	12-14 8	12-14 2	Parent(s) 25 Asylum 32
Guatemala	16 Female	20	15-16 23	15-16 5	Other family 19 Other humanitarian 11
Honduras	11		17 14	17 5	No family 1 None 2
			18+ 33		

Findings

Contrary to policymakers’ assumptions, unaccompanied minors and their family members on both sides of the border are well aware of the risks of unauthorized journeys to the US. Yet, in the context of widespread violence targeting children and teenagers in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (UNHCR 2014, Galli 2023), knowledge of such risks does not deter migration. Caretakers are not irresponsible and unfit, as they are portrayed by politicians and social workers (Terrio 2015, Heidbrink 2014). Rather, they are protecting their children by supporting their independent migration. During his interview, Matias, a 17-year-old from Honduras, expressed gratitude to his mother for doing what she could to help him flee.

“My mom had some savings, she said, ‘take it, son, I want you to have it.’ A lot of people criticized her because she helped me. But she loves me, she wants what’s best for me. It must have been painful for her to give me her money all the while knowing that I might die during the journey.”

Matias was independent and experienced by the time he migrated. Months earlier, he had left his rural hometown –where his family lived in poverty and suffered his stepfather’s abuse– to work in the city of Tegucigalpa.¹ There, gang members threatened to kill him. He returned home to say goodbye to his mother before he embarked on the journey to the US with a friend. His family could not afford to hire a *coyote*, but when his mother learned he was in danger, she gave him her savings so he could pay for food, transportation, and lodging during the trip, as well as the phone number of her brother who lived in the US so Matias could call him when he arrived. Matias understood his mother’s support as an act of love, pushing back on discourses that demonize the parents of unaccompanied minors. To flee dangerous home countries and overcome significant constraints on their mobility, most “unaccompanied” minors rely on family members in receiving and sending countries in some capacity to plan and fund costly unauthorized journeys.

Knowing about how violence was affecting their children’s lives in Central America was crucial for families to be able to help plan migration. Strong ties to immediate family in the US played a more important role in fostering child migration in part because parents were more likely than non-parent relatives to be informed about this. Indeed, in most cases, children like Matias barely knew their non-parent relatives in the US before migration and/or did not maintain a relationship with them. Some children went into hiding in their home countries to cope with violence while adult caretakers made attempts to track down US-based family with whom they had lost touch to secure funds to pay for journeys or so that youths could, at least, travel with their

¹ Pursuing internal migration prior to migrating to the US was not common among my research participants (only Matias pursued this). For research examining internal migration as an alternative pathway for Central American youth, see Escamilla Garcia (2021).

contact information. While migrant networks theory focuses on the flow of information from the receiving to the sending country, I found that, in the case of Central American child migration, the flow of information was crucial in *both directions*, an indispensable precondition to activate resource flows in migrant networks.

Matias, who was raised by his mother in Honduras, felt close to her and immediately told her when he was threatened by gang members. Yet other children kept caretakers in the dark about the risks they faced at school or in their neighborhoods because they feared retaliation from those targeting them. In particular, children did not always feel close enough to their US-based parents to tell them about these risks. These children had typically been separated for over 10 years from parents who migrated when they were toddlers, leaving them in the care of other family members. While some kept in touch through weekly or monthly phone calls, others could hardly remember their parents. Because US immigration policy keeps Central American families apart, these relationships deteriorated with time, and even “strong” ties weakened. As a result, both children without “strong” ties to US-based parents and those whose “strong” ties had deteriorated over time were less likely to benefit from information and resources in migrant networks, and they sometimes had no option but to brave dangerous journeys alone.

The next sections focus on what children knew about the journey and US protections for unaccompanied minors, and how they acquired this information, depending on the strength and composition of their networks and on their relationships with family.

Information about US laws protecting unaccompanied minors

Table 2 categorizes my child interviewees based on: (1) the level and accuracy of their information about protections for unaccompanied minors that would allow them to be admitted at

the U.S. Mexico border; (2) what actors in their migrant networks provided this information, most often their family members (n=10) and *coyotes* (n=9) and, in fewer cases, their peers (n=4). As we will see next, some respondents acquired information from more than one source. For simplification purposes, in Table 2, I categorized them under the source they emphasized as most important during their interviews.

Eighteen of my interviewees (40%) had vague, sometimes inaccurate, information about what to expect when they arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border. This information was usually limited to two recommendations, as 16-year-old Eva recounted, “*the coyote said I should pack my birth certificate [...] and that I should learn my dad’s phone number by heart.*” When migrants arrive at the US-Mexico border, the Border Patrol allows them to call a family member in the US who, among other things, verifies their identity. Only very few youths knew to pack their birth certificate because this document would demonstrate they were unaccompanied minors eligible to be admitted at the US-Mexico border.² Most youths packed their birth certificates merely as a form of documentation. They fled violence because they had no other option, with only vague hopes that they would be “*let in*” and “*find help*” at the border. As shown in Table 2, nearly half of my interviewees knew nothing about protections for unaccompanied minors at the US-Mexico border (n=22 or 49%), and almost none of the unaccompanied minors I met during my fieldwork and interviews had known about forms of deportation relief, like asylum and SIJS, before migration.

² Categorized as having “full and accurate information” in Table 2.

Table 2. Pre-migration knowledge about protections for unaccompanied minors at the US-Mexico border

<i>No information about US protections n=22 (49%)</i>	
<i>Some vague and/or inaccurate understanding n=18 (40%)</i>	
Some (learned from coyote)	8
Some (learned from family)	7
Some (learned in home country - peers)	3
<i>Concrete understanding and information is accurate n=5 (11%)</i>	
High (learned from coyote)	1
High (learned from family)	3
High (learned in home country - peers)	1

Data from n=45 formal interviews with unaccompanied minors (Galli 2023)

Compared to children whose parents lived in the US, those who had non-parent relatives in the US were less likely to tap into the information provided by migrant networks. Oscar was a 14-year-old Maya child from Guatemala who was not in touch with his brother-in-law who lived in the US. He migrated completely unprepared, without his birth certificate or his brother-in-law's phone number. Oscar traveled with a *coyote* hired by his parents in Guatemala who did not give him information about protections for unaccompanied minors at the border. Rather, he assured Oscar that he would evade apprehension but did not keep his promise:

“‘we are almost there,’ the *coyote* told us. But around noon the [Border Patrol] caught us. [...] I thought that I would get deported [...] a helicopter flew [over us], and the coyote said, ‘hide!’ So, we hid, but the helicopter came back. Then came the motorcycles, horses, cars, they surrounded us.”

Oscar was fearful and disoriented during his interactions with the Border Patrol. A native K'iche' speaker who did not understand Spanish, he relied on a fellow migrant to translate. Even with this improvised translation, he signed paperwork without understanding what it was, fearful that he would be deported. Oscar recounted that the Border Patrol officers did not explain what

was happening when they put him in a van to transfer him to the ORR shelter: “*I thought, ‘where are they taking us? Are they going to kidnap us?’*” Indeed, Border Patrol agents neither inform children of their rights nor provide basic information about how they will be processed. In legal aid organizations, I observed how immigration attorneys asked children about their interactions with the Border Patrol to write briefs documenting that the government had not done its due diligence in providing migrants with information about their rights in a language they understood. Even though about half of Border Patrol agents are Latinos and speak Spanish (Vega 2018), even Spanish-speaking immigrants were routinely deprived of information in their native language and made to sign documents they did not understand.

Even when youths were in touch with parents and relatives in the US, these adults were usually not savvy about US immigration law and protections for unaccompanied minors. Indeed, the vast majority of unaccompanied minors join relatives who are undocumented immigrants who avoid interactions with the US immigration bureaucracy. More information flowed through migrant networks when family members in the US had already facilitated the migration of an unaccompanied minor—for instance when gangs had targeted multiple children in the same household, usually from eldest to youngest, prompting their escape (Galli 2023)—or knew others, like neighbors or community members, who had done so. These families had more knowledge about the process at the border, and in some cases, about what would happen after their children were released from ORR custody.

For example, Rosa frequented a church in Los Angeles where more than one congregant had recently brought their children from El Salvador, who also went on to win their asylum cases. Her 16-year-old daughter Yesenia’s life was at risk in El Salvador: she had cancer and could not access adequate medical care, and she was being abused by her family. Rosa hired a *coyote* to bring

Yesenia to the US-Mexico border, knowing that she would be admitted and hoping her asylum case would be successful. While the asylum office denied her claim, Yesenia was able to join her parents in Los Angeles and get chemotherapy, so her cancer went into regression. She was attending school and living in relative peace thanks to the temporary stay on deportation all asylum-seekers benefit from and was appealing her asylum case. As child migration to the US continues, we might expect more information about US protections for unaccompanied minors to flow through migrant networks from the receiving to the sending countries as in the case of Yesenia, but this was relatively rare during the time of my fieldwork.

Even when family members in the US were familiar with the system of reception for unaccompanied minors, this information did not necessarily travel back to the home country. The need to organize migration quickly in contexts of violence often left little time for adults to involve children in migration decision-making and planning. What's more, adults generally shield children from distressing or complex information and make decisions and plans on their behalf to protect them. While this dynamic can be observed in all families, it is especially important in contexts of violence where extracting children safely often depends on as few people knowing as possible.

Sometimes, even children traveling to the US together had different levels of information, as was the case for Honduran siblings Elsa and Elvin who migrated at ages 16 and 11 respectively. Before embarking on the journey, each sibling had interacted to different degrees with their family in the US, including their older sister Paz who had gone through the process for unaccompanied minors a year earlier. The two girls spoke on the phone when Elsa was still in Honduras, and Paz told her what to expect, not only during the journey but also once they arrived at the border and in the ORR shelter: *“My sister told me we would go to a youth shelter [...]. She spoke wonders about the shelter! Like, ‘they are going to treat you well, give you food and medical care.’”*

Well-prepared, Elsa carefully packed both their birth certificates in a plastic bag so they would not get wet or torn. Elsa took being entrusted with the care of her 11-year-old brother very seriously: “*my aunt had never let me care for him before, she said I was too young.*” She comforted her brother when he was scared as they rode in crowded trucks, gave him her clothes to keep him warm, and nearly risked drowning to help him swim across the Rio Grande. When they arrived at the US-Mexico border, Elsa recounted:

“[the Border Patrol] told me I had to sign. I was traumatized because my sister told me that you get deported if you sign [...] I didn’t know whether I should sign, nobody explained anything to me in Spanish. [...] [The coyotes] told us, ‘We need to cross you at the border and once you are [on the US side], you can turn yourselves in.’”

That 11-year-old Elvin knew less than his sister about what awaited him during the journey and in the US is not surprising. Given his young age, Elvin was treated by his family as a child to be cared for and taken to safety but not necessarily informed about decisions taken on his behalf. Younger respondents like Elvin took on a more passive and dependent role. This finding is in line with Abrego's (2011) study of younger children who traveled to the US with their parents who, she argues, have few recollections of the journey because their parents organized the trip and later shielded them from discussions about unauthorized border crossings. Elvin did not talk to his sister or mother in the US before leaving. He was merely placed in the care of Elsa who assumed the adult role. At the border, Elvin was terrified when the Border Patrol separated him from his sister: “*I didn’t know anything [...] I thought they would send us back, but I wasn’t sure. [...] I got even more scared when they separated me from my sister.*” While Elvin was eventually sent to the same ORR facility as his sister, this is not the case for all siblings who travel together, and children who travel with adult caretakers other than their parents or legal guardians were routinely separated from them at the border. These separations were frightening and traumatic for children who did not know where their loved ones were being taken or whether they would ever see them again.

Coyotes provided children with information about what to expect at the border to a similar extent as family members did, but this information was usually less accurate (Table 2). Instead, the information *coyotes* provided was partial at best or even somewhat misleading, as exemplified by the case of 13-year-old Ernesto from El Salvador:

“The *coyote* said that, once we crossed the river, we should keep walking until we got to the wall. There, we could decide what to do: run away or let immigration catch us. [...] [they said] the difference was that, if immigration caught you, it could be easier to find your family. If they didn’t catch you, and you kept running, who knows where you might end up?”

Telling youths that turning themselves in would make it “*easier to find your family*” obscures the complex process unaccompanied minors navigate after apprehension at the border. This includes sometimes prolonged detention in abysmal conditions in border holding facilities and ORR “shelters,” which children described as punitive and anxiety-provoking (Galli 2020). Children are next usually, but not always, released to family members. Some children are deported from ORR to their home countries through so-called “voluntary departure” or transferred to adult detention facilities upon their 18th birthday. When navigating removal proceedings, children face challenges finding legal services in scarce supply and satisfying the narrow refugee definition to win their cases (Galli 2023). Deportation is a risk at each of these stages.

Even children who *did* have information about protections for unaccompanied minors at the border were at risk of being illegally expelled by the Border Patrol, an agency with a well-documented record of human rights violations that does not have children’s best interests at heart and operates without independent oversight (IHRC/ACLU 2018). Because of children’s unequal power relationship with the receiving state, knowing about one’s rights was not always enough to ensure the enjoyment of these rights. For example, two Salvadoran siblings knew about protections at the border because their *coyote* shared this information. Yolanda refused to sign a deportation

order and stomached the abysmal conditions in the freezing holding cells migrants call “*hieleras*” (ice boxes), while her brother was illegally deported:

“The *coyotes* said they protect minors a lot [in the US] and everything would be OK if we didn’t sign anything. Then [the Border Patrol] arrested us [...], and my brother couldn’t take it. He wasn’t 18 yet either but he couldn’t stand the *hieleras*. After a day, he signed his deportation [order] [...] I was there for four or five days [...] My brother called my dad, but he didn’t pick up because his phone was broken. By the time my dad’s phone worked again, my brother was gone.”

Far from being devious immigrants who “cheat” their way into the US, Yolanda and her brother were vulnerable to rights violations at the hands of the Border Patrol. No matter what youths know, how they are treated will depend in large part on the discretion of the officer they deal with. In sum, the information that circulated in migrant networks was seldom complete and accurate as it was in the case of Yesenia who knew not just about protections for unaccompanied minors at the border but also about the possibility of applying for asylum. Instead, partial notions about US laws and protections flowed across borders, provided by coyotes and family members. Yet even in the minority of cases when youths were well-informed about what awaited them at the US-Mexico border, they were still vulnerable to rights violations at the hands of the Border Patrol.

Information about migration industry services

While the adults involved in facilitating youth migration knew little about US immigration laws, they knew far more about the travel options provided by the migration industry. This information flowed through migrant networks back to the home country. Respondents’ accounts revealed that coyotes offered a two-tiered service: a more expensive option (starting at \$6,000) that supposedly allowed migrants to avoid apprehension and be “delivered” in Los Angeles; and a less expensive option (starting at \$3,000) to be “crossed over” in a heavily patrolled area like the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Trips were more expensive for Salvadorans and Hondurans who travel longer distances than Guatemalans. While brokers in the migration industry seem to be

fashioning their services to capitalize on provisions that allow Central American unaccompanied minors to be admitted to the US, family members usually decided which service to pick merely based on financial considerations. When the sudden need to extract children from violence arose, undocumented family members working exploitative jobs in the US had limited savings and could seldom afford the more expensive travel option. The more affordable option allowed families to get their children to safety as quickly as possible.

Because US-based family members had undertaken unauthorized trips themselves, they had first-hand knowledge of the risks involved. Families entrusted their children to *coyotes* to protect them during the trip, especially if other adult family members were unable to accompany them. Of the 45 unaccompanied minors I interviewed, 35 (78%) traveled the entire way to the US-Mexico border with a *coyote* (Table 3). All children aged 14 and under traveled with a *coyote*. Although I was not always able to obtain this information from participants during my fieldwork in legal aid organizations, most children whom I could ask had traveled with *coyotes* as well. Table 3 examines the gender patterns in travel strategies among my research participants. Girls and boys relied on coyotes to a similar extent to make the trip (75%-80%), but it was more common for girls (15%) to travel with family members than it was for boys (4%). Just 6 interviewees, only two of whom were girls, traveled alone or with peers their age. Yet, while they braved most of the journey alone, unlike the boys in this group, both girls relied on a *coyote* for the final leg of the journey: crossing the Rio Grande on a dinghy. They each paid a \$1,000 fee for this service: money that one girl received from her mother in the US and the other from her grandmother in Honduras, after calling them from Mexico to ask for their help.

Table 3. Mode of Travel and payment by gender (n=45 interviews; 20 girls/F and 25 boys/M)

	Total	Girls	% (of 20 F)	Boys	% (of 25 M)
(I) Traveled w/ friends or alone	6	2*	10%	4	16%
(II) Traveled w/ family (no smuggler)	4	3	15%	1	4%
(III) Traveled w/ coyote	35	15	75%	20	80%
Family pays for all/part coyote	28	15	75%	13	52%
Family in US pays coyote	19	13	65%	6	24%
Family in sending country pays coyote	8	2	10%	6	24%
Family in both countries pays coyote	1	0		1	4%
Child responsible for migration debt	6	0		6	24%

Reflecting how age and stage in the life-cycle shape migratory mechanisms, virtually all children depended in some capacity on their family members to either pay for their journeys or to give them information about how to hire coyotes. Children were often still in school in their home countries. Those who worked did so for limited hours and in exploitative jobs, so they did not personally have the savings necessary to pay for costly journeys, which ranged from \$3,000 to \$10,000. Among my interviewees, girls were generally more likely to access resources from their families on both sides of the border to pay for the trip. Family members paid for the services of coyotes in 72% of cases among girls as compared to 52% of cases for boys. These trends reflect gender norms suggesting that females need greater protection than males during the journey and mirror findings from existing research on adults that show that females are more reliant than males on help and resources from smugglers and family members to support their migration (Hagan 2008, Sanchez 2015). In 19 cases, US-based family members paid for the trip, which was far more common for girls (13) than for boys (6). In 10 cases, adult family members in the sending country paid for the trip in full or in part. In the case of six respondents, all male indigenous teenagers from Guatemala, parents in the home country mortgaged their land to organize the trip through “debt-

migration,” a common migratory strategy among this population (Heidbrink 2020). These children had already taken on adult-like roles before migration; they worked and participated in sustaining family economies. While they were reliant on family assets to secure smuggling services, upon arrival to the US, indebtedness put pressure on these boys to grow up even more quickly, taking on additional responsibilities because they were responsible for repaying these loans.

Most unaccompanied minors relied on information from adult family members in their migrant networks and in their home country to connect them with *coyotes* and help plan their trips. These children usually had never even left their hometowns. Unsurprisingly, they lacked information about how to organize an unauthorized journey across international borders alone. Amongst my interviewees, only three respondents, all boys, knew a *coyote* personally or through their peer networks. Only those boys were able to access smuggling services to plan the journey without the help of adults. For example, one 16-year-old from El Salvador named Jose quickly hired a *coyote* whom he knew personally when gang members threatened his life and left without telling anyone for fear of being discovered. However, as other scholars have also found (Belloni 2020), even children who start unauthorized journeys alone and without the consent of caretakers often rely on them at some later stage to continue their migration and avoid getting stuck in transit. Jose agreed to give the *coyote* all his savings from working a part-time job, which amounted to \$1,700, and he was under the impression that this would be enough to get him to the US-Mexico border. Once he arrived in Guatemala, however, the *coyote* called his uncle in El Salvador –his main caretaker– to request additional payment. Jose’s uncle paid approximately \$5,000 so that he could safely continue his journey using higher-tier services that involved a combination of bus and plane. Jose explained: “*I didn’t know whether I would have to pay my uncle back [...] But he said it was a gift because they consider me like a son.*”

Like adults (Sanchez 2018), children experienced mixed treatment at the hands of *coyotes*. Some said that *coyotes* did not have their well-being at heart and described being subjected to inhumane and life-threatening travel conditions, such as being crammed alongside hundreds of migrants in cargo containers or being abandoned in the desert or mountains for hours. Girls described being harassed, and in one case raped, by smugglers. For those who were victimized, the journey was yet another dire chapter adding to the traumatic experiences they had experienced before fleeing their home countries. In most cases, however, the services of *coyotes* instead provided some measure of protection, hastening the trip and shielding children from apprehension in Mexico. It was with good reason that caretakers entrusted their children to these guides.

According to some interviewees, *coyotes* took good care of them. Lolita, a 16-year-old from Honduras said the *coyote* often reassured her since she was the only child traveling in the group: “he would say, ‘don’t you worry, everything is going to be OK [...] you will be with your family sooner than you think.” Jorge, a 16-year-old from Honduras, traveled with a *coyote* who was his mother’s friend. He shared with pride that knowing the *coyote* personally ensured him preferential treatment, shielding him from corrupt Mexican police officers who extort migrants.

“Nothing bad happened to me because I was traveling with my mom’s friend. She told him to keep me by his side [...] I traveled in the front with him. Every time the police stopped us, they looked at the people in the back of the van, but they didn’t look at me [...]. The coyote told me to learn the eight states of Mexico in case they asked where we were going. When [the police] asked, ‘what are you doing here?’ I would tell them I was going to work. [...] the police made [other migrants] get off [and give them money] because they had their suitcases but not me. My mom’s friend was carrying my clothes, so I wouldn’t look like a migrant, so they wouldn’t pay much attention to me.”

As Jorge’s story shows, children also pick up information during the journey, strategies that help them cope with the risks involved. In this case, the *coyote* taught Jorge strategies to pass as Mexican and evade apprehension and deportation in case the police asked him questions.

Traveling alone

My interviewees who traveled alone faced more risks during the journey. Without the help of *coyotes* skilled in the evasion of migration control, some were deported in Mexico and had to attempt crossing the Guatemala-Mexico border multiple times. Journeys also tended to be longer for youths traveling alone, like 16-year-old Marisa (an ethnography participant) who took a full year to make her way from Honduras to the US alone. Of course, not having enough money to secure the services of *coyotes* meant that these children also had little to spend during the trip. They had to work or beg for food and money along the journey and faced additional risks because they were unable to pay for transportation and safe places to sleep.

Learning how to cope with danger was crucial for children traveling without protection from smugglers or relatives. David, a 17-year-old from Guatemala, made it to the US by riding in part on the infamous freight train La Bestia. David grew up without having a relationship with his parents, who migrated to the US when he was a baby and with whom he had completely lost contact by the time of his migration. When David's grandfather died, he left home to become independent at age 9 and soon went from working menial jobs to running his own stand at the local market. From his perspective, David was anything but a child when he left Guatemala. In fact, he had never had much of a chance to be a child and had only attended school for three years. When gang members murdered his brother, David fled without planning, savings, or family support. He unloaded trucks along the way to pay for food and transportation. To make it to the US, overcoming Mexico's vertical border, David had to pick up information about the route and improvise strategies to avoid apprehension:

“Whenever I didn't know something, I asked. The men I worked with told me how to get to the US [...] by train, then bus. The bus was riskier because the Mexican immigration police would come aboard and ask for my papers [...] I told them that I forgot my papers, but I was Mexican, from Comitán. [...] One time, they made

me get off the bus and told me I would spend 24 hours in jail because I didn't have my papers. I told them, 'If this is how you treat your *paisano*, fine.' They thought they would scare me into telling them I'm Guatemalan, so they could send me back, but I didn't. After two hours, they let me leave and even paid for my bus ride and food because I told them, 'I have my rights, I am Mexican.' Another time, I asked this Mexican lady on the bus to tell the police I was her son so they wouldn't detain me again. [...] When [the police] got on to check papers, she said, 'what do you want, he's my son and he's sleeping.' They believed her and didn't touch me."

Age and stage in the life cycle shape migratory strategies and the extent to which migrants rely on family to make the trip to the United States. Children like David, who were able to brave the journey alone, were all older teenagers. Some were already self-reliant, working and sometimes living independently before migration. Others could not rely on family for care and protection because they lived in abusive homes. They had run away from home, and their migration was a continuation of family ruptures. Compared to peers reliant on family whose experiences I describe above, children growing up in abusive homes or working in home countries since early childhood, well before their teenage years, had grown up at an accelerated pace, taking on adult-sized responsibilities and hardships from a young age. For them, the journey was an extension of the precarity they faced in their homes, which equipped them to be resourceful and independent, skills that would serve them as they made dangerous trips to the US-Mexico border.

Conclusion

This paper extends adult-centric migrant networks theory and research on the migration industry by centering the experiences of children. I explain how migration mechanisms differ for children because of their age, stage in the life cycle, and gender. I thus contribute to a burgeoning new literature at the intersection of migration and childhood studies that takes seriously the agency and communication strategies of children. At the same time, however, I resist romanticizing the agency of migrant children and contextualize their mobility strategies within the stark power

imbalances that constrain their choices as they escape violence, navigate increasingly deadly journeys, and encounter punitive state actors that violate their rights.

The type of ties in migrant networks mattered for children's migratory dynamics: "strong" ties to US-based parents were especially important to ease constraints on migration while other US-based non-parent relatives provided lesser support. While adult-centric migrant networks theory focuses on the flow of information from the receiving to the sending country, my findings highlight that, in the case of child migration, the flow of information was crucial in *both directions*, as a precondition to activate resource and information flows in migrant networks. Family members in the US had to know how violence was affecting their children in their home country to facilitate their migration. Overall, children were more willing to share this information with parents than with non-parent relatives whom they had never met or barely knew. However, years of family separation imposed by restrictive US immigration policy yielded emotional distance that deteriorated even children's "strong" ties to parents in the US, limiting how much and what kinds of information flowed across borders.

Due to their age and stage in the life cycle, except for children who ran away from home and those who had already substantially emancipated themselves from family support in the home country, most of my respondents were reliant on their adult family members in some capacity for information about how to hire a *coyote* and for resources to fund their trips. This is unsurprising given that children are less experienced in travel and do not have savings to independently pay smugglers. Mirroring findings in the research on adults, girls were more reliant than boys on their family members both to accompany them during the journey and help them pay for trips. Families hired smugglers to mitigate risks and protect their children because they were well aware of the dangers of the journey. Conversely, family members knew far less about US immigration laws that

ostensibly serve as pull factors, and the information they transmitted to their children about these laws was usually partial and incorrect. Further, this information was diluted as it passed through other adult caretakers and gatekeepers before reaching children themselves. As a result, most children knew little or nothing about US policies protecting unaccompanied minors.

Importantly, even in the minority of cases when unaccompanied minors were aware of protections that would allow them to be admitted at the US-Mexico border, this alone was not enough to ensure that they would enjoy access to their rights. Far from being “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” immigrant children are caught in a sorely unequal power relationship with the state. All too often, their treatment at the border depends not on the letter of the law but, rather, on the discretion of border patrol agents who operate with little oversight and frequently violate their rights. By examining what kind of information flows through migrant networks in the case of Central American child migration, this paper has important implications in dispelling harmful rhetoric popular among US politicians and the general public.

This study suggests new avenues for research on child migration. In future work, scholars should continue to revise and extend existing adult-centric migration theories to account for the experiences of children on the move. Future research should systematically compare the experiences of children and adults to investigate whether the age-based and gendered trends identified here are representative and reflected in other migration streams, including those that are not characterized by strong push factors associated with violence. Future work can also further compare migratory strategies across cultures, asking how local norms tied to childrearing and the life course prompt children of different ages to travel alone or with smugglers and family. Extending migration theories in this way is paramount in today’s world, one where children are increasingly migrating across international borders and seeking asylum alone.

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