

## The human cost of deportations

# What happens to Obama's deported children and youth?

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Over the past few months the Obama administration has been deporting Central American immigrants en masse, sending hundreds back to their home countries where they face extreme violence and poverty. Most of the immigrants originate from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras is the murder capital of the world. El Salvador and Guatemala rank close behind, with the fifth and sixth highest homicide rates respectively.

Additionally, poverty in the Central American triangle is amongst the highest in Latin America: 52 percent of the population lives on less than \$4 per day in Honduras. That figure is 53.5 percent in Guatemala and 42.7 percent in El Salvador.

Drug cartels, gang violence, extortion, prostitution and corrupt legal systems dominate daily life for most in the region. Gangs, or Maras, recruit and target teenage boys as members and victims. US imperialism, including the US-backed "War on Drugs," has played a key role in creating the conditions of poverty and violence many are fleeing.

The WSWs interviewed a group of undocumented immigrants from El Salvador and Honduras living in South Central Los Angeles.

Ken is 17 years old, from Honduras, and has lived in the US for two years. "I left for the US when I was 13 and it took me two years to get here," he said. "I left my home because I had problems with the Mara [gangs]. I spent three months in El Salvador; then Guatemala, not sure how long there; then a year and a half in Mexico, riding *La Bestia* [cargo train]. I saw such horrific things, the terrible treatment of women, kidnappings in trucks, all of that, all while traveling alone."

Ken added, "I lived on the streets and survived by begging. I would hide in rivers and under bridges to try and avoid danger. I have lived in so many places in Mexico: Vera Cruz, Tierra Blanca, Guajaca, D.F. Tijuana, and Mexicali.

"When I lived in Honduras I went to school and cleaned cars. There are no opportunities and many children are forced to work. Newspaper companies pay children 50 lempiras (\$2.50) a day to sell newspapers. If you don't sell every newspaper, they only pay you 30 lempiras. An egg carton costs 55 lempiras.

That's not enough to survive.

"I left my country because it isn't safe and the Maras were trying to recruit me. Things are so dangerous that you can't even be on the street. You can't display any money, can't even wear Nike shoes. You can't have your head shaved, nothing. You always have to be mindful of how you look or else it could get you into trouble. Also, you have to pay rent to the Mara or you risk your and your family's lives.

"The young boys over there have to enter the Mara during their school years and that life is hard. You have to sell drugs, steal or charge rent to homes or businesses. Rent is charged every month. The way they charge rent for homes there depends on the amount of people in the house, what area the home is located. Life over there is scary; you can't walk across neighborhoods. You can only use the bus to go from one section to another.

"I lived in Tissatio, but that neighborhood got divided into Tissatio 1, 2, and 3 around 2005. The division was due to the fact that there were a lot of killings and the police don't ever do anything because they fear for their own lives.

"The Mara charged about 25 lempiras to businesses all the time and right now the value of the lempira has dropped. One dollar is worth about 20 lempiras right now. But sometimes it drops as low as 14, other times it goes up to 25."

Ken was just issued an order of deportation and has dropped out of school for fear of being picked up by immigration. He told the WSWs, "I am so scared of being deported that I barely leave my home, except for work to save money to pay the lawyer. Hopefully he will be able to help me obtain asylum so that I can stay. I hope I can stay, but I lack confidence in the justice system. There are a lot of frauds and some people are just trying to take your money.

"It was such a struggle just to make my way here and in my country the crisis is even worse. There's no work in Honduras. I came to the US because I wanted to help my mother. I planned to send money to her and the rest of my family, but I wasn't aware of the crisis going on here in the US. Though things are difficult here, it is still better than there. The suffering isn't as bad."

When asked about what happens to the youth being deported back to Honduras, Ken responded, “I have an aunt and a cousin who just got deported. They were told that they would be given work, but that was three months ago and their lives have gotten worse because they spent all the money they had on traveling to the US.”

Alex, who is from El Salvador, commented, “There’s also the situation with Obama militarizing the border. The government claims they want to help these children but it’s a lie. We’ve all seen the conditions they face when detained.

“Many kids enter here to be reunited with their families. Life for an undocumented worker is hard and it’s nearly impossible to find a good paying job. We, the laboring masses, are often taken advantage of. There are times that we work and we aren’t paid. I have an undocumented brother in the north, the company owes him 15 days and now the employers are telling him that they are going to call immigration on him just so that they won’t have to pay him.”

Alex continued, “The level of suffering is so inhumane that it’s clear that the government doesn’t really want to help these children. Children get here and they see that their parents are struggling and there’s no food in the house, so they take jobs to help their parents. What happens to their schooling and their dreams? They’re thrown out the window, exactly the same as back in their homeland. They are never even given a chance.”

Fernando, another Honduran immigrant, interjected, saying, “You see this with the eight-year-olds being deported. How could they know anything about laws? How are they deporting them when they are underage? It’s against the law. Many of their families are in the US. The government doesn’t even know if they have family or anyone to go home to once they are deported. They are sending them back to die.”

The response by the Obama administration to the waves of immigrants has been a brutal policy of mass deportation. In light of November’s upcoming midterm elections, Obama is worried that his administration’s punitive and militarized response to the influx of child migrants will cost the Democratic Party votes—especially amongst the Latino and immigrant populations. Whatever the false promises, his administration will continue engaging in mass deportations.

In mid-July the Obama administration sent the first plane of immigrants back to San Pedro Sula, where they were met by Honduran First Lady Ana García de Hernández and an entourage of politicians interested in a grossly ironic public relations opportunity to “welcome home” the immigrants. As members of the Honduran ruling elite, these layers benefit from the impoverishment of its citizens.

In reality, the number of families broken up as a result of deportations has skyrocketed in the last seven years. In 2007 nearly 20 percent of those deported were sent back alone, leaving their family members behind in the US. In 2012 that figure had quadrupled to 77 percent.

The women and children who arrived by plane were

distraught at having to return to what some describe as a “life of hell.” “Part of my heart stayed in the US because I missed a chance to get ahead in life,” said Isabel Rodriguez, who was deported along with her two-year-old son and eight-year-old daughter.

The recently deported also worry about how they will acquire the means to pay back the thousands that they borrowed to make the arduous trek north. The cost of unsettled debts can be life threatening. One woman told reporters that she still owes \$7,200 to the smuggler who helped her cross.

Crossing the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border is dangerous on multiple fronts. Smugglers are known to be violent to those who are crossing. Rape and beatings are a common occurrence on *La Bestia*, and some areas of the Southwest desert can reach temperatures as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit). The decomposing bodies of adults and children, mostly victims of heat stroke, are often found, a nightmarish sight.

A new wave of migrants is expected this fall as temperatures begin to decline. Many en route wait out the hot summer months in border towns like Tijuana, located just south of San Diego, California. Subhuman conditions define such border towns, which are in all accounts open-air toilets where homeless migrants sleep and do what they can to get by. People survive by “cleaning windshields, offering to carry people’s bags outside of supermarkets, doing odd construction jobs, collecting refuse to sell for recycling, or panhandling on the streets,” reports the Inter Press Service News Agency.

Valdette Wileman, a nun who runs the Center for Returned Migrants in San Pedro Sula, asserted in a recent interview that about 80 percent of the children deported from the US left Honduras to escape gang violence, many of them used as gang lookouts.

“Some of these children are threatened with their lives, and now they are being forced

to return to the same place,” she said. A large number of children embark on the risky journey to the US in response to the loss of their families, killed by gang violence.

Wileman complained about a desperate lack of resources. “This is the responsibility of the government. This is the responsibility of the entrepreneurs who run this country ... Those who are in power. All I can do is pray.”



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