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A homecoming racked with guilt and shame for Guatemalan migrant children

by [Katya Cengel](/profiles/c/katya-cengel.html) | October 5, 2015 5:00AM ET

For the 10 percent of young people who are returned from the US, failure weighs heavily, and the safety net is thin

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Guatemalan minors Ana, Juan and Adan wait at the air force base at La Aurora Airport in Guatemala City after being repatriated from the United States. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series on Guatemalan migrant children who are returned to their country after unsuccessfully trying to reach the United States. Part two (<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/10/migrant-kids-highlight-legacy-of-violence-and->

inequality-toward-maya.html) focuses on the disproportionate impact of migration on Guatemala's indigenous communities. Part three

(<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/10/guatemalan-children-return-from-mexico-shelters-in-very-bad-shape.html>) looks at children who are apprehended in Mexico before reaching the U.S. border.

GUATEMALA CITY — They arrive without shoelaces — Ana with her long hair, Juan with his nervous, darting eyes and Adan with his anger. Because they are children and are traveling alone, they are escorted from the airplane to a cordoned-off section of the main building at the Guatemalan air force base at La Aurora international airport. The government psychologist assigned to watch over them tells them they are lucky: Their shoelaces were taken before they left the United States, but at least they weren't handcuffed.

Outside, the adults deported from the U.S. cover their faces as they exit the airplane. Inside the airport, there are three plastic chairs and three bagged lunches. The boys eat their chips. Ana locates the turquoise rosary given to her at the Arizona shelter where she spent the last seven months. Juan has a gray one. Adan had one as well. He threw it out, just as he threw away the sandwich he was given on the airplane.

It is their first time in Guatemala City, their country's capital, and it was their first time on an airplane. It was their first time crossing the U.S. border and being returned — but probably not their last. They are 14, 15 or 16, depending on who is asking.

On the rise for several years, the number of unaccompanied minors traveling to the U.S. from Central America reached epic proportions last summer. In fiscal year 2014, more than 50,000 children from Central America's Northern Triangle — El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — were apprehended in the U.S.-Mexico border region. That's more than double 2013's total and 15 times 2009's.

The vast majority — 90 percent or more (<http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/majority-media/johnson-continues-border-hearing-series-assessing-the-governments-response-to-unaccompanied-minors>) — of the children stay in the U.S., according to Sen. Ron Johnson, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. It is mainly children like Juan, Ana and Adan — children who could not be placed in the care of a relative or friend during deportation proceedings — who are returned.

The sense of failure weighs particularly heavy on indigenous adolescents like them, said Maria Rohr, a psychologist at a Catholic shelter for migrants in Guatemala City. Indigenous child migrants often feel responsible for their family's well being, she said, believing they were their family's best hope.

“They are carrying a lot of burden of guilt for not being able to make it, without understanding it was not their fault,” said Rohr.



Meals sit ready for migrants arriving from the U.S. at the air force airport in Guatemala City. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

While efforts have been made to address certain aspects of re-integration at arrival, there is no substantial follow-up, according to a Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars report.

The authors of “The Realities of Returning Home: Youth Repatriation in Guatemala”

(<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-realities-returning-home-youth-repatriation-guatemala>) argue that there is no meaningful effort to determine if the children were able to reintegrate and “no indicators of the psychosocial or emotional abilities of the children to reconnect with their families, make sense of the whole experience or readapt to life in their home communities.”

Carol L. Girón Solórzano, director of general projects with the Pastoral Care of Migrants, a religious organization with an office in Guatemala City, agrees: “This is a task we still have to do.”

“The government has taken on a few cases. This is a positive thing, it is good,” said Solórzano. “But it’s insufficient.”

Paul Briere, a deputy in Guatemala’s Congress and the chairman of its immigration committee, was more direct about how little is done for returnees.

“Nothing happens,” he said.

When Oscar A. Chacon, the executive director of the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities, visited the Northern Triangle last year, he said none of the governments spoke about reintegration programs. “And the reason why they weren’t speaking about reintegration programs is ... they don’t have them,” he said.

In order to have such programs, governments need to be operational and healthy and provide a sense of security and well-being, he explained. But if Guatemala could do that, children like Juan, Ana and Adan wouldn’t have left in the first place.

It took Juan 19 days to reach the U.S. and Ana, a month. They were apprehended by U.S. authorities in the desert near the border in February and January, respectively. Adan was caught in April. After months spent in shelters in Arizona, the three children were repatriated to Guatemala in July.

Children under 14 returning from the U.S. are supposed to travel by commercial flight and arrive at Guatemala’s international airport, according to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Those 14 or older — like Juan, Ana and Adan — arrive at the air force airport.

After they pass through immigration and are taken to a nearby building, psychologist Isabel Morales Barrera asks the children how it feels to be back in Guatemala. They ignore her. Barrera, who is with Guatemala’s Secretariat of Social Welfare (SBS), tries again, prompting them to consider how many migrants die on the journey, how lucky they are to have survived, how nice it is to have a government program meet them at the airport. Barrera reminds them that there are two ways to travel — one with proper documents, the other, the way they did, risking the perils of the desert and detection. She encourages them to try the legal way next time.

She does not tell them how to do so.

Ana writes several sentences on a piece of paper and turns it over. The boys write a line or two each in Spanish: “I am happy because you are here to receive me in my country.” “Thank God I’m alive, because a lot of people come back dead.”



Adults deported from the U.S. arrive back in Guatemala. Minors are repatriated in a similar way. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

The children are given backpacks — blue for the boys, purple for Ana — and photographed. They drop the bags without opening them.

Alex Humberto Ajcuc, 19, is part of a small government team that meets the returning children at the airport. He has been on the job a month. Dressed in red sneakers and a gray hoodie, he gives them playdough. “Some are really sad,” he said. “Some come with a large burden because of all that happens to them on the road.”

While each case is different, there is one thing all the returning children share, said Carol L. Girón Solórzano, the director of general projects with Pastoral Care of Migrants, a religious organization that works with government and nongovernmental entities on migration issues. “They self-blame, so they carry that burden. It’s how they live — the failure of migration,” she said.

When asked, the three teenagers tell Barrera that they made their journey with the help of a coyote, or human smuggler. Their families had to borrow money to pay the coyote and are now in debt.

Ana is the first to play with the modeling clay. She makes a floppy-eared turquoise dog, its front paws resting on a hot dog. In the shelter she became a fan of American food — hamburgers, hot dogs, potato chips. She calls the dog Jule.

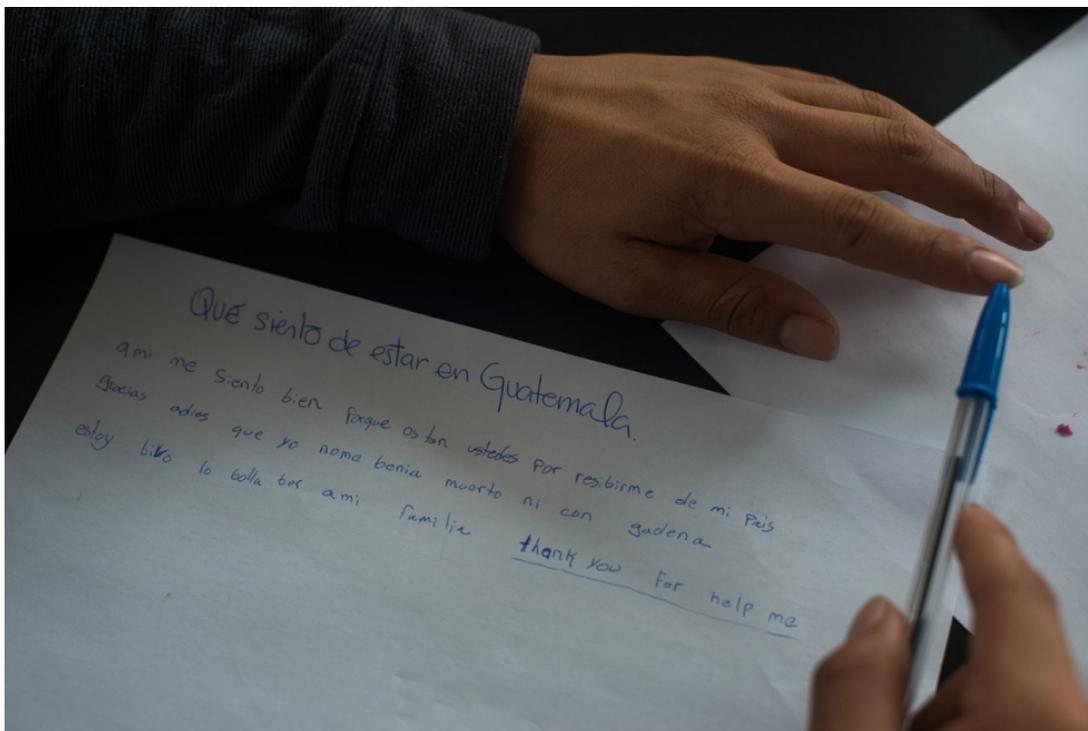
Juan makes a pink duck.

Adan doesn't make anything.

In a binder stuffed with drawings of hearts and roses, Ana keeps several handouts she received at the U.S. shelter: the Pledge of Allegiance in English and Spanish, information about how to become an American citizen. She was hoping to live with an aunt in Georgia and work at a nearby chicken processing plant. She never left the shelter.

Juan left once, to attend a baseball game. He has a picture of himself in an Abercrombie & Fitch hoodie and blue baseball cap standing in the stadium bleachers. He wears the same zippered hoodie now. He has a binder from the shelter as well, one filled with English flash cards.

After several hours at the airport, the children are taken to a government-run shelter in Guatemala City where their parents have been notified to meet them.



Before the children arrive, the parents are interviewed by a psychologist who asks whether the child traveled with their permission, how they located a coyote and how much they paid the smuggler. When the children arrive, they are allowed to greet their parents briefly before being taken away for questioning too.

A psychologist asked Juan to answer “How do you feel being back in Guatemala?” Juan replied, “I feel good because you received me in my country. Thank God that I came back alive and without handcuffs. I’m alive, and soon I will see my family.” Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Although the SBS runs the shelter, the national attorney general is responsible for deciding whether it is safe to return the children to their parents. According to Solórzano, many of the children suffer violence at home.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 23 percent of the 302 unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle it interviewed for a report on unaccompanied child migrants mentioned suffering violence in their home. Attorneys working with unaccompanied child migrants in the U.S. also report high levels of family violence suffered by their Guatemalan clients. And yet, according to SBS head Raquel Vielman de Alcázar, almost all the children who return to Guatemala — 99 percent — are returned to their families.

The Guatemala City shelter is painted cheerful yellows and greens. The bunk beds in the girls' room are covered with pink bedspreads, the boys' with blue blankets. The layout is open and light, having recently been remodeled. Everyone speaks Spanish, although that is not the children's first language.

All three teenagers are indigenous, like 78 percent of the unaccompanied children who are returned to Guatemala, according to the SBS.

At the Guatemala City shelter, parents wait in a reception area cordoned off from their children until they are allowed to take them home. Zulma Garcia, the good-natured psychologist in charge of the shelter, says the children and parents serve as translators for those who don't speak Spanish.

Juan's mother, dressed in the Ixil people's traditional red skirt and colorful woven headdress, lacks official identification documents. She was born during the civil war in a region gravely affected by genocide, never attended school and speaks minimal Spanish.



Juan's parents, center, wait with other relatives of minors repatriated from the U.S. in a shelter in downtown Guatemala City. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Since last summer's surge of migrant children, the U.S. has acted on several fronts, funding campaigns to discourage migration, encouraging and funding additional enforcement and opening an in-country refugee processing program for children. What these projects haven't done is give children a reason to stay, said Alejandra Pamela Argueta, a co-author of "The Realities of Returning Home: Youth Repatriation in Guatemala."

"That was the big gap," she said.

At the shelter the children are informed of the risks of crossing and encouraged to stay in school. Juan would like to continue studying. He finished seventh grade, but the school was a two-hour walk followed by the expense of a daily bus ride from his home. His family needs him to work instead; that's why he went to the U.S. He planned to live with his uncles in Florida and find work so he could send money home to his parents and younger siblings.

He doesn't qualify for the new U.S. program In-Country Refugee/Parole Processing for Minors in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Alcázar said she sent information to the U.S. Embassy about 200 of the more than 4,500 children who returned to Guatemala this year to see if they would qualify for the program. According to a recent Migration Policy Institute report, 59 Guatemalan applications had been submitted as of mid-August.

After signing release papers, Juan, Ana and Adan are each given a plastic bag with soap, shampoo and toothpaste and sent on their way. Juan walks out with his father, mother and aunt. The family paid \$200 to hire a truck and driver to take them to Guatemala City and back. Taking a bus would have been far cheaper, but Juan's father, Sebastian Matón Chavez, wasn't sure how he would find his way around what he considers a foreign city, having never been there before and speaking little Spanish.

"I don't know anything about the city," he said. "I didn't want to get lost."

It is raining when they reach the truck. It is late, and it will be a long ride home. Juan's parents awoke at 2 a.m. to begin the two-hour hike from their home to a passable road where they could meet the driver. Juan's flight left the U.S. at 4:30 in the morning.

It is now Friday night. If Juan were still in Arizona, he would be attending the weekly shelter dance.



Juan walks to a bus that will take him from the airport to the shelter in downtown Guatemala City. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Ana is a pseudonym; the girl's name was changed for this story at her mother's request.

Katya Cengel reported this story with the support of a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (<http://www.internationalreportingproject.org>)

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Migrant kids highlight legacy of violence and inequality toward Maya

by [Katya Cengel](/profiles/c/katya-cengel.html) | October 6, 2015 5:00AM ET

In El Salvador and Honduras, drug and gang violence is to blame for exodus; in Guatemala, poverty is the leading culprit

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Juan, 14, with a cousin outside their home in the village of Xeo. After making it to the U.S., where he spent several months in a shelter in Arizona, he has little to show for his journey north except the debt that his family owes the smuggler. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Editor's note: This is the second of a three-part series on Guatemalan migrant children who are returned to their country after unsuccessfully trying to reach the United States. Part one (<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/10/a-homecoming-racked-with-guilt-and-shame-for-guatemalan-migrant-children.html>) focuses on the guilt and shame migrant children carry with them. Part three (<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/10/guatemalan-children-return-from-mexico-shelters-in-very-bad-shape.html>) looks at children who are apprehended in Mexico before reaching the U.S. border.

XEO, Guatemala — Juan wears the same Abercrombie & Fitch hoodie he wore when he arrived in Guatemala City three days before. It was given to him in the United States. He keeps his other mementos from his northward journey, including a stack of CDs he has no way of playing, in the two-room structure his family once called home in Guatemala's western highlands.

Juan, 14, is the only person still sleeping in the wooden house. The rest of his family — his mother, father and three younger siblings — have all moved in with his maternal grandmother. They say it is because the grandmother was lonely after her husband died. But her husband died over a year ago, and their move was relatively recent.

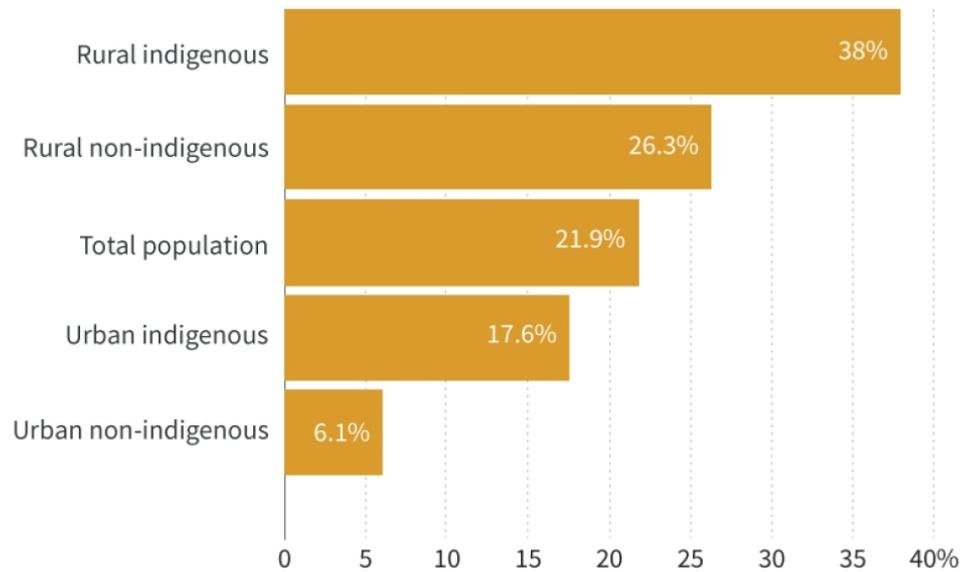
The home isn't much: an uneven dirt floor, wood-plank walls with large gaps, a tin roof. There is no electricity or indoor plumbing. A concrete sink stands outside, an outhouse down the hill. The family used the house and the land it occupies as collateral to borrow 50,000 quetzales (\$6,540) to pay a coyote to smuggle Juan to the U.S. to find work. He left so his father, Sebastian Matón Chavez, would not have to leave every year to work in the sugar cane fields on Guatemala's Pacific coast. Chavez makes 30 quetzales (\$4) a day cleaning his neighbors' cornfields and 1,400 quetzales (\$180) a month when he works in the sugar cane fields.

Juan was apprehended near the Mexico-U.S. border and sent to a shelter in Arizona. Now he is back in Xeo, a mountain community of about 300 people in the Guatemalan department of Quiché in the western highlands. He has nothing to show for the six months he was away but a bag full of braided bracelets he learned to make at the Arizona shelter, a baseball he doesn't know how to throw and a debt he has no way of repaying.

Child migrants from Central America's Northern Triangle — El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — made headlines last year when more than 50,000 were apprehended in the U.S. In El Salvador and Honduras, gang and drug trafficking violence is largely blamed for the exodus of children. In Guatemala, extreme poverty is the leading culprit.

And it's a poverty that disproportionately affects the country's long-persecuted indigenous population, of which the majority of the children migrating to the U.S. are a part.

Maya make up about 40 percent of Guatemala's population but account for less than a quarter of the country's income and consumption. The Maya literacy rate is 60 percent, compared with 87 percent for the rest of the country. In the largely indigenous western highlands, three-quarters of the population is living in poverty; 67 percent of children under 5 are chronically malnourished.



Percentage of Guatemalan population earning less than \$1 a day. *Source: UNDP Guatemala Human Development Report 2005*

Most of those killed during the country's 36-year civil war were Maya — 83 percent, according to a 1999 report by the U.N.-backed Commission for Historical Clarification. The commission cited U.S. involvement as contributing to human rights violations. The signing of peace accords in 1996 ensured on paper the rights of indigenous communities, but infrastructure and investment in predominantly indigenous regions, especially in the western highlands, remains lacking.

Once back home, the children are confronted not only with the forces that drove them to migrate in the first place but also with the trauma of the journey and return. There is the debt they owe their smugglers and the guilt they feel for failing.



Members of Juan's family — including his mother, Jacinta Santiago Brito, center, 35, and his grandmothers, Petrona Chavez and Magdalena Brito — in the kitchen of their home. They identify as Ixil, one of Guatemala's many indigenous peoples, which account for about 40 percent of the country's population. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

It is a little after 6 a.m., and Juan's family is gathered around a fire in his grandmother's kitchen. The house is smoky, dark and as simple as the one in which Juan sleeps 50 feet away. He is awake now but not at breakfast. He hasn't been at breakfast with the family since he returned.

His two youngest siblings — Pedro, 7, and Magdalena, 10 — grab a few meatless tamales and head to school. Petrona, 13, stays behind. She has finished sixth grade. The community school doesn't go any higher. The closest seventh grade is a two-hour walk each way, something Juan did before he headed north. He hoped to work and live in Miami with his mother's cousins. Unlike the rest of his family, Juan speaks some English now, and his Spanish is much improved — something that is not lost on his mother, Jacinta Santiago Brito.

“He changed. Now he doesn't seem like my son. He seems like he's Guatemalan,” she said.

They may live in Guatemala, but the family identify as Ixil, one of the many indigenous peoples accounting for about 40 percent of Guatemala's population.

In the early 1980s the Guatemalan army, under the pretext that the Ixil were collaborating with the rebel guerrillas, burned Ixil villages and massacred residents. Guerrilla combatants did the same, although to a lesser extent. The massacres resulted in a third of the Ixil being exterminated, according to the prosecution in the 2013 genocide trial of retired Guatemalan army Gen. Efraim Rios Montt.

Juan's grandfather, after whom Juan was named, survived the massacres by hiding in the forests but died of fever at the age of 40. His widow, Petrona Chavez Ijom, is now in her 60s or 70s — no one is quite sure. She has outlived two husbands and two of her children. The first time the army destroyed her home was in 1982. They cut the cornfields, shot the family cow and burned everything else. The family fled to the mountains. They built another house. The army burned it. They moved on.

“For two years we didn't have food or clothes or anything,” said Ijom.

In 1984 they were captured and taken to a village run by the military, where they remained prisoners for 10 years. Two of Ijom's sons died of starvation. Juan's father was 13 when they moved to where they live now, a community founded by other refugees. He is 33 and cannot read or write. “I've never been to school one day, because my father was so intimidated by the conflict, by the war,” said Chavez.



Juan in his bedroom in Xeo, where the nearest school for him to attend is a two-hour walk away. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

His wife, Juan's mother, 35, is also illiterate. Her father didn't send her or her sisters to school because he needed them to help him in the fields. “Our dad would tell us if we don't go to work we're going to die of starvation, so we all went to work with him,” she said.

They are safer now. But the legacy of violence and inequality lingers. Although the signing of peace accords in 1996 guaranteed the rights of indigenous communities on paper, infrastructure and investment in predominantly indigenous regions remains lacking.

In Xeo the government gives each teacher 220 quetzales (\$28.50) a year to pay for paper, markers and other supplies, said third-grade teacher Sebastian Herrera Terraza. “But 500 pages of white paper is 40 quetzales (\$5),” he said.

Teachers receive an additional 55 quetzales (\$7) per student for books, glue, scissors and other materials. It is never enough. There is no secondary school, which doesn’t matter much because for every 10 kids who start primary school, only five complete sixth grade. The rest are sent to work in the cornfields with their parents, making about 30 quetzales (\$4) a day.

Juan and his family survive mainly on the corn they grow. They wrap meatless tamales in corn husks, cook water and corn to make a drink known as *atol* and make the traditional dish *boxbol* with cornmeal and squash leaves. Now that Juan is home, he works in the fields with his father, traversing the small footpaths that wind their way around the green mountains. In the morning, a mist covers the mountains. In the evening, they sparkle with the remnants of the afternoon rain. At night, the barking dogs remind Juan of the time he spent crossing the border.

They bark, he said, “the same way the coyotes do in the desert.”



In the house where no one but Juan lives, there is a brochure from Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), an American organization Juan learned about in the Arizona shelter. The pamphlet states that someone will meet returning children at the airport in Guatemala. Juan waited, but no one from the group was at the

airport to meet him. He was taken to a government-run shelter in Guatemala City, and his parents were notified to take him.

Now he waits for the other things he said the organization promised him: help finding a job and a scholarship to continue school. KIND and its current partner organization in Guatemala, Colectivo Vida Digna, said that a representative from Colectivo Vida Digna met Juan’s parents at the shelter in Guatemala City, took them to lunch and gave them 300 quetzales (\$39) to pay for a hotel for the

night. The representative talked to Juan briefly, but Juan does not remember the conversation. The representative has called the family several times since, promising to visit soon. Juan and his father both have cellphones, which they charge by paying two quetzales (\$.25) to use a neighbor's solar panel.

A month after Juan's return to Xeo, Colectivo Vida Digna paid a visit. It gave the family food, which was gone within two weeks, and another 300 quetzales (\$39), Juan said. Colectivo Vida Digna called later and informed Juan that they had arranged for him to live at their headquarters in Quetzaltenango while he studies carpentry and attends school, Juan said.

Lisa Frydman, KIND's director of regional policy and initiatives, said in an email that KIND will repay Juan's parents for their transportation costs to the shelter. The group planned to do so recently but was prevented from reaching the region because of political unrest.

KIND and Colectivo Vida Digna would not discuss how they planned to help Juan specifically, citing privacy concerns. Their general work focuses on family reunification, cultural support services, education and training. Colectivo Vida Digna holds workshops on Maya culture but not in Nebaj, the closest substantial city to Juan, which is a two-hour walk plus a bus ride from his home.

Dennis Stinchcomb, the program manager of the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University, questioned the reach and impact of KIND's Guatemalan child return and reintegration program.

"KIND, as great as the work they are doing is, they just are a lot of publicity more than actual what they're doing," he said. "If you're only reaching 6 percent of deportees with your services, then you're really not solving the problem."

According to a statement by Philip T. Miller, the assistant director for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) field operations enforcement and removal operations, 2,347 unaccompanied children have been repatriated to Guatemala since 2012. KIND says it has helped 127 children since 2010. KIND would not provide Al Jazeera access to its clients.



Juan, far right, in his family's cornfield, with, from left, his sister Petrona, 13; father, Sebastian Matón Chavez, 33; and mother, Jacinta Santiago Brito. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

In recent years, the majority of U.S. government assistance to the region has come through the Central American Regional Security Initiative, mostly funding the strengthening of law enforcement and judicial capabilities, according to a report co-written by Stinchcomb.

A \$1 billion proposed plan, the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, included in President Barack Obama's 2016 budget request, has been criticized for catering to large businesses, local elites and U.S.-owned corporations. There have been smaller, more focused funding efforts: The U.S. Agency for International Development has helped fund a violence prevention program and work done by the International Organization for Migration and World Vision at Guatemalan shelters. There is also a new refugee-processing program (<http://www.uscis.gov/CAM>) for minors in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Other organizations have tried to fill the gap, including Asociación Pop No'j (<http://asociacionpopnoj.blogspot.com/>) and Cafe RED (<http://desgua.org/initiatives/cafe-r-e-d/>), which focus on empowering returning migrants and potential migrants by providing them with platforms to voice their concerns, and Cafe RED also offers culinary training.

Technical training was the inspiration behind four planned government centers devoted to returning child migrants. The first, in the department of Solola, opened in February. The program is under Guatemala's Secretariat of Social Welfare. With the recent resignation of the president and a runoff election to replace him scheduled for Oct. 25, the program's future is unclear.

Even now, government support is fickle. The center in Solola, Centro de Formacion "Quedate" ("Stay" Training Center), offers classes on subjects like jewelry making, computer literacy and how to be a tour guide. But the government has not funded supplies. So the English classes are conducted without books, and the children are told to buy their own materials for jewelry making, said Lesvi Manchame, a psychologist at the center. Nor did the government fund transportation for the children, making it extremely difficult for many to reach the center.

"There is a specific budget for this on paper, but we don't have funds to execute it," said Manchame.

In five months, 185 children have visited the center, but many do so irregularly because of transportation issues and lack of support from family members who would prefer they spend their time generating immediate income, said Manchame.

The majority of those children, about 70 percent, are at risk of migrating, not those who have migrated and returned, said Timoteo Perez, a social worker at the center. Returnees are harder to reach. "For example, I went to visit a boy today who came before, but he had already gone to the U.S.," he said.



Juan with his family at their home. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Adan returned to Guatemala on the same airplane as Juan and is already planning to go back to the United States. Juan is more tentative.

In the evening, standing underneath the orange tree in which the family chickens sleep, Juan mentions having to carry a box of eggs across Mexico for five days. The men who gave him the eggs had large guns. He later learned he was actually carrying marijuana.

“I was scared. I almost cried because I didn’t want to carry it,” he said. “I refused, but they made me.”

He didn’t tell his social worker in the U.S. or the psychologist at the Guatemala City shelter.

“They don’t ask nothing, so I don’t say it,” he explained.

Intimate things that are difficult to talk about happen on the journey, said Solórzano of the Pastoral Care of Migrants. To get the children to open up, you need to spend time with them and develop trust, she said, something that isn’t possible during the rapid reception process. Although the Secretariat of Social Welfare has 16 suboffices throughout the country, its head, Raquel Vielman de Alcazar, admits that it cannot follow up with everyone.

In addition to being vulnerable to human trafficking, gang recruitment, extortion and other forms of violence, these youths are often ostracized. There is a common belief that those who are sent back are criminals and must have done something wrong aside from simply entering a country without authorization, said Alejandra Pamela Argueta, one of the authors of a Wilson Center report (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-realities-returning-home-youth-repatriation-guatemala>) on repatriated youth. “The people in the Guatemalan community are very skeptical as to why you returned, like ‘What happened?’” she said.

For women and girls, it can be even worse. Rape and assault are commonplace on the journey. Mateo Lucas Alonzo, a migration expert with Asociación Pop No’j, said that through research conducted in one area, they found there was an issue of “rejection of women because they already know she has probably been raped.”

A week after Ana returned home to the department of Huehuetenango in the western highlands, she had yet to leave the house for more than a few minutes. (Ana’s name has been changed at her mother’s request.) “There are many neighbors that gather now and look for me,” she said.

So she stays in the one-room home above a cemetery that she shares with a mute father and a frightened mother in San Mateo Ixtatán. The family belongs to the Maya Chuj group, and her mother wears a traditional skirt and top. Ana wears jeans. Her mother sold Ana’s traditional outfit before Ana left in order to buy her modern clothes for the journey. Migrants are advised to hide their indigenous background and are coached to speak Spanish with a Mexican accent. Her coyote cut Ana’s hair.



Ana’s uncle, who lives nearby, does most of the talking. The plan was for Ana, 15, to get work in a chicken-processing plant in Atlanta, where one of her aunts lives. Instead, she spent five months in a shelter in Arizona.

“There are no jobs here. Presidents have never given anything,” said her uncle. “The money the government receives they put in their pockets.”

Ana, 15, at her home in San Mateo Ixtatán, with her mother and dog. Ana was detained for seven months at a shelter in Arizona before being sent back to Guatemala. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

A dog eats the corn left out for the chickens. Its name is Jule, like the playdough dog Ana made while in custody at the airport in Guatemala City with Juan and Adan the week before.

“That’s why we [children] think to go there,” added Ana. “We can get jobs there. Here we don’t get anything.”

A local lawyer, Diego Félix Pablo Alonzo, jokes among his friends that “San Mateo Ixtatán is without children now.” Last year during the summer, he said, he received at least one request a day to help families whose children had migrated alone to the U.S.

When Ana’s mother learned her daughter was apprehended near the U.S.-Mexico border, she was afraid she would never see her again. “Day and night, I’m thinking about her,” she said. “She was alive, but I didn’t know where.”

Now that Ana is back, her mother says she will send Ana to school. Ana finished sixth grade before she left. But then there is the debt they owe the coyote. They would not say how much it is, only that they believe it will take several years for them to pay it. Debt for the journey is something many face and something no government agency or nongovernment group adequately addresses. It is the reason many continue to travel to the U.S., despite the risk. There are few opportunities for them to earn that kind of money in Guatemala, where the gross national income per capita in 2012 was less than \$3,250, according to U.N. data.

Ana’s mother makes 10 to 20 quetzales (\$1.30-\$2.60) a day washing other people’s clothes. Her father is too ill to work.

On her first trip out since being back, Ana ordered a hamburger and rated it “not quite as good as in the U.S.” On the walk home, her mother noted the newly constructed houses built with money sent back by Guatemalans working in the U.S. A neighbor stopped to ask why Ana was back so soon. It is a common question, and Ana’s mother had a ready reply.

“It was her fate not to stay in the U.S.,” she said.

Katya Cengel reported this story with the support of a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (<http://www.internationalreportingproject.org/>).

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Guatemalan children return from Mexico shelters 'in very bad shape'

by [Katya Cengel](/profiles/c/katya-cengel.html) | October 7, 2015 5:00AM ET

Researchers and social workers complain of overcrowding, poor food and vulnerability to abuse

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Marta, age 14, sits in her bedroom in her grandparents' house in Aguacatán, Huehuetenango, in the western highlands of Guatemala. She and her younger brother Sergio were trying to get to Atlanta, where their parents and two younger siblings live, when Mexican federal police removed them from the bus they were riding. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Editor's note: This is the last of a three-part series on Guatemalan migrant children who are returned to their country after unsuccessfully trying to reach the United States. Part one (<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/10/a-homecoming-racked-with-guilt-and-shame->

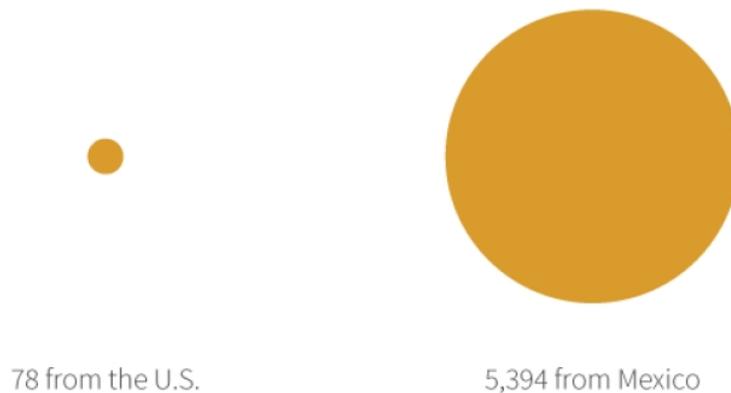
for-guatemalan-migrant-children.html) focuses on the guilt and shame migrant children carry with them, and part two (<http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/10/migrant-kids-highlight-legacy-of-violence-and-inequality-toward-maya.html>) on the disproportionate impact of migration on Guatemala's indigenous communities.

GUATEMALA CITY — The reunion lasts only a few minutes — just long enough for Marta to bury her face in her grandfather's chest and for her grandmother to shed several tears. Then Marta and her brother, Sergio, who are in government custody, are ushered away. No words are spoken. None are necessary. The children are back in Guatemala. They failed to reach their parents in the United States. They didn't get past Mexico.

Marta, 14, and Sergio, 12, were far enough north that they were transported back from Mexico by plane instead of by bus. They are reunited with their grandparents in the Guatemalan capital, at one of two government shelters for children returning from migrations north.

The Guatemala City shelter receives children returning from both the U.S. and Mexico; this summer the vast majority came from Mexico.

According to official numbers provided by Guatemala's National Institute of Statistics, 5,394 Guatemalan children were returned



Guatemalan minors returned from the U.S. and Mexico between January and June 2015.
Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala

from Mexico during the first six months of 2015 compared with 78 Guatemalan children returned from the U.S. While the numbers vary depending on who is reporting them, the trend is consistent. According to Raquel Vielman de Alcazar, the head of Guatemala's Secretariat of Social Welfare, 53 children have been returned from the U.S. this year, compared with 4,453 from Mexico.

Child migrants from Central America's Northern Triangle — El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — made headlines in 2014 when more than 50,000 were apprehended in the U.S. After that summer's surge, Mexico, at the United States' urging, sent thousands of federal police to the border with

Guatemala, increased border and highway checkpoints and cracked down on migrants riding the northbound freight train known as the Beast.

Now the children are being picked up everywhere in Mexico — “from hotels, from taxis, from buses” — said Yuseli Santiago, a psychologist at the Quetzaltenango shelter. Daniella, an administrator there, said, “The [Mexican federal police] are all over, even in the rivers.”

According to the latest U.S. Customs and Border Protection numbers, 26,685 unaccompanied children have been apprehended at the United States’ southwestern border since Oct. 1, 2014, the beginning of fiscal year 2015. That is a drop of more than 50 percent from the same period the previous year. What happens when these children enter the U.S. is well documented. The fate of those who are apprehended in Mexico is less publicized.

Busloads of children now arrive at the second shelter, in Quetzaltenango in the western highlands, three days a week instead of two.

Zulma Garcia, the psychologist in charge of the Guatemala City shelter, said children who arrive from Mexico “usually come in very bad shape.” That, she said, is the big difference between those arriving from Mexico and those from the U.S.

Marta and Sergio were headed to Atlanta, where their parents and two younger siblings live. Marta keeps a picture of her mother, Petronila, on her cellphone. In the photo Petronila holds one of Marta’s younger brothers, a baby boy named Jonathan whom Marta has never met.

Petronila talks to her older children almost daily, but they have no memory of her presence. Their grandparents Gaspar Raymundo Mateo and Paulina Agustin Mendoza raised them after Petronila left to find work in the U.S. a decade ago. And their grandparents are the ones who retrieved them from the Guatemala City shelter.

Sitting in the makeshift courtyard of her adobe home in the department of Huehuetenango a week later, Mendoza said that in Guatemala, “people who have jobs are those who have studies, those who went to school.” Petronila never went to school; only the youngest two of Mendoza’s 12 children received an education. Mendoza, 58, also lacks schooling. She learned Spanish when she was sent to work as a housekeeper in a Spanish-speaking household at the age of 13. Her native language is Chalchiteko. Like the majority of the children who migrate, her grandchildren are Maya.

Indigenous Maya make up about 40 percent of Guatemala’s population



but account for less than a quarter of the country's total income and consumption. During the country's 36-year civil war, 83 percent of those killed were Maya, according to a 1999 report by the U.N.-backed Commission for Historical Clarification. The signing of peace accords in 1996 ensured that the rights of indigenous communities exist on paper, but infrastructure and investment in

Many of the Guatemalan children trying to migrate to the U.S. come from the largely indigenous western highlands, where infrastructure and investment is lacking.

indigenous regions remains lacking. In the largely indigenous western highlands, where Mendoza and her family live, 76 percent of the population lives in poverty, and 67 percent of children under 5 are chronically malnourished. The Maya literacy rate is 60 percent, compared with 87 percent for the rest of the country.

Marta finished sixth grade. There is no seventh grade in their community, so she is no longer in school. Sergio is in school, along with one of Mendoza's younger children, five of whom still live at home. The family survives on the corn, tomato, bean and other crops they grow and sell, all of which have been affected by a regional drought that is now in its second year.

"Because there's no water, we can't really work," said Mateo, who is 62. "Sometimes we have to buy corn."

Mateo is spry, which is good because getting to his house in Tierra Blanca Exchimal requires hiking into a valley and fording a small stream. It is the same community where he grew up and where he has worked as an evangelical preacher for 35 years. He is paid only what parishioners can afford, which isn't much. In 2012 the gross national income per capita in Guatemala was \$3,241.90, according to U.N. data. Petronila paid the 19,000 quetzal (\$2,484) it cost for a coyote to smuggle her two children to the U.S.

Marta remembers a week of taking buses, one after another, maybe 10 in all. The man who smuggled her told her not to talk to her brother and not to sit with him. They had been on the same bus for more than a day when Mexican federal police stopped the driver and ordered the passengers off.

“They were only one night away” from the U.S., said Mendoza.

After spending 15 hours in immigration processing, the children were sent to a Mexican shelter where they were served badly cooked chicken, said Mendoza. Mateo said the children studied during the two weeks they were detained in Mexico. Marta said they played, watched television and ate unfamiliar food, like hamburgers. The hardest part of the journey, she said, “was when they caught us.”



Sergio, age 12, watches TV with his cousins in their grandparents' house in Aguacatán after an unsuccessful attempt at reaching the U.S. His parents, who live in Atlanta, are saving money for another attempt. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Santiago and Daniella Carlos, an administrator at the Quetzaltenango shelter, have heard that the Mexican shelters are so crowded, some children are forced to sleep sitting up. If they are lucky, they are given a mattress to sleep on, said Santiago.

“A lot of them come with stomach problems and with flu because they have been sleeping on the floor,” said Carlos.

“Everything is dirty,” said Santiago. The shelters smell like excrement, she added, the food is awful, and if the kids don’t eat a tortilla at night, they are given it for breakfast the next morning.

The children's belongings, which they are required to hand over, aren't always returned, Santiago continued, especially money and cellphones. She said some children spend as long as two to three months in the shelters. One boy said he was physically abused by Mexican authorities but did not want to follow up after his return to Guatemala. Others suffer abuse at the hands of coyotes and other migrants.

According to research done by the media network Fusion, 80 percent of Central American women and girls are raped on the journey. The communications director for Mexico's National Migration Institute would not answer Al Jazeera's questions over the phone or by email, despite repeated requests.

Children interviewed for a report by Georgetown University Law School's Human Rights Institute echoed the Guatemalan staff members' complaints of overcrowding, poor food and vulnerability to violence and abuse. The report also faulted Mexico for subjecting children to long and arbitrary periods of detention. More critical, it found that Mexican officials often fail to screen for international protection needs. This is backed by the accounts of parents, shelter workers in Guatemala and a report by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which found that in Mexico, migrant children do not receive adequate screening to determine if they qualify for humanitarian relief. The report concludes that the Guatemalan consular offices in Mexico also do little in this regard because of limited resources.

"Neither Mexican migration authorities nor consular posts are thoroughly examining each case and providing adequate measure of protection for children and adolescents," the Wilson Center report states.



If they make it to the U.S. and secure legal representation from a private attorney, through an organization that provides legal assistance to unaccompanied children (sometimes with federal support), or in some cases with the help of local government, unaccompanied minors have about a 50 percent chance of being allowed to stay, according to a review

A statue representing a young migrant stands alongside the road in Huehuetenango in the western highlands, home to many Guatemalan

Clearinghouse. About 90 percent of the unaccompanied minors from Central America held in a shelter in fiscal year 2015 were released to a sponsor while their cases were being decided, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Those who are not granted relief are not a high priority for immigration officials and anecdotally it is believed many stay.

But for those who don't make it as far north as the U.S.-Mexico border, the U.S. is not involved. A U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement adviser to Latin America said that any migration issues between two sovereign countries — Mexico and Guatemala in this case — are handled by those countries.

Since last year's surge, efforts have been made to more humanely process children and families. The U.S. Agency for International Development has helped fund work done by the International Organization for Migration to upgrade reception centers in all three Northern Triangle countries.

Also, there is a new U.S. In-Country Refugee/Parole Processing for Minors in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala program. To qualify for it, children must have a parent lawfully present in the U.S.

As of August 2015 there were 59 Guatemalan applicants, according to a Migration Policy Report.



Marta keeps photos of her parents in the U.S. She speaks to her mother regularly, but has no memory of being with her in person. Daniele Volpe for Al Jazeera America

Miguel Angel Oxlaj holds his baseball cap in his hands. It is Monday afternoon in July, and he is at the Quetzaltenango shelter waiting to pick up his 16-year-old son, Miguel Antonio. The fourth of seven children in a Quiche Maya family, Miguel Antonio finished high school last year and left two weeks ago to try to find work in the U.S.

“God knows what he’s going to do now, because he wants a stable job and there’s nothing [here],” said Oxlaj, who lives in the department of Quiche.

Mari Josefina Rodriguez Chilel is also waiting for her son, Wilson, 17. He was traveling with a fake Mexican birth certificate and was gone only a week. He was headed to the U.S. to look for work to help his family, whose San Marcos home was damaged in a landslide four years ago.

“He’s a scared guy. I don’t know how he’s going to react now,” said Chilel, who lost her oldest child in a car accident. “He’s never gone anywhere.”

Santos Gomez Felipe took his wife and brother-in-law with him to pick up his daughter Angelica because he does not know how to read or write. They are Mam Maya, from a small community near San Marcos whose name means “place of armadillos and snakes.”

Angelica is 15. She left for the U.S. a week ago because she didn't want to work in the fields and heard there was factory work in the U.S. Felipe has already lost two children (boys who died in infancy) and worried about her, since as a girl she was more vulnerable to abuse. The other parents were also concerned about their children.

"They're our children," said Chilel. "We worry for them regardless of the sex."

The children arrive on a Pullman bus a little after 5 p.m. A government representative lectures Chilel and the other parents about the risks of migration, advising them to wait for an appropriate time to travel to the U.S. It is raining, and the children are eating a dinner of chicken, rice and cooked carrots in a separate area.

The children are given psychological evaluations and then are interviewed with their parents by a representative from Guatemala's attorney general (*procuraduría general de la nación*, or PGN). The shelter is run by the Secretariat of Social Welfare, but the PGN is legally responsible for the children. Santiago admits that because of the volume of children — the shelter receives about 180 a week — the psychological interviews last only three to seven minutes. PGN interviews last five to eight minutes. Just two or three children are removed from their homes each year because of abuse, said Algedy Morales, the PGN delegate for Quetzaltenango.

The Quetzaltenango shelter is being remodeled, and the temporary shelter is barely large enough for the chaos that ensues when a busload of 40 children arrive. Backpacks are stacked up in the entry hall, family members crammed into a front room, interviews conducted wherever there is space. In the kitchen a girl in jean shorts and sandals sits across from a PGN representative. Her father sits next to her. The girl, who is 16, does not have a birth certificate. The woman from the PGN briefly scolds the girl's father for denying his daughter the right to her birth certificate. Then she reads from a form, asking where they live, where the girl's mother is and what grade the girl reached.

When the PGN representative learns the answer to the last question — the girl has never been to school — the representative admonishes the father once again for denying his daughter another right, the right to an education. Then she asks the girl if there was a specific reason she left home, a problem that she was trying to escape. The girl shakes her head no. The father signs a form, the girl gives a thumbprint. The woman tells the girl, "You know your rights now. You better go to school." Then she hands her a green exit ticket and tells her she is free to leave.

By 8 p.m., most of the families have cycled through the process and left. The shelter was able to notify only 15 families in advance. The rest arrived because their children called them. Others will meet them in the morning. At least one child will remain, a friendly boy from the department of Petén whose parents aren't picking him up. He has been at the shelter for several days and in a few

days will be taken to a government home near Guatemala City. He will be 18 soon, at which point, Carlos said, “they are going to give him his documents and release him.” It is the boy’s second stay at the shelter.

Santiago said 30 to 40 percent of the children who arrive at the shelter have been there before. One child has been there four times, others two or three. Some coyotes let the children try until they get through, she said. Others offer three tries for a single price. The Secretariat of Social Welfare attempted to study the children who return, but when it tried to follow up with them, it found many were already in the U.S., said Carlos.

“They don’t stay,” Santiago said.

Marta and Sergio’s parents are eager to see their children and are saving money for another attempt. The children, Mateo said, “are going to go again.”

Katya Cengel reported this story with the support of a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (<http://www.internationalreportingproject.org/>)

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