



Crisis on the Border:

Refugees and Undocumented Immigrants

Stuart A. Kallen



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CHAPTER ONE

The Caravan from Central America

Edith Cruz was hoping to make her life a little easier when she opened a small tortilla-baking business with her cousin in central Honduras on October 12, 2018. But on her first day in business, Cruz was threatened by gang members. The men said they would kill her and her cousin unless they handed over half their daily profits. After the confrontation, Cruz was viewing Facebook on her cell phone when she saw a post: “An avalanche of Hondurans is preparing to leave in a caravan to the United States. Share this!”⁸

Within three hours Cruz had packed her bags and was meeting up with dozens of others gathered at the local bus station. Although Cruz learned about the caravan on Facebook, others had seen similar messages in a Whatsapp chat group named Caravana Santa Ana. The group advised travelers to pack two pairs of pants, three shirts, a sweater, water, and medicine. The caravan message went viral, spreading through Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, three countries known collectively as the Northern Triangle. Within a few days large groups of people were assembling at bus terminals, town squares, and other central meeting points with plans to band together and walk north through Mexico to the US border.

“An avalanche of Hondurans is preparing to leave in a caravan to the United States. Share this!”⁸

—Facebook post

Although some took buses or managed to catch rides on passing trucks, most walked. Mothers pushed strollers with infants over potholed roads while fathers carried small children on their shoulders. According to news reports, many people in the caravan walked ten hours a day. Torrential rainstorms and temperatures above 90°F (32°C) often slowed the group's progress.

Thick bushes along the roadside served as latrines for caravan migrants. Tree-lined streams gave travelers a place to wash while seeking temporary shelter from the broiling sun. Dehydration was common and food was scarce. Many lived on a single daily meal of beans, rice, and an occasional egg. When the migrants reached villages at nightfall, they slept on sidewalks or bedded down on the floors of crowded local schoolhouses, abandoned

The Migrant Caravan Route, 2018



warehouses, or churches. Maria Lourdes Aguilar, who traveled with her two daughters and four grandchildren under the age of ten, described the conditions: “On this trip you do not eat well, you do not sleep well, you never rest.”⁹

Coming Together for Protection

The caravan soon swelled to more than five thousand people. Former Honduran legislator and radio show host Bartolo Fuentes said this number was roughly equal to the number of migrants who leave Honduras every month. Fuentes explained why so many were eager to join the group: “These people who have normally migrated, hidden, day after day, had decided to come together and travel together to protect themselves.”¹⁰ Fuentes was referring to the notoriously dangerous journey many migrants make through Mexico to reach the United States. Many of those who have traveled north alone or in small groups have been robbed or assaulted. They have been forced to pay bribes to corrupt officials along the way and have been overcharged by merchants for basic necessities.

In hopes of avoiding these problems, many migrants pay human smugglers called coyotes around \$4,000 for safe passage, according to the Mexican Migration Project. Hiring a coyote is no guarantee of safety or even of reaching one’s destination, however. Many migrants have lost all of their money to coyotes who have abandoned them along the way. Others have been injured or killed in their trek toward the border despite hiring coyotes to escort them safely to the United States.

Migrants are keenly aware of these dangers, which could explain why the caravans attracted so many people in such a short period of time. As a twenty-three-year-old mother named Carolina explained, “I was going to pay a coyote to take me

“These people who have normally migrated, hidden, day after day, had decided to come together and travel together to protect themselves.”¹⁰

—Bartolo Fuentes, Honduran radio host

Violence in the Northern Triangle

Every year tens of thousands of people flee their homes in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These nations are ranked as some of the most violent countries in the world that are not actively engaged in war. The murder rate in this region, known as the Northern Triangle, is more than ten times higher, on average, than in the United States. Citizens in the Northern Triangle face daily violence from gangs, drug traffickers, carjackers, kidnappers, and extortionists.

Northern Triangle citizens have nowhere to turn for protection. Due to insufficient funding for law enforcement agencies, nineteen out of twenty murders remain unsolved. And citizens fear authorities as much as they do criminals. Police and soldiers are often corrupt, and some even work for drug cartels.

Women are particularly vulnerable and face a startling degree of violence from gangs, including sexual assault. According to a United Nations (UN) report, 64 percent of women in the region cited threats or attacks as their primary reason for leaving their communities. In a 2018 interview, one Salvadoran woman named Sandra described her situation: “The father of my [two] children is a gangster. He beat me a lot, and after I left him, he tried to kill us all.” Sandra’s husband was imprisoned for his gang activities, but other members of his gang threatened to kill her. When Sandra heard of the migrant caravan, she knew she had to take a chance and seek asylum in the United States.

Quoted in John Washington and Tracie Williams, “Portraits from the Exodus,” *Nation*, December 13, 2018. www.thenation.com.

out of Honduras, but when the caravan happened it seemed so much easier.”¹¹

Dreams of a Better Life

Although there are no exact figures, organizations that work with the migrants say the majority were from Honduras. The others came mostly from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. At least twenty-three hundred were children, according to figures compiled by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Whether they came from small villages, medium-sized towns, or big cities, most

migrants shared similar harrowing stories of poverty, corruption, violence, and political repression.

Thirty-three-year-old Glenda Escobar left San Pedro Sula, Honduras—one of the most violent cities in the world—with her two youngest children, boys who were five and eight years old. Escobar had plans to attend college, but at age eighteen she was kidnapped and raped by a man she knew. Her abductor was a policeman and gang member. Escobar escaped but was pregnant. After giving birth to a daughter, Escobar married a man who fathered her two youngest sons. But he was physically abusive to her and the boys. Escobar was working as a cook and seamstress when she heard about the caravan. She quickly packed

Glenda Escobar, accompanied by two of her children, makes her way toward what she hopes will be a new life in Los Angeles. She says she fled violence and abuse in her native Honduras.



SOURCE NOTES

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ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

125 Broad St., 18th Floor
New York, NY 10004
website: www.aclu.org

The ACLU works in the courts, legislatures, and communities to preserve and defend the individual rights and liberties that the US Constitution guarantees to everyone in the country. The ACLU's Immigrants' Rights Project addresses immigration issues that include workplace rights, detention and deportation, and discrimination.

Center for Immigration Studies (CIS)

1629 K St. NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20006
website: www.cis.org

The CIS is an independent, nonprofit research organization that publishes a variety of reports and articles that examine the social, economic, environmental, security, and economic consequences of both legal and illegal immigration. The CIS believes that debates informed by objective data will lead to better immigration policies.

Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR)

25 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 330
Washington, DC 20001
website: www.fairus.org

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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