

Unaccompanied Child Migrants

The crossroads of unattended minors in Inter-America, between the politicization of social reinsertion and the crudeness of violent migration.

The Inter-America Preferential Option Commission is a network of Salesian presences and services in 18 countries from Canada to Bolivia, focusing on children, adolescents and young people in high-risk situations. Each year various meetings are held in the region and, since 2011, the General Superior of our Congregation established a specialized commission to address the issue of unaccompanied migrant minors in our network. It was explicitly requested to raise awareness amongst all Salesians of the Region of the migratory phenomenon, as well as to prepare a regional project in response to this reality.

Since then, the networking team has begun integrating this worrying reality into their articulation and work exercises. A first meeting in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in October 2014, was tasked with producing a strategic plan. This plan included, among other things, these commitments: to form an international community comprising a regional team for the care of unaccompanied migrant children in the Inter-American Region; to develop on the US-Mexico border a presence made up of members from two North American Salesian jurisdictions; to form an intervention corridor along the border to facilitate our response; to strengthen significant Salesian presences in Central America, linked to the issue of child and juvenile neglect.

The last meeting of the Inter-America Preferential Option held in Los Angeles, California, in October 2016, focused on the reality of unaccompanied minors. There, the progress of the regional commitment was focused on migrant minors from the Northern Triangle Region of Central America to the United States and its transit through Mexico. What follows is a summary of the data and observations shared by participants from across the Inter-America region.

The United States is the main destination for child migrants in the region. Much of them hope to be admitted on humanitarian grounds. Noteworthy is the decline of minors attempting to enter the USA from Mexico. This decline is due largely to three reasons. First is the prohibitive cost of smugglers (“coyotes”), whose assistance is necessary for the illegal crossing. Secondly, Mexican nationals are less likely than other nationals to be granted refugee or humanitarian status. Thirdly, organized crime is omnipresent. This presence makes both the north-south corridor of Mexico and the east-west Mexico-United States corridor very dangerous, especially for minors falling prey to human trafficking.

Child migrants from the countries that make up the Central North Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador) face unfavorable conditions in their transit to the United States through Mexico. According to the National Immigration Institute of Mexico, the number of foreign child migrants intercepted by Mexican immigration authorities increased from 4,160 in 2001, to 9,630 in 2013. From January to August 2015, the number grew exponentially, to a record 22, 864 cases.

According to statistics, the largest group of child migrants are Guatemalans, representing 48.7%. They are followed by Hondurans at 29.0% and Salvadorans at 20.3%. The remaining 2.0% come from other countries. The clear majority of those traveling unaccompanied by an adult are between 12 and 17 years old.

The causes of this phenomenon are diverse. However, the experiences of our presence in these contexts identify three main causes:

1. - *Economic necessity*. Poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities are so dire that people must leave not simply to seek a better life situation, but to survive and to have some hope of access to new possibilities.

2. - *Violence and insecurity*. Adolescents face a deep security crises where they risk becoming part of cartels and criminal groups, and/or falling victim to them. For example, failure to join the gang could mean your family will be killed.

3. - *Family unification*. many child migrants travel without adult relative supervision because their parents may already be living as “undocumented” in the United States. The desire or need to unite with their relatives lead them to make their way to them through the “coyotes”. The increase of child migrants also increases the likelihood of human exploitation and trafficking for sexual and labor purposes.

These situations, which assail young people, are provoked by one underlying problem: they are unattended youth. They are unattended outside of prison, and they remain unattended when they go to prison. Because they are unattended minors, they get caught up in a spiral of violence. They are pressured to join gangs. As members of a gang which they did not have a choice about joining, they commit crimes. When they are apprehended, they become part of yet another unattended group of youths in our juvenile detention centers. This tragic cycle betrays too many minors who already were unattended because of having had to leave their family and community of origin.

We can make some observations about the complex youth reality in our region. Not only does the neglect of minors expose them to great risk, it also perpetuates the self-fulfilling prophecy about poor Latino youth. They become stigmatized and labelled for being criminals, a situation which could have been prevented had they received the attention they need, the attention they deserved. Already suffering neglect, the youth face two choices, neither of which is satisfactory: either they fall prey to criminal behaviour or become wards of the state in institutions that are unable to attend to their needs. Therefore, they either become criminals, or become entangled in situations that bring them into conflict with the law, or they are wrongly labelled “criminal” simply because they are migrants.

Mobility among underserved minors happens at every level. Not only does it occur from south to north and from periphery to center, but also within their own cities. Within prison systems; through forced displacement due to conflicts between gangs; to escape violence in their own neighborhoods; because of incarceration; to comply with monitoring measures which, require minors to check in weekly with police or participate in social reinsertion programs; or because they have dropped out of school or are fleeing from their family.

Minors, when treated as criminal offenders, become objects of an institutional process of conditioning that seeks to regulate their behavior. In detention centers, they are subjected to procedures of collective coercion to make them “docile and useful” to society. The perversion of this model is that it considers the minor as the sole, isolated subject responsible for their complicate situation; it exonerates “society” from any responsibility for the child’s problems, as if society were a perfectly healthy, just and ordered entity.

Within the prison system, discipline is pretentiously touted as the vector axis for “reinserting” prisoners back into society. Within immigration policy, deportation is the weapon of choice; deportation is considered, erroneously, to be a vector axis for undocumented people to be reintegrated within their society of origin. Both strategies – discipline and deportation - fail. Discipline, even where is successfully modifies one’s behaviour, will never address the causes that need to be prevented if we want to keep minors out of prison. Deportation, while answering to protectionist concerns in the host community, will never generate alternatives to the misery that drives people from their home country.

Lamentably, the most common victim of a failed strategy of reintegration by discipline or deportation, are unaccompanied minors. This is an egregious violation of their human rights.

Children have the right to be cared for. Since we live in a society that monitors and punishes those who do not fit into established hegemonic categories, it is unjust and ill-advised that preventive measures are not advanced as vigorously as are coercive measures. An adequate response to the needs of underserved minors must include preventive measures that will allow children to pursue better life alternatives before their young lives are derailed.

To “attend to youth” means to elicit conditions in the very context where young people are growing, so that every child is guaranteed the minimal support they need to build healthy relationships within solid social structures where they can write their own story. This is the great challenge that Salesian works and services have outlined in the Inter-America Region as a network of Preferential Option.

Juan Carlos Quirarte Méndez

Salesian Priest

Doctor in Social Anthropology

Director of Desarrollo Juvenil del Norte A.C. Salesian Presence in Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua, México

Network Coordinador of the Inter-America Preferencial Option

Anti-Homicide Commission Coordinator of the Security and Justice Bureau in Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua. México

Coordinator of the support for minors of the Center for Social Reintegration of Juvenile Offenders No.3 (jail for minors) in Juárez, Chihuahua, México.