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**From Hopscotch to Border Hopping: Assessing the Role of Education as a Catalyst for Child Migration from the Northern Triangle**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Political Science and International Studies

By  
Taylor Close

Under the mentorship of Dr. William Biebuyck

**ABSTRACT**

This paper will evaluate forced child migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, more commonly known as Central America's Northern Triangle. More specifically, the research questions how the denial of primary education may constitute a human rights violation that catalyzes forced child migration from the region. If the denial of education constitutes a human rights abuse, then current classifications and management of child migrants at the border can no longer be deemed sufficient or legal. Ultimately, if the denial of primary education represents a significant human rights abuse and cause of forced child migration, United States immigration policy must be altered in order to conform to international law, as well as provide security and sanctuary to these vulnerable 'refugees'. This project will also closely examine how corruption, gang violence, and economic stagnation - other 'push' factors for child migration - are intertwined with failing schools and the denial of education at the domestic level.

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## **Introduction**

Once back “home”, their governments welcome them with open arms but closed minds - either uncaring or oblivious to what prompted them to flee. Authorities in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have spoken to us with enormous pride about how quickly they are able to “process” hundreds of deportees each day. The trouble is, no one is taking the time to find out exactly why they were so desperate to leave home in the first place and why most prefer to make the perilous journey again and again rather than stay home. (Guevara-Rosas 2016).

Latin America, and more specifically the Northern Triangle of Central America, suffers from an unbalanced migratory pattern. The three countries that make up the Northern Triangle of Central America, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, continually lose native citizens. This region experiences unbalanced migratory patterns due to an array of push factors that force native residents to leave their homes and cross national borders.

Without addressing these push factors, migration will continue apace, as it is seen as the sole path to survival. The current standard of life and human security levels in the Northern Triangle are not sufficient to its people’s needs. Consequently, until the standard of living is raised enough to eradicate these “push factors,” migration will continue. The term “push factor” is used to denote any circumstances or factors within the country of origin that have motivated the migrant to migrate elsewhere. Push factors such as economic stagnation, gang and street violence, drug cartels and addiction, family disintegration, lack of education, and governmental corruption all play important roles in pushing people to leave these countries.

The Northern Triangle is known for having high migration numbers to the United States, especially among unaccompanied minors, which serve as the main subject group of this project. There is a large diversity in the classification of migrants from these

countries; while some are applying for standard citizenship, others are applying for asylum and refugee status. However, a catch all classification for migrants from Latin America has become the “economic migrant.” The common use of this classification leads us to question how migrants, specifically children, are classified. The problem lies in the misclassification as economic migrants due to the fact that you cannot be an economic migrant in this scenario. First, children cannot be economic migrants; a child cannot be expected to be held responsible for their financial wellbeing. Second, you cannot be financially successful and stable without some form of primary education. All aspects of life rely on the standards of primary education such as reading and writing. Without that, it is not possible to be economically fluent and independent.

Therefore, if an unaccompanied child migrant experienced a denial of education, the cause of migration would be human rights abuse, and the migrant should not be labeled as an economic migrant. Furthermore, the concern for the migrant shifts from financial to ethical, as a human rights abuse has occurred. It is crucial to remember we are not just talking about all migrants; we are specifically discussing children, not adults, experiencing a lack of education, thus creating a human rights abuse. Thus, the denial of ‘a right to education’ forces us to rethink the relationship between education, economics, and forced migration in the context of unaccompanied child migrants from Central America.

Assuming that we are supporting the link between educational attainment and economic security, should a minor be classified as an economic migrant if they were not given the opportunity to receive a primary education? Or at that point, can a lack of a basic primary education be understood as an indicator of a human rights abuse that is

generating forced child migration? Furthermore, if education can be classified as a catalyst for child migration from this area, how can immigration policy be altered to conform to international law, in terms of classifying and processing child migrants at the United States border for those seeking refugee status or asylum? It should be acknowledged that examining the right to education is an integral part of this project. The importance of education and its presence in the Northern Triangle has been vastly understudied. It is rarely given detailed attention in the available literature as a possible human rights violation. Instead, it is grouped in with the other generic push factors, with no attention paid to the broader personal and socioeconomic implications that it has. Primary education occurs during the early years of life, a period that is integral and crucial in the development of a child into a functioning adult. This structural phase of life demands attention and acknowledgment, for it is being disrupted in the Northern Triangle. More so, a denial of basic and primary education is labeled as a human rights abuse, which in itself radiates importance and the need for international attention.

It is important to note that education is not the only catalyst here. In fact, it is closely linked to the core group of push factors that trigger child migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States: corruption, gang involvement, and economic stagnation. Corruption plays a large role in the allowance of gang involvement at all levels of government, creating a violent environment. This further creates economic stagnation from a lack of available work, as it becomes extremely difficult to find work outside of the gang. Even more so, gangs target schools as recruiting grounds, making it difficult to obtain an education in the first place. All of these push factors are intertwined and overlapping, but the lack of primary education may be the adhesive keeping them all

connected in the experiences of children migrating from the Northern Triangle. In order to fully comprehend what is occurring, this project will investigate how all push factors of migration listed correlate to a lack of basic and primary education, as well as how this phenomenon will affect classification of child migrants at the United States border. This aspect of regional forced migration represents the question and set of experiences that my project will specifically target.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will include academic literature on child migration, push factors of migration from the Northern Triangle, and education in the Northern Triangle region as a human right. Unaccompanied minors and how they are defined, as well as why they are migrating as children in such high numbers from this geographic area will be the focus point. The gang presence in the Northern Triangle will be evaluated, describing how gangs infiltrate the entire country, from small towns, to national governments. And lastly, the idea of education as an internationally declared human right will be reviewed and critically examined. The importance of the possibility of education as a human right must not be overlooked. Human rights violations are occurring, meanwhile United States migration policy is formed to funnel human rights abuses under the catch all term of economic migrant. In reality the human rights abuse that occurs due to a lack of access to free, compulsory, basic education is occurring, thus feeding into the rest of the push factors.



*Unaccompanied Child Migration*

Migration from the Northern Triangle is an issue in and of itself. The question of why migration from this region is so high begs to be answered. It is crucial that we establish the idea that how a migrant is labeled affects not only how they will be treated, but their access to protection. This leads us to the following question: how does a label affect a child migrant and their access to requested protection?

Adding that the migrant is unaccompanied and underage, classifying migrants from the Northern Triangle at the United States border is undoubtedly a confusing process, unless one understands the push factors those children have for migrating alone in the first place. Until then, single motivator theories of migration, which are theories that only view one singular cause of migration, will continue to inform border control policies that fail. Thus, this assigns the majority of migrants as economic migrants, when in fact, there are underlying push factors that complicate the true motives, making asylum and refugee cases seem far simpler than they ultimately are.

Stephen Castles (2003) examines the need for a sociology of exile, displacement and belonging by evaluating theoretical frameworks, topics of study, and methodology in the field of migration studies. He asserts that mixed migration must be understood as a sociological question that allows for interdisciplinary influence. Sociologists must be concerned with forced migration because it impacts social transformation in the contemporary world. Qualitative data is used rather than quantitative, due to the difficulty in accurate quantitative data in areas of conflict. Therefore, data such as ethnographic accounts and a holistic approach is necessary in this type of research. Forced migration has become an integral part of global North-South relationships, and it can no longer be

evaluated as a sequence of separate humanitarian events, but rather a transnational issue. This research adds background information on how to investigate forced migration holistically, which allows my research to then look at my specific area of forced migration without ignoring any push factors.

Castles (2003) further upholds this by arguing that the failure of migration and border control policies proves that “social dynamics” (17) must be understood if a change is to be made. He furthers his point by directly claiming that policy is failing because policy makers are ignoring the social dynamics that directly influence migration and are linked to “broader patterns of social transformation” (26). In relation to child migration from the Northern Triangle, until United States policy makers truly understand these push factors and migratory causes, policy will continue to fail. “The old understanding of refugee situations as a string of unrelated and specific humanitarian emergencies does not stand up to the reality of the early 21st century, in which forced migrations have become an integral part of North–South relationships” (Castles 2003, 30). It is therefore the North’s responsibility to understand its role in this relationship, as well as the different motives that may influence other possible push factors affecting child migration from this region.

Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen (2018) examine voluntariness in migration decisions by supporting acknowledgment of forced and voluntary migration as a continued relationship rather than a dichotomy. They claim that how you label migrants, specifically as forced, carries great weight in both the treatment and classification in their target country. “And here the significance of how migration is described returns: whether a migrant is labelled as forced or voluntary within an immigration system majorly

impacts their access to protection” (Erdal and Oeppen 2018, 994). This article is posed as an extended discussion piece, relying heavily on ethnographic accounts from both Pakistanis and Afghans as they travel to Europe. States may have reasoning behind why they classify migrants certain ways, but ultimately, migration scholars should be free to choose which perspectives apply to certain migrant situations. This validates that the labeling of a migrant greatly affects the end result of their migration to a country. If they are not labeled correctly, they cannot get what they are seeking. “Whether someone is discursively presented as an economic migrant or a refugee, for instance, majorly influences their treatment by immigration authorities and humanitarian actors” (Erdal and Oeppen 2018, 983).

Susan Schmidt (2017) analyzes interview responses from Central American and Mexican migrant children when asked what kind of aid could help migrating youth like themselves. She also investigates and discusses multiple push factors that lead to unaccompanied child migration. Push factors force children into seeing migration as the only way out of a “no win” situation. Participants were randomly selected from a pool of migrant children that met nationality and age requirements. Following this, the participants' data was collected from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The interview findings showed an interconnectedness between the push factors of economics, security, and education, as expected. This data substantiates my claim that child migration from the Northern Triangle is exacerbated by the combination of these push factors.

Furthermore, we are led to question whether it is not only legal but ethically just to label children as economic migrants. There is an argument to be made that a group of

child migrants that have been denied the right to basic education can be classified as a new social group, mandating that they be acknowledged as such in the eyes of United States Immigration Law and Refugee Policy. However, there are many factors, specifically push factors, at play that directly influence unaccompanied child migration from this region.

### *Migration in the Northern Triangle: Push Factors*

Corruption in the Northern Triangle of Central America is no secret. It is arguable that it is one of the better known characteristics of the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Corruption is discussed by academics, global, and regional organizations alike. The corruption in this region is heavily discussed or noted in much of the research on the Northern Triangle, making it a highly relevant topic. How is corruption in the Northern Triangle talked about, researched, and discussed?

The cause of the high levels of corruption in the Northern Triangle somewhat differs depending on the source of the corruption itself. Overall, there are a few main lines of argument. The first is that the region's corruption stems from its geographic location in terms of the drug trade which links South America to the United States. For example, cocaine often originates in South America, leaving only the thin strip of Central America between it and one of the largest cocaine markets in the world: the United States. Therefore, Central America has been geographically predisposed as a route for drug trafficking from South America to the United States. Others claim the corruption stems from the United States' involvement in Latin American governments during the

Cold War era, when the U. S. supported corrupt officials in order to remove communist threats from Latin American government systems.

The backing of corrupt officials during the cold war era is illustrated by the United States' attempt to squander communism by involving itself in events such as the Guatemalan overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Arbenz was the first president to have a peaceful transition of power in Guatemala. However, the United States supported Carlos Castillas Armas, a leader of the junta that overthrew Arbenz's Administration (Frederick W. Marks 1990). However, the claim of United States involvement in this region is a common claim that corruption appears in all forms of Northern Triangle government, even if it is assumed to have originated from different sources.

In order to discuss corruption, we must establish a definition of what we are considering to be corruption. This project will use Transparency International's (1997) definition that defines corruption as the "misuse of public power, for private benefits; for example, the bribing of public officials, taking kickbacks in public procurement, or embezzling public funds" as discussed in "Perceptions of Political Corruption in Latin American Democracies" (2005, 94) by Damarys Canache and Michael E. Allison.

Canache and Allison (2005) try to untangle the relationship between political corruption and public opinion in several Latin American countries. They assert that Latin American citizens are aware of the high levels of corruption their countries face, and are therefore more likely able to combat it in some form. Canache and Allison (2005) use data collected by the 1995-1997 World Values Survey in order to compile general opinions on corruption in Latin American countries. They found that Latin Americans are

extremely aware of the levels of corruption in their countries and are therefore able to connect the blame of that corruption to the appropriate leaders and officials. This provides an analysis of first hand opinions on corruption in Latin American countries which provides valuable evidence for my own project as to how corruption then acts as a push factor of child migration.

Canache and Allison further discuss corruption in Latin America not in terms of how it originated, but how it has impacted public sentiment towards the government:

At one level, when the highest authorities are frequently implicated in electoral manipulation, financial scandals, or the abuse of public resources to achieve personal benefits, their bases of authority and legitimacy may be seriously undermined. At another level, corruption constitutes a violation of the unwritten contract between citizen and public official (92).

Canache and Allison (2005) use this to elevate the idea that current corruption in Latin America may lead to a drop in public support of democracy, since the current democratic systems in place are riddled with corruption, and as many would say, failing.

Many fear fighting corruption in the Northern Triangle, as this would mean giving more power to military and police groups, which ended in more turmoil and corruption in previous attempts in the late 20th century. Justin Healy (2015) questions how we detect and subsequently deal with greed and graft, through his analysis of global corruption, while specifically looking at Australia. Corruption affects the entire globe by undermining democratic institutions, economic developments, and general governmental security and balance. Healy (2015) first looks at global corruption, or corruption as a concept, then moves onto the specific case of Australia through qualitative measures. A general baseline and description of global corruption is given, with specific examples from Australia. This allows me to further define corruption and how it works, which then

allows me to evaluate the relationship between corruption and the breakdown of education systems in the Northern Triangle that can lead to increased child migration.

This solidifies that whatever is done to lessen the corruption in the Northern Triangle must be done carefully so as to not create more corruption by assigning more power to the wrong parties. Doing so would create a new price for the people to pay, on top of what they already deal with. Healy (2015) writes:

Not only do people pay the costs of corruption directly, but their quality of life is also affected by less visible forms of corruption. When powerful groups buy influence over government decisions or when public funds are diverted into the coffers of the political elite, ordinary people suffer. When there is widespread belief that corruption prevails and the powerful in particular are able to get away with it, people lose faith in those entrusted with power. As the Global Corruption Barometer 2013 shows, corruption is seen to be running through the foundations of the democratic and legal process in many countries, affecting public trust in political parties, the judiciary and the police, among other key institutions (4).

Healey (2015) illustrates the careful balance that must exist when dissolving corruption in the Northern Triangle. You must find a way to lessen it without moving it to the hands of another party. Someone has to be given the power to combat the corruption, without transferring the corruption itself. On the contrary, if corruption prevails, people will lose faith in democratic systems. Either way people face the threat of losing their belief and support of democracy.

Democracy itself, or rather its failure, is the reason corruption has taken over the Northern Triangle. It has failed, leading to the disastrous government systems we are currently seeing. However, a strengthening of sources could result in a stronger democracy and elimination of corruption. If corruption was eliminated from the government and political system, we would likely see a rise in education levels due to the general increase in access to and quality of schooling that would result. This would be a

result of the government creating a stricter education system, with more financing, which currently cannot be done as the government is fulfilling the desires of the parties that run the government from the outside. A regulated education system would mean better access to education, thus eliminating the human rights abuse of a lack of educational opportunity, and theoretically lessening child migration as a result.

Violence is a migratory motive that may often outweigh other motives in a mixed motive framework or theory. Each country of the Northern Triangle has extremely high homicide rates, mostly due to gangs (or maras), and other criminal organizations. Furthermore, violence is most often seen coupled with gang presence and organized crime in this region.

One of the forms of corruption mentioned in the previous section includes the geographic location of the Northern Triangle. Douglas Farah (2013) investigates transnational organized crime in the Northern Triangle, specifically drug cartels. He evaluates the Northern Triangle as a whole unit, then further investigates each country on its own. The true power structures are transnational crime organizations, such as Mexican drug cartels, rather than the formal power structures within the government. This furthers the claim that crime is rampant in the Northern Triangle, thus affecting migration flows out of this region. "It is indisputable that Central America's geographic location between the world's leading producers of cocaine to the south and the largest consuming nation to the north makes it a major transit hub" (Farah 2013, 97). It seems as if the trio of countries are caught in what appears to be the perfect storm. The geographic location of the Northern Triangle has set up its members for certain doom; three struggling countries are caught in the direct middle of a turf war between international gangs and the



international drug trade. Coupled with the corruption that these three governments already face, it seems nearly impossible to regain peaceful control of the country, or democracy at all.

On top of the geographic factors pushing the region towards gang violence and thus political corruption, internal factors are at play too. Roberto Suro (2018) questions why migrant surges, specifically unaccompanied child migrant surges, have increased. Suro (2018) claims that the unaccompanied migrant surges are an extension of the typical push factors from this region, rather than a completely different issue. An analysis of several academic migratory developments are considered in order to qualitatively investigate current migratory trends from this region. Suro (2018) states that “economic deprivation combined with generalized violence and a breakdown of the social order can constitute a life-threatening circumstance for individuals, especially for vulnerable populations like women and children” (70). This quote is paramount to the research question of this project because it bridges the gap between education, gangs, and the economy in stating that poverty and employment or economic activities enable gang growth. This statement allows us to connect all three, forming the idea that while all of the push factors that have been discussed are connected, we can isolate education because it can be seen as more of a causal factor than the rest.

Education, or a lack thereof, can be argued to directly influence and cause gang violence, which leads to corruption, which ultimately leads to economic stagnation, finally leading to migration. All of this leads to Suro’s (2018) point that there is a humanitarian obligation of the people at the receiving end of migrant surges: “If people at

one end of the channel face an existential threat, those at the other end of the channel have an obligation not to let them perish” (19).

Luis Rene Caceres (2017) analyzes economic growth and stagnation in Central American countries over the last two decades, and further questions how policy should change in order to promote economic growth. Economic growth has slowed due to high trade deficits, lack of national savings, and general economic stagnation. This article uses quantitative data such as tariff rates, while also taking into account current literature on the general economic health of Central America. “There is evidence that the reduction in unemployment is associated with a reduction in crime and, as well, the evidence indicates that economic stagnation is associated with rising violence” (Caceres 2017, 385). This helps explain the economic situation in Central America on a large scale, which we can then apply to the more personal economy of families and communities in the Northern Triangle.

Poverty greatly affects the Northern Triangle as large portions of the population live below the poverty line. As with all of the other push factors discussed, poverty is deeply connected to the core issue of why children migrate. However, it is important to note that it is a combination of all these push factors together that create the push needed for children to leave. This illustrates that poverty affects both education and employment, thus creating economic stagnation. It is important to acknowledge that this is another way in which a lack of education has worsened conditions, creating a push for children to leave.

*Education as a Human Right*

The idea of education as a human right is not something that most people would immediately think of when considering human rights. Most people would most likely list things that are essential to everyday biological survival, such as food, water, and shelter. More specifically, we must determine how the right to education is being threatened in the Northern Triangle. Education is not a single isolated issue; instead it is affected greatly by the other push factors of migration from this area, specifically violence.

Matthew Lorenzen (2017) examines the mixed motives of unaccompanied child migration from the Northern Triangle. He claims that migrants have mixed motives for migrating, both voluntary and forced. The data comes from a small 2016 survey that took place across 10 shelters run by a Mexican governmental agency. The data shows that it is extremely difficult to make straightforward distinctions between voluntary and forced migration because they are often intermixed at different levels. My thesis specifically supports a mixed motive theory of migration in children from the northern triangle, so this study creates direct parallels to my own research. Lorenzen (2017) asserts the idea of violence being a leading, yet intertwining factor with denial of education by writing:

Migrants who were fleeing violence were most often also looking for better economic or educational opportunities, or attempting to reunite with family members. In other words, violence is the motive that mixes the most with other motivations . . . when people flee economic extortion by gangs and hence are fleeing violence but may also be migrating to find new livelihood opportunities (757).

Furthermore, he goes on to state that education and violence are also linked in the way that gangs often influence education by targeting minors at schools (Lorenzen 2017, 758). The educational situations of each country in the Northern Triangle are relevant and important because as violence is highly involved with the ability to receive an education;

they both are key migratory push factors that influence child migration. Lorenzen (2017) paraphrases the ideas of Susan Schmidt (2017) by claiming that:

Guatemalan children placed most emphasis on the relationship between education and economics; Salvadoran minors focused more on the connections between economics and security, and education and security; while the comments from Honduran children were more evenly distributed among the three domains (751).

Underage and unaccompanied migrants from all three countries of the Northern Triangle leave their homes for the same core group of reasons; however, each country has at least one factor that influences child migration more than the rest, creating a mixed motive migratory pattern that traditional migration theory does not support. Mixed migration theory lends itself to the idea that these children are migrating for a myriad of reasons. This in turn leads to ineffective policies while the problems continue to rage on in the Northern Triangle.

Katarina Tomasevski (2005) examines the dual legality of education as a human right and as a service within the international legal context. “Where public education is not available or only exists as “poor education for the poor,” that choice is not really a choice at all. Moreover, where public education should be free but is only accessible for payment, there is no choice at all” (Tomasevski 2005, 14). The author cross examines multiple laws and legal claims on both sides of the argument to gauge which has the stronger legal footing. Human rights law predates international trade law, in which Tomasevski works, thus signifying that human rights law, which claims education as a right, resides over international trade law. She finds that education as a human right requires governmental obligations both domestically and globally. This is crucial to my project because it investigates education as a human right, which is directly tied to my thesis statement.

Amongst all countries however, education can be observed as a causal factor that greatly impacts the influence of all other push factors. This is because the basic human right of educational opportunity overlaps with the other push factors and is not being provided as mandated by international law. This project will look at education as a human right, and further look at the role of education as a catalyst for child migration from the Northern Triangle. There is an existing lack of research in this area, making this project important in filling in the current gaps of knowledge. The lack of access to basic primary education violates the Declaration of Human Rights, creating the investigation of a human rights abuse. It also provides a need to migrate for children that do not have access to education, potentially causing it to be a stand alone push factor. And lastly, a lack of basic primary education goes against refugee protocol and the objectives of the global compact for migration, which forces the issue to be evaluated in terms of policy for the United States border.

### **Theory**

The general, neoclassical “macro” approach to migration theory provides the idea that migration occurs in “push-pull” factors (Boswell 2002). I have used this model to describe what I have referred to as “push factors” that trigger child migration from the Northern Triangle in the above sections. This theory of “push-pull” factors is often used to explain forced migration, as there is something pushing people out of their homes, and often something pulling them towards better opportunities, or a better chance at survival. And while the traditional “push-pull” model helps to explain child migration from the Northern Triangle, it cannot be ignored that the traditional theory of “push-pull” is

melded with mixed migration theory in this scenario. A traditional, single causal model of migration does not fit the narrative for what is actually happening. For example, the macro neoclassical economic theory suggests that migration is related to the global supply and demand of labor, thus producing the push-pull model. But, this ignores the other reasons why children are migrating from the Northern Triangle.

Migration theory takes many forms depending on the type of migration being studied, and the approach being utilized to study it. When discussing child migration from the Northern Triangle, a single migration theory does not fit the situation. Rather, there are multiple theories that explore different avenues of this complex issue behind child migration, thus allowing us to determine that child migration from the Northern Triangle is best described as ‘mixed motive migration’, as discussed by Lorenzen (2017). Mixed motive migration is a key theory in this case because it combines ideas of forced migration and displacement with typical migratory theory.

The same conclusion can be drawn from yet another single causal migration theory: the world-systems theory. The world-systems theory of migration ignores micro level impacts and decision making that affects the choice to migrate, focusing mainly on more visible and higher levels of agitation (Massey et al., 1993). Micro level impacts and decisions are those that are found at the individual, familial, and small group (or neighborhood) level. Consequently, utilizing a mixed migration model while borrowing concepts and ideas from other theoretical approaches is the best way to approach the issue of child migration from this area. Massey et al. (1993) further give voice to this research approach by stating:

Rather than adopting the narrow argument of theoretical exclusivity, we adopt the broader position that causal processes relevant to international migration might

operate on multiple levels simultaneously, and that sorting out which of the explanations are useful is an empirical and not only a logical task (455).

Furthermore, and on a much broader theoretical scale, rational choice theory fits child migration from the Northern Triangle exceptionally well. Rational choice theory asserts that when given options, people will choose the option that has the best outcome for themselves. In other words, people will rationalize outcomes in order to serve their own best interest. In the best interest of children from the Northern Triangle, migration appears to be the most rational choice. However, it is important to note that migrants are faced with making the rational choice between extremely rigid and fixed options. Therefore, the alternative to the rational option involves little free choice, and a difficult fight for survival. The rational choice in this scenario is survival, because it is the only choice apart from acceptance of the situation.

I theorize that a human rights violation is hiding within the label of “economic migrant” for children under the age of eighteen. On many United States immigration forms, a lack of education and economic mobility are labeled as voluntary or economic migration. However, this lack of education is a human rights violation, because it is not being provided as internationally mandated by the United Nations, and other push factors are hiding behind the facade of a lack of education. The World Bank cites that education is:

one of the most important drivers for ending poverty and boosting shared prosperity, as well as for improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability. Guaranteeing the human right to a basic education means little unless schooling leads to learning for all children and youth (2017).

Upon investigating a lack of education, one can see the political corruption, as well as gang and drug violence, that directly feeds into this human rights violation. I theorize

young migrants that are attempting entrance into the United States for work, have endured civil rights violations as well as refugee and asylum level violations.

I have formed two hypotheses; each correlates with the way I have divided the research project into multiple discrete analytical questions. The first part deals with the question of whether education is a human right, the second part investigates classification and understanding of child migrants, and the last part investigates how the proving of such would warrant policy change.

Regarding the first half of the research, I hypothesize the following.

*H1: If there is a lack of basic education provided to children in the Northern Triangle, then a human rights abuse is occurring.*

Given the evidence presented above, we can hypothesize that a lack of basic education in the Northern Triangle is technically a human rights abuse as it goes against international law.

For the second half of the research moves the investigation towards the way in which minors from this region are classified.

*H2: If a denial of basic education is a human rights abuse, then it is necessary to rethink how we classify and understand the nature of forced child migration from the Northern Triangle.*

This hypothesis questions how we view child migrants from this region, should education be classified as a human right that is being abused. Therefore, if large portions of these children are migrating due to human rights abuse, we must rethink how we perceive and manage these children.

We must also reevaluate how we assess the other push factors of migration in relation to the human rights abuse of education. All of this will change how we perceive



migrant children at the border but more importantly how we classify them within immigration policy.

### **Research Design**

This research project is a qualitative study that utilises sources and texts including data sets and policy reports from international and regional organizations, government documents, and historical studies. A qualitative study has been chosen because this project aims to understand the entwinement of many complex factors that alter the human experience, such as a denial of basic and primary education. Qualitative analysis allows the researcher to observe, interview, and deconstruct primary documents, all of which allow the researcher and reader to understand the human experience. However, the result of this project is not quantifying data, but rather providing a contextualized and interpretive account of a significant transnational humanitarian issue. This is not done by isolating variables, but by studying the rules and relationships that govern the issue, thus making sure all parts of the research receive equal attention.

Original evidence is being generated through semi-structured individual interviews conducted with academics, policy specialists, and activists working in the area of Central American migration. Semi structured interviews allow the interview subjects to tell the interviewer their story, in their own words, without the infringement or boundaries of rigid, preset questions. Original interpretations are also generated through the evaluation of primary sources such as policy papers, government documents, and immigration application forms. Some numerical data is being used alongside the

interviews to provide a conceptual understanding and framework of the issues at hand throughout the project.

Semi-structured interviews are a typical research method in the field of International Studies, with little risk being present. Academic Silvia E. Rabionet writes: “there are some specific topics that I would like to cover, but at the same time I want to hear their stories. Consequently, I will use the format of an opening statement and a few general questions to elicit conversation. I will have some additional questions designed to probe for information if it does not come up” (Rabionet 2011, 564). As Rabionet outlines, semi structured interviews will allow me to keep the conversation on topic while allowing my subjects to give additional details and stories as they see fit.

This is further demonstrated by Gaudet and Robert (2018) as they state: “participants decide on their field of expression, that is the contours and substance of what is important to them on a certain subject. On the other hand, the prepared list of topics ensures that the interviews still have some degree of substantive homogeneity” (99). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to consider new ideas, without being limited to a list of strict questions. Van Tassell and Novotney (2017) further illustrate this idea. “During an interview, the conversation could take us into topics that we may not have anticipated when we began our research, yet we can potentially change our focus as we learn while talking with and listening to those we interview” (Van Tassel and Novotny 2017, 25).

Castles sums the above statements up in a more general sense by stating: “forced migration researchers need to take a holistic approach, linking their specific research topic to broader aspects of forced migration and its embeddedness in social relations at

various spatial levels” (Castles 2003, 29). This statement solidifies that research in this field area must be flexible and fluid in a way that a fully structured interview cannot achieve.

An analysis of evidence, specifically detailing migratory patterns across time of children across national borders throughout Central America, and more specifically the Northern Triangle consisting of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, is created to compare and seek out the trends of unaccompanied child migration. The time frame of my study is 2012 to present day. More important than the trends across time, are the trends that lead to answer the question of why children are migrating at such young ages, as well as why migration is seldom a one time venture. Special attention is given to the connections between education, human rights and the flow of unaccompanied minors, thus evaluating education as a human rights abuse. Data is pulled from a multitude of resources such as think tanks, global nongovernmental organizations, and international organizations. Reports from the United Nations are of crucial importance, especially the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as they have published extensive information needed to investigate this area. Any reports or papers used have been selected based on the use of key words and report topics found when searched.

The goal of this project is not to validate my hypothesis with quantitative data, but to use contextualized, interpretive, and personal accounts to illustrate the narrative that is occurring around this issue. Therefore, for my own primary evidence collection, I set up semi-structured interviews with people in this field. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow the interviewee to take the conversation to new and unexpected topics that the interviewer may not have considered prior to the interview.

This allows the interviewer, me, to ask open ended questions that solicit narratives, context, and argumentation relating to my research question. This deviates from standard and rigid interviewing that asks specific questions with specific answers. Interview subjects have been selected by those who hold an encompassing expertise in the area, whether it be academic, policy based, or related to migrant advocacy. Furthermore, recommendations and names of people they recommend speaking with were taken from interviewees.

I narrowed down the interview subjects to a list, ranging from researchers, lawyers, and experts in the field. I was able to secure three interviews, one with Elizabeth G. Kennedy, one with Muzaffar A. Chishti, and one with María M. Rodríguez. Dr. Elizabeth G. Kennedy has interviewed over 1,700 Central American migrants, and more than 250 officials over the last 10 years. A large majority of her work is writing testimonies for unaccompanied migrants from the Northern Triangle, authoring articles, and conducting research. The second interviewee, Muzaffar Chisti is the director of the Migration Policy Institute office at the NYU (New York University) School of Law. He frequently provides testimony in regards to immigration policy for the United States Congress. The third interviewee, María M. Rodríguez, works as a staff attorney with the KIND (Kids In Need of Defense) organization. She works directly with child migrants, specifically unaccompanied child migrants, to aid them by assisting legal representation in going through the immigration and asylum court system.

All interviews took place over Zoom, a popular and trusted video conferencing platform. The interviewees signed an informed consent waiver prior to the interview taking place, which specifically states that the video call will be recorded. At the

beginning of the video call, I asked for verbal consent again, began recording, and stated that verbal consent had been given. Interview questions varied based on the interviewee's expertise, but all focused on push factors, specifically education, and how they have seen education as a catalyst for child migration from this region. After the interview, participants were emailed the recording of their interview for their own records. It is of importance to acknowledge that all interview participants consented to their names being used and published in the research.

The second half of the research addresses the United States policy for categorizing child migrants, making distinctions between economic, refugee, and asylum statuses. It is also important to detail the United States' history in commitments to human rights violations in other policies and agreements. The United State's Department of State is an extremely important source of information in using government documents concerning migration, as well as the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services. One of the most important documents that is being evaluated is the I-589, which is the form used to apply for asylum for both children and adults.

Data from these departments plays a crucial role in the development of this project, as the United States must uphold commitments that have been previously made regarding these issues in other forms of legislation and law. Furthermore, governmental and organization reports and data were used as well. Secondary sources stem from academic articles, government reports, working papers, and books in order to examine the evidence that is already available in the field. Secondary sources are the main source type for this project as I did not have access to conduct the level of research that is needed on an international scale for this project. However, there was still heavy influence

of primary sources in the analysis section. Tertiary sources were used on the occasion that a synopsis of multiple data sets or information was needed.

### Analysis

I combined my interview responses and evidence with studies and reports, thus creating a flushed out and comprehensive evidence section that combines my own research with already available primary data in the field. I will compare the interview results to the existing research and evaluate how it correlates or contradicts the other, therefore creating an original, qualitative, and primary account of the evidence. The interview responses will be used as context, arguments, and empirical evidence.

In order to truly analyze the makeup of this region, we can use data from the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (2013). Upon first exposure to the statistics of Northern Triangle unaccompanied child migrants entering the United States, the numbers seem miniscule. However, when you holistically approach the statistics by evaluating living standards in these areas as well emotional turmoil that may cause migration, one is able to see that these small numbers are the window to larger problems. The data in *Table 1*. Foreign-born population for selected countries of birth, 1990-2015, published by the Pew Research Center (A), visualizes the ratios of overall migration into the United States from Central America. When migration is evaluated as a whole, it is easy to understand that unaccompanied child migrants from the Northern Triangle heavily outnumber other unaccompanied child migrants.

We can see how unaccompanied child migrants from the Northern Triangle heavily outnumber other unaccompanied child migrants by considering the following:

this region has accounted for up to 87% of the United States' unaccompanied child migrants in the past, heavily outnumbering child migrants from other countries (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2013, 10). For the purpose of this research, the term unaccompanied child migrant (occasionally referred to as an unaccompanied minor) refers to migrants under the age of eighteen, travelling alone.

Using the words of the United States Department of State (A), refugees will be classified under the following criteria.

Under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), a refugee is an alien who, generally, has experienced past persecution or has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Individuals who meet this definition may be considered for either refugee status under Section 207 of the INA if they are outside the United States, or asylum status under Section 208 of the INA, if they are already in the United States.

According to data provided by D'Vera Cohn, Jeffery S. Passel, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera of the Pew Research Center (2017), the peak number of child migrants apprehended at the border was in the 2014 fiscal year, with 51,705 apprehensions. For the fiscal year of 2017, 31,754 child migrants were apprehended at the United States border with Mexico. Both of these numbers can be verified in *Table 2* from United States Customs and Border Protection.

However, unaccompanied child migration from this geographic area is not caused by one sole push factor. Rather, Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa (2009) suggest that poverty, inequality, and conflict coexist creating a "mixed" form of migration that not only affects migratory motivators and push factors, but the characters of migration flows as well (Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009, 1). This creates the idea that migration is not as easily categorized at the border as economic, asylum seeking, or refugee status

cases are typically thought to be. Instead, it is suggested that “outward movement may be forced, precipitated by persecution, conflict, war or some other life-threatening circumstance” while “inward or onward movement, including the choice or determination of the destination, may be shaped by economic, livelihood, betterment, or life-chance considerations” (Van Hear, Brubaker, and Bessa 2009, 4). The lines that are often used to classify migrants therefore become even more blurred when there is not one clear motive to assign to a migrant.

Furthermore, if children are constantly fighting against a multitude of issues keeping them occupied with survival, it then becomes increasingly harder to obtain an education. The United Nations argues on their webpage for “World Day Against Child Labor” that children cannot be used for work if it interferes with their rights as children to education, health, or general childhood activities (such as play time). Therefore, we can infer that denying asylum or refugee status to children based on economic principles is not only morally unsound, but legally unacceptable in the eyes of international law, as children cannot be expected to provide for themselves, or interfere with their rights as children to do so.

The United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) asserts the idea that there is a direct correlation between education and human rights violations.

The lack of educational opportunities for children often reinforces their subjection to various other human rights violations. For instance these children, who may live in abject poverty and not lead healthy lives, are particularly vulnerable to forced labour . . . Moreover, there is a direct correlation between, for example, primary school enrolment levels for girls and major reductions in child marriages (1999, 1-2).



This assertion from the UN CESCR allows me to deduce that the lack of educational opportunity in the Northern Triangle is indeed a human rights violation. Not only is it a human rights violation, but it is creating a pathway for other human rights violations to occur simultaneously.

In addition, if a refugee must be a part of a “social group,” (U.S. Department of State, A) could children not be identified as a social group in this context? I am arguing that if the U.S. Department of State claims that refugees must be part of a “social group”, children can most definitely be grouped together in this aspect. Children have the same relative experience of growing up. In this region, the Northern Triangle, they share the experience of violence, corruption, and a lack of education, thus cementing their identity as a collective group.

Michael Shifter (2012) dissects violence further by corroborating the fear of strengthening police and military by writing the following in his report “Countering Central Violence in Central America” for the Council on Foreign Relations.

The failure to construct effective state institutions has enabled some criminal organizations to penetrate all levels of government and broaden their reach in the region. Police forces command few resources and scant public trust, often because of their extensive links to organized crime. Judicial institutions, such as courts and public prosecutors, are also systematically subjected to cooptation by criminal groups, leading to high levels of impunity (Shifter 2012, 5).

Children never want to join the gangs for fun, rather they eventually join out of force, unless they can run. This in turn affects the political state of the country, as many gangs play the role of Oz behind the government’s curtain. Articles 4.1 and 5 of the American Convention on Human Rights “Pact of San Jose, Costa Rica” reads: “Authorities in the Northern Triangle are failing in their obligation to respect and protect the right to life and personal integrity by not addressing the soaring levels of violence and

murders.” Ruling gangs inadvertently run the government, which of course, can affect the entire country. When a gang has control, the country has lost control over everything.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 1990-2018), in 2018 Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador had an intentional homicide rate of 22.5, 38.9, and 52, respectively. These ratings are the number of intentional homicides per 100,000 people in that country. For reference, the United States has a rating of 5 for 2018. This data helps to explain the extreme violence this region of Central America deals with in perspective to the United State’s level of violence.

Furthermore, violence is most often seen coupled with gang presence and organized crime in this region. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas writes that “the prominence of gangs in the region is fueled by the Northern Triangle’s weak institutions, corruption, scarce rule of law, and paucity of economic opportunity” (AEI 2017, 37). This statement further creates linkage between many of the push factors, furthering the narrative that migration is mixed and motives are not easy to pinpoint or single out. UNODC asserts that gangs create local levels of corruption as well. “These territory-bound groups are intensely concerned with local affairs . . . they can demand tribute (extortion), give credit at usurious rates (loan sharking), and dictate local employment conditions (labour racketeering) within their zones of influence” (UNODC 2012, 22). Gangs are often territory based, claiming areas as their own, which leads to torment and havoc by different gangs based on location. UNODC demonstrates just how far the reach of the gangs can extend within the community, by detailing their torment from extortion to labor control.

The UNHCR “Children on the Run” report also displays the reach gangs have over children and more specifically schools. Josephina, age 16, of El Salvador describes her experience being targeted by local gangs. She was targeted to be the girlfriend of a local gang leader, facing her own kidnapping or the death of her family members if she did not comply. She also knew from the experience of a friend that accepting a position like this would lead to sexual assault and rape, as well as an end to her personal liberties. “Once the gang started harassing her, she didn’t feel safe, so she stopped going to school and stayed at home until her family was able to make arrangements for her to travel to the U.S.” (Children on the Run 2014, 25). This is a prime example of the ultimatums that many children, especially young girls, face.

Josefina is not alone in her experiences. However, young males typically face a different type of blackmail. Rather than being chosen to be entertainment for that gang as young girls often are, boys are chosen to become gang members. Alfonso, age 17, of El Salvador describes his interactions with the gangs in his community.

The problem was that where I studied there were lots of M-18 gang members, and where I lived was under control of the other gang, the MS-13. The M-18 gang thought I belonged to the MS-13. They had killed the two police officers who protected our school. They waited for me outside the school. It was a Friday, the week before Easter, and I was headed home. The gang told me that if I returned to school, I wouldn’t make it home alive. The gang had killed two kids I went to school with, and I thought I might be the next one. After that, I couldn’t even leave my neighborhood. They prohibited me. I know someone whom the gangs threatened this way. He didn’t take their threats seriously. They killed him in the park. He was wearing his school uniform. If I hadn’t had these problems, I wouldn’t have come here. (Children on the Run 2014, 27).

Alfonso’s testimony makes it evident that the education problems in the Northern Triangle are deeply intertwined with a multitude of other issues.

By examining the death of both police officers that were meant to protect his school, we can see that there is an obvious lack of accountability on behalf of the government to intervene and take action. Not only that, but the gangs in that area were openly killing children; this was another opportunity the state did not take to assert itself as just. This allows us to assume that there is most likely some level of corruption in this area allowing the gangs to live above the law. In the last sentence of his statement, Alfonso discusses these experiences being the reason in which he left his home and traveled to the United States. We can use his testimony to understand why other migrants like him are leaving their homes; education often makes you an enemy of the gang, thus leading to death.

Kevin, age 17, of Honduras summed up his experience in fewer words: “My grandmother wanted me to leave. She told me: ‘If you don’t join, the gang will shoot you. If you do join, the rival gang will shoot you—or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you’” (Children on the Run 2014, 36). This shows that even when gangs do not have a direct connection to the local school system, they still possess a large amount of control over the community. Therefore, they still indirectly have control over education levels by regulating what young males do, and on behalf of who.

David, age 16, of Guatemala gives testimony that speaks to the endless cycle that gangs, economic stagnation, and a lack of education create.

Gangs in a nearby neighborhood wanted to kill me and some other people. They wanted me to give them money, but what money was I supposed to give them? I didn’t have any. They asked me a bunch of questions, like who was my father, and who was my family. I told them my father was dead. They told me to say goodbye because I was going to join my father. They asked me if I knew who they were, if I could identify them. I said no, because I knew if I said yes they would kill me. They held my cousin and me for three hours, tied up. My cousin was able to untie

the rope and he helped me untie mine. We heard gunshots and we ran. They kept looking for us, but we escaped. (Children on the Run 2014, 35).

The CIA's World Factbook reports that in Honduras 29.6% (2014), El Salvador 32.7% (2016), and Guatemala 59.3% (2014) of people live below the poverty line. Since the years of these reports it has been speculated that large portions of the population have now moved from the category of below the poverty line to extreme poverty. Jennifer Phillip (2019) of the Borgen Project claims that gentrification is also impacting the Northern Triangle, increasing poverty levels. Phillip also explains the poverty of the region by writing that the countries of the Northern Triangle have deep economic connections due to legislation passed during the 1980s and 1990s: "The majority of those changes, however, have had macroeconomic effects on the region leaving large portions of the population enduring unequal access to resources and encouraging many to migrate elsewhere, working against stimulating its economy." The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection" states the following about how poverty affects child migration.

A significant number of the children, 53%, discussed issues related to poverty and lacking basic survival necessities, needing to provide support to family members, or lacking meaningful opportunity for work or education as one reason . . . entrenched poverty and deep lack of meaningful opportunity for education and employment lie at the very core of what could be called root causes for children leaving these four countries and coming to the U.S. (Children on the Run 2014, 46).

This idea is substantiated by the UNHCR in "Children on the Run" again:

At the very core of what could be called root causes for children leaving these four countries and coming to the U.S. are issues of entrenched poverty and deep lack of meaningful opportunity for education and employment. This is compounded by, in the cases of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the long-term effects of years of civil war (Children on the Run 2014, 24).

Not only is education a root cause of child migration from these countries, but it is also a human rights violation.

Education is an internationally declared human right by the United Nations (UN).

Article 26, part 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (UN General Assembly 1948).

Article 26, part 1 provides enough evidence for me to declare that a human rights violation is occurring in the Northern Triangle. There is not a pathway for children in this region to receive a basic or primary education without great risks being taken, thus creating the human rights violation in question. One fundamental flaw that children in this region face is that in order to receive education, they must be able to pay for private school or lessons. This directly goes against free elementary education. Furthermore, education in these countries is listed as compulsory, yet it is not enforced. Rather, many students do not go to school due to taking on a job to help support their family, or they simply cannot safely attend school.

The Pew Research Center (B) published the following data in *Figure 1*, illustrating education levels in the Northern Triangle. *Figure 1* displays educational attainment in levels from each member of the Northern Triangle.

The United States Department of State, (B) (2015) reports that in Honduras, education is free by law, required, and universal until middle school, or ages fifteen to seventeen. However, higher level students often have to pay fees, making enrollment harder to attain. In 2014, data shows that enrollment for the first six grades was roughly

92%, seventh to ninth grades were less than 45%, and tenth and eleventh grades only amounted to 26%. In terms of gangs, Honduras does not have penalties for minors in its anti gang legislation, leaving minors vulnerable to getting involved with the gangs in their early years, usually between ages eight to twelve. Areas around schools are often battle grounds for gangs as well, connecting education with violence even more.

Guatemala has compulsory education until the age of fourteen, however, secondary school is optional. Compulsory primary education is often not available or is limited in rural areas (United States Department of State (C), 2015, Guatemala). El Salvador provides free, universal, and mandatory education until the ninth grade, and high school is “nominally” free. Similarly to Guatemala, El Salvador often did not provide the promised education to all eligible students in rural areas due to a lack of funding and withdrawal. Parents often withdraw their children by the sixth grade, so they can begin working and provide financial support to the family (United States Department of State (D), 2015, El Salvador).

The documentary *Between Borders: American Migrant Crisis* also mentions a narrative that differs from official reports on education. At one point in the documentary, the claim is made that “the official highschool dropout rate approaches 50%, but everyone here says it's much higher, with kids routinely leaving school to help parents earning less than \$2 a day” (Renaud, 00:06:01).

This data is further validated in *Figure 1*, provided by Pew Research Center (B), with the data showing that percentages of children with less than a ninth grade education are as follows: El Salvador 35%, Guatemala 44%, and Honduras 38%. *Figure 1* cites the actual high school graduation rate as 28%, 26% and 28%, respectively. In order to

understand the gravity and severity of the situation, we can look at *Figure 2*, provided by the Pew Research Center (C), which shows how all migration, not just child migration from the Northern Triangle has tripled since 1990. We can use this information to assume that all migration and unaccompanied child migration from the Northern Triangle are positively correlated, thus allowing us to infer that unaccompanied child migration has also increased drastically since 1990.

In order to apply for asylum, all migrants must fill out the I-589 form. This form is used for all applications regardless of age or region. The I-589 form must be filled out completely in English; translators must be brought by the applicant themselves, and if they are unable to understand or complete the form in English, it will not be accepted. Hence, there are inherent flaws with the methodology used in this process. First, if you have an unaccompanied child migrant who never surpassed an educational level equivalent to, for example, elementary grade level 3 in the United States, how is that migrant to be expected to coherently, legibly, and logically fill out an asylum application in a foreign language? With this example, it may be impossible for the migrant to complete the application in their native language, let alone English. With that being said, there is no possible way that a child migrant in a situation such as this could successfully fill out the I-589 form.

More so, it cannot be ensured that child migrants will even fully comprehend asking for asylum, and if they do, the probability of a child having all of the proper documentation is low. Migrants requesting asylum must be able to present a passport photo of themselves, as well as official documentation from their home country. If we hypothetically have a child migrant that has to flee quickly from their home in Honduras



due to gang violence at their school, it is highly improbable that the child will be able to afford a passport photo and obtain official documentation. This is especially true in cases where children leave without telling their parents they are leaving. Situations such as this often occur when there has been an outside threat, such as a threat of violence from a local gang. If the child were to tell their family where they were going, or if they were going at all, the gang might take it out on the family after the child has left. Thus, a child will migrate alone in order to protect their family from the perceived threat.

They also cannot be labeled an economic migrant since they are not migrating for economic purposes. It is true that they may not be able to get a job in their home country, but the inability to get a job is due to a lack of education, which is ultimately a human rights abuse. One of the most worrying factors is that teenage unaccompanied child migrants have a propensity to lie and say they are over the age of eighteen, because they have a false sense that this will help their chances of either getting into the United States or lessen their chances of being sent back home. *Between Borders: American Migrant Crisis* details the phenomenon of child migrants lying about their ages throughout their journey.

“The migrant shelters in Mexico are full of young kids fleeing Central America for the United States. They all insist that they are 19 years old, and they never carry IDs, a precaution they hope, if captured, will keep Mexican immigration from deporting them back to child services in their home country” (Renaud, 00:15:34).

If these children do not have official documentation on them, there is no way to confirm or deny the truth of their ages. In turn, they may be self identifying as eighteen or older, as demonstrated in *Between Borders: American Migrant Crisis*. This becomes a problem when they are citing their reasons for migrating: an unaccompanied minor might

think they are migrating for more economic opportunities and state that on a form such as the I-589. However, if they are truthful about their age, it is impossible to categorize them as an economic migrant because they are legally still children. And more, they endured a human rights abuse: lack of access to a basic and primary education. Thus, these children should be applying as refugees and asylees; this creates another level of confusion in the asylum process and how it applies to the issue of lacking education in the Northern Triangle.

This leads to the next problem which is that if you are either a very young child, or you do not understand international law, it is very possible that you do not understand the asylum process, or how it works. If migrants are not apprehended at the border, they may not fully understand their right to apply for asylum within the first year of living within the United States. More so, as Dr. Elizabeth G. Kennedy states, there is no foundation of trusting public institutions such as police or government.

I think the other factor that doesn't get enough attention is that if you come from a country where laws do not work, and the justice system is not made for you, as a poor person or an indigenous person, or a young person from a notoriously violent neighborhood, you do not automatically decide to trust in judicial institutions because you crossed a border. That distrust remains and also that belief that "why would I situate myself legally when it's never been important" and it was actually something that could place you at risk. So there are some major barriers to overcome from the beginning, so if there's not ever any assistance given, most kids and their families will attempt to avoid the U.S. justice system and law (Elizabeth G. Kennedy, interview via Zoom with author, March 3, 2021).

This is yet another factor that has been ignored in the available research. If importance has never been placed on abiding by laws and public institutions, crossing a border does not automatically change that. Coming from a place where institutions are corrupt teaches you to avoid the law, rather than lean on it. With that being said, it is hard

to imagine that the majority of migrants from these three countries would therefore automatically take the most legal route of immigration possible.

More so, as briefly discussed previously, if children migrate and are never apprehended, they will most likely not be informed on the asylum process or the legal immigration process. Children that end up enrolled in public school in the United States may get a presentation on their immigration rights, but it is not guaranteed. Furthermore, if no one informs the migrants of this, the place they are most likely to go for help and information is their new community, which is almost always composed of other migrants. Dr. Kennedy explains this process by discussing how information is passed along in different cases.

. . . assuming the child enrolled in school, which a lot of sixteen and seventeen year olds don't, they have on staff social workers that will help the kids complete this as well. And so again, they'll get the "Know Your Rights" presentation. But at every point, a lot of kids fall through the cracks because not everyone goes through the ORR facility. Some kids do cross undetected. Even those who go through the facility for whatever reasons might leave sooner than they get to meet with an attorney. And not everyone goes to school. Or it may not be a school that has a "Know Your Rights" presentation. I mean the other way that people, -- so there's another major way people find out how you pursue legalizing your situation and that's through your community networks. So most of the time Guatemalans end up living with other Guatemalans, because of the segregation of U.S neighborhoods and cities. Salvadorans with other Salvadorans, Hondurans with other Hondurans. And so, if someone in that network has gotten asylum or some other type of relief, they often tell them "hey this is what you do, this is my lawyer, this is how I did this." On the flipside of that, if people in that network didn't win their case, or were essentially robbed thousands of dollars . . . they're going to tell everyone: "forget about it, lay low, avoid the law, and stay as long as you can (Elizabeth G. Kennedy, interview via Zoom with author, March 3, 2021).

Therefore, the decision to even seek help is dependent on multiple factors including where they cross and if they are apprehended, if and where they enroll in school, and the experiences of others that have gone through the same process in their newfound community in the United States.

It is crucial to remember how all of these factors are intertwined and related, thus creating the complex system we observe in this project. José Guadalupe, Director of Casa Alianza of Honduras states in *Between Borders: American Migrant Crisis*:

In reality it's a combination of causes that occur simultaneously -- high levels of poverty, lack of educational and employment opportunities, lack of protection, and the disintegration of the family. But it can't be denied that violence is the main motivation for the majority of the children who travel to the United States, despite the risk (Renaud 00:11:19).

It is easy to look at this statement and focus only on the later half. What he says is not wrong; violence is a huge motivator in child migration from this region. But you must also give weight to the first part of his statement, that the causes occur simultaneously, meaning one singular factor cannot be isolated. And while violence may very well be one of the most visible push factors in research, it cannot be isolated by itself. Violence is directly tied to gangs, which affect government corruption, thus affecting the economy and job availability, which further affect the education system.

For example, *Between Borders: American Migrant Crisis*, describes a time when many schools were shut down in the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Schools were shut down as a result of the gangs getting out of hand. As a result, authorities shut down most high schools in the area. The documentary crew visited one school that was able to remain open. "The school . . . is one of the few that managed to stay open, as a consequence of it's principle being a former gang member himself, who was able to negotiate his school a neutral zone" (Renaud 00:13:02). This demonstrates the close ties gangs have with the education system. It also demonstrates how little the authorities do to limit gang activity; schools were shut down rather than shutting down gangs to keep schools open.

Dr. Kennedy sums up the issue of misclassification and the generalization of push factors by simply verbalizing:

Even people who have fled for their lives will say that they've gone to have a better life or a better job, or be a better family. And they unintentionally hide the many traumas they went through beforehand. It applies for adults as well because most people don't get to study past sixth grade. And there is a large number that don't study at all in the formal education system (Elizabeth G. Kennedy, interview via Zoom with author, March 3, 2021).

This statement alone explains that misclassification begins at the personal level; migrants, especially unaccompanied children, do not know enough to classify themselves correctly. More so, they may not even be aware of the trauma they have endured, and that it may be enough to classify them as an asylee or refugee. They may not understand that they have endured human rights abuses. So, without personnel to help child migrants with the application process, there is little to no chance that it will be done correctly, meaning unaccompanied child migrants have a minimal chance of being granted asylum even if they are deserving, given the current system.

Previously, there were better programs that assisted with this. However, with the Trump Administration, these programs were cut, and child migrants were left to fend for themselves. Dr. Kennedy explains

“prior to the Trump administration, there was a process in place so that most kids went through an ORR facility. And all of those ORR facilities have partnerships and collaborations with legal service providers, who before that, interviews them and determines what type of relief they would be eligible for and submits the first basic paperwork. But that stopped under the Trump administration. And it was never foolproof, you know, before that” (Elizabeth G. Kennedy, interview via Zoom with author, March 3, 2021).

This provides evidence that there is hope for the classification system of unaccompanied child migrants; however, it displays that there is still room for improvement. While we previously had a system that provided at least some level of aid,

even if it was not enough, we then reverted back to a system of no aid at all. Policy needs to be created that creates a system of aid for unaccompanied child migrants travelling to the United States. As long as we continue to mislabel them, our government will continue to ignore the problems they face in their home countries, because they will not be seen as asylum seekers. They will be seen as migrants looking for better economic opportunities, as they are currently viewed by many politicians. Furthermore, if policy makers do not acknowledge the reasons for which child migrants should be classified, they cannot adjust foreign policy for Northern Triangle countries. Without a policy adjustment, there will continue to be a mass flow of child migrants from this region. There are serious issues within these states, and they will continue until there is some sort of intervention on behalf of the United States.

Intervention can take the shape of many forms. I am not arguing for one form of intervention over the other; rather I am stating that it needs to happen in some form. This can be done by halting the flow of aid sent to the corrupt governments of the Northern Triangle. “The United States keeps sending not just millions but billions of dollars to those that they know are corrupt and those who abuse human rights, so if that stopped that would be very helpful” (Elizabeth G. Kennedy, interview via Zoom with author, March 3, 2021). Or, the United States could send more money, either through a separate funding operation, or a redirection of the money already being sent, that would allow more social welfare programs to take hold, thus raising the standard of living and allowing human rights, such as the right to access education, to flourish. And on a final note, we can summarize the need for reform in these countries with the following quote.

It's also money that contributes to further distrust of governmental institutions, because oftentimes, for particularly young males, and females, they're as likely to

fear the police and soldiers as they are to fear gang members and cartel members. So, if you wanted to build trust in institutions, you would need to make sure your institutions are not human rights violations as well (Elizabeth G. Kennedy, interview via Zoom with author, March 3, 2021).

The institutions that often cause fear among the young need to be reformed as trustworthy and for the people. And the United States needs new policy that supports this idea both monetarily and in practice. If the United States wants to curb immigration, specifically unaccompanied child migration from this region, they need to acknowledge the true push factors and reasons behind them. Otherwise, migration will continue, and it will continue at the high rates we have seen over the last decade.

Meanwhile, Muzaffar Chishti details the ideal scenario for unaccompanied children seeking asylum. For unaccompanied child migrants who seek asylum with no resources, he argues that the judge should act accordingly. The judge should follow the philosophy that unaccompanied minors need a lawyer. The judge should “say ‘take some time to find yourself a lawyer.’ So what people do is, most of these kids obviously cannot afford their own private lawyer. They try to find a not for profit legal service provider to take their case” (Muzaffar A. Chishti, interview via Zoom with author, February 18, 2021). And while that would be an ideal scenario, it is unfortunately not true for most unaccompanied child migrants seeking asylum. Chishti solidifies the problem in this logic: “it takes time to find them. That’s why it’s important for judges to give you a continuance. Postpone your hearing until you get a lawyer. So that’s one aspect of the problem” (Muzaffar A. Chishti, interview via Zoom with author, February 18, 2021). The other aspect to the problem is that children seeking asylum will not always be granted more time. Therefore, there needs to be policy in place that allows unaccompanied child

migrants easier access to legal representation. Chishti is hopeful that the Biden administration will provide relief in that area.

In regards to future policy changes, María M. Rodríguez outlines two changes that she believes would improve the asylum process for unaccompanied child migrants. Her first claim is basic; "every child should have an attorney, and definitely an attorney that can speak to them in their language, whatever that is, so they can accurately gather information and accurately put that information on applications" (María M. Rodríguez, interview via Zoom with author, March 26, 2021). Her second suggestion addresses the issue of language barriers, specifically in illiterate child migrants.

In addition I would say that all children, whether unaccompanied or not should have the opportunity to go to the asylum office to do their asylum case instead of having to do it in court. Once again, because it's less adversarial; there isn't an attorney or part of the government that is there to poke holes in their story, or be aggressive with their story. It's just their opportunity to share what happened to them, and it's a less traumatizing experience for the child (María M. Rodríguez, interview via Zoom with author, March 26, 2021).

This would allow child migrants who never received a basic and primary education the opportunity to still have their story told correctly on the asylum application.

In fact María M. Rodríguez detailed a client of hers that was not able to find the asylum application she had sent because he could not read the title. She then had to send photos so that he could match the document in his possession to the document photo she sent him (María M. Rodríguez, interview via Zoom with author, March 26, 2021). This demonstrates how incapable many unaccompanied child migrants are to fill out the asylum application on their own.

The great paradox in the United States asylum process is this: if a child migrant does not have an education, and that is why they are migrating, they cannot be held



accountable for their inability to complete the asylum application. Furthermore, if they cannot adequately complete their asylum application and they do not receive help in this process, they have a stronger possibility of inadvertently downplaying their role as refugee or true asylum seeker to that of an ordinary economic migrant.

### **Conclusion**

I argue that a lack of basic primary education can be understood as a human rights abuse, thus generating child migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America. This led me to question two things. Primarily, can a minor be classified as an economic migrant if they were not given the opportunity to receive a primary education? And secondarily, if education can be classified as a catalyst for child migration from this area, how can it alter immigration policy and international law in terms of classifying and processing child migrants at the United States border in terms of using refugee status and granting asylum?

If we prove that a lack of basic education is in fact a human rights abuse, how would we need to reform border and immigration policy that deals with migrant children from this area? Policy would need to reflect that education is no longer an economic factor, but a human rights factor, which would greatly affect how policy perceives and deals with child migrants. The process for determining refugee and asylee status is precisely what would change, impacting child migrants in these situations. Global laws and standards, that the United States are already in agreement with, moderate that human rights abuses constitute classification as a refugee or need for asylum. This would prove to be a catalyst for major changes in immigration legislation dealing with child migrants.

The classification system of classifying child migrants would also need to be changed to include the factor of education as a human right.

In this project I asked the question of if a minor should be classified as an economic migrant if they were not given the opportunity to receive a primary education, or at that point, can a lack of a basic primary education be understood as an indicator of a human rights abuse that is generating forced child migration. Furthermore, if education can be classified as a catalyst for child migration from this area, how can it alter immigration policy and international law in terms of classifying and processing child migrants at the United States border in terms of using refugee status and granting asylum? I asserted that if all of these things were occurring, necessary changes would need to be made in multiple levels of the system, and my research supports that education is lending itself to be an instigator of forced migration of unaccompanied child migrants from the Northern Triangle.

Because education is strongly influencing unaccompanied child migration, we must acknowledge its presence in both practice and policy. Therefore, when children arrive at the border or ports of entry, they need to be given more assistance when completing the I-589 form. Spanish speakers and translators should be available to aid children in filling out this form; public policy needs to be altered to allow this to happen. It was once available in at least some capacity, so there is no reason for it to not be available at all currently and over the last few years. Second, staff members, border control, and security agents should be trained on how push factors such as a denial of basic education directly affect unaccompanied child migration to the United States.

Ideally, the staff at these locations wouldn't be traditional border patrol officers. The most beneficial staff members would hold social worker positions. Border patrol, ICE, and other positions are not trained to deal with the complex situations that arise at the border. Migrants at ports of entry, or the border, have often experienced trauma and hardship. When taking into account unaccompanied child migrants, the trauma you can expect to see is multiplied. Therefore, it is crucial that the staff working these areas be trained in social work and trauma response, rather than hold the title of officer and have police training.

Furthermore, staff in these areas also need to have background training on the home countries and areas of origin of unaccompanied child migrants seeking asylum. Many children will not know how to classify themselves. In fact, many children may have a hard time describing what life events and trauma they have endured. This is especially true if they have only ever known hardship. A child simply cannot tell you something is wrong or out of the ordinary if they do not understand what the standard is; all they have is their experience, which they may believe to be normal. Therefore, the staff must know what the conditions are like in the region these children are coming from.

In this case, that means that staff members need to have a comprehensive understanding of the push factors of migration triggering unaccompanied child migration from the Northern Triangle. More than that, they must understand how the push factors work in a complex web, together, rather than independently. This in turn would mean that underlying issues, such as the human rights abuse of a lack of basic and primary education, would be on the radar of the staff receiving the asylee applicants. Having

knowledge on the crucial role education plays in unaccompanied child migration from this area could prevent the mass mislabeling of child migrants.

Furthermore, policy needs to reflect the human rights abuse that is occurring. The fact that children are being prevented from a human right, access to basic and primary education, and that their governments are doing nothing to protect that right, is a major international concern. Therefore, policy is needed to either aid the Northern Triangle governments in having legitimate control over the government and eliminating corruption, or the United States needs to have policy that acknowledges a human rights abuse is occurring in the cases of Northern Triangle children migrating to the United States alone. Theoretically, we need to acknowledge that forced migration, especially for unaccompanied child migrants, is not a one sided issue. It must be looked at from multiple viewpoints, allowing us to see how multiple factors work together to create the perfect storm that we have seen within this migration phenomenon of unaccompanied child migrants from the Northern Triangle.

While good progress has been made in my research, there were also limitations that prevented a greater amount of progress from being made. The biggest limitation has been the inability to speak with child migrants themselves due to IRB and ethics protocol. This limitation is to be expected, however, it is important to note that it does create a barrier of first hand accounts from the children themselves. Future research should consider the possibility of speaking with the children themselves, or consider this limitation when planning their research design. Another limitation has been funding. My needs were met for this project, but if a future researcher is able to secure funding to

travel and do interviews, or do cite visits with an ethnographic focus, that opportunity should be taken.

Further funding for projects such as this would allow researchers to better articulate first hand accounts and have a better understanding of the issues and factors at play themselves. Overall, future scholars could expand this research by entering the beast itself: asylum hearings in court and the asylum application process for children. The ability to sit in on these occurrences would be invaluable to future research regarding unaccompanied child migration from the Northern Triangle and how education affects the issue as a whole. A comparative study between migrants of varying education levels and asylum success rates could be a great study to do this. This would allow the researchers to look at how education level is directly related to asylum application acceptance in a more statistical way, providing a quantitative correlation that this study lacks.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Foreign-born population for selected countries of birth, 1990-2015

*In thousands*

Years	All countries	Mexico	Total Central America	Northern Triangle			
				Total Northern Triangle	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras
2015	44,750	12,025	3,540	3,030	1,420	980	630
2014	43,650	12,175	3,420	2,920	1,370	945	595
2013	43,375	12,150	3,350	2,850	1,320	955	580
2012	42,550	12,050	3,330	2,830	1,320	930	580
2011	41,900	12,250	3,210	2,720	1,300	890	530
2010	41,125	12,225	3,100	2,630	1,250	830	545
2009	40,675	12,350	3,100	2,570	1,230	840	500
2008	40,550	12,475	3,010	2,520	1,180	825	515
2007	40,550	12,750	2,940	2,430	1,200	750	480
2006	39,250	12,250	2,840	2,350	1,110	800	435
2005	38,100	11,875	2,710	2,200	1,070	705	430
2000	32,650	9,380	2,250	1,700	980	405	310
1995	26,875	7,310	1,730	1,310	740	340	225
1990	20,950	5,620	1,360	980	595	265	115

Note: All numbers are rounded independently and are not adjusted to sum to the U.S. total or other totals. See Methodology for rounding rules. Central America includes Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates for 2005-2015 based on augmented American Community Survey (IPUMS); for 1995 and 2000 based on augmented March Supplements to the Current Population Survey. Estimates for 1990 are from augmented 1990 census tabulations.

"Rise in U.S. Immigrants From El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras Outpaces Growth From Elsewhere"

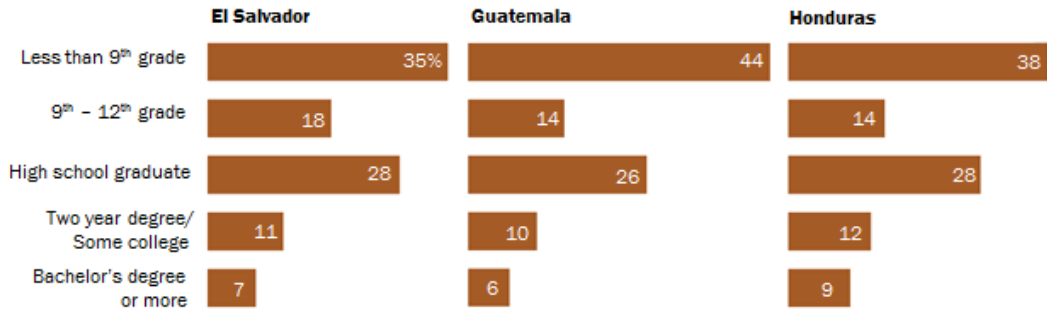
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Table 2. Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions by Country (2018).

Numbers below reflect Fiscal Years 2013 - 2018

Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions by Country						
Country	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018
El Salvador	5,990	16,404	9,389	17,512	9,143	4,949
Guatemala	8,068	17,057	13,589	18,913	14,827	22,327
Honduras	6,747	18,244	5,409	10,468	7,784	10,913
Mexico	17,240	15,634	11,012	11,926	8,877	10,136

Figure 1. Educational Attainment of Northern Triangle immigrants. This figure illustrates the % of immigrants ages 25 and older from \_\_\_ with designated education level (2015).



Note: Shares may not add to 100% due to rounding. "High school graduate" includes persons who have attained a high school diploma or its equivalent, such as a GED.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented 2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

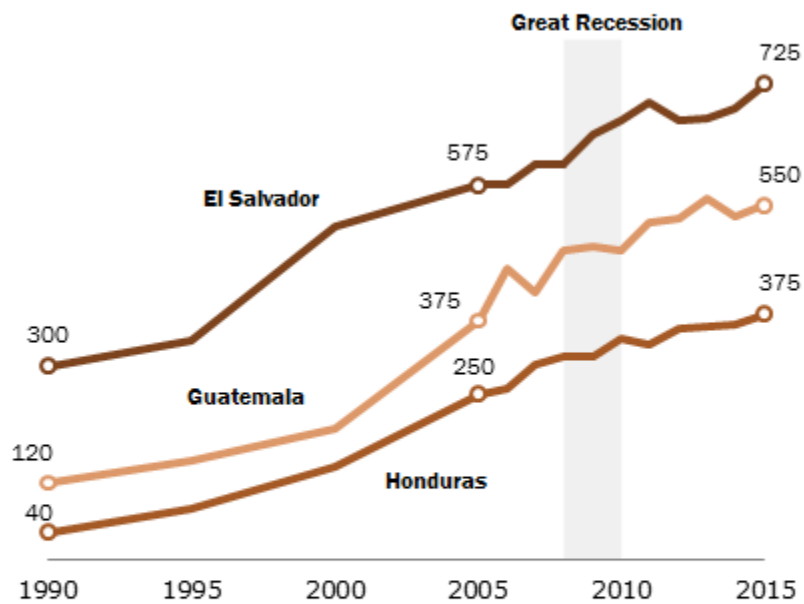
"Rise in U.S. Immigrants From El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras Outpaces Growth From Elsewhere"

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Figure 2. U.S. unauthorized immigrant population from Northern Triangle countries more than tripled since 1990 (2017).

### U.S. unauthorized immigrant population from Northern Triangle countries more than tripled since 1990

*In thousands*



Note: Data labels are for 1990, 2005 and 2015. See methodology for rounding rules. The Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on adjusted 1990 census, augmented 1995 and 2000 Current Population Survey and augmented 2005-2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

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