A Set of Borders to Cross; For Children Seeking Immigrant Relatives in U.S., Journey Is Twofold

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Body

Seventeen-year-old Guillermo Antonio Iraheta Hernandez traveled thousands of miles from his native El Salvador only to land in limbo.

Left behind more than a decade ago by his parents, illegal ***immigrants*** living in Northern Virginia, Iraheta made part of his trek to the ***United States*** hidden in the baggage compartment of a Mexican bus. But soon after surreptitiously ***crossing*** the Rio Grande into Texas, he was picked up by the ***Border*** Patrol and brought here to a converted nursing home run by the federal government where 136 ***children*** from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are temporarily housed.

Iraheta is but one drop in a new and fast-growing stream of illegal immigration to the ***United States***, those under 18 who are sneaking into the country without their parents. Authorities say the phenomenon is growing and includes girls traveling alone and even toddlers being carried by older siblings or entrusted to smugglers.

Many of those who are apprehended by the ***Border*** Patrol end up in a burgeoning network of shelters ***set*** up by the ***U.S.*** Department of Health and Human Services. There they run up against Washington's paradoxical approach to the problem of ***children*** who entered the country illegally without their parents. The government agency that runs the shelters tries to reunite the ***children*** with ***relatives*** living here, regardless of their legal status. Another federal agency works to deport them -- as well as their parents. Iraheta's mother and father are reluctant to come forward to claim their son, fearing that would lead to being sent back to El Salvador. So are his sisters, who are also in the country illegally. Even uncles who are legal ***U.S.*** residents living in Texas have stayed away.

"They're afraid this might not be in their best interest," said Iraheta's sister, Dina. "Nobody wants to help him. Nobody wants to do anything, and that's the problem."

Iraheta, whose father paid a smuggler $6,000 to bring him into the county, said he would like to attend high school and college in the ***United States***, perhaps to study literature.

"Every day I pray that someone in the family will come forward to help advance my case," the teenager said.

Last fiscal year, the ***Border*** Patrol apprehended 115,000 unaccompanied minors, up from 98,000 in 2001. Almost 7,800 ***children*** landed in the federally funded system of shelters last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, 2005 -- 25 percent of them girls, 20 percent under 15.

Fueling this immigration is the crackdown on ***border*** enforcement and illegal ***immigrants***, authorities and immigration experts say. Adults in the ***United States*** without legal papers who used to risk trips to Central America to retrieve ***children*** and make the illegal trip back across the Mexican ***border*** are hiring smugglers instead. Documented ***immigrants*** waiting years for approval from immigration officials to bring their ***children*** to the ***United States*** legally are also turning to traffickers.

So the ***children*** come alone, undertaking arduous ***journeys***, including treks across deserts and rivers, led by smugglers who will not hesitate to abandon those who are sick or weak or cannot keep up. Many of the girls are sexually abused along the way.

Robert Garza, director of operations of the shelter in Nixon, where Iraheta is living, said that when he started his job three years ago, he was taken aback by the young ages of the ***children*** brought in by immigration authorities and the youngsters' stories about their ***journeys***.

"I thought, how can a parent send a ***child*** on that long ***journey***, not knowing what'***s*** going to happen?" Garza said. "But it'***s*** the environment they come from. There is no hope, and the only way out of that environment is to come to America. That'***s*** how they see the ***United States*** -- as hope."

Most of the ***children*** in the shelters come from Central America. ***Children*** from Mexico who are caught at the ***border*** are immediately returned, though the ones who make it into the ***United States*** may end up in shelters if they are caught by immigration authorities. In the past two years, the shelter system across the Southwest has grown to 21 from five. Most are in Texas.

Some, like Texas Sheltered Care in Nixon, are plush worlds compared with the living conditions the juveniles left behind. The shelter in Nixon offers classes in English, math, carpentry and computer skills. The ***children*** get round-the-clock supervision, plus counseling, medical care and recreation -- even yoga classes and outings to bowling alleys or local football game pep rallies.

The shelter'***s*** walls are decorated with colorful posters depicting the seasons and inspirational sayings in English and Spanish. Large flags on the wall announce the residents' home countries: Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil. A courtyard garden, tended by the ***children***, is dotted with wooden ***crosses*** they made to memorialize loved ones who died back home -- part of the grief counseling offered by one social worker. They get bused weekly to the local swimming pool, once a whites-only facility. Today it is an illegal-***immigrants***-only pool and is owned by Texas Sheltered Care.

Mostly, though, the ***children*** wait, hoping social workers can cajole their parents or other kin to claim them before Immigration and Customs Enforcement lawyers can persuade an immigration judge to deport them.

"We're a social service agency. We aren't law enforcement," said Maureen Dunn, director of HHS'***s*** Division of Unaccompanied ***Children***'***s*** Services, which runs the shelters. "We want to make sure kids are safe and well cared for and that they are safely reunified."

Dunn'***s*** agency was created in 2004 as the result of a lawsuit settled on behalf of ***immigrant children***. Before the ruling, ***children*** generally were sent to juvenile detention centers to await deportation. Now, the agency'***s*** goal is to reunite unaccompanied ***immigrant children*** with their parents or close ***relatives***. If that occurs, the ***children*** are then ordered to appear in an immigration court for a hearing that might lead to their deportation. But no one knows how many keep that court date or how many just melt into the country'***s*** underground world of undocumented ***immigrants***.

"It'***s*** kind of a gaping hole in the new wall that'***s*** supposedly going up against illegal immigration," said Don Barnett, a fellow with the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors tighter ***borders*** and immigration controls.

To get custody of their ***children***, many of these parents must appear in person. While HHS will not turn them in, many fear capture at ***Border*** Patrol checkpoints on highways and in airports, or by the increasing number of local police agencies that have been given the power to enforce immigration laws. Some ***immigrants*** also just don't believe the assurances of social workers that they are not an arm of la migra.

"I told them 'No, this is like a school, there are no police here,' " Iraheta said, describing how he tried to reassure his parents and persuade them to claim him. "But they're scared to come get me; they don't have the courage."

Many ***children*** languish in shelters for weeks, attending immigration court hearings periodically, until a judge issues a deadline for reunification or a deportation order.

"I feel sorry for any ***child*** that doesn't get reunified, especially if it'***s*** [with] the parents or siblings," said Jose Munoz, one of the Nixon caseworkers. "Some of it is due to being undocumented, and some of it is they're scared to travel. . . . What happens is that it becomes an emotional roller coaster for the ***child***."

Nelvin Johac Lara Pineda, 17, left Honduras with one goal: Get to the ***United States***, get a job, and send money home because his parents and five younger siblings are being threatened with eviction from their small home.

The boy'***s*** father, a field laborer, borrowed money last year from an acquaintance to tide the family over while he was ill and unable to work. Lara worked the fields, too, having left school after fifth grade to help his father support the family. But this year, with both of them working, they made enough to cover only the interest payments and none of the loan principal. The lender began threatening the family with eviction.

"I want to help my father, and I don't want my family to end up on the street," said the doe-eyed boy. "For me, it'***s*** no problem to be out on the street. But not for my parents or my brothers."

Lara left Honduras in early May, walking for six days through Guatemala and traveling through Mexico atop freight trains. He swam the Rio Grande into Texas one night in late May and was promptly apprehended by the ***Border*** Patrol. He was transferred to Nixon on June 6.

Lara gave his caseworker at Texas Sheltered Care the names of cousins and other distant ***relatives*** in the ***United States*** who were called to see if they would sponsor his release from the shelter. Undocumented also, they did not want to step forward for fear of being deported.

In mid-September, an immigration judge in San Antonio issued a deportation order for Lara, and the teenager cried and cried. "I don't know what we're going to do," he said later. "I've talked to Papi and he still fears that they will be evicted. I couldn't realize what I came to do. I guess that'***s*** it."

After the order, his clothing was restricted: Like other ***children*** with deportation orders, he had to wear red shorts, a white T-shirt, white socks and brown slippers at all times so the shelter could keep track of him and make sure he didn't try to run away.

Earlier this month, Lara was put on a plane by ICE agents and sent back to Honduras.

But not all stories end that way.

Last December, after years of telephone conversations, Yeni Patricia Castillo Medrano, a tall, soft-spoken 17-year-old from El Salvador, met her father for the first time. Having obtained legal papers to live in the ***United States*** and travel back home, her father, who lives in Northern Virginia, visited El Salvador for the first time in 17 years.

She was thrilled to meet him, yet Castillo admitted the visit didn't go well. "I treated him badly; I spoke to him badly," she said. This is a normal reaction, immigration experts say, from ***children*** whose parents leave home to make a better life for their families. But in late August, Castillo told her father in a telephone conversation that she wanted to join him. He paid almost $7,000 to a smuggling ring to bring her to him.

Castillo and four other teenagers from her village illegally entered Mexico from Guatemala aboard a makeshift raft, traveled in the baggage compartment of a bus through Mexico and floated on inner tubes across the Rio Grande.

By the time the ***Border*** Patrol apprehended Castillo in south Texas, the girl had been walking through desert and brush for almost four days. Dehydrated and ill from heat exhaustion, she was taken to a hospital for an overnight stay.

Twenty days after arriving at the Nixon shelter, Castillo flew from Houston to Reagan National Airport, where she was reunited with her father, Mardoqueo Castillo.

The girl and her father hugged tightly upon meeting, and she cried. She was sad, she said, to leave the girlfriends she had made at the Nixon shelter, but glad to be with her father.

"How would I not be happy to be here with my loved ones?" she said, before walking out of the airport terminal, her head on her father'**s** shoulder, her hand in his.

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