

Fleeing Gangs, Children Head to U.S. Border

By [FRANCES ROBLES](#) JULY 9, 2014

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras — Anthony O. Castellanos disappeared from his gang-ridden neighborhood on the eastern edge of Honduras's most dangerous city, so his younger brother, Kenneth, hopped on his green bicycle to search for him, starting his hunt at a notorious gang hangout known as the "crazy house."

They were found within days of each other, both dead. Anthony, 13, and a friend had been shot in the head; Kenneth, 7, had been tortured and beaten with sticks and rocks. They were among seven children murdered in the La Pradera neighborhood of San Pedro Sula in April alone, part of a surge in gang violence that is claiming younger and younger victims.

The killings are a major factor driving the recent wave of migration of Central American children to the United States, which has sent an unprecedented number of unaccompanied minors across the Texas border. Many children and parents say the rush of new migrants stems from a belief that United States immigration policy offers preferential treatment to minors, but in addition, studies of Border Patrol statistics show a strong correlation between cities like San Pedro Sula with high homicide rates and swarms of youngsters taking off for the United States.

"The first thing we can think of is to send our children to the United States," said a mother of two in La Pradera, who declined to give her name because she feared gang reprisals. "That's the idea, to leave."

Honduran children are increasingly on the front lines of gang violence. In June, 32 children were murdered in Honduras, bringing the number of youths under 18 killed since January of last year to 409, according to data compiled by Covenant House, a youth shelter in Tegucigalpa, the capital.

With two major youth gangs and more organized crime syndicates operating with impunity in Central America, analysts say immigration authorities will have a difficult time keeping children at home unless the root causes of violence are addressed.

In 2012, the number of murder victims ages 10 to 14 had doubled to 81 from 40 in 2008, according to the Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University of Honduras. Last year, 1,013 people under 23 were murdered in a nation of eight million.

Although homicides dropped sharply in 2012 after a gang truce in neighboring El Salvador, so far this year murders of children 17 and under are up 77 percent from the same time period a year ago, the police said.

Nowhere is the flow of departures more acute than in San Pedro Sula, a city in northwestern Honduras that has the world's highest homicide rate, according to United Nations figures.

Between January and May of this year, more than 2,200 children from the city arrived in the United States, according to Department of Homeland Security [statistics](#), far more than from any other city in Central America.

More than half of the top 50 Central American cities from which children are leaving for the United States are in Honduras. Virtually none of the children have come from Nicaragua, a bordering country that has staggering poverty, but not a pervasive gang culture or a record-breaking murder rate. “Everyone has left,” Alan Castellanos, 27, the uncle of Anthony and Kenneth, said in an interview in late May. “How is it that an entire country is being brought to its knees?”

He said the gangs operated with total impunity. “They killed all those kids and nobody did anything about it,” Mr. Castellanos said. “When prosecutors wanted to discuss the case, they asked us to meet at their office, because they were afraid to come here. If they were afraid, imagine us.”

The factors pushing children to migrate vary, according to an analysis of their home cities by the Department of Homeland Security.

The Guatemalan children who arrive in the United States are more often from rural areas, suggesting their motives are largely economic. The minors from El Salvador and Honduras tend to come from extremely violent regions “where they probably perceive the risk of traveling alone to the U.S. preferable to remaining at home,” the analysis said.

“Basically, the places these people are coming from are the places with the highest homicide rates,” said Manuel Orozco, a senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based research group. “The parents see gang membership around the corner. Once your child is forced to join, the chances of being killed or going to prison is pretty high. Why wait until that happens?”

A confluence of factors, including discounted rates charged by smugglers for families, helped ignite the boom, he said. Children are killed for refusing to join gangs, over vendettas against their parents, or because they are caught up in gang disputes. Many activists here suggest they are also murdered by police officers willing to clean up the streets by any means possible.

In the case of the Castellanos family, the police said the older boy was a lookout for the gang and had decided to quit. The order to kill him, the police said, came from prison.

Several arrests have been made. Héctor A. Medina, 47, who the police said lived at an abandoned house controlled by the 18th Street gang, where Kenneth was killed, was charged in the boys’ deaths. “It’s a serious social problem: any children born in this neighborhood are going to get involved in a gang,” said Elvin Flores, a police inspector in charge of La Pradera. “Our idea is to lower crime every day. We need a state policy to involve kids from when they are little to go to school.”

But gangs, which rob, sell drugs locally, kidnap people and extort money from businesses, often recruit new members at schools.

In some cities, blocks are empty because gangs demanding extortion payments have forced out homeowners. Many people have had to move within the country in a displacement pattern that experts liken to the one seen in Colombia's civil war.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said that from 2008 to 2013, the number of asylum claims filed in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize increased sevenfold.

Most were from people of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the three nations with large numbers of migrants now arriving at the United States border.

Refugee advocacy organizations have urged the State Department to treat the children arriving at the United States border as refugees, and proposed a processing system where asylum claims could be reviewed in Central America and those accepted could move safely to the United States or countries willing to accept them, as was done in countries such as Haiti and Iraq. They have not yet received a response, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said.

Mr. Obama urged Congress on Wednesday night to pass a \$3.7 billion budget supplement that would, among other things, beef up border security, hasten deportations and help Central American nations address security problems. "The best thing we can do is make sure the children can live in their own countries, safely," he said.

During a recent late-night visit to the San Pedro Sula morgue, more than 60 bodies, all victims of violence, were seen piled in a heap, each wrapped in a brown plastic bag. While picking bullets out of a 15-year-old boy shot 15 times, technicians discussed how they regularly received corpses of children under 10, and sometimes as young as 2.

Last week, in nearby Santa Barbara, an 11-year-old had his throat slit by other children, because he did not pay a 50-cent extortion fee.

"At first we saw a lot of kids who were being killed because when the gang came for their parents, they happened to be in the car or at the location with them," said Dr. Darwin Armas Cruz, a medical examiner who works the overnight shift. "Now we see kids killing kids. They kill with guns, knives and even grenades."

Dr. Armas said his family was thinking of migrating, too.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/world/americas/fleeing-gangs-children-head-to-us-border.html>