

Hondurans fled to the US because their lives were in danger. The US sent them back.

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For the United States, the reason that tens of thousands of Central Americans arriving on the US-Mexico border this summer was a crisis was that [too many people were showing up at the border for the system to handle](#). The Obama administration's bet was that a hardline against arriving migrants would curtail the flow of people, resolving a political headache and possibly even doing would-be future immigrants a favor by sparing them the dangerous journey through Mexico to the US border. Anything they could do to deter more Central Americans from coming here could save lives — and get a political hassle off the table.

These days, from the perspective of the US border, [the migrant crisis is in remission](#) — far fewer Central Americans are making it here. But evidence suggests that for Hondurans who were deported from the US this year, deportation really has put them in mortal peril.

There aren't reliable numbers suggesting how many people have been killed after being deported back to Central America, although [one report from a morgue in Honduras](#) said that between five and ten recently deported children had been murdered as of August. But a [new report from Human Rights Watch](#), which interviewed 25 recently deported Hondurans — who researchers found by introducing themselves as deportees off the plane from the US — shows that most of the deportees can't return to their normal lives because gangs have marked them for death.

"I put on a motorcycle helmet to come here"

The Hondurans interviewed in the report fled Honduras because their lives had explicitly been threatened — mostly by gangs. One man had been shot in the back repeatedly by a gang initiate, and had to spend two months in the hospital and relearn how to walk. Even though he'd initially been targeted at random — the initiate was told to kill the next person he saw — he found out after he recovered that the initiate was now obligated to track him down and finish the job. Another man had sent his wife and son to the US after gang members tried to kidnap his son, then left on his own once he heard they were safe. And at least two of the 25 deportees had fled the country after they watched their mothers killed by gang members — knowing that witnesses of gang murders aren't allowed to live.

Now that they've been returned to Honduras, their only priority is to make sure the gang members looking for them don't know they're back in the country. And because gangs are so powerful, and the government provides no protection, that means making sure *no one* knows they're back in the country. Deported Hondurans hiding from gang violence can't work, stay in their homes, or even see their children.

Many of the Hondurans interviewed in the report haven't been able to return to their houses — instead, they're staying with relatives, or moving from house to house every few days, so that gang members don't know they've returned to the country. One man, who left Honduras after his

life was threatened by a gang member who was having an affair with his wife, told the report authors that he couldn't go outside without covering his face: "I put on a motorcycle helmet inside the house to come here."

Deported Hondurans are too afraid even to contact their children to let them know they've returned. The man who wears the motorcycle helmet outdoors said, "I think about my children all the time. I can't contact them or tell them that I'm back in the country though. That would be dangerous." Another man, who fled Honduras after he watched his mother get killed by gang members, said, "I have two kids here but I can't see them because that would put them in danger. They can't know I'm here."

Asylum law doesn't always protect the threatened

As horrifying as some of the stories of deported Hondurans are, US asylum law doesn't protect everyone whose life is threatened by gangs. To get asylum, applicants [have to prove](#) that they're being targeted because of their "race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group." (See [here](#) for more on how asylum works.) So Hondurans who are marked for death by gangs because they're small business owners who failed to pay extortion money, for example, aren't necessarily eligible for asylum in the US.

However, some of the deported Hondurans interviewed in the study said that their entire families had been threatened — which *would* make them eligible for asylum (in this context, family counts as a "social group"). Furthermore, all of this is supposed to be up to an asylum officer or an immigration judge to determine. And none of the Hondurans in the report even got the chance to make their case. It appears that officials charged with securing the southern border operate with an overwhelming presumption that would-be migrants from Latin America have economic motives rather than legitimate asylum claims.

Border officials have been deporting asylum-seekers

When officials at the border apprehend someone and prepare to deport him, they're supposed to screen him to make sure he's *not* afraid of returning to his home country. Anyone who says he is afraid of threats or persecution is supposed to be referred to an asylum officer, who can conduct a longer interview to determine whether or not the applicant is likely to qualify for asylum — in legal terms, whether he has "credible fear." Immigrants who pass that interview go to an immigration judge for a full hearing.

The border officials screening Hondurans this summer (at least the 25 deported Hondurans who were interviewed for the report) didn't just fail to ask if they were afraid to return to their home countries. They paid no attention when Hondurans *said* they were under threat. "I asked for asylum," one deportee said. "The officer told me don't apply, 90 percent of the people who do don't get it." Another deportee said, "The officers don't pay attention to you. If you say you are afraid they say they 'can't do anything.' All they said to me was that if I came back they would give me six more months in prison."

This is consistent with reports about [how border officials treat unaccompanied children who come to the US from Mexico](#) — who officials are also responsible for making sure aren't afraid to return before deporting them. In fact, there's evidence that border officials just don't take asylum claims that seriously when they come from Mexicans or Central Americans apprehended coming into the US.

The Human Rights Watch report compiles data from October 2010 to September 2012 — before the child and family migrant crisis hit the headlines in the US, but during the current wave of gang violence in Central America. It finds a huge gap between the way Mexicans and Central Americans are treated, and the way immigrants from other countries are treated:

It makes some sense that more people coming through the US-Mexico border from faraway countries would be claiming asylum than people coming here from Central America. But that kind of thinking can also be self-fulfilling: if officials assume that people coming to the US from Central America *aren't* coming here for asylum, they're likely to be skeptical or dismissive of people who do say they're afraid to return.

In fact, most of the immigrants who get referred for asylum pre-interviews, according to the HRW data, don't get referred by the agency that's supposed to be doing the screenings. Three quarters of all immigrants who got referred for asylum pre-interviews between 2010 and 2012 were referred by officials Immigration and Customs Enforcement or another agency — who just happened to hear something from an immigrant that indicated they might qualify for asylum. The agency that's required to ask immigrants about their fear, Customs and Border Protection, was only responsible for a quarter of referrals.

What happens now?

The US government removes immigrants' shoelaces before they're deported. The Attention Center for the Returned Migrant in San Pedro Sula gives them a new set. (Stephen Ferry/Human Rights Watch)

The good news is that, with far fewer Central American children and families coming into the US in recent months, the government is no longer pressured to take extraordinary measures. It's possible (although, given the data from previous years, unlikely) that border officials are less dismissive of immigrants who claim they're afraid — or that immigrants have better access to lawyers, even at the border. There is evidence that families in detention centers, at least, have better access to lawyers now than they did over the summer. So the US might be deporting fewer immigrants back to mortal peril now than it was a few months ago.

But the Hondurans interviewed in the HRW report, who've already been deported, simply can't return to their jobs, families or lives — which means they can't stay in the country. "Almost everyone suffering these kinds of threats," the report says, "told Human Rights Watch that they planned to flee the country again as soon as possible." Some were already making plans to try to come to the US again.

They might be headed to other countries in the region, which have also seen an explosion of asylum applications. And if they do try to make it to the US, they may not make it — the [Mexican government has gotten more aggressive](#) in apprehending immigrants going from Central America to the US. But the federal government has made a point of saying that just because the migrant crisis is currently in remission doesn't mean it won't happen again next year. And if many of the people they've already deported have no intention of staying in their home countries, that's a big indication the problem hasn't been solved.

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