

## Fear Is Driving Young Men Across the U.S. Border Central American Countries Lose a Generation Because of Gangs.

The day of his first kidnapping, Wander's life broke in two. Before it, he was a middle-class kid living in a humid Honduran city. Growing up, he had a live-in maid, attended private school, and enjoyed a modest but steady flow of new clothing and electronics. After graduating high school, he drove a bus for his mother's transportation company. Then, on the morning of June 12, 2014, when he was 19, a quartet of masked men approached his black Toyota Corolla, ordered him to exit, and shoved a pistol against his skull.

Their goal was simple. They wanted money, and they knew Wander, the child of a small-time entrepreneur, had it.

The men pulled a ski mask over his head. It quickly filled with snot and tears. "I was a boy more than anything," he said. "I knew nothing about life." The men kept him for three days, until his mother arranged to pay \$4000 for his freedom.

Once released, Wander went to the police, who asked him to identify his kidnapers from a series of photographs. He thrust a finger toward a man he recognized, then left. Days later, that man arrived at his door. The police, Wander presumed, had tipped him off. "You ratted us out," the man growled. "Now we're going to kill you." Once again: the pistol, the ski mask, the crying. Only through error—his captors left him alone temporarily—did he escape.

From then on, Wander was a marked man with a powerful gang on his tail. He shuttled northward, arriving in New York in October 2015. "I couldn't live in Honduras anymore," he said one day this winter, a sparse mustache above his lips, his cheeks freckled lightly with acne. "These people are consuming my country."

Wander is part of a new surge of immigrants crossing into the United States: young Central Americans fleeing swelling violence in countries where the state is too weak or too corrupt to protect them. In fiscal year 2014, just over 6,000 immigrants under the age of 18 were taken into custody by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, which provides services for unaccompanied immigrant youth after their apprehension. In 2018, the government is planning for 60,000.

The surge prompted the American government administration to declare a humanitarian crisis and establish emergency shelters for young migrants in

California, Oklahoma, and Texas. It has also forced U.S. officials to face a new round of immigration-related questions: Who should receive safe haven in the country and who should be sent back? And how will courts, hospitals, and other institutions deal with the influx?

Most of the young migrants in government custody come from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Seventy percent are between the ages of 15 and 17. And three-quarters of them are male. Over the past decade, massive efforts to root out the drug trade in Colombia and Mexico have transformed Central American countries into critical and hotly contested slices of territory for cartels funneling narcotics into the United States. The wave of child and teen émigrés, experts say, is related to the ascension of these gangs, who feed on the money and manpower that youths provide; these gangs pursue the young victims with an almost-religious persistence.

In 2012, the Refugee Commission, a research and advocacy group, conducted field studies to examine the causes of this unprecedented influx. Of the 151 young immigrants interviewed, nearly 80 percent said that violence was the main reason young people were fleeing their countries.

“It’s push factors, not pull factors,” said Jennifer Podkul, a senior program officer at the Refugee Commission. “These countries are losing a generation.”

Those interviewed by RC described gangs with “join or die” policies. They spoke of limbs left on doorsteps, and of gang members who used rape to coerce girls into selling drugs. “They said that staying in their country would guarantee death, and that making the dangerous journey would at least give them a chance to survive,” reads a report summarizing the commission’s findings.

Wander, for one, never wanted to leave Honduras. He was comfortable there. In New York, he works 13-hour days for minimum wage at a supermarket, and lives in a partitioned section of a living room. He has two young children back home. (After he fled, they moved with their mother to another Honduran city where they can live anonymously.) They call to him over the cell phone he keeps strapped to his waist.

He speaks with his mother every day. “Am I happy? No,” he said. “It is wrong what is happening to these hard-working people.” Young men like Wander stream north – riding atop open trains through Mexico, hoping somehow to gain access to

the United States before they are caught and killed by the gangs pursuing them. It is a tragic migration.

While the number of young Central Americans crossing into the United States has grown, few will find legal safe haven in their adopted home. Some will qualify for visas designated for victims of specific abuses, like human trafficking or parental abandonment. But immigrants who haven't suffered these particular crimes—including Wander—are left to apply for asylum. The real story here is that there are not adequate forms of relief for all those who need protection from the deadly gangs of Central America..