

The invisibles: 57,000 minors crossed the Southern border last year. Should we send them back?

By Billy Ball 




Photo by Alex Boerner

NO GOING BACK: Sofia, who immigrated to the U.S. after gang members terrorized her school, wants to stay at her home in Durham.

Somewhere between the gang-riddled streets of Honduras and the Rio Grande River, Jessica*, a 13-year-old with long, curly hair, a pretty face and dreams of being a model, seemed to fall into a black hole.

The men who'd promised to deliver her to the U.S. border had abandoned her in a warehouse populated by drunks, drug addicts and other desperate children fleeing violence in Central America. Jessica hoped to make it to the border, where she figured American officials would reunite her in Durham with her mother, who'd fled Honduras a decade ago to escape an abusive partner.

Her mother, Claudia, an undocumented immigrant, lost all contact with her daughter after Jessica was dumped at the bodega in the fall of 2012. She didn't hear from her for days. Then Jessica phoned her sometime after midnight, crying. A man from the bodega had taken her to an abandoned home, where he planned to have sex with her. When he went to the bathroom, Jessica stole his phone and called her mom.

"She was screaming, crying, she wanted to go home," Claudia would later recall. "It was just horrible. I felt like I was dying here."

When the man returned, Claudia, still on the phone, pleaded with him: "Don't touch my daughter." Furious, he threatened to imprison Jessica for the next two weeks, then hung up. He didn't make good on his threat.

A few hours later, a woman called Claudia to tell her that Jessica was with her at the bodega. The woman promised to look after her.

Claudia heard nothing for days, until the woman dropped off Jessica at a bridge over the Rio Grande. Jessica was quickly apprehended by border guards and eventually flown to reunite with her mother.

Those empty stretches, where there was no contact or explanation for Jessica's disappearance, still haunt Claudia. And Jessica isn't talking about it, has never talked about it, not even to her own mother.

"I always live with this doubt," says Claudia. "Did they abuse her? I ask her and I ask her and she doesn't say anything. She cries and says, 'Mom, don't ask me that.'"

There's a not-insignificant segment of America that believes Jessica—and thousands of children just like her, colloquially known as "unaccompanied minors," who've made the fraught journey from dangerous environs in Central America—needs to be sent home, the sooner the better.

These teens and children—more than a quarter are younger than 14, according to federal data—have been making the trek for years. But 2014 saw an unprecedented spike: A reported 57,000 minors flooded across the southern border. Since then, the feds have delivered more than 2,000 of them to sponsors in North Carolina, mostly parents who'd left their kids behind to earn money for their families back home.

Most come from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, a few from Mexico. Their journey is marked by kidnappings, sexual abuse and worse. Some make it. Others, advocates say, are never seen or heard from again, sold into international sex trafficking schemes, raped or murdered by vicious Central American crime syndicates.

"There are so many of them who are victimized," says Luke Smith, executive director of El Futuro, a Durham-based nonprofit that provides mental health care for Latino immigrants.

As it's doing now with the Syrian refugee crisis, the media last year shined a spotlight on the plight of these

children. But much of the attention's gone now. The calls to address what President Obama called a "humanitarian crisis" have faded. And in North Carolina, these children are often left without access to social programs they need: They are denied Medicaid assistance and struggle to fit into their new schools, which typically don't offer specialized teaching programs or outreach.

Meanwhile, federal deportation courts, which do not guarantee undocumented immigrants legal representation, are speedy and brutal. Court hearings sometimes last only minutes, says Derrick Hensley, a Durham immigration attorney who represents dozens of unaccompanied minors.

"It's the government's job to take apart the claim of the other side, whether it's an adult or an infant," says Hensley. "It's just stacked. The government always has a strong advocate."

Nevertheless, empathy can seem in shortly supply. Last July, protesters in Murrieta, California, blocked busloads of detainees, many of them women and children, who were being shipped from overcrowded immigration facilities in Texas to California, where they would be reunited with loved ones. "Go home!" they chanted. "We want to be safe!"

The same animus was seen in the Triangle, too. Responding to the Obama administration's calls for spare clothing for undocumented detainees, one Raleigh-based political action committee, Americans For Legal Immigration, asked its followers to mail dirty underwear.

William Gheen, the group's president, argues that the wave of unaccompanied minors is an invasion cooked up by liberals and President Obama to turn the United States into a socialist state. "'Refugee' and 'asylum' are just code words for the president," says Gheen. "It's just another way to flood America with illegal immigrants."

This sort of sentiment isn't confined to the far-right fringe.

Last July, in a letter to the White House, Gov. Pat McCrory and the Republican governors of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Utah, Kansas and Alabama urged federal officials to speedily return the children to their homes.

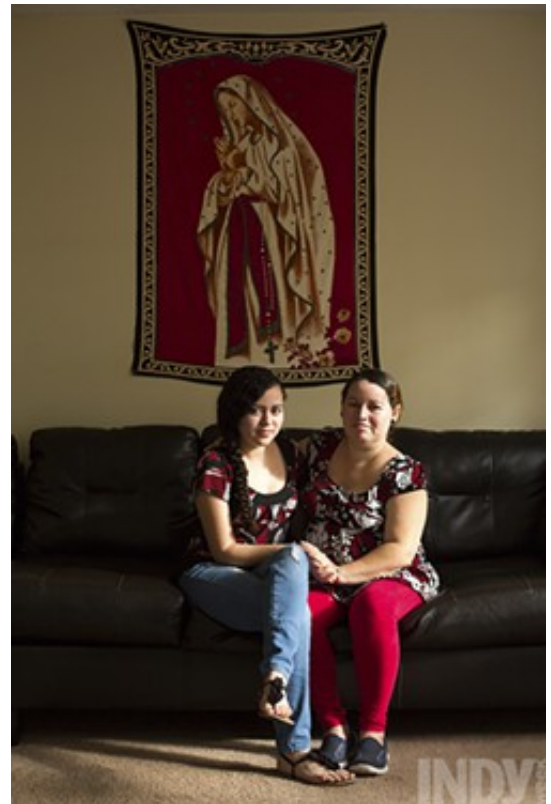
"We are concerned that there will be significant numbers who will end up using the public schools, social services and health systems largely funded by the states," the letter read. "More importantly, we are concerned that the failure to return the unaccompanied children will send a message that will encourage a much larger movement towards our southern border."

(Many of these same critics, including McCrory, are today pushing to deny asylum to Syrian refugees fleeing a devastating civil war.)

Earlier this year, the N.C. General Assembly approved the Protect North Carolina Workers Act, its key tenet being to outlaw so-called sanctuary cities, municipalities such as Chapel Hill, Carrboro and Durham that order their local police officers not to ask about an individual's immigration status when responding to emergency calls. Without that guarantee, advocates say, many immigrants are afraid to call police, regardless of the need.

For immigrants, documented or otherwise, this is a toxic moment. But to Smith, the important thing isn't the right

[click to enlarge](#)



• Photo by Alex Boerner
• REUNITED AT LAST: Patricia (right) was separated from her daughter, Sofia (left), for more than a decade

and wrong of how the kids got here. Rather, it's about treating their ailments once they arrive, a score on which America has failed.

In October, El Futuro held training seminars at Triangle universities to prepare local mental health professionals and family doctors to identify and treat these traumatized children. Several area nonprofits, meanwhile, have led concerted efforts to connect unaccompanied minors with badly needed legal representation and health care. And a scant few school systems in North Carolina have unveiled pioneering attempts to address this cohort's needs, including hiring de facto social workers to track and monitor the children in school.

It's not enough, but minus any substantial show of compassion or planning for America's refugee-besieged borders, advocates say, these piecemeal efforts are all they have.

"Now that they're settled, they're not feeling unaccompanied," says Smith. "They're feeling invisible."

This isn't a movie. It's real life."

Tears well in Marissa's eyes when she recalls the three weeks her daughter, Christine, spent last summer with Los Zetas, a gang of Mexican cutthroats who've made a business out of kidnapping unaccompanied minors and ransoming them back to their parents.

Last year, partway through Christine's arduous expedition from Honduras to the U.S., Los Zetas kidnapped her and threatened to kill her if Marissa didn't hand over \$3,000. Marissa knew they weren't bluffing.

"If I had known everything that would happen, I would have never come here," Marissa says.

She immigrated more than five years ago to earn a better living in the United States. (In Honduras, she worked 15-hour days for as little as \$40 to \$50 a week.) She didn't want her daughter to make the trip—it was too dangerous—but Christine begged to join her mother in Durham.

Back in Honduras, local gang members had set their sights on the then-12-year-old. They said they wanted to make her their "girlfriend," code for sex slavery.

"If they like a girl, they will follow her," says Marissa. "They will be on her until she's part of them. That's not what I wanted for my daughter."

Finally, after a gang member groped Christine on the way to school, Marissa relented. A cousin volunteered to lead Christine to the border, but they were intercepted by the Zetas.



• Photo by Alex Boerner

• Sofia, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, travelled from Honduras as an unaccompanied 16-year-old to flee violence in the area where she lived.

Marissa had no choice. She paid the gang to release Christine. But for two weeks, she heard nothing. "I thought they killed her," Marissa says.

Then Marissa received a phone call from a man who offered to drop Christine at the border in exchange for another \$500. Marissa paid once again, and the man deposited Christine at the Rio Grande.

When border guards found her, she was taken to a holding cell in Texas, dubbed the "ice box" for its cold evening temperatures. Marissa says her daughter contracted pneumonia and was hospitalized before the two were reunited.

She won't let her daughter talk publicly about the experience. The trauma was too much for her, she says. Christine's still afraid to be touched, Marissa says. God knows what Los Zetas did to her.

Derrick Hensley, a broad-shouldered attorney with slightly askew glasses, rolls his eyes when Syria comes up. Syria is not his area of expertise, he admits, but, as one of Durham's leading immigration attorneys, he knows the arguments all too well.

"I don't know how people have come to their point of view," he says. "It's still just mind-blowing."

Syria and Central America are very different places, no doubt, but the two groups of immigrants have at least one thing in common: They're escaping violence.

"These refugees are trying to find a safe place," says Bedrija Jazic, director of refugee services for Lutheran Services Carolinas, a Salisbury nonprofit that connects immigrants with legal assistance and medical resources. "They're running away from exactly the same things people here are afraid of, violence and murder, except they experienced it firsthand. These people have come here seeking safety."

Jazic knows their struggle intimately. She arrived in the United States in 1996 after escaping Bosnia during its war with Herzegovina. Jazic was a high school English teacher in Sarajevo when the war began.

Since the late 1990s, Jazic has directed immigrant policy at Lutheran Services. She says treating the Central American children will require a comprehensive approach, but because they don't qualify for Medicaid, and because most local governments are unreceptive to the notion of local programs aimed at this population, finding support is a major difficulty.



• Photo by Alex Boerner

- Sofia joined her mother, who was already in North Carolina, one year ago.

This is especially important in Durham and Raleigh. Officials with the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement—tasked with housing and sheltering unaccompanied minors while the courts settle their future—estimate that at least 650 unaccompanied minors have been shuttled into Durham and Wake counties since last summer.

Right now, however, both Wake and Durham rely heavily on nonprofits to bear the load.

"We have not sat down as a body to discuss these children," says Michael Page, chairman of the Durham County Board of Commissioners. "But all children who enter into our community and enter our public schools should have their needs and concerns addressed. We will bend over backwards."

Page says the lack of social programs for undocumented children is a problem across North Carolina. "We really do not believe we are addressing the mental health needs of our children," he says.

Unaccompanied children have been crossing the border for about two decades, El Futuro's Smith points out. The ones who are still here are adults now, dealing with trauma they've kept to themselves for fear of being exposed as undocumented.

"Mental health is one of the biggest concerns that we have," adds Jazic. "The kids might be healthy otherwise, but we have to help heal those mental wounds that they are not guilty of."

Despite federal laws that require public education regardless of immigration status, North Carolina school systems have, for the most part, been slow to embrace programs targeted to this vulnerable population. These children require intensive monitoring, in addition to the English-as-a-second-language programs offered in most schools, says Helen Atkins, ESL coordinator for Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools.

"It's hard to articulate," says Atkins. "It's not that they're not equipped. It's just a particular subset of needs that many of our kids face. It takes a lot more time and a lot more tracking."

To that end, this year, Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools created a new position, known as a student success advocate, to act as a de facto in-school social worker. The advocate, Atkins says, will track children arriving from war-torn places to assess whether they're in need of mental health care. If a principal or teacher spots a red flag, the advocate is notified immediately.

In the Triangle's other school systems, it's more of a mixed bag. Orange County Schools has hired ESL outreach and support staff members to work with unaccompanied minors. Durham Public Schools does not offer specialized programs for this group, but schools offer courses and after-school programs to help Latino youth.

In Wake County, says Darlene Johnson, lead social worker for the school system, all 171 schools utilize a social-worker liaison whose responsibilities include treating and monitoring unaccompanied youth along with the rest of the student body.

Advocates, meanwhile, say this population needs more.

"I hear people saying, 'We need a plan for the Syrian refugees,'" Smith says. "It makes me crazy. What's our plan for the immigrant population that's been here for 20 years? They're here. Now. And we're putting our heads in the sand."

Even if these services are put in place, many of the children who crossed the border last year won't be around long enough to use them. Navigating language barriers and labyrinthine laws, oftentimes by themselves, and depending on overwhelmed nonprofits and charities for assistance, they face an uphill legal battle.

While the number of undocumented children resettling into North Carolina is relatively small, their cases nonetheless clog up immigration courts. Crowded dockets produce speedy, aggressively prosecuted cases, sometimes against infants and toddlers, says Hensley.

Without legal representation, just 15 percent of these minors are allowed to remain in the United States. When attorneys intervene, nearly three-quarters are granted a stay on deportation, many through a complicated application process for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.

SIJS requires proof that it would not be in the best interests of these children to return home, either because of violence in their home country or abuse. Gaining official asylum in the U.S. takes evidence that the child would be persecuted at home based on their race, religion, nationality, political views or for being a member of a particular social group. Both are preferred methods for staving off deportation proceedings for unaccompanied youth.

It's not an easy argument to make, says Hensley. He's represented both Christine and Jessica in their deportation cases. They're in different stages of the process, and Hensley isn't sure if either will be granted SIJS. The courts are not set up for such a humanitarian crisis, so it's up to policymakers to change the laws, he says.

"It's as fair or unfair as Congress deems it to be."

Patricia fled her native Honduras a decade ago in search of opportunity, but she hasn't forgotten her home. A red-and-black tapestry of the Virgin Mary christens her living room. Faith, it seems, is necessary these

days.

Last summer, Patricia's 17-year-old daughter, Sofia, traversed the border to join her mother after a gang of gun-toting men terrorized her school. The potential for violence had always been there. But when the gangs threatened to shoot children, presumably as recompense for some gang warfare, Patricia decided she'd had enough.

Her daughter's neighbors in Honduras, friends of the family, promised to help Sofia. They took her all the way to the U.S. border in Mexico. When she was apprehended by border guards, Sofia was transported to a refugee resettlement camp in California before she joined her mother in Durham.

Sofia's legal case is ongoing. Patricia, meanwhile, is watching the news. She's livid at how politicians, including McCrory, are treating Syrian refugees.

"It's like he isn't a father," Patricia says. "Some people, they've never been in our shoes. They've never been apart from their children, like us."

Sofia was one of the lucky ones who escaped kidnappers and murderers preying on unaccompanied minors, Patricia says. But her daughter still requires regular psychological therapy, partially due to the violence she experienced back home. Now, Patricia says, she hopes Sofia will get the treatment she needs. And she hopes Sofia will have the chance to get used to her new home in Durham.

"She always eats so quickly," Patricia says. "Like it's not going to stay. I tell her, you're not in Honduras."

This article appeared in print with the headline "The invisibles"