**All Alone**  September 14, 2014By Brooke Ross

**Thousands of kids from Central America are entering the United States illegally—and alone**

The border crossings usually take place at dawn and dusk. The smugglers—called coyotes—pull up their vans to the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, the river that forms the border between Texas and Mexico. Then they unload their cargo: dozens of children.

The kids, some as young as 3, are from Central America, and they’ve made the long journey north through Mexico without their parents or families. Now the smugglers pile them onto rafts, and send them across to Texas.

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Most people who enter the United States illegally run from the Border Patrol agents who try to catch them. Not these kids: They run toward the agents. Many of the kids are trying to reunite with family already in the U.S. But tens of thousands of others are fleeing poverty and gang violence in their home countries and hope to be allowed to stay in the U.S.

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Although illegal immigration has been a controversial issue for years, the number of kids coming to the U.S. on their own from Central America has reached crisis levels in the past few months. About 63,000 unaccompanied children have been caught entering the U.S. illegally since October—more than double the number from the year before. The surge is overwhelming border authorities and draining resources. Thousands of kids are being sent to shelters throughout the U.S. It has also sparked a debate over how— and whether—to help the kids. President Barack Obama recently called the situation a “humanitarian crisis,” saying that it underscores the need to “fix our immigration system once and for all.”

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**CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE**

About 11 million long-settled immigrants live in the U.S. illegally, more than half from Mexico. The Department of Homeland Security expects 240,000 more undocumented immigrants to enter the U.S. this year, including 90,000 unaccompanied minors. The children are coming primarily from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where many people live on as little as $2 per day. Drug gangs control the streets, killing people with guns, knives, and even grenades.

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Children are frequently on the front lines of the danger. Teens are killed for refusing to join the gangs, which often recruit near schools. In Honduras, which has the highest murder rate in the world, hundreds of kids were killed last year alone.

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Maynor Dubón, 17, knows about the violence firsthand. He tried to escape from Honduras last year, but he was caught in Mexico and sent back. He now lives in a children’s shelter. On the streets of Honduras, Maynor says he lived in a constant state of fear.

“You really don’t know what moment you’re going to be killed,” he says of life in Honduras. “The gangs say things like, ‘You work for me now.’ They asked me to join, and I said, ‘Let me think about it for a few days,’ so I left. It’s like being in hell.”

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The kids’ journey to the U.S. can take months. Some parents pay smugglers up to $7,500—a fortune for many of the families— to get their kids away from the gangs. But many of the smugglers are criminals themselves, often connected to drug cartels. So thousands of kids make the trek across Mexico alone. They face extreme heat and go for days without food or water.

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**COMING TO AMERICA**

Why is the surge of unaccompanied minors happening now? Although President Obama has been tough on adults who enter the country illegally, the U.S. hasn’t deported as many kids in recent years. One reason is a 2008 law aimed at combating child trafficking. The law says that minors entering the country alone from nations that do not border the U.S. have the right to an immigration hearing. Word has gotten back to parents in Central America that if they send their kids to the U.S., they might have a shot at staying.

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Once unaccompanied minors are detained at the border, they are placed in federal shelters. They are then sent to live with relatives in the U.S. or placed in foster care while their cases move through the courts. Although few of these children are allowed to stay in the country permanently, it can take years before they have their hearings. Some kids slip through the cracks and never show up in court. But for those who are eventually sent back, the risk is usually worth it. While in the U.S., the kids attend school and receive medical care and don’t live in fear.

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However, the young immigrants don’t always get a warm welcome. Worried about the impact the kids could have on the local economy, protesters in Murrieta, California, recently turned away three busloads of immigrants with signs proclaiming “return to sender.” But in other places, such as Phoenix, Arizona, some people have turned out to greet the young immigrants and bring them food.

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**SOLUTIONS TO THE SURGE**

To help reduce the wave of immigrants at the border, President Obama is urging Congress to provide $3.7 billion to beef up border security and help Central American nations combat crime. To deter future immigrants, he’s sped up efforts to deport thousands of adults and families who have recently entered the country illegally. The president is also asking Congress to find a way to send unaccompanied minors home faster. For kids who face the greatest dangers at home, however, he’s considering a plan to make it easier for them to seek asylum in the U.S. before they leave their home countries.

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Central American leaders say they have stepped up efforts to stop the flow of kids heading north. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have assigned additional police officers to border-crossing checkpoints and are cracking down on smugglers.

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But Sor Valdette Willeman, who works with deportees who have been sent back to Honduras, says that the U.S. will continue to have a difficult time stopping children from coming unless the root causes of why they’re leaving home are addressed.

“They will migrate again unless there is something here for them— jobs and schools and a lack of violence,” she says. “I am afraid without those things, they will eventually try again.”