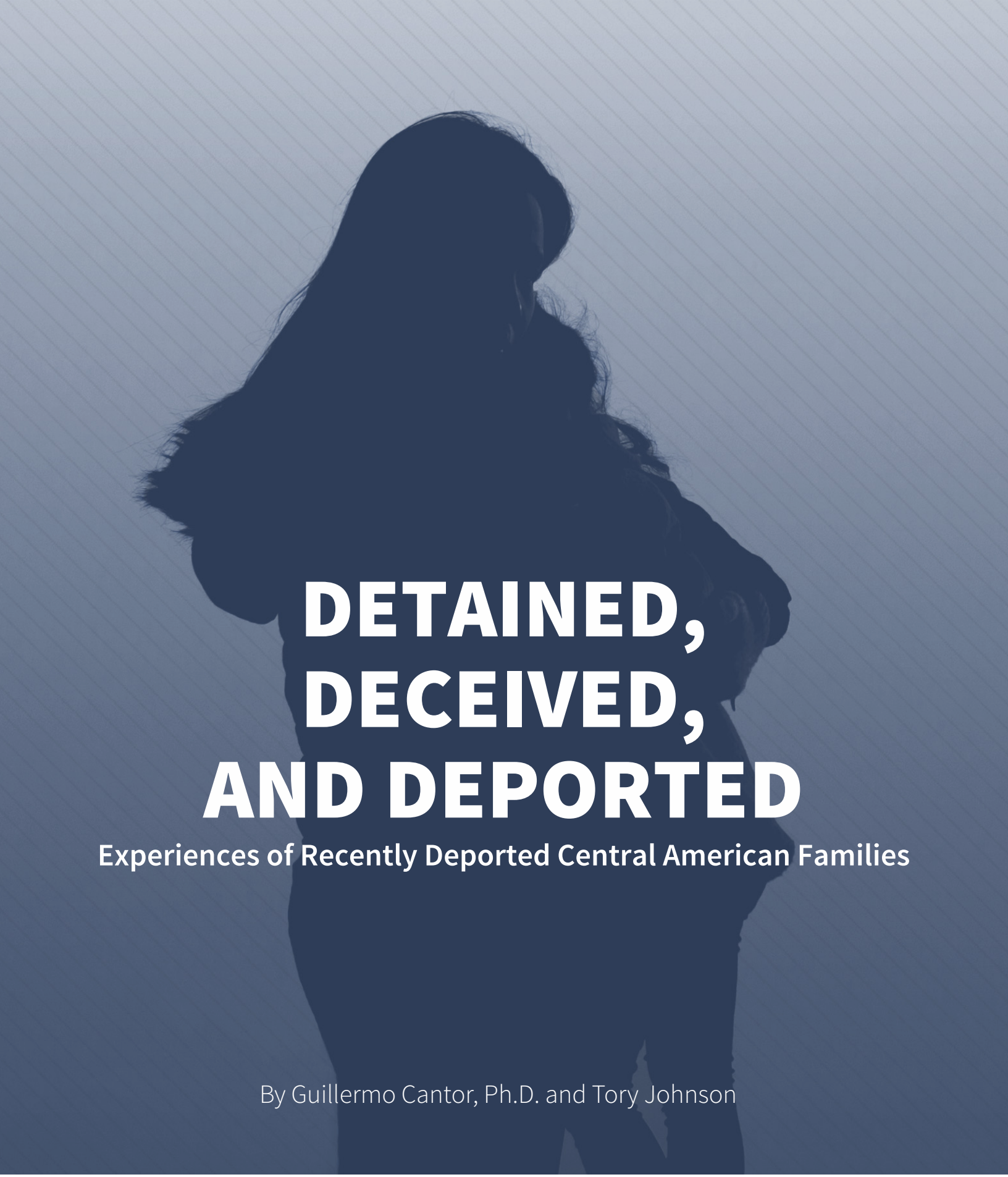

DETAINED, DECEIVED, AND DEPORTED

Experiences of Recently Deported Central American Families

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American Immigration Council

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CONTENTS

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About the American Immigration Council

The American Immigration Council's policy mission is to shape a rational conversation on immigration and immigrant integration. Through its research and analysis, the American Immigration Council provides policymakers, the media, and the general public with accurate information about the role of immigrants and immigration policy in U.S. society. We are a non-partisan organization that neither supports nor opposes any political party or candidate for office.

Visit our website at *www.AmericanImmigrationCouncil.org* and our blog at *www.ImmigrationImpact.com*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last few years, the escalation of violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (collectively known as the Northern Triangle of Central America) has reached dramatic levels. Thousands of women and their children have fled and arrived in the United States with the hope of finding protection. But for many of them, their attempts to escape merely resulted in detention, deportation, and extremely difficult reintegration in Central America. In fact, for some, the conditions they face upon being repatriated are worse than those they tried to escape in the first place.

Between February and May, 2016, the American Immigration Council interviewed eight individuals who were deported (or whose partners were deported) from the United States after being detained in family detention facilities, during which time they came into contact with the CARA Pro Bono Project.[1] These women (or in two of the cases, their partners) shared their experiences—both describing what has happened to them and their children since returning to their country and recounting the detention and deportation process from the United States.

First-hand accounts from Central American women and their family members interviewed for this project reveal the dangerous and bleak circumstances of life these women and their children faced upon return to their home countries, as well as serious problems in the deportation process. The testimonies describe how women are living in hiding, fear for their own and their children's lives, have minimal protection options, and suffer the consequences of state weakness and inability to ensure their safety in the Northern Triangle. The stories presented in this report are those of a fraction of the women and children who navigate a formidable emigration-detention-deportation process in their pursuit of safety. The process and systems through which they passed only contribute to the trauma, violence, and desolation that many Central American families already endured in their home country.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014, an unprecedented number of indigent Central American mothers and children crossed the United States' southern border fleeing murder, rape, and other forms of violence in their home countries. In response to this humanitarian crisis, the U.S. government reinstituted the practice of large-scale family detention. On December 19, 2014, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) opened the South Texas Family Residential Center, a 2,400-bed family detention center in Dilley, Texas. Around the same time, the agency took steps to double the size of the Karnes County Residential Center, an existing 500-bed family detention facility in Karnes City, Texas. The existing Berks Family Residential Center (in Berks County, Pennsylvania), with 96 beds, began almost exclusively to detain asylum-seeking families.

The U.S. government's renewed use of large-scale family detention is specifically designed to curtail the flow of asylum-seeking women and children migrating from Central America to the United States—that is, to deter future migration. In addition to increasing the use of detention against women and children apprehended at the border, the government's deterrence strategy also includes increased collaboration with the Mexican government to prevent Central American migrants from arriving at U.S. borders; a multimedia public awareness campaign;[2] expedited removal of women and children from the United States; and raids in search of individuals with outstanding removal orders. The effectiveness of this aggressive, multi-prong deterrence strategy, however, has not been corroborated. In fact, knowledge of the dangers that surround migration to the United States does not seem to play a role in the decision of those considering migration.[3] Yet, such a strategy has an extremely high human cost.

Day after day, women and children seeking protection in the United States are sent back to the Northern Triangle of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador), and, consequently, forced to face the same dire conditions that they fled—or worse. The Northern Triangle is one of the most dangerous regions in the world and in recent years the influence of complex organized criminal groups has grown in the region, driving up murder rates, gender-based violence, and other forms of serious harm.[4] It is also a region devastated by poverty[5] and food insecurity.[6] This precarious socioeconomic context, in turn, contributes to a vicious circle of socio-economic exclusion and violence. As has been previously documented, poverty and inequality are likely to increase this region's vulnerability to certain types of crime (e.g., gang activity).[7]

Perhaps one of the most palpable indicators of the catastrophic conditions in the Northern Triangle countries is the weakness of their state apparatuses. According to one of the most widely accepted definitions, "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."[8] The Northern Triangle of Central America, however, is dominated by what political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell calls "brown areas":

> Let us imagine a map of each country in which the areas covered by blue would designate those where there is a high degree of presence of the state (in terms of a set of reasonably effective bureaucracies and of the effectiveness of properly sanctioned legality), both functionally and territorially; the green color would indicate a high degree of territorial penetration but a significantly lower presence in functional/class[9] terms; and the brown color a very low or nil level in both dimensions.[10]

Previous research has shown that vast stretches of territory (and much of the population) in Central America have been abandoned by the state. In the absence of strong and capable states, the rule of law is also nonexistent, and organized crime groups (including transnational criminal organizations) compete for control of the territory.[11] In Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, criminal organizations exploit territories under the influence of local *caudillos*.[12] For example, previous reports estimate that 40% of the territory in Guatemala is dominated by drug traffickers and organized criminals.[13] To make things worse, dysfunctional judicial systems have been closely associated with high levels of impunity and corruption.[14]

In the last few years, the escalation of violence in the Northern Triangle has reached dramatic levels. This, in turn, has resulted in the increasing number of people fleeing the region.[15] But for many of them, their attempts to escape to what is viewed as a promised land result in a journey to detention, deportation, and extremely difficult reintegration in Central America. For many asylum seekers, the conditions they face upon repatriation are worse than those they tried to escape in the first place.[16] Paradoxically, this means that people who are trying to flee stateless areas dominated by violence and anomie must navigate a powerful, complex, and sometimes unnavigable state system once they reach U.S. territory.

This report features first-hand accounts from eight women recently deported to Central America after being held with their children at one of the family detention centers in Dilley or Karnes City, Texas or Berks County, Pennsylvania. The testimonies reveal that for the most part, upon return these women live in hiding, are terrified to leave their homes, are confronted with extreme hardship, receive frequent threats, and have no access to any protections or assistance from state institutions. The testimonies from these women and their partners also expose the traumatic conditions that characterize the removal process, which regularly involve the use of misleading information and threatening tactics by U.S. authorities.

The rushed removal of women and their children raises serious concerns about both the conditions these women and children confronted upon return and the deportation methods utilized. The descriptions provided by women[17] interviewed upon return highlight some recurring problems:

Increased vulnerability and exposure to threats

Upon return, women are often targeted by and experience direct threats from gang members, often the same individuals who drove the families to flee. These threats include pressure to join criminal groups, pay money or "rent" to them, or sell drugs.

> "The men who were threatening me before I left have called me three times since I got back to El Salvador. They call demanding that I join their gang, because they have asked me for money again and I won't give it to them […] The first time they called they told me that if I didn't join the gang they were going to kill me and take my children." (Gabriela)

> "Now that these men know they [interviewee's wife and child] have returned, and that they failed in trying to escape, they are even more seriously pursuing them both, demanding that both of them sell drugs for the gang now or that the gang will make both of them 'disappear'." (Brenda's husband)

Living in hiding

Most of the women interviewed for this report revealed that upon return they were forced to live in hiding as a way to protect themselves from violent groups.

> "When I was gone […] they were monitoring my house, always around, looking for me. Now that I had to come back I live a little bit away from my own home, but I have to stay hidden. We don't have any freedom. My kids don't know what is going on, and I won't tell them." (Francisca)

> "I have been hiding ever since I got back. The fact is I can't go back anymore to live in my mom's house because she said they have been threatening my family. I can't go back there because if I go back there my whole family is in danger, especially my kids." (Andrea)

Lack of protection

Upon being sent back home, the women interviewed reported feeling extremely vulnerable and unprotected. In the absence of any help from the government, some of them were able to adopt informal strategies to protect themselves—e.g., by going out in groups, seeking refuge at a family member's home, or paying for "private security" services. Some of them, however, live completely isolated.

> "I don't have protection. I don't have the protection of anyone and it's very scary. There are a lot of gang members here everywhere on the corners of my neighborhood. And so I can't go out because I'm really afraid, so that's why I stay home almost all the time, because I'm very afraid of going out alone." (Gabriela)

> "We are paying these people [private security] to make sure our daughter gets safely to and from our house every day." (Brenda's husband)

State weakness and gang territorial control

The women interviewed experience the lack of state control of territory—and, in particular, of public spaces—in a very direct and dramatic way. Further, the testimonies analyzed reveal instances of complicity between state agents and gang members. Because of this perception of inefficacy or corruption, crime usually goes unreported.

> “The police may take your complaint if you go to report some kind of crime or if someone is threatening you. But if that person finds out you went to the police, you will be found dead the next day. And the police can’t stop anyone from hurting you.” (Ana)

> “We are not being protected by the government or by anything… by no one. No one.” (Brenda’s husband)

Severe economic hardship

Individuals returned to Central America usually find themselves in an extremely challenging economic situation, in many cases aggravated by debts acquired to help fund their journey to seek protection in the United States.

> “I’ve had to give up my business because it was in the market. I can’t work there anymore because some of the people that are looking for me could see me.” (Francisca)

> “The situation now is that I don’t have much, don’t have many resources. The reality is I am much poorer now… I invested all my money in going there [the United States].” (Maria)

Traumatic removal methods

The women interviewed—and their children—suffered several forms of trauma during their attempt to seek protection in the United States. In addition to their time in detention, the deportation process itself tormented the families and compounded the abrupt end to a trip they hoped would free them from the violence and hardship that they fled. Specifically, the interviewees’ accounts highlight the lack of information, or use of misleading information, as one recurring element that dominated the removal process.

> “And now when [my daughter] calls me this is what she cries about…she cries because she says that the official told her ‘you will be on the plane soon and it will be for you to go see your daddy.’ But in reality when she got on the plane it was to send her back to Guatemala, and no one told her that.” (Brenda’s husband)

> “The day she [interviewee’s wife] was deported, they woke them up at midnight, and they called me and told me to be waiting, that they were going to the state of Virginia, I think…she was tricked! Totally tricked when they took them out. Then directly they drove them to the airport, and they deported them.” (Rosa’s husband)

The testimonies compiled in this report, while limited in number, are a glimpse into the experiences of hundreds of women and children who navigate a formidable emigration-detention-deportation system in their pursuit of safety. This process and the system through which they pass contribute to the trauma, violence, and desolation that many Central American families already endured in their home country.

FIRST-HAND NARRATIVES FROM WOMEN WHO WERE RECENTLY DEPORTED

What follows are the stories of eight[18] women who were deported from the United States after being detained, during which time they came into contact with the CARA Pro Bono Project.[19] These women (or, in two of the cases, their husbands) shared their experiences, recounting the deportation and detention process in the United States and what has happened since returning to their countries.

Francisca - 29, El Salvador

Francisca fled El Salvador with her two sons, ages two and nine, in 2015 after receiving threats from the MS-13 gang—a powerful transnational criminal organization—for not meeting their extortion demands. She stated: "Four days before I left El Salvador, [two men] showed up at my store and identified themselves as members of the MS gang. They told me that I had to pay them $50 a week. They told me that they were going to kill me if I didn't pay them. They told me that they knew where I was living and who my parents are." Francisca feared retaliation from gang members if she went to the police and never filed a complaint due to this fear and mistrust. Francisca explained, "I know that the police don't help people anyway. I know that the police are corrupt."

Francisca and her sons sought asylum in the United States and were detained at the Karnes detention center for approximately 27 days. Francisca and her two sons were deported to El Salvador in late 2015 after the asylum office determined they did not have credible fear[20] and elected not to reconsider their case.

The Deportation Process

> "…When we had to leave the United States my children cried and said, 'Mama we want to stay here in the United States.' [Immigration officials] took us out of our rooms at 8:00 p.m. and put us in separate rooms. [Immigration officials] never told me that I would be deported. They told me I was going to change rooms, and they put us in a room until 1:00 a.m.

We were there all night in a freezing room; [my children] were saying, 'Mommy it is so cold in here.' I think the children were traumatized by this, staying all night in that cold room in the detention center, waiting for the deportation like that. They were trembling from cold and no one knew what would happen to us. Then they showed me these papers that I thought were saying something about our detention, but they weren't. It turns out they were papers to send me back.

They sent us home without me signing any deportation order. They told us we were moving to another room. But that was a lie. They tricked us and sent us home. It was very unjust.

Francisca's Life after Deportation

Since I've been deported I am living imprisoned in my own home. I don't go out because I am afraid. Afraid that they—the people I am running from—can do something to me, or to my two kids.

When I was gone, while I was in the United States, they were monitoring my house… coming around looking for me and asking for me. Those guys, so far they don't know I am here, and I haven't seen them either. We couldn't return to where we lived before because they were looking for me. So we had to come live with my mother, but I can't go anywhere since no one [can know] I am here. We don't have any freedom. I am hiding from them…for now we are only safe until one of them finds out [we are back]. We are trusting and hoping in God that no one finds out.

My kids don't know what is going on, and I won't tell them. This isn't something that little kids should know about, and I don't want them to know. They would be traumatized if they knew. I live imprisoned and I can't go out to the street because they could do something to me and my kids.

I changed the school my kids go to; we had to find another school for them to go to when we came back. When they go to school now, my mom has to take them. I've had to give up my business because it was in the market. I can't work there anymore because some of the people that are looking for me could see me. Now I have to go out to wash other people's things right here in this area to make money. It's the only way I make any money to have something for my kids. And look, the reality is that there are [no protection options] here. We see that the police are somehow connected to the gangs. So you realize it's better to resolve things on your own, because they [the police] are in with the gangs. There are probably others [police officers] that are afraid of the gangs. But either way, they can't help.

The truth is that I am terrified here and I want to try again to leave. But, I am also very afraid that someone could grab my children on the way [to the United States]. I am very worried about risking my children on the way through Mexico, because it's a very difficult journey. They have to suffer hunger and fear, and I have second thoughts about putting them through that again.

Rosa - 36, Honduras

Rosa and her 15-year-old son fled Honduras in 2015 after a powerful transnational criminal organization, the Mara 18 gang, tried to recruit Rosa's son near his school and subsequently demanded money and physically assaulted him. Rosa went to the police, but was told that they could not help unless her son was dead. Rosa also has a daughter, who is married and remained in El Salvador with her husband. After Rosa and her son left for the United States, the gang members went to her daughter's house looking for Rosa and her son.

Rosa's husband fled Honduras and came to the United States nearly ten years ago after being robbed multiple times and receiving death threats.

Rosa and her son sought asylum in the United Stated in the fall of 2015 and were detained at the Dilley detention center for approximately 32 days. They were deported to Honduras after an asylum officer and immigration judge determined they did not have credible fear.

The Deportation Process

It was too difficult for Rosa to talk about her experience, so her husband shared his family's experience.

> "[My wife] told me many things that happened…The day she was deported [the immigration officials] woke them up at midnight, and they called me and told me to be waiting, that they were going to the state of Virginia, I think. She was tricked! Totally tricked when they took them out [of their rooms].
>
> The worst thing she told me was that the officers locked them in the van for two hours while they went into a restaurant and ate. This was on the way to the airport in Houston. They stopped on the way and the officers locked them in with the key, her and my son and another woman and her kid. Then, they kept driving around for a long time, circling around, until it was time for the flight. [My family] went on a commercial plane, with all the other passengers and an official with them."

Rosa's Life after Deportation

"

I [told] my wife and my son [to leave Honduras]. He's my only son. I only have him and my daughter. He is 15 and in my country they kidnap boys this age and make them join the gangs. I was hoping we could get them out of harm's way, but they couldn't win their case. I came to the United States for the same reasons, because of threats against me, because of my business. And when I couldn't stop the threats, I had to leave my family.

There are many people [still] threatening my family. There is the case of my son being threatened by the gangs, who say they want him to work for them, and the person who is after my daughter.

My daughter has continued to be threatened by this person, and so she finally made a report to the local authorities. One of the guys who threatened my daughter was [someone] from the neighborhood. [My family is] in another place now. But they might go back to the old house because this person who is threatening my daughter is always very close to the house… We are hoping the police will help monitor and see if we can catch him making these threats. And yes, going to the police is a risk. But also we had to have some kind of documentation and some security that if something happens it will be clear who did it. We are trying to go through the legal channels.

[There are not protection options in Honduras]—no, no, no. Everyone is leaving there to come [to the United States], to make a better life. [My children] had to start going to another school. I found a private one that has security and protects them while they are there. We also pay a company to accompany them to school and back. Many families have to do that.

People [in the United States] hear things about Central Americans and they think that we come here to start trouble or to bring that delinquency here and it's not true. We come [to the United States] to protect our families and to overcome the obstacles to have a better life. I truly hope that some kind of

legal option can become available to help people who are trying to get away from threats and violence, like my family. Because we need it now more than ever.

I feel like I am split in two, with my children gone. Part of me is here in the United States, and another part of me is in my country with my children. And it's very sad because children are the most important part of life. I wish there were some way to help them, to find some asylum for them, to bring them [to the United States] and make sure they are safe. Even though it breaks my heart, I can't do anything about it.

”

Brenda - 30, Guatemala

In 2015, Brenda and her 13-year-old daughter fled Guatemala because "men who were known for raping teenage girls and who are part of the drug ring that runs [their] town" tried to kidnap her daughter. Brenda was too afraid to call the police because "the police in [Guatemala] are corrupt" and believed she would be putting her and her daughter's lives at greater risk.

Brenda and her daughter sought asylum in the United States. They were detained at the Dilley detention center for approximately 33 days. Brenda and her daughter were deported while their requests for reconsideration of their negative credible fear determination were pending with the asylum office.

The Detention and Deportation Process

When asked about her experience, Brenda told her husband:

> "I am kind of traumatized by what happened, when they had me jailed there [in detention], sick the whole time, you know? So if they just want to know about my deportation and what happened, then please don't have [the interviewers] call me…I don't plan to talk to anyone anymore."

Brenda's husband, who lives in the United States, spoke on behalf of his wife and described what his family experienced:

> My daughter was affected the most because of the trauma she lived in detention. She says they took her into a meeting with the official [all by herself]—without her mother, not in front of the judge or anything. The official asked her [if she wanted to be with her dad]. Of course she said, 'Yes, I do. I want to go be with my Daddy.' And this official told her, 'Well, if that is what you want, then you better behave very well, and not cause any trouble. Don't say anything out of line to the immigration officers or no one here in the detention center because if you do it's going to go very bad here in this detention center'…
>
> Now when [my daughter] calls me…she cries because she says that the official told her, 'You will be on the plane soon and it will be for you to go see your daddy.' But in reality when she got on the plane it was to send her back to Guatemala, and no one told her that. She says, 'I was happy because this official told me that I would be able to see you. And why did they deport me then?' And I try to console her and say, 'Don't worry honey. Only they know why they did that.' Like I said, we respect the law. They have their jobs. I don't know if they are doing them correctly, but they have their jobs.
>
> Eight days before they were deported [immigration officials] had gotten them up at 9:00 p.m. and put them in a van and taken them to the airport…they brought them to a plane and had them in their seats, [but then] they took them off again at the last minute. And I can't even tell you why this was because I have absolutely no idea. [But] exactly seven or eight days later they deported them. They never said why. And my wife and daughter will ask me, 'Why do you think this happened to us, did something happen? What did we do?' And the truth is I am in the same place as them, I have absolutely no idea.

Brenda's Life after Deportation

When asked about how his wife and daughter were faring upon their return to Guatemala, Brenda's husband explained:

> The truth is [my family is] worse. The men who were threatening them found out they left, they realized they were gone. Now that these men know that they have returned, and that they failed in trying to escape, they are **even more** seriously pursuing them both, demanding that both of them sell drugs for the gang now, or the gang will make both of them 'disappear'.
>
> I took them out of the house they were living in and I put them in another place that—well, only I and they know where they are. I don't and I won't tell **anyone** where they are. Because all of this happened where we used to live. Now they are in another place, and they are in a, let's say a little calmer, place, but they are still having to flee and hide always. Unfortunately…all of our family is in another place and where they are now we don't have any family members that can watch over them. But they call me every day. They are really suffering, but that's just the way it goes. We have to try and live this way.
>
> They have completely had to change their way of life. It used to be that my daughter could go to and from school. But now she has had to join a group of people that protect other students going to school, because there is security in numbers. We are paying these people to make sure our daughter gets safely to and from our house every day. And other parents also pay these people. And that might seem like an extreme measure to take, but honestly since we were not able to reunite safely in the United States we have to take action so that we can get away from the delinquency that is so terrible here. We are not being protected by the government or by anything… by no one. No one.

In fact, now when I send money to her I have to send it in the name of someone else so that these people won't find out where they are right now, through the bank or any other way. The gangs have run off many mothers whose husbands live in the United States. They've made them run off to other parts of the country and try to hide when they are in the same situation as my wife.

They were coming to the United States because I told them to, because I realized that they had no other alternative. Because she was calling me regularly telling me, 'They—some gang members—are leaving me anonymous notes under the door telling me to give my daughter to the gangs and that she has to sell drugs. And that if I don't submit my daughter to the gangs to work they are going to rape her and kill me.' I told her 'Nothing is going to happen to you, be patient, be patient.' But then, my wife…found out from a man in our neighborhood that his daughter had been raped by the same people that had chased my daughter several times and threatened her.

Look, we were making all of this effort for them to get [to the United States] for the good of my daughter… Because we believe in the system of laws in the United States. But, unfortunately, they didn't give us the opportunity to reunite as a family. So that is why they are there and I am here, and they are very uncomfortable where they are.

She told me that she wanted to come back, and I told her she had to come with my daughter again [too]. She is worried, because what if they put them back in detention, and this time for what, two months? And really, going through Guatemala and Mexico is very hard. It's really hard going through everything that happens in Mexico. She says, 'It's too hard to risk our daughter going through Mexico again, and I don't think I will do it.' That's why I have them where I have them now. If God blesses me with life until August, I am going to go back and take care of them.

”

Gabriela - 27, El Salvador

Gabriela fled El Salvador with her two-year old daughter and two sons, ages nine and six, in the fall of 2015 after they received threats and were extorted by a powerful transnational criminal organization, the MS-18 gang.

Gabriela and her three children sought asylum in the United States and were detained at the Dilley detention center and later at the Berks detention center for approximately 48 days. Gabriela and her children were deported while their requests for reconsideration of their negative credible fear determination were pending with the asylum office.

The Detention and Deportation Process

A few days before Gabriela and her children were actually deported, she thought she was being deported, but returned to detention after witnessing the deportation of another family. She described that experience to her attorneys:

> I was awoken [at about midnight] by officers wearing red shirts who work in the resident areas of this detention center. They told me to get all my things ready and pack them because they were going to take me to the office.
>
> I called my husband and he told me that immigration officers had called my mother in El Salvador and told her that I would be at the airport in El Salvador at noon the next day (today). I cried when he told me that I was going to be deported. No officer had told me about any of this…
>
> At 3:00 a.m. two officers wearing green uniforms, a man and a woman, took [the other family] and me and my children outside to a van. We left and they did not tell me where we were going. We were in the van for about an hour and a half. They did not tell us anything the entire time. I was very distressed.

Although she was returned to the detention center later that night, less than 48 hours later, ICE agents woke Gabriela and her children after 2:30 am and told them to pack their things. She did not know they were being deported.

> "…When we left the kids were weak and sick with the flu and cough. They left [detention] really weak. That's bothering them right now.
>
> When officers tried to deport me, we didn't really know what was going on. They drove us to the airport and we were all confused and very sad that we were being deported, because I hadn't been told we would be deported. When my oldest son, who is nine, found out that we were going to be deported he got very, very angry and he told me he wanted to go be with his dad. He had a very hard time, and he was angry and sad and it was really hard on him. It tore me apart. It was a very difficult time for us.

Gabriela's Life after Deportation

> The men who were threatening me before I left have called me three times since I got back to El Salvador. They call demanding that I join their gang, because they have asked me for money again and I won't give it to them. These are the same men that were threatening my sons before we left the country, and now that they know I am back they are calling to threaten me too. They are telling me I have to join the gang now…it's really distressing.
>
> The first time they called they told me that if I didn't join the gang they were going to kill me and take my children. Then they called me again and told me I had to join the gang. The last time they called me was [a few months ago], because I keep changing my phone number…The last time I got a new phone number [I] thought they weren't going to call me anymore, but within four days they were calling me again.

Here, because of the MS (gang), the police can't take care of the neighborhood and are the ones that are helping the gangs. And the gangs say they are taking care of the neighborhood...but there's no protection from anything because they are the ones threatening everyone, harassing everyone. How would there be any protection for me here?

I don't have the protection of anyone and it's very scary. It's extremely hard for me to be here, without the protection of my husband, without protection of my family or anyone. There are a lot of gang members here everywhere on the corners of my neighborhood…I'm always afraid that I might run into one of them and they're going to hurt me. For now I just ask God to help me. At night I make sure that I lock the door before it gets dark and I stay inside with the kids.

The kids are going to school. But I'm not about to let them go out into the street. I'm always afraid. I'm always thinking what if they do something to my kids? I talk with the teachers and tell them to be careful and not let them go anywhere. As for me, I go out to go to church, but I'm always really afraid. I stay home almost all the time, because I'm very afraid of going out alone.

My kids don't really know what's going on. I try not to let them know what's happening, but my older boy saw me get a message from [the gangs] once and he asked me what it was. So I told him. And it's hard because my kids are really bright and they want to know everything.

My husband really wants us to come back to the United States, but it's such a difficult trip with three kids. For me, considering how much the children have suffered, sometimes I think it's better for me to be here imprisoned than to put the kids through that again. They got so sick and they vomited and they had fever [during the last trip].

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Ana - 32, Guatemala

Ana fled Guatemala in 2015 with her daughter, age 16, and son, age 12, after they were targeted by gangs. Ana and her daughter suffered direct threats and physical violence from the gang, and a relative was killed shortly before Ana left with her children. She hoped to find safety in the United States, where Ana's husband lives.

Ana and her two children sought asylum in the United States and were detained at the Dilley detention center for approximately 25 days. Ana and her children were deported while their requests for reconsideration of their negative credible fear determination were pending with the asylum office.

The Deportation and Detention Process

> It was so terrible for me and my kids. At the end of the day I think I was treated very unfairly. We were treated terribly by the border officers, and put into the hielera[21] and treated terribly, and then we went to the detention center. It has been very traumatizing.
>
> I never got a fair chance to get my case heard. They do these interviews [for asylum] that determine your fate, but my interview was during a time when I was not well. I was sick and I was so depressed from being detained that I didn't get a fair chance to explain myself or to know what was going on. Then the judge also rejected me, and I was deported before I ever really had a fair chance. I begged them, please, for my children give me another chance to explain why I am here. But they didn't. I know [the lawyers] tried to help me, but I'm really sad. It smashed my dreams of getting [my children] to safety and reuniting them with their father. The truth is I am very, very sad about it all.

Ana's Life after Deportation

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I am afraid because at any minute the people who were threatening me and my daughter can be back. The same people who followed her and who hurt me before we left. They can be back at any moment. Nothing has changed. We are in the same situation, always fighting for our lives.

For the first two months [after being deported] we lived in another part of the country, but we couldn't make it there. We don't have anything now and we are in so much debt that we really can't go anywhere else. I don't have much education and there are no jobs here, so the very little I earn doesn't go far enough. We rely on the little money my husband sends us.

We've only been back in our old house for a short time. So far no one has called or come to my house, but I have taken the old chip out of my phone. We never go anywhere alone and we don't call any attention to ourselves. My daughter goes to school, but I always take her there and bring her back. Someone always has to be with her. [My daughter] is always afraid that someone is following her, like they did before we left.

There are no options for [protection] here. The police may take your [complaint] if you go to report some kind of crime or if someone is threatening you, but if that person finds out you went to the police, you will be found dead the next day. And the police can't stop anyone from hurting you.

You never get accustomed to living in fear. You never get used to having your daughter followed and threatened. I've been telling my kids that what I really want is for us to get very far away from here…from this situation. And that road isn't easy either. There is danger here and there is danger on the journey. It's very hard to know what to do now because they aren't safe here and they can't stay here living this way, so we have some very hard decisions to make.

As a mother the only thing I really want is for my children to be safe and happy. As their mother, I'd give anything to give them the opportunity to not be struggling through life here, to not be in danger here. I'm not the one that matters. Even if it means I have to be here alone, because we don't have the resources for us all to make that journey again.

What I really want is to have a legal way for me and my children to be able to come to the United States as a family.

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Maria - 42, Honduras

Maria fled Honduras in 2015 with her daughter and son, ages two and nine, after she began receiving threats and was robbed. A single mother living alone with her children, Maria felt targeted because of her living situation. She lives in a remote area with almost no police presence and feared escalating violence from the perpetrators for any official complaints she made.

Maria and her two children sought asylum in the United States and were detained at the Dilley detention center for approximately 24 days. They were deported to Honduras in late 2015 while their requests for reconsideration of their negative credible fear determination were pending with the asylum office.

The Detention and Deportation Process

> The border was not good. I was in the place they called the perrera [dog pound]. After they get you at the river they take you there. I don't know really how many days I was there because after you are put in there you really don't have any idea what time it is. They took me out in the morning, but I have no idea how much time we were in there. But then we went to the detention center…
>
> At 1:00 a.m. they told me to gather all my things. I couldn't sleep all night, just thinking, 'What is going to happen to me? Are they going to deport me?' This was on my 20th day of detention. And my lawyer had given me a piece of paper and said, 'If they come to deport you, you show them this.' But I did and [the immigration officials] told me the paper didn't count. I showed it to the people that get your bags together when you leave, but they didn't pay me any attention.

They didn't explain anything. They didn't tell me anything. They gave me a [document], but it was in English. I asked other people what it said, but they didn't know. [Immigration officials] told me [to] wait and see, wait and see. It was morning when I finally knew the truth—that they were going to deport me. They came and said, 'We are only following orders.'

I didn't get [to Honduras] until 3:00 p.m., and it had been hours since I had eaten anything, since I had any water. I suffered all day, without eating anything.

I told the truth there. I don't know why the deported me. Why they denied my case. I don't understand at all. You just don't know why they decide to deport you.

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Maria's Life after Deportation

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I am still getting lots of threats. My children are in danger too. I had to move to another house because I didn't feel safe there [in my previous home]. It wasn't safe for me or my kids. They try to harass me. I'm a single mother. My older son tells me, 'Mommy, let's get out of here. Let's leave here. We can't live here anymore.' That's how it is here [in Honduras].

They [the people threatening me before] know I have had to come back here. They have told me not to report anything they do to me, or tell on them for the things they stole from me. I am afraid to report anything I know about them or [what] they do to me…

Life is not the same [here] as it is in the United States. I think the laws there are better than they are [in Honduras]. I [can't] go to anyone for help. It's better for me to put up with the problems than go to the police.

The situation is very depressing here. You can't say one word about anything that goes on here because if you do, what happens is they kill your children or they kill you. You watch the news. So you know this, but women are fleeing from here just like the men are. And we can't look to legal avenues here because the authorities don't even listen. So how are we supposed to solve all these problems? There is no way! That is exactly why people suffer that journey to get there, and hope they find luck when they do.

Going through Mexico they assault you, and they carry huge machetes! And that's why I am so afraid of taking that journey. I didn't see many police at the [southern Mexico] border, but if you go out in to the mountains you will see them everywhere. Not many at the border there, but if you go out in to the mountains (el monte) you will see them everywhere. And I am afraid of being captured by them. I think of how dangerous it could be with them. So that journey is truly very difficult.

I have definitely thought of coming back. But I'm not sure if I can… You really have to think about taking that journey again…I would have to bring my children. But my fear is that they would deport me again. I don't want to be deported again. I might have to just do it, because I can't take the poverty and the problems here […] You fix one problem and another one appears. And you have to invest so much in traveling [to the United States]. That's one reason we are so poor. But I didn't even pay anyone to bring me there. I just was resolved to leave here, and go. I did it once…I will think about doing it again. God help me.

The situation now is that I don't have much, don't have many resources. The reality is I am much poorer now… I invested all my money in going there [the United States]. I don't feel OK. I'm sad.

Andrea - 26, Guatemala

Andrea fled Guatemala in 2015 with her three-year-old daughter because she feared gangs and extortion of her and her family.

Andrea and her daughter sought asylum in the United States and were detained at the Dilley detention center and later the Berks detention center for approximately 46 days. After an asylum officer and immigration judge determined Andrea and her daughter did not have credible fear, Andrea could no longer take the detention of her daughter and accepted deportation in early 2016.

The Deportation Process

> "You know, an adult can handle [detention]. But little kids can't. They don't understand being kept caged-in like that for such a long time. I don't know why they had me detained so long. I finally decided to be deported because of my daughter. We had been detained so long I finally decided [it was] better to be deported than stay in there anymore. She couldn't do anything there, and they wouldn't tell us anything about if they were going to let me go. I didn't know how long we would be there, so I finally had to decide.
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> In there they don't explain anything. You can ask them, but they still don't answer anything about what is happening or why."

Andrea's Life after Deportation

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I have been hiding ever since I got back. The fact is I can't go back anymore to live in my mom's house because she said they have been threatening my family. I can't go back there because if I go back there my whole family is in danger, especially my kids. My husband actually left Guatemala because he was being threatened so much, and he is now in the United States. Before I was in the detention center, they threatened my family and they were threatening us. So we couldn't go back [to that neighborhood] now that we were deported; I have to struggle to keep my kids safe.

I don't go out. I live practically encaged here, because I can't risk going out in case they see me. I stay in close to my kids more than anything. We had to move to another part of the country, because when I came back they found out I was back. Now we live alone because my family is not near here. I sell little things to make money, to be able to care for my kids.

Yes, [I have received threats since returning to Guatemala]. I don't know how they get everyone's phone numbers. It really scares me. I filed a police report, but here if anyone finds out they will hurt you. I did try to go [to the authorities], but they don't do anything.

I have thought about coming [back to the United States]. But actually they told me in the detention center that I can't come back now for five years.

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Esperanza - 34, Guatemala

Esperanza fled Guatemala in late 2015 with her two-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter after she was physically and emotionally abused by her son's father and believed this man returned to her neighborhood to take her son and hurt her family. She never reported him or went to the police because she feared it would make her situation worse. Additionally, she explained that it is difficult to even reach the police in the remote area of Guatemala where she is from.

Esperanza and her children sought asylum in the United States and were detained at the Dilley detention center for approximately 22 days. Esperanza and her children were deported to Guatemala in early 2016 after she received a negative credible fear determination from the asylum office, which was upheld by an immigration judge.

The Detention and Deportation Process

> "It was so shameful, all the things I had to tell [the asylum officers]. But I did. I told them about when he threw a hot iron on me and burned my foot very bad. And I told the lawyers everything. They were so attentive to me and I put all my trust in them, and I even told them that he sexually abused me. But when I went to have my interview, I just couldn't bring myself to tell the [male officer] that part. It was really difficult as a woman to tell [him] this. I didn't want to relive that."

Esperanza recounted what she and her children experienced when immigration officials came to deport them:

> I remember it was a Tuesday and they took me out of my room at 10:00 p.m. All they [the immigration officials] did was tell me I was leaving, and they took us outside and told us we had to sign some papers. I [refused to sign anything]. My kids were there too, watching this, and crying—crying with me. I cried the whole day. I couldn't even eat [after] 10:00 p.m. when they came to take me out of that room…
>
> When we pulled up to the airplane I broke down and I begged them, 'Please don't do this. Please don't deport me and my kids.' And they talked between themselves and then they told me, 'No, there is nothing we can do about it.' They said 'We are going to give your lawyers time to get here before you leave. Starting at 8:00 a.m., we are going to see if your lawyers get here while you are on the plane.' I realized, how are the lawyers going to get here on time if they probably don't even know what is happening right now? If the officials don't notify them?
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> They didn't explain anything at all. They just said, 'You are being deported. You have to go back.' And that's why when the flight lifted off I was so heartbroken, because I [thought I could still fight my case].
>
> I think my children suffered more than anything while we were being deported…When they realized we weren't going to be with Grandma and that we were being sent back, they cried. They were so hurt…It's been so sad since we got back.

Esperanza's Life after Deportation

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So far he [my son's father] hasn't been back to take my child or do anything to me, but I am really worried. A friend who knows of his whereabouts told me he has seen him around here—always drunk and drugged up—wandering around [my neighborhood]. My friend told me, 'Be very careful. It's such a shame you weren't able to make it [in the United States], because he has the same plans to take your son from you.'

I already suffered so much with him. He used to hit me, and come and sexually abuse me. And he made me…he would make me do things to him. Always while he was drunk. That's the fear I have—that this man is going to come back and do something to [my children] or to me. He wanted to take my little one who is just turning two… I don't know if you are a mother, but if you are, you would know that no one would let anyone harm their children or take them away…

The only times I go out are to wash my clothes, in the river near me. It's not very far and I will only go early in the morning. I don't really have any employment. I wash clothes for people when they have something for me to do, but there is no consistent work for me. And I wash things, but while I do I have to constantly be watching out for this man, [to make sure] he won't show up and hurt my kids. And I can't go out to work because I have no one to leave my children with. I have a little 2 year old and a 9 year old. So who would watch them for me?

My mom sends me what she can, but it's not enough. She calls me every few days, to ask about the kids. She calls to make sure this man isn't doing anything to me. She is upset that we weren't able to come live with her and she is worried about something happening to my kids and me. I am afraid of that too, but I don't have anywhere to go. I think about going to another place, but I am worried this man would find me. So I have to stay hiding in here. I am afraid, but here I am.

> And here [in Guatemala] there is nothing…there is hardly even enough food. My kids don't even have milk. My daughter told me on the plane the day we were deported… 'Mommy, let's not go back [to Guatemala].' I would like to be able to [go to the United States again], but because it is so expensive I don't know how. I just pray to find some legal way to go back to the United States… Thank God I have the church here; that lifts my spirits some. But really what I hoped was to be with my mother, to see her again. Since I didn't get to be with my mom I just feel so sad and sick. I am so scared that this man will come hurt me and take my boy. I don't have any support here. They are all so far away.
>
> ”

CONCLUSION

The testimonies from Francisca, Rosa, Brenda, Gabriela, Ana, Maria, Andrea, and Esperanza are just the tip of the iceberg of a vicious circle of widespread violence, migration, detention, deportation, trauma, and extremely difficult reintegration. They also exemplify the journey from lawless territories and powerless states to the United States, which, in the name of efficacy and deterrence, detains and removes individuals in record time. The rushed removal of asylum-seeking families raises concerns about the potential harms that these mothers and children are likely to be exposed to after their deportation. With no support available upon return, these individuals have limited chances of living a normal, safe, and healthy life.

Endnotes

1. CARA is a partnership of four organizations that joined forces in the spring of 2015 in response to the mass detention of children and their mothers. CARA consists of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), the American Immigration Council, Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), and the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). CARA represented the families whose stories are presented in this report, and their staff and volunteers were instrumental in helping us reach their clients upon return to Central America.
2. In July 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) launched a multimedia public awareness campaign known as the "Dangers Awareness Campaign," which involved the use of print, radio, and TV ads to deliver the message that the journey was too dangerous and that children would not get legal papers if they made it to the United States. "CBP Addresses Humanitarian Challenges of Unaccompanied Child Migrants," *U.S. Customs and Border Protection,* last accessed May 2016, https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/humanitarian-challenges.
3. Jonathan Hiskey et al., *Understanding the Central American Refugee Crisis: Why They Are Fleeing and How U.S. Policies are Failing to Deter Them* (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, February 2016), http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/understanding-central-american-refugee-crisis-why-they-are-fleeing.
4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, *Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico* (Washington, DC: UNHCR, October 2015), http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html.
5. According to the World Bank, in 2014 about 63 percent of Hondurans, 59 percent of Guatemalans, and 32 percent of Salvadorans lived in poverty. *See* World Bank Open Data Country Profiles for Honduras, http://data.worldbank.org/country/honduras; Guatemala, http://data.worldbank.org/country/guatemala; and El Salvador, http://data.worldbank.org/country/el-salvador, accessed April 17, 2016.
6. The World Food Program estimates that 2.3 million people are moderately or severely food insecure in this region. *See* World Food Program, *Global Food Security Update*, Issue 20 (December 2015), http://vam.wfp.org/sites/global_update/December_2015/Index.htm.
7. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire* (UNODC, May 2007), 25, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/Central_America_Study_2007.pdf.
8. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," published as "Politik als Beruf," Gesammlte Aufsaetze zur Wissenschaftslehre (Tubingen, 1922), 396-450, based on a speech at Munich University in 1918. *See* H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. and eds., *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-128, http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf.
9. Uneven presence of the state in functional or class terms means that democratic legality, publicness, and citizenship operate differently for different social classes or other socially defined groups.
10. Guillermo O'Donnell, "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems," (Working Paper #192, The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, April 1993), https://www3.nd.edu/~kellogg/publications/workingpapers/WPS/192.pdf.
11. Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson, eds., introduction to *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, November 2011), 1-17, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf.
12. Jorge Vargas Cullell, "Advancing the Study of Stateness in Central America: Methodology and Some Illustrative Findings," in *Handbook of Central American Governance*, ed. Diego Sánchez-Ancochea and Salvador Martí i Puig (New York: Routledge, 2014), 119-133.
13. Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson, eds., *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, November 2011), 174, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf.
14. Ibid., 1-17.
15. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres, *Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico* (Washington, DC: UNHCR, October 2015), http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html.
16. Victoria Rietig and Rodrigo Dominguez Villegas, *Stopping the Revolving Door: Reception and Reintegration Services for Central American Deportees* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, December 2015), http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/stopping-revolving-door-reception-and-reintegration-services-central-american-deportees.
17. For confidentiality reasons, all names were replaced with pseudonyms.
18. The American Immigration Council attempted to reach 54 individuals. Many women and families spoke with us, but were not willing to share their experience—for many it is simply too difficult to discuss.
19. CARA is a partnership of four organizations that joined forces in the spring of 2015 in response to the mass detention of children and their mothers. CARA consists of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), the American Immigration Council, Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), and the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). CARA represented the families whose stories are presented in this report, and their staff and volunteers were instrumental in helping us reach their clients upon return to Central America.
20. A credible fear interview is used to determine if the individual can show that there is a significant possibility that he/she can satisfy the qualifications for asylum. The interview takes place if someone expresses a fear of persecution or a desire for asylum and arrives in the United States with false documents or no documents, which makes the person subject to expedited removal. National Immigrant Justice Center "Basic Procedural Manual for Asylum Representation Affirmatively and in Removal Proceedings," March 2016, 69, http://immigrantjustice.org/sites/immigrantjustice.org/files/NIJC%20Asylum%20Manual_03%202016%20final.pdf. *See* p. 8 and 25 for more general information on the asylum process and asylum law.
21. Spanish for "freezers" or "iceboxes," the name used to describe the "short-term" detention facilities run by Border Patrol near the U.S.-Mexico border.