



Fishing boats line the docks in Chiapas, Mexico.

Photo by Néstor Fernando Hernández Candelaria.

## MIGRATION

# Stitching Together a New Life

By Lauren Markham

Last fall, I visited a lonely port on the coast of Puerto Chiapas, Mexico, where wooden fishing boats were beached on shore or bobbed out in the bay. Here, I met a Salvadoran man, whom I'll call Adolfo, who had recently left his country behind.

After a morning of fishing, Adolfo had hung a large net, bigger than a king-size bed sheet, from a hook high on the porch of his boss's house. He was mending the places where the line had grown weak or had split, leaving holes. I was with another journalist friend, who was looking for information about migrant-smuggling routes along the coast. "Yeah," said Adolfo, "They take people out there." He motioned toward the sea beyond the bay. "Drugs, too." He shrugged and kept working on the line.

Many Central Americans come through Chiapas, Adolfo explained. But "many" is an understatement. Every year, Mexico deports tens of thousands of migrants to Central America — mostly to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras — but many more slip through unnoticed.

While some are apprehended and sent home, others are able to continue on to the United States. Adolfo and his family were applying for asylum from the Mexican government, on account of "many problems" back home.

These problems were, of course, gang related. El Salvador is one of the most dangerous countries in the world, plagued by gang violence, political corruption, and endemic poverty. Communities throughout the country — particularly poor communities like the small fishing town on the coast where Adolfo had lived — are controlled by the gangs. Businesses large and small — from big hotels and bus companies to the lady selling tamales on the street — are required to pay *renta* (rent), a euphemism for extortion. If they don't turn over the money every two weeks, they risk death.

Adolfo paid the *renta*, but eventually, the gangs took possession of his boat. It was worth about \$8,000 in cash, but far more than that as the tool he needed to earn his living from the sea.

"What could I do?" he asked. He knew no one would help him get his boat back. The police were corrupt, and any kind of *denuncia*, or official report, against the gang would put his life at risk and potentially the lives of his family, as well.

Adolfo is in his forties, with curly hair, leathered skin, and bright eyes; he dresses like a hip teenager in baggy shorts, a t-shirt, and trendy sneakers. He has two children: a teen daughter and a 12-year-old son. They are all in Mexico now, living with his sister who had moved here years ago. Adolfo's kids weren't going to school, and his occasional work helping out a local fisherman barely kept food on the table. But he was adamant that he couldn't return to El Salvador.

"They've ruined my country," Adolfo said, practically spitting the words. By "they," he meant the gangs but also, and perhaps more importantly, the politicians. They've done nothing, as he sees it, to put a stop to the violence. "They've only empowered the gangs. They are gangsters, too," he said. "El Salvador is dead." He will never go back.

Adolfo and his family are just a few of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who have left El Salvador in the past decade, and the country already has a long history of migration to the United States. Between 1980 and 1990, the most brutal years of El Salvador's civil war, approximately 371,000 Salvadorans — 7 percent of the country's population at the time — migrated to the United States. Today, more than 2 million Salvadorans reside in the U.S., approximately a third of El Salvador's entire population.

In recent years, the number of migrants has increased in almost direct proportion to the rise of gangs. None of the domestic or foreign policies of El Salvador, Mexico, or the United States has done anything to curb migration — be it El Salvador's *mano dura* campaigns or gang truce, the ramp-up of deportations in both Mexico and the U.S., or anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States. Ask Adolfo or anyone else from El Salvador — from politicians and migration officials to local fishermen and shopkeepers in this Mexican coast town — and they'll tell you: no matter what happens in the United States, no matter what the Trump administration does (or threatens to do), migration from El Salvador is not going to stop anytime soon.

As I write in my book about child migration from Central America, *The Far Away Brothers: Two Young Migrants and the Making of an American Life* (Crown, 2017), El Salvador is now hemorrhaging people. Salvadorans "are crossing into the United States in search of the fabled 'better life' that has attracted migrants, authorized and

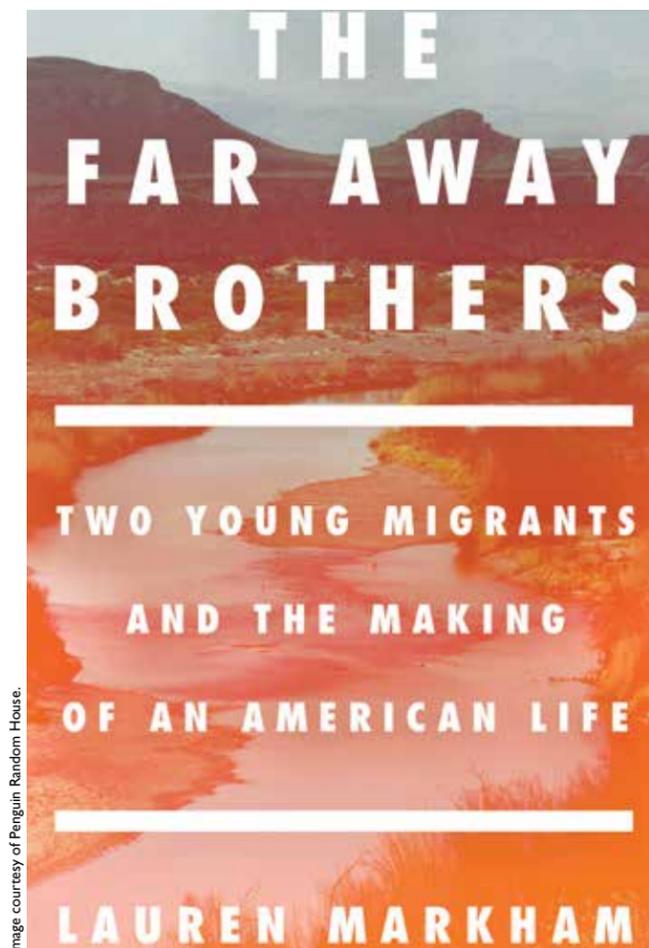


Image courtesy of Penguin Random House.

unauthorized, since before the *Mayflower* landed. But in the Northern Triangle — Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador — a 'better life,' for many, means a life where they are not afraid of being killed." Though the conditions on the ground in El Salvador have not changed much since I began reporting *The Far Away Brothers* four years ago, what has changed is the profile of the Salvadoran immigrant to the United States.

For decades, it was mostly adult breadwinners, like Adolfo, who struck out on their own for the North, hoping to get a job and send money home to take care of their loved ones. Over the past several years, however, solo adult crossers are at record lows, while solo youth crossers, as well as young families, are at record highs. I wrote *The Far Away Brothers* to better understand why so many people were leaving their homes in El Salvador and why the profile of the Central American migrant had shifted. What is happening in El Salvador that is pushing so many young people out toward the Great Northern Unknown?

Scratch the surface of this question, and the answers are abundant. There's the generations-old story of poverty. The Northern Triangle of Central America is plagued by economic insecurity and increasing environmental

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concerns; currently, 3.5 million people are at risk of food insecurity or are already hungry. El Salvador is also now one of the most violent places in the world, with many sectors and aspects of society dominated by brutal gangs. *La violencia*, as it's called in shorthand, is harder to escape than ever.

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have some of the highest murder rates in the world. In 2015, El Salvador's murder rate reached 103 per 100,000 people — a figure rivaling the time of the civil war. By way of comparison, the United States, a country 50 times the size of El Salvador, had only four times the total number of homicides that same year. In 2017, El Salvador's murder rate dropped to 60 per 100,000, but it is still among the most dangerous countries in the world. In the Northern Triangle, approximately 95 percent of crimes go unpunished; to denounce a gang member is to risk retribution from the gang, often in the form of rape or murder. Meanwhile, in a crippled economy that relies heavily on remittances from abroad (the vast majority from the United States), 3 percent of El Salvador's GDP goes to extortion — the bread and butter of gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18.

Today's violence is easily traced back to the horrific war that brutalized El Salvador in the 1980s. Adolfo watched his country battle itself (with funding from the United States), finally forge peace and begin to recover, and then launch back into another kind of armed conflict: the unconventional, pernicious struggle of gang violence. It's a strange war, and one that might be invisible to an unknowing outsider. The violence is so endemic that it is somehow normalized: daily life continues amid the homicides, the funerals, the threats to life and limb, the extortion. People go fishing, have birthday parties, sell tortillas on the street, make dinner, have babies, go to school: normal life goes on, until it doesn't. More than 50 percent of Salvadoran migrants surveyed by the United Nations state that they have seen someone close to them murdered. It's no wonder so many Salvadorans like Adolfo and his family are fleeing home to save their lives.

After the gangs stole Adolfo's boat and he couldn't do anything about it, he moved on. He kept fishing, kept trying to eke out a living with his family. They were evangelical Christians; he showed me the photo ID cards from his church, eager to offer me proof: one for him, his wife, his

son, his daughter. "See," he said, "We're Christians. We're good people. We didn't ask for any of this."

But one night a few years later, he had a run-in with some gang members on his way home from the piers. A group of young men stopped him — "kids," he said, most of them — maybe five or six all together. They shoved him to the ground and beat him up, kicking and punching him. Then they pointed a gun at him. They were about to shoot, he recalled, when one of them said, "I don't think it's him."

"They'd confused me with someone else," he explained. "Someone they wanted to kill." To confirm his identity, they stripped him naked in search of telltale tattoos, and when they saw he didn't have any, they realized their mistake and let him go. Adolfo walked home, bruised and battered, having just barely escaped death.

It's hard to know precisely how many people are involved with the gangs in El Salvador. A 2013 study of somewhat questionable merit by the Salvadoran government estimated that 470,000 Salvadorans — more than 7 percent of the population — had direct ties to gangs, either through family members or as full-fledged gang members themselves.

Police often arrest suspected gang members with little evidence. Just hanging out in a group on the street can be grounds for arrest according to the law against *agrupación ilícita* (unlawful assembly). The courts and penal system are so backed up that people languish in prison for months or years before being formally charged or going to trial (prisons are at 310-percent capacity). The police kill with impunity, too. Several extra-judicial massacres have been reported, including the high-profile 2015 "San Blas" case where eight people were murdered by the police, their bodies rearranged to make it look like self-defense. Such incidents give credence to the belief that the police are killing based on mere suspicion. Meanwhile, vigilante groups are also going after the gangs, which smacks of the clandestine death squads from the civil war days.

The gangs are not just fighting each other and the police, but also the government — at least those government agencies not already intertwined with the gangs. Both major political parties in El Salvador have been accused of buying votes from gang members in exchange for lighter prison sentences and reduced police crackdowns.

Yet one of the most vexing problems with the gang wars in El Salvador today is that there's no easy good guy/bad guy dichotomy. The outcomes for young people in El Salvador are dire. Only half of Salvadoran youth enroll in 7th to 9th grades, and only half of those move on to high school. More than 300,000 youth between the ages of 15 and 24 are currently out of school and without a job. With

these options in mind, it's no surprise young people are joining the gangs.

These young people are ground troops for gangs and, therefore, most likely to die or go to prison. The gangs prey on youth, using methods similar to the recruitment of child soldiers around the world: youngsters are incorporated into the ranks by brute force (they are told they'll be killed, or their sister will be raped, or their father will be killed, if they don't join) or by force of circumstance (youth who come from abusive households, who are orphans, who have no other place to go).

Migrants from Central America, like Adolfo, who are fleeing violence back home are generally shocked to learn that MS-13 is a dire — and growing — problem in the United States, too. After all, MS-13 was born within the United States among Salvadoran exiles who had fled their civil war only to land in under-resourced urban areas dominated by crime and home-grown gangs. Young migrants formed MS-13 to mimic these other gangs, and in some cases, in an effort to protect themselves from neighborhood violence. When tens of thousands of young Salvadorans were incarcerated and then deported in the late 1980s and 1990s, they brought this gang culture home with them, effectively starting a new era of Salvadoran unrest. Gang violence in the United States is not an imported crisis, but a reflection of the conditions in the U.S. itself, where inequality is so stark that gang violence has been roiling among disaffected youth for decades, if not centuries.

Yet Trump claims that young Salvadorans are smuggling themselves into the country in order to bring their gang ways to our "peaceful parks and beautiful quiet neighborhoods," which they have turned into "bloodstained killing fields." In response to the influx of young migrants, the current administration is attempting to criminalize immigration more than ever before, both in terms of the actual letter of the law and in the court of public opinion: from efforts to ban immigrants from certain countries whole hog, to attempts to increase deportations and daily detention capacities, to claims that youth crossing the border alone are taking advantage of immigration loopholes and are "wolves in sheep's clothing."

Salvadorans, in particular, have ended up in the crosshairs. In the fall of 2017, President Trump announced the end of the popular Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides relief to more than 25,000 Salvadorans who arrived here as young people (as well as hundreds of thousands of others). Then, in January 2018, the Trump administration announced plans to end Temporary Protective Status (TPS) for nearly 200,000 Salvadorans who had been granted this special status after

El Salvador's legacy of violence: a casualty of the massacre at Archbishop Oscar Romero's funeral, April 1980.



Photo from Keystone/Getty Images.



A rally supporting the continuation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for refugees, January 2018.

several natural disasters struck El Salvador in the early 2000s, with repeated extensions as a stopgap to a failing immigration system without many permanent options.

The prospect of sudden deportation for 200,000 Salvadorans who have long been in the United States isn't just horrifying to the potential deportees, but to the entire Salvadoran society. As I wrote in the *New York Times*, "El Salvador is home to 6.34 million people; the 200,000 deportees from the United States would mean a population increase of 3 percent. Where are these 200,000 people expected to go, and how will they possibly be absorbed?" After all, conditions in parts of El Salvador are so dire that people continue to migrate by the tens of thousands every year.

Adolfo didn't want to leave El Salvador. Even after his boat was stolen, after he'd been stripped and nearly shot point blank for the bum luck of looking too much like someone else, El Salvador was still his home. He had a trade and a calling as a fisherman. His work made him proud and earned him enough to take decent care of his family. His kids were in school; his family was close to their church community and to their extended family. Life was dangerous, and he was worried, but he didn't really think about leaving. Where could they possibly go? And then the gangs started going after his daughter.

On the way home from school one day, Adolfo's teenage daughter was stopped by some kids she thought might be

in a gang. They kept her from going home; they asked her to join them, to come along and hang out with them. She demurred for long enough that they let up. She made it home safely, but it happened twice more. And then, one of the gang members started stalking her, insisting that she be his girlfriend.

Gang members reserve the right to claim their girlfriends, and refusal can be a death sentence. While most members (and most murder victims) of the gangs in El Salvador are men, young women are increasingly joining, either as full-fledged members or as girlfriends who to do some of the dirty work (transporting drugs as "mules," collecting renta, cutting drugs). But being a young woman in El Salvador already means being at risk of rape or murder, both inside and outside of the gangs. In 2012, El Salvador had the world's highest rate of femicide, the gender-motivated killing of women. Those young women who survive become pregnant at alarmingly early ages. According to a 2015 study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 25,132 of the 83,468 registered pregnancies in El Salvador (approximately 30 percent) were girls or young women between the ages of 10 and 19. The odds are not good for young women like Adolfo's daughter.

"The problem is," Adolfo told me as he mended the net with swift hitches of a hooked needle, "She's too pretty."

Once their daughter had been made a target, Adolfo and his wife felt they had no choice. They didn't tell

anyone where they were going but packed their suitcases and hit the road one night, heading for his sister's place in southern Mexico.

Adolfo has been in Mexico almost a year, preparing his asylum paperwork and waiting for good news. But despite the time and money he is spending to earn asylum in Mexico, he has no intention of staying. "It's dangerous here, too," he said. Not so much because of gang violence, he explained, but because of the *narcos*. The asylum paperwork is a long-term safety net, an elaborate one at that: if Adolfo or his family get deported from the United States, they will be sent back to Mexico instead of all the way home to El Salvador, where he fears for his daughter's life. Once Adolfo gets the paperwork, he and his family will hit the road again.

When I asked Adolfo what he'll do when he gets to the United States, he told me that a cousin of his thought he might be able to get him a job pouring cement, in Kansas, maybe. "You know," he said, "Building roads." Wouldn't he miss the fishing life, I asked, motioning toward the sea, all those colorful, bobbing boats?

"Nah," he said, shaking his head. He wanted to leave everything behind. "They have ruined my country. It's nothing anymore, nothing." Another hook of his needle. "I

A woman watches neighbors flee their homes following gang threats in Tunamiles, El Salvador.



Photo by Salvador Meledendez/AP Photo.

want to forget all that." He tied a knot, bit off the line, and started in on another hole. His life, back home, was over.

A few days ago, months after I met Adolfo that bright sunny day on the coast, I got a phone call. He'd gotten his asylum paperwork. "We're getting ready to go," he said. He'd been watching the news, he knew what was being said about El Salvador, and he understood the peril for thousands of Salvadoran migrants who had long been in the United States, as well as for those who had just recently made the journey north in fear for their lives. He knew enough about the current immigration debate and crackdown to understand what might be in store for him once he got to the United States. But these were risks he felt had to take for the sake of his family. "Primero Dios," he said. "God willing," one of these days, Adolfo and his family will race across the border, come what may once they've made it across.

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References for this article are available at [clas.berkeley.edu](http://clas.berkeley.edu).