

YOUTH ASYLUM SEEKERS STUCK AT THE BORDER:

A look at their past, present,
and future

August 2021

Templo Embajadores de Jesús Shelter, Tijuana
UCSD Center on Global Justice / UCSD-Alacrán
Community Station
Mexican Migration Field Research Program
University of California, San Diego

Contributors

This study was designed collaboratively by the Templo Embajadores de Jesus Shelter, the Center on Global Justice/UCSD-Alacrán Community Station, and the Mexican Migration Field Research Program at the University of California, San Diego.

- **Research design:** Zaida Guillén, Hanael Guillén Banda, Kyle Haines, Fonna Forman, Teddy Cruz, Abigail Andrews, Ana López Ricoy, and Andrea Garfio
- **Logistical support:** Hanael Guillén Banda
- **Data collection, analysis and writeup:** Nancy Castillo Camacho, Priscila Cervantes, Alexxis Hernández, Kimberly Lopez, Marianna Lozoya, Estefanny Mendez Hernandez, and Jaqueline Munive
- **Final draft:** Ana López Ricoy and Abigail Andrews

Executive Summary

This report analyzes the experiences of youth migrants living in limbo at the US-Mexico border. It is based on a series of 10 weekly Zoom meetings in 2021 with migrant youth ages 12-15 living in the *Templo Embajadores de Jesús* shelter in Tijuana, and 24 interviews in 2019 with migrant youth ages 12-17 living in the YMCA youth shelter in Tijuana.

We use these data to illustrate the particular experiences and perceptions affecting youth as they struggle to get by in Tijuana.

We structure this report around three key questions that framed our research and particularly our interactions with youth:

- 1) Where did we come from? (Legacies of fleeing violence and poverty),
- 2) Where are we now? (Experiences and impacts of life in a migrant shelter) and
- 3) Where are we going? (Perceptions and fantasies of the United States).

Key Findings

1. Young people's experiences of poverty and violence in their home countries make them feel responsible to find income and/or safety for their families (Part 1).
2. Shelters can provide youth migrants a sense of security, routine, and community. In turn, this sense of security shapes the ability of young asylum seekers and their parents to use other services in Tijuana and engage with same-age peers, including in schools (Part 2).
3. Youth imagine the United States as a space of consumption and family reunification and pin their hopes on making it north of the border (Part 3).

Resumen Ejecutivo

Este reporte analiza las experiencias de los jóvenes migrantes que viven en la frontera México-Estados Unidos. Se basa en una serie de 10 reuniones semanales por medio de Zoom en 2021, entre estudiantes de UCSD y jóvenes migrantes entre las edades de 12-15 que vivían en el albergue Templo Embajadores de Jesús en Tijuana. También, utilizamos 24 entrevistas hechas en 2019 con jóvenes migrantes entre las edades de 12-17, que vivían en el albergue del YMCA en Tijuana.

Utilizando estos datos, ilustramos las experiencias y las percepciones de los jóvenes durante su lucha para sobrevivir en Tijuana.

El reporte se basa alrededor de tres preguntas que nos ayudaron a guiar la investigación y las interacciones con los jóvenes:

- 1) De dónde venimos? (Efectos de huirnos de la violencia y la pobreza)
- 2) Por dónde estamos? (Experiencias y efectos de la vida en un albergue para migrantes)
- 3) A dónde vamos? (Percepciones y fantasías de la vida en los Estados Unidos)

Hallazgos Claves

1. Para los jóvenes, las experiencias de pobreza y violencia en el país de origen les hacen sentir responsables de buscar ingresos y/o seguridad para sus familias (Primera parte)
2. Los albergues de migrantes les pueden dar un sentido de seguridad, rutina y comunidad. Seguido, este sentido de seguridad les ayuda a los adolescentes y sus padres acceder a otros servicios en Tijuana, interactuar con otros jóvenes de su edad e incluso en las escuelas (Segunda parte)
3. Los jóvenes perciben los Estados Unidos como un espacio para consumir ,tanto como para reunificarse con sus familias. Ellos asocian la esperanza con la posibilidad de llegar al otro lado de la frontera (Tercera parte).

Contents

Introduction	6
Part 1: “Where did we come from?”: Shouldering Poverty and Violence	7
Poverty.....	7
Violence	9
Part 2: “Where are we now?”: The Importance of Stable Shelters.....	10
Stability and safety	10
A sense of normalcy	12
Building community	16
Part 3: “Where are we going?”: Dreaming of the United States	17
Family reunification.....	17
Comfortable lifestyle	18
Final notes	19
Conclusion.....	20
Recommendations.....	20

Introduction

In recent years, violence and poverty have driven tens of thousands of children leave their home countries in Central America and Mexico to migrate to the United States. Under the Trump and Biden administrations, policies like Zero Tolerance, Title 42, and the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP, or Remain in Mexico) have aimed to stop such migrants and their families from entering the United States, even if the migrants are seeking asylum. These policies have left migrants to wait in Mexico for months or even years, where they are vulnerable to terror, ransom, kidnapping, and even death.

Research about migrants stranded at the US-Mexico border tend to focus on adults. By contrast, this report takes the vantage point of young people (under age 18) as they seek asylum and become trapped at the border. We are especially concerned with three themes: 1) the impacts of poverty and violence for youth migrants' lives after leaving their places of origin, 2) the implications of stable shelter for youth's sense of community, normalcy, and safety, and 3) the aspirations – correct or incorrect – that youth associate with the United States.

We structure the report around three key questions that framed our research and particularly our interactions with youth from January to March 2021: 1) Where did we come from? (legacies of fleeing violence and poverty), 2) Where are we now (experiences and impacts of life in a migrant shelter) and 3) Where are we going (perceptions and fantasies of the United States).

Our project highlights the struggles of migrant youth who are often caught between the binary of wanting to enter the US while still being stuck and forced to remain in Mexico. At the same time, we seek to identify practices that can better support immigrant youth surviving the traumatic process of migration.

Methods

The report is based on a series of 10 two-hour Zoom meetings in 2021 with eight migrant youth ages 12-15 living in the *Templo Embajadores de Jesús* shelter in Tijuana with their families, 22 interviews in 2019 with unaccompanied migrant youth ages 12-17 living in the YMCA youth shelter in Tijuana, and 21 interviews with parents awaiting US asylum in Tijuana in 2021.

Our data for this report are drawn from three sources:

- **Fieldnotes from ten two-hour Zoom meetings, mentoring sessions, and workshops with a set of eight immigrant youth ages 12-15, conducted in 2021.** The authors of this paper all participated in a mentoring program between UCSD and the *Templo Embajadores de Jesus* Shelter in Tijuana between January-March of 2021. There were eight youth participating in this program, all housed with their families at Templo and all between the ages of 12-15. For 10 weeks, we held weekly 2-hour Zoom calls on Saturdays, in which UCSD students spoke with the migrant youth. For part of the call, we held group workshops and for part of the call we held individual mentoring conversations. Five of the youth participants were from Mexico and

three were from Guatemala and Honduras. After each session we took notes. We also asked the youth to share photos and drawings. The questions asked were often open-ended and revolving around future plans and current thoughts on the future. The respondents were not offered any kind of incentives to participate.

- **Transcripts from 22 interviews of youth migrants in shelters in Tijuana, conducted in 2019:** These interviews were conducted in Spanish with Central American and Mexican migrants ages 13-17. All of these youth were living in the YMCA shelter in Tijuana for unaccompanied minors. All interviews were conducted in person at the shelter by UCSD students, and respondents were not paid to participate.
- **Transcripts from 21 interviews of parents who were seeking asylum with their children, conducted in 2021:** These interviews were conducted by UCSD students over WhatsApp between January-March 2021 in collaboration with the Border Rights Project of non-profit legal aid organization Al Otro Lado. All participants were members of Al Otro Lado's humanitarian aid program, which provided them debit cards. Our interviews focused on their experiences living in Tijuana and their access to services. While 90% of participants were from El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras, a few were also from Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, or other third countries. All participants were given US\$15 on their debit cards as acknowledgment of their participation.

The authors of this report were involved in the 2021 fieldwork with youth at *Templo Embajadores de Jesús* and helped to transcribe the interviews with parents in 2021 and unaccompanied youth in 2019.

Part 1: “Where did we come from?”: Shouldering Poverty and Violence

It is widely known that economic factors and gang violence drive young people out of Central America. We show that these experiences of violence and poverty and in transit through Mexico shape young people's understandings about why it is important to reach the United States. Specifically, we illustrate how poverty makes youth feel responsible to provide for their families, and violence makes them desperate for a sense of safety and security. We address each point in turn, below.

Poverty

Poverty is one of the key factors that drive people to migrate to the United States, and the youth we interviewed were no exception. Youth who left their countries due to financial hardship aspired to reach the U.S. to seek better opportunities, such as work to help provide for their families. But we also found that poverty drives youth to take on adult responsibilities and decisions, including those focused on making money for their families.

For instance, José, a 17-year-old boy from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, migrated in hopes of helping his mother and grandparents. José was not able to continue school back in Honduras because his family did not have enough money to pay for his schooling. The

family was unhoused, and they needed the funds to afford necessities such as food. José had attempted to reach the US multiple times and had been deported four times in the process. He told us: "I dream of arriving to the United States to see my family, even if it is just to buy my mom and grandparents a house, because they don't have anywhere to live." José underscored that his history of economic instability developed a sense of responsibility to provide for his family.

José was 17 years old when this interview was conducted and was already thinking and planning about buying a home. When we asked what he expected from the United States, José said he wanted to work, and if there were an opportunity to go to school, he would be interested. In laying out these priorities, José indicated that for his family, working was more important than continuing going to school.

In some cases, like that of Diego, a 13-year-old youth in our group at *Templo Embajadores de Jesus*, youth had already taken on provider roles before they left their home countries. Diego was from Guatemala and had left when he was 10. At first, his family stayed at Templo, and then they came to rent a home nearby. In one of the weekly meetings, Diego shared that when he was 9-10 years old, he and his brother who was a little older would sell jewelry, flowers, and food on the street. Diego's mother had no work, so he had multiple jobs. Diego added that he would earn tips from being funny with customers. With the money he earned, he was able to afford his school uniform, food, and other utilities. The experience instilled on Diego that he had a role as a provider and motivated him to want to make additional money for his family.

Dario offered a similar example of how the history of poverty shaped youth migrants' mindsets. Dario was a migrant from Chiquimula, Guatemala who fled from violence. Dario's dad was murdered when he was 6 years old, and his mother abandoned him and his after his father's death. As a result, Dario became like a parent to his brothers and sisters. He felt an immense imperative to provide for them. He shared:

I have thoughts, like I told you, of giving my siblings a chance to study, if possible, if God decides it that way. And giving the others a chance to study as well, so that they go down a good path and don't do what the rest do [and go into gangs].

The response show how Dario feels responsibility for providing his siblings with education. He added that he wanted to work in the US, save money, and then bring his younger brother and nephew.

From a parental perspective, parents were also often debilitated by poverty, violence, or illness, and came to rely on their children for money. Santino, a 46-year-old father from Guatemala who was living in Tijuana with his sons, had been separated from his wife and daughter for two years, as the latter made it to the United States. Meanwhile, Santino suffered a hernia, chronic back pain, and memory loss. As a result, he depended on his eldest son for financial support.

Like in these examples, many migrant youths are impacted by poverty. In the 22 transcripts we analyzed from 2019, for instance, 12 young people underscored their

financial hardships. Seven of them were unable to continue their education at home due to lack of funds, and five hoped to send money back home.

Violence

Violence also pushed many youth and their families to migrate. We find that youth's dreams and end-goals were shaped by their search for safety and a life away from violence. They believed that in the US they would find protection.

An example is a youth migrant named Araceli. Araceli was a 17-year-old girl from Michoacán, Mexico. She was also a single mom to a one-year-old daughter. Her baby's dad was abusive. He would verbally, psychologically, and physically mistreat her. Araceli decided to leave him, but when she did, he kept looking for her and threatened to take her child away. Thus, Araceli felt she must leave to protect her child. After living through these rough experiences, she was grateful to be out of her hometown and felt safer in Tijuana. She stated, "My life has changed. I feel very happy here ... I feel really good about being here. Sometimes I think I regret asking for asylum [in the US. I think] I should just stay here." Having made it to relative safety, Araceli felt perhaps she had done enough.

Another young person who left due to violence is Pablo. Abandoned by his family at age 15, Pablo had been living on his own. Soon, local gangs threatened that he had to join them and work smuggling drugs, weapons, or people. If he did not, they said, he'd be killed. As a result, Pablo had to grow up fast and decide whether to leave his country of origin. He explained, "I want to create a future for myself, and I know it will not be easy, but I want to do it because I do not want to go back to my country. I can only have hope."

Pablo knew life was not easy and that it took hard work to live United States. As he put it, "I know the United States is a country where you practically go to work and then you go straight home." But he preferred constant work to returning to threats back home. He went on:

The United States could have so much more security for my life, because in my country there is a lot of delinquency, and things get out of control for youth. Because young people are more in danger of stuff like maras and gangs. In my case, that's how it was, and that is why I choose to leave my country and come all the way over here.

Pablo had to take it upon himself to find a way out. Indeed, many of the young people we interviewed had been threatened by gangs and were terrified they would be targeted back home. They chose to go to the US in hopes it would be safe.

Manolo, who was 17 at the time of their interview, had fled Honduras a year earlier when gangs attempted to force him to sell drugs. Manolo's father had been murdered by gangs just outside their family home when Manolo was two years old. Then the gangs came for his elder sister and forced her to be one of their "women." So, Manolo made the decision to join a caravan on his own as an attempt to escape. On the journey through Guatemala and Mexico, however, he was assaulted, robbed of all his (little)

money, and watched people be kidnapped and recruited by cartels. He was now determined that to save his own life, he had to get to the United States. He insisted he could not stay in Tijuana because “I do not have anyone here [Tijuana] and I am also very afraid of the narcs and the cartels.” On one hand, this was a very adult decision. On the other hand, Manolo hoped to be adopted in a family in the US who could help teach him English and send him to school. In this vision, Manolo imagined almost “reclaiming” his childhood when he got to the United States.

In sum, migrant youth's experiences with violence and poverty in their home countries drove them to take on adult responsibilities, including earning money and making decisions to migrate. Often, they also took responsibility for their younger siblings, parents, or other family members. Having already lost the opportunity for schooling or a more carefree form of childhood, they take on the roles of adults. At the same time, some still longed for a means to feel like children again. As we show in Part 3, they often imagined that happening in the United States.

Part 2: “Where are we now?”: The Importance of Stable Shelters

In this section, we look at how shelters shape day-to-day life for immigrant youth at the border. By comparing youth housed in the migrant shelter *Templo Embajadores de Jesús* with youth and families without access to a shelter, we learned that shelters can provide a sense of safety and security. In such cases, it may also offer normalcy and routine for youth, as well as a sense of community.

Stability and safety

Through our fieldwork, we found that *Templo Embajadores de Jesús* offered youth migrants stability, while parents and young people living on their own experienced greater feelings of insecurity and isolation.

In Tijuana, migrants are at high risk of being victims of crime. For instance, Ada, a 35-year-old Central American mother, was seeking asylum along with her husband and their two sons. Ada shared that she felt unsafe in the place she currently lived, because anyone had access to the rooms where she and her family rented. Recently, the room below hers had also been robbed. She shared:

[I feel] a bit unsafe to tell the truth. There are many people who have Access to the rooms. They are plenty. And they have already been inside the room downstairs and robbed it. That is how unsafe it is. Because they entered it to steal things. And this is how my situation is now. Because when I arrived the shelters were too full.

As Ada hinted, she would have preferred to stay in a shelter with her children, but all the shelters were full. As a result, she lived in fear that something would happen to her or her kids. Other parents expressed similar concerns, with 14 of 21 parents interviewed stating that they did not feel their children were safe in Tijuana or in their current shelter.

We also found that because of safety concerns in the streets of Tijuana, migrant parents preferred for their children to stay inside their rented rooms for most of the day. In other words, danger created restrictions. Youth in rental apartments could not interact with other children or explore their neighborhoods.

In other cases, secure housing came at the cost of money and personal items. For example, Alicia, a 33-year-old mother from Honduras, described how she struggled to find shelter when she first came to Tijuana. She mentioned how, despite the high cost of an apartment, she needed to rent a place to get her children away from the insecurity of living in the streets. She explained:

We were forced to live on the streets once, and we didn't have anywhere to go. Suddenly, we had no choice but to go live in a very expensive apartment while we found something. And they were very tiny and very enclosed. We had to sell a refrigerator and things like that to be able to get by, and we had some money, we always had something saved just in case.

This example demonstrates how housing costs in Tijuana can drive some migrant parents to sell personal items in order to find a secure place to live.

For those living in immigrant shelters, things were different. Our repeated interactions with youth in *Templo Embajadores de Jesus* suggested that living in a shelter created a stronger sense of personal and economic security. In UCSD student Nancy Castillo's fieldnotes, based on conversations with her youth mentee, for instance, she wrote:

My mentee said her family had already planned their stay in Tijuana because the pandemic held them back from entering the United States. Luckily enough, her new life began to take shape in Tijuana. She said she likes it better where she is now because when she was in Michoacán she did not go out as often nor have the liberty she has now.

In this example, the youth believed that her current living situation was less restricted than her life back home in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, where her family had been pursued by cartels. Similarly, many young people we spoke with at Templo said that they had both freedom to move about and a strong community in the shelter. We often heard stories of children visiting the church, attending activities provided by the shelter, and playing with friends. Some had even taken field trips outside of Templo as well. One youth who did not live in Templo anymore even shared that he had built such strong connections with other youth there that he now visited frequently to be with friends.

Similarly, Dario, who we quoted in Part 1, shared how in the current Tijuana shelter (YMCA) he felt calm, while previous shelters he was in did not provide a safe space for him. Therefore, the ability to provide security and a sense of calm may vary among shelters.

As these examples suggest, having a sense of security is important for youth because it influences their ability to move about freely and interact with friends. Although youth are not able to leave Templo Embajadores de Jesus without permission from a parent, the shelter and surrounding area host between 600-1200 migrants at a time, and youth are able to wander around the shelter itself with friends, without having to worry about

robberies or kidnappings. By contrast, those on the streets are vulnerable to violence, and those renting rooms are often stuck at home, to avoid violence outside. Living in a stable shelter such as Templo can provide youth with a sense of security along with the opportunity to experience some sort of freedom, which is particularly important for adolescents and teens.

A sense of normalcy

We also found that having an unstable shelter affected young people's senses of normalcy, in that their routine became confined and restricted. Migrant youth who live in unstable shelters also often live in unsafe and unprotected environments, as mentioned before. As a result, parents often keep them indoors during the day. This means young people lose the ability to participate in activities such as school or outdoor play, which are critical for normalcy and routine.

Santino, the father of two sons mentioned in Part 1, for instance, lived in a crowded home with many other people. Santino felt uncomfortable in his current living situation. Although he wanted to rent a home on his own, he did not have the money. Santino felt frustrated that his 12-year-old son had no access to school and no daily routine. He contrasted the boy's experiences with that of his daughter, who had reached the United States:

My son is desperate as well. He does not want to be here; he wants to be with his mother [in the US]. He wants to study. And my youngest daughter is over there with my wife is studying. They gave her a computer, and she is taken to school everyday: the bus picks her up in the morning and brings her back in the afternoon. She is studying and can even speak some English, and my son here, he doesn't know anything. He has already lost two years of study, and he knows nothing about school. The little bit he knew, he has already forgotten.

Santino's experience sheds light on the difficulty of accessing resources for his child in Mexico. The father's comparison of his children's educational experiences not only reflects the father's frustration but the challenges migrant youth experience as well.

In our data, we frequently noticed how parents struggled with a lack of access to school for their children. Of seventeen parents interviewed, only three explicitly stated that their children attended school. However, even for these parents, school was difficult once classes went virtual since none had stable internet. Six parents explicitly described their experiences with education as a barrier within their daily life. Two of them mentioned fears of added costs, and two mentioned the inconvenience of having to enroll their children when they only planned to be in Tijuana a short time and were going to migrate again. Three also mentioned they lacked legal documentation to enroll while navigating through the Mexican education system.

By contrast, in our interactions with youth housed at *Templo Embajadores de Jesús*, young people said that even though they have experienced disruption in their life, the shelter has given them some sense of normalcy. A conversation between Alexis and her mentee J, who was from Guerrero Mexico, offered an example. Alexis noted:

She told me about her routine and what she did that day ... Got up, got ready, ate, hung out with friends, played on the phone, went to classes, talked to me ... They do arts and crafts or play games ... She told me about a trip that Templo took some of the youth on and how fun it was.

This example highlights routine within the *Templo Embajadores de Jesús* shelter. J said that she followed a schedule, unlike other youth living outside of structured shelters. Although the youth at Templo also had little money, the schedule could help them feel normal. During the interactions with the youth, we learned that youth participate in daily classes, sponsored by Save the Children, where they have an opportunity to learn and be creative. They also have access to art and music activities.

In one of our meetings, we asked the youth to sketch a day in their life in Templo. Two of the images they drew appear in Figure 1 and Figure 2. As shown in each image, the young people articulated consistent daily patterns they had come to expect in the shelter. For instance, many of the youth depicted themselves having breakfast, spending time on their phones, and playing with friends, like in Figure 1. Figure 2 was drawn by a 15-year-old from Michoacán, Mexico. The young woman pointed out that she listens to music since she hardly has anything to do. In her drawing, she also mentioned that she enjoys spending time with friends and reading because she finds it to be relaxing. Although youth recognize how much free time they have while staying at Templo, they are also able to fill up that time with different activities.

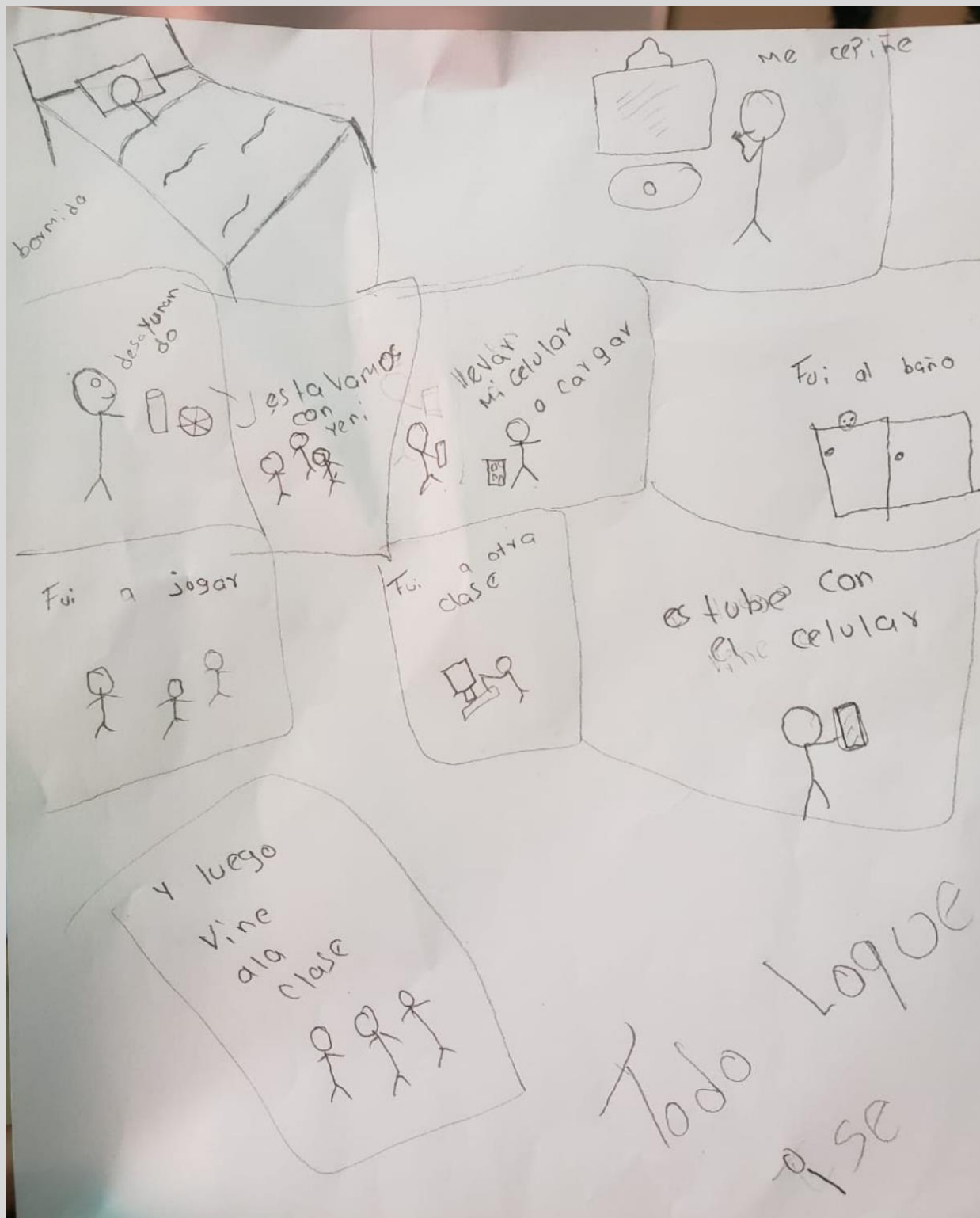


Figure 1. Youth's illustration of their daily routine at the Templo shelter



Figure 2. “One of my daily routines” by a youth migrant housed at the Templo shelter

The rhythm of life inside Templo contrast with that of youth living outside a shelter. Although we did not speak directly with youth outside of Templo, parents expressed concerns about not being able to provide their children with any activities nor educational opportunities. Stable shelters like the one provided by Templo Embajadores de Jesús are important because they cover youths' needs by helping them develop healthy habits and life skills such as social skills, which are the foundation for forming relationships and connections. They also provide access to other NGO service providers, including organizations like Save the Children that provide on-site fill-in schooling even when parents do not have access to formal school.

Building community

Finally, we found that shelters could give youth a sense of community. When youth migrate to Tijuana, they often experience an array of emotions, and many feel socially isolated due to leaving friends and often family behind. It becomes crucial for them to build relationships and create a sense of community with people they can rely on. Yet not all youth are able to experience this. Youth living outside a shelter have a more difficult time creating a community due to safety concerns. For example, one Central American migrant mother expressed concerns about her son's education and him always being alone. She also explained that she was unsuccessful in enrolling him in school due because she did not have legal documentation that was needed. She shared, "He has no support at all. He is by here himself, alone. The only thing he does is to draw and paint. But I would like him to keep studying."

Many migrant parents were concerned about their children being isolated. From the twenty-one interviews, only two parents felt community support (specifically, from a church). However, no parent expressed any sense of community for their children. Because parents fear for children's safety, children remain isolated and rarely interact with others. Youth living outside a shelter are especially unlikely to interact with other youth due to not having access to education. As a result, they may struggle to form adequate relationships and friendships.

By contrast, youth living in *Templo Embajadores de Jesus* interact daily with other youth. They are able to build relationships and create a community in Tijuana as they await their asylum cases. During a one-to-one interaction, for instance, one of the *Templo* youth told her mentor about the relationships she has created in *Templo*. The mentor, Andrea Garfío, noted:

She enjoys being with her friends inside Templo. One of her very good friends, Leslie, is 22, has a baby, and she spends a lot of time with her... She also considers two other youth in our project to be her friends... A. likes to help others in any way she can. When I asked her in what ways, she replied "If someone needs help, if they have nothing to eat or have no money, I try to help."

In other words, this young woman spent most of her time with friends. As she did, she learned to care for others and rely on others – as suggested by her suggestion about her willingness to help anyone there.

Many of the youth we met weekly felt the same way. Four of them explicitly mentioned and had a positive outlook on the relationships they were able to form while living in *Templo Embajadores de Jesus*. These youth said they had friends to hang out with during the day. Even when attending the classes offered at *Templo*, youth were interacting with each other, giving them a sense of connection to people outside their immediate families.

While youth living in an unstable or stable shelter might have parents to rely on, at this stage of life youth often rely on friends. From the interactions with the youth from *Templo*, we believe that a stable shelter can bring youth together and help to support this need.

Indeed, even when young people moved away from Templo, some felt so connected to their friends there that they regularly came back. For instance, Diego, the 13-year-old from Guatemala who had left on his own to provide for his family, had lived in Templo for a while before moving out. Nevertheless, he came back to the shelter almost daily to see the young people with whom he had built strong bonds.

In short, a stable shelter can provide security, normalcy, and a sense of community for youth migrants. Specifically, shelters can do this by offering a safe space, a consistent daily routine, access to other young migrants, and access to programs that may offer school or enrichment. These qualities help youth begin to restabilize into a more “normal” teen life. They gain the opportunity to explore, reconnect with other youth, learn, and ultimately enjoy life as a minor once more.

Part 3: “Where are we going?”: Dreaming of the United States

In this final section of the report, we look at how youth construct images of their futures – and how they imagine the United States. For many of them, we found, the United States embodies hope. Young migrants imagine the US as the promised land where, most importantly, they will be reunited with family and be safe. That said, many also associated the US with fantasy lifestyles of luxury and consumption, such as they have heard about in pop music and on social media. These imagines include romanticized ideas about living in homes of their dreams, getting an education, and having extensive resources and pay. Often, they bear little resemblance to the lives actually led by most Central American migrants in the United States.

These romanticized images drive youth to fixate on “making it” to the US rather than imagining any possibility of continuing to live in Mexico. They are often willing to sacrifice heavily to make it to the United States – sometimes desperate to be with family (and thus reclaim their youth) and other times desperate to chase a fleeting “American dream” of a life of economic ease. These images reinforce a feeling of unease in Mexico and mostly ignore the reality that even those who get allowed to cross the border are almost all deported by the United States.

Family reunification

Several of the young people we interviewed had been separated from family in the process of migration – especially when parents or siblings moved to the US ahead of them. Such young people were often incredibly determined to get to the US, simply to see their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers again. Many such young people had not seen their loved ones since they were small and had instead been sent to live with relatives (who often neglected them) or subsist on their own. They hoped that by finding the long-lost relatives, they might also obtain a new chance to feel happy or safe, in spite of having to adjust to a new country.

For example, Daniela, a 15-year-old asylum seeker from Guatemala, shared that she took the journey to the US-Mexico border alone. When Daniela was 2 years old, her mother

had left her in Guatemala and moved to the United States. Daniela was left with an aunt who beat her and longed to return to her mother – whom she imagined as an ideal, loving parent. This hope drove her to take the three-week trip from Guatemala to Tijuana alone. When we asked why Daniela wanted to go to the US, or what she thought of when she heard the words “American dream,” she replied that she did not know; all she wanted was to find her mother.

Daniela's story echoes the Pulitzer Prize-winning series “Enrique's Journey,” published in 2002 in the *Los Angeles Times* by journalist Sonia Nazario. In the series, Enrique, an adolescent from Honduras, was left behind by his mother at five years old. In the story, Enrique travels to the US, undergoing a harrowing journey alone, but driven by an intense determination to find his mother and reach the United States.

Like Daniela, several other youth we spoke with were primarily focused on making it to the US to re-find their families. Their longings to reach family members that were largely only images in their minds drove them to make impulsive decisions with very little prior knowledge about the US. Even though Daniela said she did not know much about the US or have a real desire to live there, she was determined to make it. Though driven by a deep and internalized sense of loss and abandonment, these youth's motivation to get to the US was still rooted in a fantasy of belonging and reunification.

Comfortable lifestyle

The second key theme in youth's images of the US was *also* based on a fantasy: of a comfortable – even luxurious – lifestyle. Many of the young people we spoke to fantasized about achieving such lives for themselves. They dreamed of being in a place full of money and opportunities, including free education, plentiful work, big houses, and “blingy” jewelry and clothing. They contrasted these images of the US with their past experiences of poverty and violence.

Indeed, many things people in the United States take for granted (such as public education) look like luxuries from the vantage point of asylum seeking youth, many of whom never had the chance to go to school, or had to drop out. At the same time, young migrants also imagine free healthcare, luxurious houses, and other benefits that are not in fact available to most low-income immigrants in the US, let alone most US citizens.

For instance, Yaqueline was a 13-year-old asylum seeker from the state of Guerrero, Mexico. Yaqueline had fled cartel violence back home and was staying at *Templo* with her mother. In one of Yaqueline's meetings with her mentor Alexis, the two had an open-ended conversation that started with bad bunny songs and ended with sharing their dreams for the future. Through the conversation, it became clear that Yaqueline believed the United States held every opportunity possible. As a result, all of her aspirations were tied to making it to the United States. Alexis, a 21-year-old student who grew up in a low-income Mexican immigrant family in Riverside, California, shared some of these fantasies – but also had to tell Yaqueline that not everyone in the US lived like celebrities. As Alexis wrote in her notes:

We bonded over Bad Bunny and how we both like him. She asked about where he lives, and I told her he's from Puerto Rico but that he's so rich he probably has houses everywhere. That led us to talking about houses, and she asked me if the houses where I live are big. She began telling me about how all the houses in the US are mansions. I told her that where I was during the call (Riverside) they are average, but in La Jolla where I go to school they're huge, and it depends on where you live. I asked her where she wants to live, and she said her family wants to live in Texas. I told her about how houses in Texas are huge and that I always joke about moving there to have "un rancho" (a big plot of land) outside a huge house. She asked if the United States is pretty, because she heard it's more beautiful than anywhere else, and I told her how many people think California is because of the weather and beaches, but that, personally, I think Mexico is beautiful. So, it depends on the person. She told me that she thinks the US is prettier than Mexico because we have nicer things. We then talked about traveling, and I told her where I have been. She told me that she's only been to Guerrero, Mexico (she is from there) and now Tijuana. She said she doesn't care to travel except to get to the United States. I asked her to just answer for fun and she said if she does travel she wants to go to the United States and maybe Korea.

In these notes, the questions Yaqueline asked hinted at her understanding and imagination of the US to be one where luxury and fame are prominent. She wanted to have a big house, be somewhere pretty, attend concerts, have nice things, and so on. Like Yaqueline, most of the youth we mentored aspired to move to the US as a means to consumption. Prominent in the movies they saw and the music they heard, such consumption almost became an identity for immigrant youth. They rarely reflected on the accuracy of such stories or the sacrifice it might take to get there.

Final notes

As our report suggests, two leading reasons that adolescent asylum seekers find the United States so desirable are 1) the ideas of reuniting with long-lost family, and 2) fantasies of a comfortable lifestyle that that is not achievable in their home countries. However, these dreams are often based more on a fantasy – either of love and belonging or of wealth and consumption – that rarely corresponds to the reality they will face upon arrival in the US (if they make it at all). Youth tend to base their images on their own desires, their histories of struggle, combined with images from media stars like Bad Bunny.

They may hold an idealized version of fame and fortune attached to the United States and on the desire to flee the struggles they faced in their home countries. Unfortunately, few know of the US's anti-immigrant policies and protocols, overall racism, inequality, and hate towards undocumented individuals. We suspect that for some, making it to the US could provide a shocking awakening, as they encountered the struggles that faced them not only during the journey but also after arrival.

Conclusion

This report sought to better understand the lived experiences of youth asylum seekers by working with them to explore three questions: 1) Where did we come from? (legacies of fleeing violence and poverty), 2) Where are we now (experiences and impacts of life in a migrant shelter) and 3) Where are we going (perceptions and fantasies of the United States).

First, we found that most asylum-seeking youth bear intense burdens of poverty and violence, which have not only forced them to migrate but have also pushed them into playing the role of adults from an early age. In particular, many youth feel responsible for making an income to support their families and for finding themselves and other siblings or family members a path out of violence.

Second, we discovered that while in Tijuana, youth and their parents face intense isolation and fear of violence. In this context, shelters (and associated institutions that offer services at the shelters) can provide youth with schooling, food, shelter, and friendships, which one can argue are crucial to a youth's development. With these needs met, youth migrants experience greater normalcy and feelings of belonging to a community. Therefore, it is essential for organizations and individuals to help and support these spaces, so that this shelter can continue to provide youth with these essential resources. Regardless of whether migrant youth are living in a stable or unstable shelter, all should have access to resources, basic necessities, security/safety, and most importantly, community.

Third, we learned that most youth hold images of the United States – and aspirations to get there - based primarily on two fantasies: that of family reunification and/or that of consumption. Sometimes, such images came either from young people's own traumatic histories of family separation and their desire to find love and a person (often a parent) to whom – as well as a place in which - they “belonged.” Other times, they are fed by celebrities and interpersonal gossip about the wealth of the United States. Shelters can support youth by encouraging them to pursue their dreams while also painting a more realistic portrait of the US laws governing (and mistreating) migrants and the kinds of lives their families may expect to experience in the United States.

Recommendations

- Expand resources and funding to shelters, which offer migrant youth a sense of security, routine, and community.
- Link shelters to educational providers, including Mexican government institutions and non-profits like Save the Children
- Reach out to isolated migrant youth in the border region, who may be living in unstable housing and unable to access the resources above.
- Provide community spaces for young people living outside of migrant shelters.

- Offer mental health treatment to help children overcome histories of trauma and violence, both in Mexico and in the United States.
- Support young people in understanding the realities of US immigration law and the kinds of exclusion they may face, so they can make informed decisions and better advocate for migrants.
- Accept unaccompanied young people and families with children directly into the US for asylum processing, so that they do not have to endure the kinds of insecurity and erosion of childhood described in this report.