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# Social Work Support for Families in Crisis at our Southern Border

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**Social Work Support for Families in Crisis at our Southern Border**  
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**“What the hell is going on at the U.S.—Mexico border?”**

Knowing of my 35 years of Child Welfare direct practice social work for the Santa Clara Social Services Agency, and 20 years of teaching social work at San Jose State University, as well as my study of human rights and Latin American history, many of my friends have been asking me, about as our president might ask: **“What the hell is going on at the U.S.—Mexico border?”**

The distance between Guatemala City (closest to the Mexican border) to Brownsville, Texas is 1,500 miles, the closest border city with the U.S.

**So Why would anyone travel this distance in the middle of summer, with 100+ degree temperatures, leaving everyone they know behind, all their possessions, without any guarantee of a safe journey through Mexico, itself an unsafe country, to get to the U.S. border and only a hope to be admitted for asylum?**

**The reason: to stay alive!** This is not an exaggeration if you know some of the history of how Central American nations have been decaying from some degree of democracies, into **failing states with death squads, roving gangs in competition for territory for drug sales, for young girls for forced human trafficking, and young boys to use as drug carrying ‘mules.’**

Some will say, “It is too bad that there are failed states, but why must the U.S. deal with this problem?” A fair question. Here is part of the answer:

These unfortunate families, unfortunate to be born, poor and in these countries where years of U.S. foreign policy has destroyed any democracy they might have had, until our intervention to ensure cheap, non-union labor. For a history of such, Google: American Fruit Company, Dulles brothers (Allen Dulles at the CIA, and John Foster Dulles at the State Dept. in the 1930-60 era).

From Google: “The **1954 Guatemalan** coup d’état was a covert operation carried out by the **U.S.** Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that deposed the democratically elected **Guatemalan** President Jacobo Árbenz and ended the **Guatemalan** Revolution of 1944–1954. It has been a dictatorship, fake elections, corrupt government ever since.”

Going south from Guatemala, the next country is El Salvador, where efforts to build a thriving democracy were derailed by a protracted civil war that lasted decades, so families fled to Mexico and the U.S. In the U.S. families migrated to Latino communities, where Spanish is spoken and employment could be found. I met and worked with many such Salvadoran refugees in San Jose, I met others in SF and in Oakland.

They also found solace with Catholic parishes, which sponsored some of the families, such as Sacred Heart Church on Willow St. in San Jose, who also sponsored refugees from Chile. For three years, I worked exclusively with the 150+ families from Chile, with parents who had been tortured, imprisoned and finally exiled by dictator Augusto Pinochet, who seized power on what we call “*the other 9-11*” (in 1973) when the Chilean army took over the government, its air force

bombed the Presidential Palace and turned the soccer stadium into an open air prison with torture, hangings and executions.

I learned from the teens and their parents, abused by American gang members, who resented these newly arriving youth. So to protect themselves, they formed their own gangs, imitating other gangs, such as "niggers with an attitude" a defiant name for a gang of African-Americans. In imitation and defiance, they formed "Salvadoreños, y Que?" Meaning: "We are Salvadoreños and what ya goin to do about it?" In San Jose we had a Cambodian gang who called themselves, "Cambodians with an attitude." Some gangs form to commit crime and violence, but my work convinced me that most gangs start for protection from other gangs. Our U.S. military has armed and trained soldiers in four of the seven nations in Central America. **Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras** have been called **El Tianguilo de la Muerte,** the Hellish Triangle of Death. In Panama, U.S. intervention began in the last century, where we supported the government to complete and operate the Panama Canal across the Canal Zone, which became a U.S. Naval Base (where John McCain's father commanded, and John Jr. was born).

**Nicaragua** won its revolution when the Sandinistas (named after Augusto Sandino, their liberator, who was assassinated after signing a peace treaty ending three decades of fighting. There is evidence that the U.S. Marines were complicit in his murder.) The Sandinistas finally defeated President Reagan's *Contra* death squads-- counter-revolutionaries seeking to bring down the newly forming democratic government. Google: Iran-Contra to review how it was illegal, by the Boland Amendment, to use tax dollars to supply weapons (bombs, M-16s, agent orange, helicopters, Vietnam War leftover uniforms, boots, ponchos, etc.) in those counties. But not to "let a stupid Congressional law make us leave our trained contras," Reagan called them "Freedom Fighters," run out of bullets," Lt. Col. Oliver North came up with "a neat idea" of re-supply, to sell weapons to our middle east enemies (Hezbollah, now renamed ISIS), who held kidnapped American and British hostages, use their money to supply the Contras. The ICBMs did get a few hostages released, but then Hezbollah just kidnapped several other unfortunate hostages, including the president of the American University in Beirut (*in their version of re-supply of hostages!*)

As you may recall, the whole scheme blew up, North would have been jailed, except for weakness from Congress to jail a so-called war hero, North, who went on to host his own show on Fox News, named War Stories, until recently, after all those students at their Florida high school were shot by one of their fellow students. North is now president of the NRA, no doubt with a high salary and millions in ad money to sell more guns to America and the world.

But back to the parents at the border: You are correct, **persons should apply for asylum at their port of entry into the U.S.** or apply from their home country, usually with the help of their attorney at their home country at a U.S. embassy.

When the death squads are roving your countryside, killing en mass, burning villages, or watching American embassies, taking names, following union leaders, priests, nuns, social workers...when you have a credible fear for your life, that of your family, when your sons have been forced to transport drugs, your daughters to be raped by everyone in a gang, you know that you have to run away in the dead of night or you will be dead as thousands have been killed already. So you flee with whatever you can carry, with your remaining children. You leave all else behind, yes all of your family—just to stay alive!

So you flee, carrying your babies, the toddlers walking along, the teens carrying their siblings, hoping to get to the U.S. after weeks, miles, paying perhaps a coyote, smuggler to get to the promised land, the Land of the Free, where you heard someone along the sorrowful refugee trail say you may apply for asylum.

Most port of entries are airports, but you did not fly in, you walked in. So at the international border, where you see an officer wearing a brown or green uniform reading, "border patrol," you think this must be your port of entry. You have finally arrived! You and your beloved children are safe!

But the border patrol officer says, "No, this is not an "official port of entry." Or says, "This port of entry is filled, so come another day, or next week." You must walk further to another gateway or another international border station, maybe miles away, not difficult in an air conditioned vehicle, but you only have sandals that are already falling apart, you and your kids are dead tired, dying of thirst, hungry, cold, dismayed.

And that is one scenario of how and why people do not follow the law, the rules of engagement to apply for asylum. But the damnable happens once inside an air conditioned border station, where you are prepared to convince the officials about your family's story of threats from the gangs, or from the government or both, that you believe will qualify you for "reasonable fear" of being murdered in the **Murder Capital of the World—Honduras!**

But instead of listening to your family story, the officer takes your baby, even from your breast, takes all your minor kids, saying, "They are going for a bath."

You assure your kids they will be ok, and you will all be reunited soon.

Days, even weeks later, you have not been re-united!!! You ask everyone of the official as they walk past your cage (yes cyclone fence, with a padlock, it is a cage!) *Y mis hijos? Cuando puedo ver a mis hijos?* My children? When can I see my children? But no one answers your desperate questions.

Most parents have been determined not to qualify for asylum, that their fear of being murdered was not as reasonable as they thought, since only thousands of their neighbors have been murdered, but perhaps those killed were guilty of belonging to the wrong gang. Some of these parents, it has been reported on all the news channels have already been deported back to Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras **WITHOUT THEIR CHILDREN!!!**

**What is the solution to this problem from hell, made worse by the Trump Zero Tolerance Policy?**

**There is no simple solution, but first, stop interventions that support corrupt governments anywhere.** Pay reparations to the countries where we intervened as noted in my historical account, but pay them to the people we hurt, such as the very families fleeing from gangs, death squads, and in some cases, fleeing the official government agents.

**Immediately return all the children in custody to their parents, paying reparations, along with a refugee permanent visa.**

No payments to the governments themselves, but rather, to legitimate NGOs that have an extensive record of serving the common people. Accept families asking for asylum in their home country, as we accepted refugees from other counties, including Southeast Asia, Cuba, Chile, Bosnia, Syria, etc.