

## Young Deportees from Mexico Face Uncertain Futures in Their Homeland

By Summer Harlow

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QUETZALTENANGO, Guatemala (CNS) -- Marta Reynosa Coronado waited with mixed emotions outside a Guatemalan shelter for migrant youths deported from Mexico.

Reynosa, 39, an indigenous woman from the department of San Marcos, on the border with Mexico, was looking forward to seeing her 16-year-old son, who had left home a month earlier to head north to the United States. Yet she also was frustrated that her son had been caught and deported before he ever made it to the United States, and she worried that he might try again.

"When I got the call that he was here, I was so sad for him," she said in halting Spanish. Her main language is a Mayan dialect. "He was on his way to a better life. It's a hard life in Guatemala. There's no money here. But I was scared of what might happen to him, because he's not an adult yet. He's too young and doesn't think about consequences."

Consequences, like the 1,000 quetzales -- nearly \$130 -- that Reynosa, who lives off just a few dollars a week, had to borrow to make the trip to Quetzaltenango with her brother and another son to pick up her 16-year-old.

Casa Nuestras Raices, a government-run shelter in the highlands of Guatemala, provides food, a bed and even entertainment for the more than 2,000 minors deported each year from Mexico -- most caught while en route to the United States. Despite such programs, a new study from the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services shows Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are not always doing enough to ensure deported youths are reunited with their parents or guardians.

"There have been reports of children going missing," said Betsy Wier, regional technical adviser for CRS in Latin America and project manager for the study. "If these kids are just dropped off in their country and not correctly repatriated, anything can happen."

"They're vulnerable to organized crime, trafficking, gangs or they end up at a brothel in Guatemala City. That is a very real problem," she said.

The CRS report said 27 percent of the youths said they had been victims of robbery or theft -- often at the hands of immigration authorities; 18 percent had been extorted; 17 percent intimidated; and 12 percent physically or verbally abused.

The problems are not limited to deportees from Mexico. Wier said Central American governments also are letting children deported from the United States fall through the cracks.

Jose Luis Dominguez, responsible for migration matters at Guatemala's foreign ministry, said he believes the country could benefit from a shelter like Casa Nuestras Raices for the minors arriving daily on flights from the United States.

Marta Lidia Lopez Mendez, 16, was on her way to Boston, where an uncle lives, when she was picked up by U.S. Border Patrol agents in the Arizona desert. The CRS study showed 20 percent of youths emigrated to reunite with family.

"I wasn't working, and I couldn't go to school," Marta told Catholic News Service at the Guatemalan air force base in Quetzaltenango after arriving with more than 100 other deportees. "I had to do something with my life. I wanted to earn money so I could buy land and a house."

Marta said migrating was a hard choice, especially knowing she would be doubly vulnerable as a minor and a female, but she was determined to go.

"When I was caught, that was the end of my dream," she said. "Now I don't know how I'll be able to achieve what I want, unless I try to go again."

In the CRS study, Wier found that 77 percent of youths were making their first attempt to emigrate when they were caught. About 16 percent were on their second or third trip, and 6 percent had made more than three attempts.

She found Guatemalans were most likely to try migrating more than once. More than a quarter reported multiple attempts, in contrast to less than 20 percent of Salvadorans and Hondurans.

Anival Vasquez Jacobo, 14, had been living illegally in Tapachula, Mexico, for a year, working to save money for his trek north, when immigration authorities caught him and deported him to the Nuestras Raices shelter in Guatemala.

Anival said he planned to go home to the department of San Marcos until he's 18, when he plans to strike out again for the United States.

"It will be easier to make it when I'm older," he said. "But people go out of need, and age doesn't change that. Whether I'm 14 or 18 or 30, I still need to go."

Elvia Juarez of Casa Nuestras Raices said such teens should be in school or learning a trade.

"They have no business trying to migrate on their own," she said.

Wier's study found that while 80 percent of the youth deportees were literate, most had completed only the equivalent of sixth grade and were not enrolled in school prior to leaving for the United States.

When asked what would prevent them from leaving again, 64 percent answered employment opportunities, and 14 percent said school or study options.

Wier said emigration brings up the "classic question of how to keep youth engaged and active when they have no resources. They want to work and study, so they're risking their lives to seek these options because they can't find them in their own countries."

Scalabrini Father Ademar Barilli, director of Casa del Migrante in Tecun Uman, Guatemala, on the Mexican border, said unaccompanied youth migration is just one facet of the migration dilemma.

"It leads to familial disintegration and disintegration of society," he said. "I see the consequences daily, the sufferings of migrants who all they want is a better life, because the need here is so great."

The CRS study found most youth emigrants left for economic reasons, with 60 percent seeking employment.

Reynosa, the indigenous woman waiting to pick up her son from Casa Nuestras Raices, said her family had been counting on the money her son would have sent home if he had been able to make it to the United States and find work.

"Now we're worse off than before he left, because now we're in debt," she said. "He was too young. He never should have left."

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