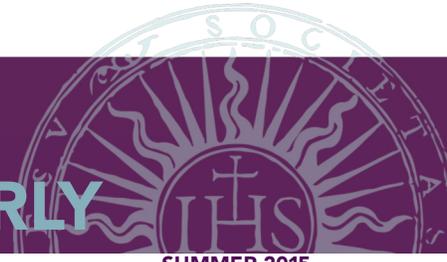
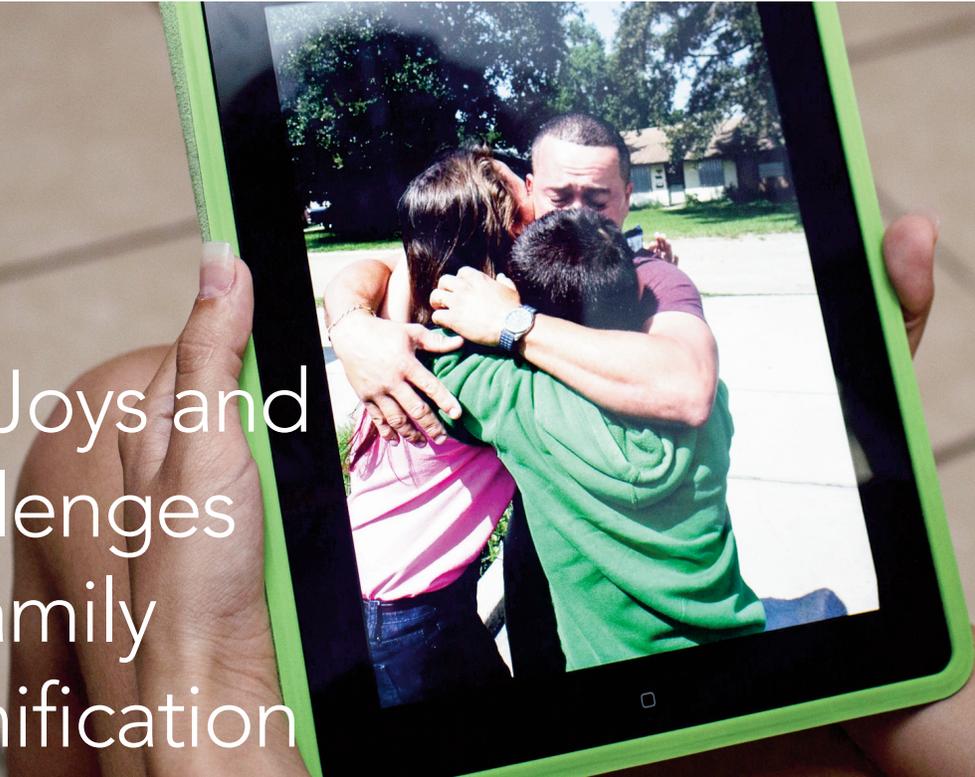


# JustSouth QUARTERLY



SUMMER 2015

## The Joys and Challenges of Family Reunification



Yerlin Sabillon views the photo of the reunion of her and her brother, Michael, with their father, Ivan, after ten years of separation.

Photo courtesy of William Widmer, [www.widmerphoto.com](http://www.widmerphoto.com)

## Immigrant Families One Year after the "Border Surge"

By SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

In May and June of 2014, the "surge" of children crossing the U.S./Mexico border unaccompanied by a parent or guardian dominated headlines. By the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, a record number of unaccompanied immigrant children (UIC), 68,541, had been taken into custody by U.S. border officials, double the number in the prior year.<sup>1</sup> Family sponsors in the Gulf South received 29 percent of the 53,518 children referred from border officials to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) for reunification with family members.<sup>2</sup>

Gulf South State	Unaccompanied Children Reunited with Sponsors in FY 2014
Alabama	786
Florida	5,445
Louisiana	1,755
Mississippi	290
Texas	7,409
Gulf South Totals	15,685

To better understand how once-separated families are doing, I interviewed immigrant mothers and their children in Mississippi and Louisiana about their experiences of finally being reunited after years of separation.<sup>3</sup>

### Immigrant Family Stories

Marta's youngest child was only 17 months old when she left Guatemala in 2005 to escape crushing poverty. Her husband was a hard worker, but when he tried to get ahead, the police would hassle him and accuse him of stealing. Marta realized soon after coming to the U.S. that life here was much better and that she and her husband could provide their children "with everything they needed" by working hard. Her husband joined her a year later in New Orleans. They would not see their three children for another eight years, until they were reunited in June 2014 after the children had spent almost three weeks in a DHS shelter near El Paso after crossing Mexico with a coyote hired by their parents.

Describing that moment on a rainy April morning in her family's New Orleans apartment, Marta said: "I felt joy. I felt as if I were born

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again. I came back to life.” But her joy was mixed with sadness when she realized how neglected her children had been by the people they had hired as caretakers in Guatemala. Her then-14-year-old son was the size of a 10-year-old. Her youngest son had bad teeth. She wept when she realized “they did not know what the support of a mother was.” The next five months would be a period of profound joy at being a family again, but also great adjustment. She and her husband and children needed to forge new relationships, and the children had to adapt to new schools and a new country.<sup>4</sup>

At first her two youngest sons, now 10 and 15, resisted going to school. Her daughter, now 17, refused to obey her mother’s orders. Marta said that because the children knew they could not disobey their father without serious consequences, they eventually adjusted to their parents’ expectations regarding school and home life, but it took five months for the “rebelliousness” to end.

Cellular telephones and other technology, including Skype and webcasts, have made communication between migrants and families in their home countries relatively inexpensive. Marta would speak to her children almost daily; it was much more difficult, however, for Teresa. She fled domestic violence and poverty in Guatemala in 2007 when her son, Santos, was 9-years-old. In the U.S. Teresa became involved with another abusive and controlling man who refused to allow her to call her son. She lost touch with Santos for two years. When she was able to speak with him later, the calls were excruciating. Santos, who now lives with his mother in Biloxi, Mississippi, explained to me: “I cried [when we spoke] because I felt abandoned. I was hungry all the time. I did not even have any shoes. ...My grandparents, who are very poor, hit me all the time and my uncles, too.”

Researchers with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found that 22 percent of unaccompanied children who had crossed the border spoke of abuse and violence by family members as a reason for fleeing.<sup>5</sup> Other children, however, may form close and loving attachments to the family members who care for them after their parents migrate. Once reunified, children may miss their caretakers and have feelings of loss and sadness.<sup>6</sup> This was evident during a

particularly poignant moment at a Teach-In on Migration that JSRI held in February when a recent child migrant broke down crying when describing how much he missed his uncle’s family in Honduras.

When a child’s caretaker in the home country is disparaging of the parent who migrates, reunification can be much more difficult. Another complicating factor is change in family composition due to new siblings or a new partner.<sup>7</sup> Lupe and her husband came to New Orleans almost 30 years ago without documents and without their daughter, Francesca, who was left in the care of Lupe’s sister-in-law. Lupe and her husband had two more daughters before they were finally able to bring Francesca to the U.S. after Lupe naturalized. The reunification has been a disaster. Francesca’s aunt was jealous and disparaging of Lupe, and Francesca came to deeply resent and distrust her mother for leaving her in Honduras. When she began living with her sisters in her parents’ home, Francesca became verbally abusive to her youngest sister, whom she claimed was unfairly favored by her parents. One year after being reunited after 28 years of separation, Lupe and Francesca are no longer speaking.

## Conclusion

In April 2015, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) warned that the border crisis has subsided but is not over, as the number of unaccompanied immigrant children and families crossing the U.S./Mexico Border remains at historic high levels. WOLA projects 37,036 UIC apprehensions in FY 2015—a 45 percent decrease from FY 2014 but nearly equal to FY 2013 apprehensions.<sup>8</sup>

Conditions that led to children and families fleeing the Northern Triangle<sup>9</sup> countries have not improved in the past year; the violence is even worse.<sup>10</sup> The number of child migrants and families crossing the border has decreased because Mexico is doing what one advocate calls the U.S. government’s “dirty work” by apprehending and deporting more migrants in Mexico and cracking down on the use of Mexican freight trains (*la Bestia*) as transportation for Central American migrants.<sup>11</sup> Many have argued that such repression of irregular migration is counterproductive, driving

migrants further underground, thereby empowering flexible and opportunistic smuggling rings.<sup>12</sup>

Now, more than ever, comprehensive immigration reform that would expedite family reunification, create an earned path to citizenship, strengthen refugee protection, and address why “desperate people reluctantly uproot and cross borders” is needed.<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2008 requires that U.S. border officials take into custody unaccompanied children from countries non-contiguous to the U.S., screen them, and transfer the children to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, ORR, within 72 hours for health screenings and placement with family members. See *Wilber Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA)* at <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/113178.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> From “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State, Office of Refugee Resettlement,” at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ort/programs/ucs/state-by-state-uc-placed-sponsors>. The apprehension of families at the border, composed largely of mothers and small children from Central America and Mexico, also hit record numbers in FY 2014, totaling 66,973 family unit members. Families crossing the border are not protected by the TVPRA. Last summer the Obama administration reinstated the much criticized practice of detaining families as a way to “deter” future families from coming, despite the profoundly negative effects detention has on children’s well-being and parent-child relationships.
- <sup>3</sup> The interviews took place in April and May 2015. Names and identifying information of interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity. My thanks to the staff of El Pueblo/Seashore Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi, for arranging a phone interview with their clients.
- <sup>4</sup> See Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irina L.G. Todorova, and Josephine Louie, “Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families,” *Family Process*, Volume 41, No. 4, pp. 625-643. 2002.
- <sup>5</sup> *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Regional Office for the United States and Caribbean, 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irina L.G. Todorova, and Josephine Louie. Op. Cit.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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**Jesuit Social Research Institute**  
6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94  
New Orleans, LA 70118-6143

(504) 864-7746  
e-mail: [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu)

[loyno.edu/jsri/](http://loyno.edu/jsri/)

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## THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF FAMILY REUNIFICATION

<sup>8</sup> Adam Isacson, *Latest Border Stats Suggest Higher Family, Child Migration in 2015 than Official Projections*, April 10, 2015, at [http://www.wola.org/commentary/unaccompanied\\_children\\_at\\_the\\_us\\_mexico\\_border\\_in\\_the\\_first\\_half\\_of\\_2015](http://www.wola.org/commentary/unaccompanied_children_at_the_us_mexico_border_in_the_first_half_of_2015)

<sup>9</sup> The Northern Triangle counties are Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the truce negotiated between rival gangs in El Salvador in 2011 has begun to break down. Murders in that country are up 70 percent in the first half of 2014. The Zetas, a violent transnational criminal organization from Mexico, appear to be consolidating control over local police and the military in Guatemala. Elizabeth Carlson and Anna Marie Gallagher, "Humanitarian protection for children fleeing gang-based violence in the Americas," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Volume 3, Number 2, pp. 129-158. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Fox, "Is America spiraling toward another border crisis?" *National Journal*, April 2, 2015 at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/defense/mexico-border-crisis-immigration-central-america-20150402>

<sup>12</sup> *End of Mission Statement Migrants and the Mediterranean: UN rights expert on human rights of migrants follow up visit to Brussels for further development of his study on EU border management* at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15544&LangID=E>

<sup>13</sup> See Bailey Dick, *Immigration Is a Pro-Life Issue*, at Faith in Public Life, January 20, 2015, <http://www.faithinpubliclife.org/blog/immigrationlife/>

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