



International  
Labour  
Organization



# The journey of illusions



Adolescent workers in the migration context  
in Central America's Northern Triangle

Who are they?

What do they face?

What recommendations  
for action are needed?

# 1

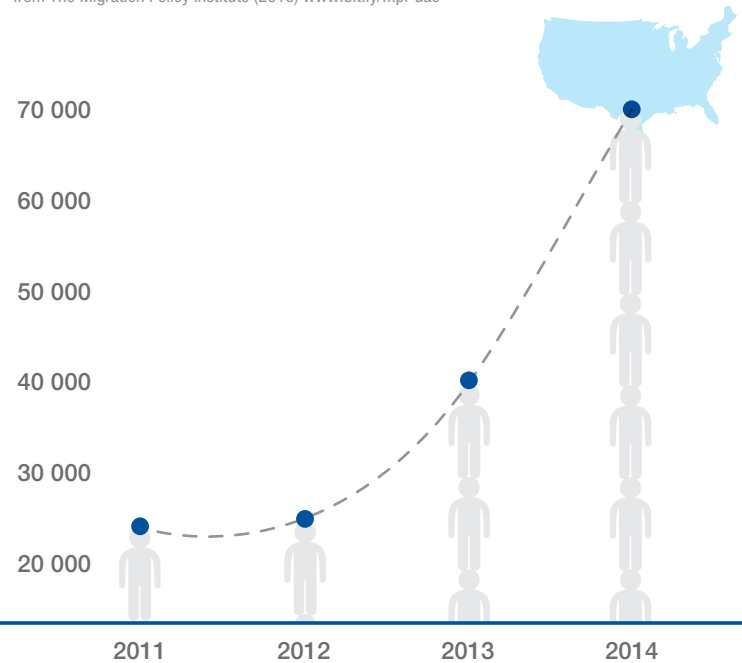
## The migration dynamics of adolescent workers in the Northern Triangle

Children and adolescents have always been a significant part of migration flows, traveling either as members of a family group or as “unaccompanied minors.” Between 2012 and 2014, there was an increase in the number of unaccompanied migrant minors from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala who attempted to enter the United States irregularly and made the journey in very precarious conditions and exposed to serious risks.

The majority were adolescents between 14 and 17 years old, who had among their expectations of migration the idea of finding a job to increase their well-being and provide them with the possibility to help their families. Although the national legislations of the countries of the Northern Triangle set 14 years as the minimum age for admission to employment, the actual possibilities of finding protected work for people under 18 years are few, which pushes many of them to migrate.

### Unaccompanied minors apprehended on the Mexico-US border, 2012-2014

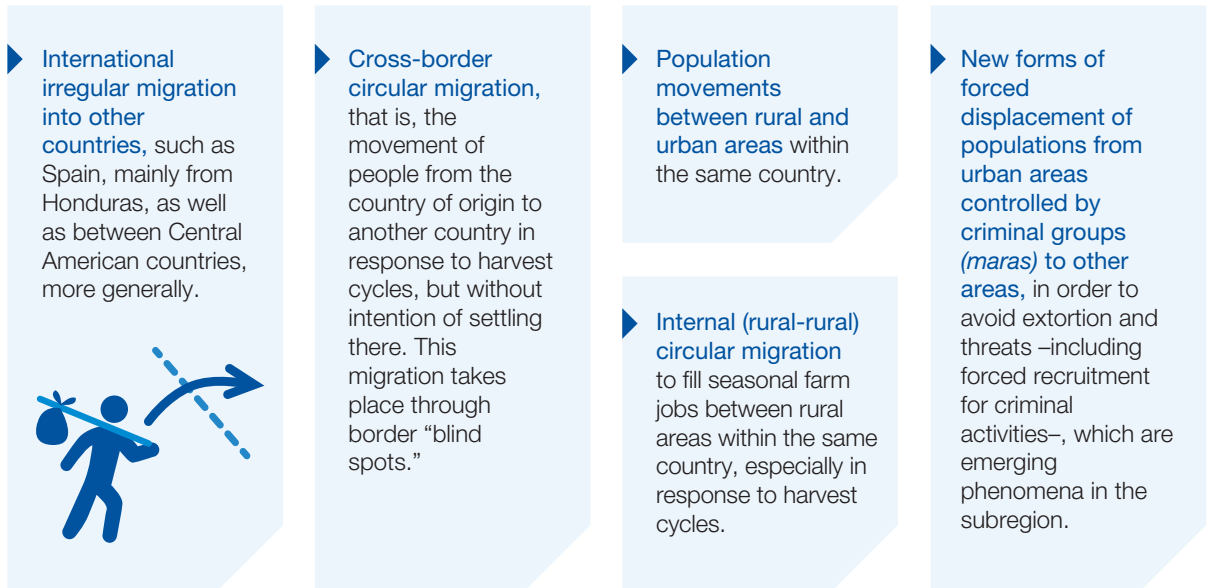
Source: Compiled by ILO from data from The Migration Policy Institute (2016) [www.bit.ly/mpii-uac](http://www.bit.ly/mpii-uac)



Although the number of apprehensions of unaccompanied migrant minors on the United States and Mexico border shows highs and lows, this figure has seen a marked increase in Mexican territory since 2014. Therefore, with no evident changes in the trigger factors of migration processes in the countries of origin, **this exodus is estimated to continue at intense levels.**

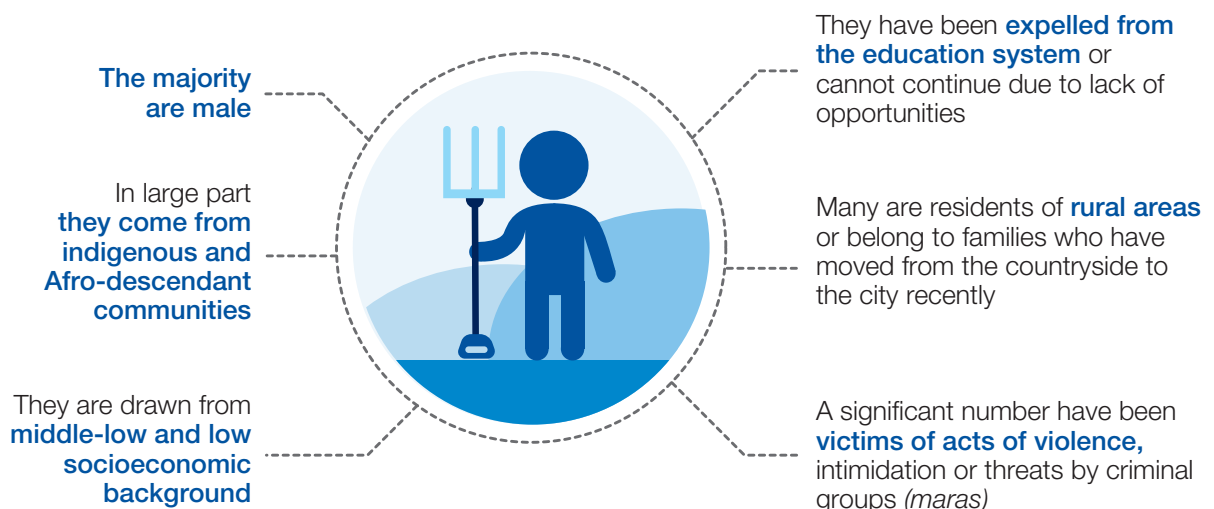
Presently, most of the efforts have focused on identifying and providing care and protection to unaccompanied children and adolescents, while progress has been less rapid in implementing preventive measures and services that will allow acting on the causes of this outflow. In addition, the particular needs of this group have not been prioritised by neither prevention measures in the countries of origin nor by opportunities for reintegration as part of assistance to returnees.

International migration flows towards Mexico and the United States are the most visible due to its implications and media coverage, but they are only part of an even more complex problem, as other migration dynamics are taking place in the subregion that affect children and adolescents to a similar extent:



Adolescents aged 14 to 17 also participate in all of these migration dynamics, willing to pay a high price in the hope of finding a job and better opportunities in destinations that are often uncertain and dangerous.

## 2 Description of adolescent migrant workers aged 14 to 17



# 3

## The link between migration and labour among adolescents aged 14 to 17

The conditions of irregular migration of adolescent workers, particularly those who migrate unaccompanied, place them in a situation of special vulnerability by exposing them to a number of risks (besides the need to survive while en route), neither of which are addressed by the labour and social protection mechanisms or regulations in force.

### CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION PROCESSES

#### ► Hazardous work and forms of exploitation:



Drug trafficking



Commercial sexual exploitation or forced labour

“ Failure to take the necessary measures can also be an unwanted outcome of return processes. ”



#### They are frequently victims of:

- ▶ Trafficking
- ▶ Smuggling of persons
- ▶ Theft and extortion
- ▶ They are easy prey of smugglers, drug dealers, gangs or maras and even corrupt government officials, who take advantage of their vulnerability to abuse, rape and kidnapping

#### ► They tend to take up jobs throughout all stages of migration:

- ▶ **Informal jobs:** street hawking, supplies markets.
- ▶ **Highly invisible:** harvesting periods on farms.
- ▶ **Temporary jobs:** temporary jobs are unlikely to be subjected to labour inspections, make it unfeasible to process work permits, and often prevent establishing a formal employer-employee relationship.

These modalities are beyond the control of existing inspection, oversight and protection mechanisms.

## OTHER TRIGGERS OF MIGRATION THAT ALSO EXERT AN INFLUENCE INCLUDE:

### PULL FACTORS MOTIVATING THE DECISION TO MIGRATE...



- ▶ Expectations of employment, higher income and consumption levels, sending remittances to home country.
- ▶ Opportunity to follow relatives or fellow countrymen who have migrated with alleged success.
- ▶ Existence of increasingly sophisticated forms of *coyotaje* (smuggling) and trafficking of persons.
- ▶ Erroneous perception that the adolescent protection laws in the United States are permissive and even encourage the immigration of young persons.
- ▶ Desire for reunification with earlier migrated family members.

### PUSH FACTORS MOTIVATING THE DECISION TO MIGRATE...



- ▶ Limited education or vocational training opportunities.
- ▶ Lack of job opportunities.
- ▶ Escaping from the violence and threats posed by gangs and organised crime, as well as from a situation of permanent insecurity.
- ▶ Discrimination within their communities and countries of origin based on race or ethnicity.
- ▶ Fleeing from domestic violence, abuse and mistreatment.
- ▶ Escaping poverty threatening food security. This situation is linked in many cases to the effects of the current drought spells and the consequences of climate change (environmental refugees).

# 4

## Recommendations for action

### ► **Prioritize preventive and rights restoration approaches**

by identifying and targeting actions in population segments most affected by discrimination, domestic violence, economic vulnerability, gang violence and organised crime, and by increasing their access to:



► Opportunities for staying in and completing school



► Alternatives for vocational training



► Protected decent jobs for those who have reached the age of admission to employment



► Better information and greater awareness of the risks of irregular migration

### ► **Strengthen the effective protection of labour and social rights of adolescent workers,**

both nationals and migrants, by increasing institutional capacities and improving the mechanisms for detection of and response to the work they do.



### ► **Harmonise the protective and punitive legislation,**

overcome internal coordination deficits and strengthen the institutional framework for effective implementation of the law and policies in a sustainable manner, which implies both improving intra and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms for protecting adolescent workers.

## ► Expand and improve the knowledge base

on the situation of adolescents aged 14 to 17 in order to identify:



Priority needs



Origin, specific characteristics and distribution (areas with the highest out-migration rates)



Regional vocational training programmes, social protection and employability improvement services



Strengthen awareness-raising processes aimed at key stakeholders

This will enhance protection for adolescent workers and promote educational opportunities for completing school and vocational training, improving employability, starting a business and accessing decent work.





International  
Labour  
Organization

During the last decade, the ILO has deepened understanding of the links between child labour and migration, contributing to increased qualitative and quantitative knowledge on the subject, the results of which have been incorporated into national strategies for child labour prevention and elimination in the countries of the Northern Triangle.

[www.ilo.org/sanjose](http://www.ilo.org/sanjose)

### **The Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour**

The countries of the region have shared their concern about the stagnation in the reduction of child labour and have developed a renewed formula to provide urgent answers to the regional situation in the form of the “Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour,” an instrument for intergovernmental cooperation with 27 member countries and active participation of employers' and workers' organisations. The aim of the Regional Initiative is to accelerate the pace of reduction of child labour, consistent with the priorities of 2030 Agenda, whose Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 seeks to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all,” including its Target 8.7 to “by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.”

The member countries of the Regional Initiative have prioritised eight “acceleration factors” to reduce child labour in the region, among which are migration and youth employment.

<http://www.iniciativa2025alc.org/>

This study seeks to contribute to the design of an appropriate response to the situation of migrant working adolescents aged 14 to 17 in Central America's Northern Triangle. Fieldwork involved interviews with key stakeholders from different sectors involved in this issue in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and included a number of focus groups with active participation of adolescent workers from several communities with high out-migration rates in the subregion.

For more details, see the online publication:

<http://www.iniciativa2025alc.org/ti-migracion-adolescentes14-17>

### **ILO Office for Central America, Haiti, Panama and the Dominican Republic**

sanjose@ilo.org  
(506) 2207-8700  
[www.ilo.org/sanjose](http://www.ilo.org/sanjose)

