

## REAL STORIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN CHILDREN & FAMILIES

**Cristian Omar Reyes**, an 11-year-old sixth grader from **Honduras** lost his father in March after he was robbed and murdered by gangs while working as a security guard protecting a pastry truck. Three people he knows were murdered this year. Four others were gunned down on a nearby corner in the span of two weeks at the beginning of this year. A girl his age resisted being robbed of \$5. She was clubbed over the head and dragged off by two men who cut a hole in her throat, stuffed her panties in it, and left her body in a ravine across the street from Cristian's house. [New York Times, 7/11/14](#)

**Anthony O. Castellanos**, a 13-year old from Honduras, disappeared from his gang-ridden neighborhood, so his younger brother, Kenneth, hopped on his green bicycle to search for him, starting his hunt at a notorious gang hangout known as the "crazy house." They were found within days of each other, both dead. Anthony, 13, and a friend had been shot in the head; Kenneth, 7, had been tortured and beaten with sticks and rocks. They were among seven children murdered in the La Pradera neighborhood of San Pedro Sula in April alone. [New York Times, 7/9/14](#)

During a recent late-night visit to the San Pedro Sula morgue, more than 60 bodies, all victims of violence, were seen piled in a heap, each wrapped in a brown plastic bag. While picking bullets out of a 15-year-old boy shot 15 times, technicians discussed how they regularly received corpses of **children under 10, and sometimes as young as 2**. Last week, in nearby Santa Barbara, an **11-year-old** had his throat slit by other children, because he did not pay a 50-cent extortion fee. "At first we saw a lot of kids who were being killed because when the gang came for their parents, they happened to be in the car or at the location with them," said Dr. Darwin Armas Cruz, a medical examiner who works the overnight shift. "Now we see kids killing kids. They kill with guns, knives and even grenades." [New York Times, 7/9/14](#)

An older man with two grand-daughters, ages seven and 10, said: "**I left Honduras because they already killed three of my four sons. I can't stay to wait for them to take away my grand-daughters.** There the gangs kill for anything, take our houses, our pay. Everything." Asked if he wanted to go home, a six-year-old Honduran boy began to cry and told the reporter: "They kill people there, and you can't play." ([La Jornada, 6/29/14](#))

**Nodwin**, an 11-year old from **Honduras**: "Big people force the children to sell bad things, and if they don't do it, they rape them or they kill them." Nodwin once witnessed a boy his own age gang-raped in a neighborhood park after the child refused to join a local drug gang. "They were stripping a kid naked, and I went to tell the kid's mom. Later, I went home, but I didn't want to leave my house, because they could have done the same thing to me." [PBS NewsHour, 6/20/14](#)

**Jenny** opened her front door one day and there were pieces of a body thrown in a plastic bag on her doorstep as a warning from the gangs about what would happen to her if she did not become the "girlfriend" of a gang member. As related to a [Women's Refugee Commission](#) staff member during a focus group discussion.

**Maritza**, a 15-year old from **El Salvador** reported the following: I am here because the gang threatened me. One of them "liked" me. Another gang member told my uncle that he should get me out of there because the guy who liked me was going to do me harm. In El Salvador they take young girls, rape them and throw them in plastic bags. My uncle told me it wasn't safe for me to stay there. [UNCHR report](#)

**David**, a 16-year old from **Guatemala**, reported the following: Gangs in a nearby neighborhood wanted to kill me and some other people. They wanted me to give them money, but what money was I supposed to give them? I didn't have any. They asked me if I knew who they were, if I could identify them. I said no, because I knew if I said yes they would kill me. They held my cousin and me for three hours, tied up. My cousin was able to untie the rope and he helped me untie mine. We heard gun shots and we ran. They kept looking for us, but we escaped. [UNCHR report](#)

**Kevin**, a 17-year old from **Honduras**, reported the following: My grandmother wanted me to leave. She told me: “If you don’t join, the gang will shoot you. If you do join, the rival gang will shoot you—or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you. [UNCHR report](#)

**Josephine**, a 16-year old from **El Salvador**: The head of the gang that controlled her neighborhood wanted Josefina to be his girlfriend and threatened to kidnap her or to kill one of her family members if she didn’t comply. Josefina knew another girl from her community who had become the girlfriend of a gang member and had been forced to have sex with all the gang members. Josefina didn’t want this for herself. Once the gang started harassing her, she didn’t feel safe, so she stopped going to school and stayed at home until her family was able to make arrangements for her to travel to the U.S. [UNCHR report](#)

**Alfonso**, a 17-year old from **El Salvador**, reported the following: The problem was that where I studied there were lots of M-18 gang members, and where I lived was under control of the other gang, the MS-13. The M-18 gang thought I belonged to the MS-13. They had killed the two police officers who protected our school. They waited for me outside the school. It was a Friday, the week before Easter, and I was headed home. The gang told me that if I returned to school, I wouldn’t make it home alive. The gang had killed two kids I went to school with, and I thought I might be the next one. After that, I couldn’t even leave my neighborhood. They prohibited me. I know someone whom the gangs threatened this way. He didn’t take their threats seriously. They killed him in the park. He was wearing his school uniform. If I hadn’t had these problems, I wouldn’t have come here. [UNCHR report](#)

**Mario**, a 17-year old from **El Salvador**, reported the following: I left because I had problems with the gangs. They hung out by a field that I had to pass to get to school. They said if I didn’t join them, they would kill me. I have many friends who were killed or disappeared because they refused to join the gang. I told the gang I didn’t want to. The more they saw me refusing to join, the more they started threatening me and telling me they would kill me if I didn’t. They beat me up five times for refusing to help them. The pain from the beatings was so bad, I couldn’t even stand up. They killed a friend of mine in March because he didn’t want to join, and his body wasn’t found until May. I went to the police twice to report the threats. They told me that they would do something; but when I saw that they weren’t doing anything to help, I knew I had to leave. [UNCHR report](#).

**Kevin Briseño**, 18, and his friend **Omar Barrera**, 19, from **El Salvador**, both spoke about why it may be a death sentence for those who try to leave but are caught and sent back. One friend fled a year and a half ago after he was threatened and gang members murdered his father, a policeman. Their friend was trying to reach his mother in Maryland, but he was stopped in Mexico and returned to San Salvador. "**He was murdered the week after he got back**," Barrera said, shaking his head. [The Desert Sun, 7/13/14](#)

Stories relayed at a focus group held by the [Women’s Refugee Commission](#): One girl said she was scared to take public transportation because Honduran gangs are burning buses full of people if the driver doesn’t pay “protection money.” She said gangs also regularly **burn jails and houses**. Another girl had to flee because of the rampant killings. Girls as young as nine are being **gang-raped by gang members** in their home countries. If a girl is impregnated, she will be left to care for the child until he or she is old enough to join the gang.

In **Honduras** in early May, at least **nine children were killed by armed criminal groups** in the La Pradera neighborhood in San Pedro Sula. All children were tortured, bound by their hands and feet, and shot in the face multiple times. Some had the skin on their faces peeled off. According to the BBC, the victims were targeted because they refused to join criminal gangs. And this is not just limited to one city. Covenant House reports that murders of children on the rise: 70 in December 2013, 90 each month from January through April 2014, and 102 in May 2014 alone.

Two workers at the San Pedro Sula morgue in **Honduras** said the number of bodies they receive is significantly higher today than it was a year ago. Stories are also piling up of young children forced to work as lookouts, messengers or spies for the gangs. **Eight children, between the ages of 7 and 13**, were kidnapped and killed in La Pareda barrio during May. Word on the street is that they were killed for refusing to join the dominant local gang. "In this job you become hardened to seeing death," says one of the morgue workers who recovered some of the bodies, and asks his name not be published. "**But to have to recover a child who has been cut to pieces and burned. That was just too much.**" [The Guardian, 7/9/14](#)

One day in May, seven gang members boarded a public bus in San Salvador, **El Salvador's** capital. They were looking for two members of a rival gang. But they fired indiscriminately at passengers, **killing six people** and wounding a score of others, including a **2-year-old**. On that day alone, 31 people were murdered in San Salvador. The city averaged more than 12 murders a day in June, according to federal police. "The gangs are in schools, neighborhoods. They're everywhere," said Alison Ramirez, who works on a U.S.-funded, violence-prevention project in El Salvador and frequently visits Honduras and Guatemala. "**Even if the kids don't want to be a part of it, they get caught up in the cross fire, extorted, threatened.**" [The Desert Sun, 7/13/14](#)

**Four children were stabbed to death** in May in Limon, a town in the **Honduran** Caribbean province of Colon, police said. The children, who ranged in **age from 2 to 13**, were murdered by unidentified individuals when they were left home alone, police chief Daniel Ferrufino told Honduran radio. [Fox News Latino, 5/4/14](#)

A family in Guatemala City received a knock on the door. Standing there were several gang members with one demand. "**We've come to take your daughter,**" they said, according to one of our local Church World Service partners. "Our boss wants her." It was an emergency and the family had to act quickly. The young teenage girl had no choice but to leave the country the next day, for her own protection. In the words of a local pastor who helped them, "Her sin was simply being pretty."

**Leticia, a pre-teen** was dragged from her home and raped by more than a dozen gang members in Honduras, so her family reported the crime to the police. The family immediately began receiving death threats. The content of the threats led the family to conclude that the police were in collusion with the gangs. When a local human rights group attempted to relocate Leticia to a women's shelter, but the shelter refused to take her in for fear it would not be able to protect Leticia or the other women from this gang's reign of terror. Honduras has only three women's shelters and the police use two of them as their own personal brothels. In the end, to protect Leticia from further harm, she had to leave Honduras. Honduras experienced a 346 percent increase in the murder rate of women and girls.

**Maria a 12-year-old girl** from Central America was trafficked for labor and sex, she fled with her baby to escape. Maria was kidnapped at gunpoint and taken to a home where she was held captive. She was beaten and raped on an almost daily basis and eventually forced into prostitution. Because of this she became pregnant and gave birth to a girl while captive. Maria fled with her child, riding on top of trains so that they might escape the sexual bondage. *Maria ended up qualifying for a T-visa and is currently doing well. She has now graduated high school.*

**Rosa, a pregnant 15-year-old girl** from Honduras fled to U.S. to escape threats against herself and her unborn child. In Honduras, Rosa had been attending school part of the day and working in the fields the rest of the day. One day while working, she was raped by a man in the community. The rape resulted in pregnancy. Rosa filed a police report about the incident, but then received threats against her life from the friends of her rapist to withdraw her police report and later to abort the baby. The threats continued so Rosa worked with her family to flee to the U.S. to seek safety and where she can carry her pregnancy full-term. *A child like Rosa might apply for asylum.*

**Laura, an 8-year-old girl** from Honduras fled domestic violence and kidnapping. Laura was living in Honduras with her aunt while mother was in the U.S. working to provide for her family. One day a man she called “step-father” who was an ex-boyfriend of her mother’s, kidnapped her from her aunt’s care. Laura’s mother in the U.S. said she could not report the kidnapping to authorities as they would do nothing. This step-father beat Laura daily with belts and pieces of wood, resulting in bruises, bleeding, and leaving visible scars on her body. On multiple occasions, he also threatened to kill her with a gun. The step father finally threatened Laura’s mother that he would kill the Laura if her mother did not send him money. Laura’s mother was finally able to save and send a large amount of money to the step-father and Laura was able to escape to come live with her in the U.S. *A child like Laura might apply for asylum.*

**Mario is a 16 year old boy** from Honduras who decided to make the journey to the United States after several of the male members of his family were killed by drug traffickers. Mario lived with his parents and siblings in Honduras and worked on a local farm in order to help support his family. He had not been able to attend school for five years due to his family’s economic situation. Mario’s his life in Honduras was fairly normal until his family was attacked. Since his father was financially successful without being involved in the drug trade others in their community became jealous of the family. He has stated that this is why his father, brother, cousin and uncle were all violently murdered one day. Mario and his family lived in fear of these individuals and the possibility that they would cause further harm to the family. Mario has a sister in the U.S. with whom he hopes to live—so he can go to school in a safe environment like a normal teenager. *A child like Mario, might seek asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Jesus, is a 17-year-old Guatemalan boy** who came to the U.S. to escape a drug-trafficking gang who brutally murdered some of his family. When Jesus was 7 years old, his older sister and older brother were kidnapped. The family paid money to the kidnappers but the children were not released. Authorities eventually found the mutilated bodies of his siblings. The group that murdered the siblings started making threats to the rest of his family. Jesus and his younger sister started being intimidated in the community by people they believed to be part of a drug trafficking gang. These threats caused Jesus to decide to flee to the U.S. *A child like Jesus might apply for a trafficking visa, special immigrant juvenile status visa, or asylum.*

**Juan, a 12-year-old boy from Honduras** and his disabled 17 year old sister Maria, fled domestic violence and trafficking. Juan and Maria lived with their uncle, who was physically abusive to both of them. Maria was raped by her father at a young age and continued to be raped once she entered the care of her uncle. While living with his uncle, Juan was trafficked by a man to download, burn, and distribute pornography. He was threatened with a gun to continue creating this pornography or he would be shot. Upon abandonment by their uncle, the children were sent to the U.S. to live with a distant relative. *Children like Juan and Maria might apply for a trafficking visa, special immigrant juvenile status visa, or asylum.*

**Carla, a 17-year-old teen,** fled attempted rape by mother’s partner. Carla’s mother’s boyfriend attempted to molest Carla. Carla immediately reported it to her mother. Her mother ended the relationship with her boyfriend. The ex-boyfriend then started threatening Carla’s life because he was outraged at the reported abuse. Carla’s mom immediately sent her to the U.S. to escape the death threat. *A child like Carla might apply for asylum.*

**Carlos, a 13-year-old boy** from El Salvador, fled to the U.S. after witnessing his mother’s brutal murder. Four gunmen broke into Carlos’s home and shot Carlos’s mother right in front of him. The gunmen where never caught, which lead to the child and family feeling afraid in their community. The child suffered from severe trauma because of this event. Due to this, his family in El Salvador decided to send him to live with a relative in the U.S. where he would not be in danger of his life and have better care. *A child like Carlos might apply for asylum.*

**Ana, a 12-year-old girl** from Honduras, fled gang abuse and abandonment by mother. Ana’s mother has a history of psychiatric care and violence against her 3 children. Ana was forced to care for her disabled younger siblings. Ana was

also sexually abused as a young child. Ana finally was forced to flee because her family started to be threatened by a local gang. *A child like Ana might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**David, a 17-year-old boy**, fled Honduras after his life was threatened. David was living with a 32 year old friend. One day, David forgot to put the farm equipment away after his work was completed. The friend and David's caregiver threatened to shoot David. Fearing for his life, David fled to the U.S. *A child like David might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Rodrigo, 17-year-old boy** from Honduras, fled domestic violence. Rodrigo was physically abused often in Honduras by his father. His father would hit him with anything around the house that he could find. One day his father threatened to kill the minor with a machete. Rodrigo afraid for his life, fled to the U.S. to escape. *A child like Rodrigo might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Ruth, a 16-year-old girl** fled violence in Honduras. Ruth was abandoned by her mother when she was 10 years old, her father then started to abuse her. When the violence started to escalate in her community, Ruth finally made the decision she needed to flee to the U.S. *A child like Ruth might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Tina, 16-year-old girl** from Guatemala fled to the U.S. because of child abuse. Tina was living with her father in Guatemala who was physically abusive. He would hit her with tree branches and cords on her back and legs. Tina has scars all over her body from the abuse. She came to the US to escape the abuse. *A child like Tina might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Dominic, 15-year-old boy**, fled Guatemala's gangs. In Dominic's neighborhood, a gang tried to recruit him and pressure him into smoking marijuana. His friend told him one day that members of the gang were waiting in a nearby park to physically assault the minor. Dominic immediately made the choice to start his journey to the U.S. *A child like Dominic might apply for asylum.*

**Hannah** survived multiple rapes in Honduras. After she fled, she was kidnapped by a Mexican gang that raped and tortured her. She eventually got to the United States.

**Nancy and Ofelia**, at ages 15 and 8, fled El Salvador. Their older female cousins had been forced to work as sex slaves for gang leaders. The gang threatened to kill Nancy and her family. Nancy and Ofelia fled to the U.S. and were placed in removal proceedings.

**Elisabet** fled El Salvador when she was 8 years old. Gang members had kidnapped her two older sisters. The girls' mother did not want her 8-year-old daughter to suffer the same fate, so she arranged for her daughter to be brought to the United States.

**Lisa** fled an area of El Salvador controlled by gangs. Her brother was killed for refusing to join a gang that tried to forcibly recruit him. She was raped by two men and became pregnant as a result. She was then required to pay *renta* to the rapists, which increased over time. She fled El Salvador and was attacked by Mexican robbers during the journey, before arriving to the United States.

**Alejandra** fled an area of El Salvador controlled by MS-13. Between the ages of 13 and 15, she witnessed two murders, several shootings, and helped identify the dismembered body of her best friend. She had male friends who were murdered for not joining gangs. She had girl friends who were raped and murdered for not submitting to gang members' demands. Alejandra was forced to pay *renta* to MS-13. After her friend was shot and killed, a gang member

threatened to kill her and harm her mother if she didn't pay higher *renta*. She fled to the U.S. and applied for her asylum. Her application is pending.

**Joana** was kidnapped by a gang in Honduras that attempted to traffic her into prostitution. She escaped and reported the kidnapping to the police. The gang then abducted her again, raped her, and burned her with cigarettes. She fled to the U.S. and is seeking asylum.

**Beatrice** fled Guatemala to Mexico, after suffering years of child abuse. She was then forced into prostitution. She escaped and boarded a train headed north where she met a man who offered to help her get in the United States. After being sexually abused by this man, Beatrice escaped and entered the United States. She applied for asylum, was placed into removal proceedings, and an immigration judge eventually granted her asylum.

**Reina** was kidnapped by a group of men who sexually abused her and forced her into prostitution for two years. She eventually escaped and fled to the United States. Once here, a social worker trained in child welfare and trafficking protection, identified her as a trafficking survivor.

*Names have been changed to protect their identities.*