

Migrant Families Were Confused When U.S. Expelled Children Into Mexico

U.S. authorities improperly expelled Central American children in violation of international agreements. Families scrambled to learn how they had ended up back across the border.



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5 MIN READ

Eva Acuña spoke with her teenage sister Esther by phone early on the morning of Aug. 15, about an hour before Esther planned to enter the United States near the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez and ask for asylum — the end of a long journey from Esther's home in El Salvador.

Ms. Acuña, a legal permanent resident in the United States, expected to hear next from American immigration authorities about her sister's status. But instead, about eight hours later, she received a call from the authorities in Mexico. Instead of taking her sister into custody, the U.S. Border Patrol had delivered the girl back to Mexico, where she was in a children's shelter.

The transfer was contrary to both U.S. policy and an outstanding diplomatic agreement with Mexico, which do not allow children from other countries who are traveling without adult guardians to be expelled into Mexico. But it is now becoming clear that a number of children have been improperly expelled after the Trump administration shut down the border to most asylum applicants because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Since The New York Times reported last week on an internal email that warned border authorities about the improper transfers, Ms. Acuña, who asked that her sister be identified by her first name to avoid immigration repercussions, is one of several Central Americans who have come forward saying they were anxious and confused after their children and young relatives were sent without any adult to accompany them into a country that is not their own.

In some cases, including Esther's, there were no other family members in Mexico to aid the children.



Mexico's agreement with the United States to accept children was meant to include only Mexicans and those with adults. Reuters

Just weeks after Esther crossed into the United States, a Honduran woman named Paola walked with her 5-year-old son Nahum to the edge of the international bridge that leads into the United States. (She also asked that she and her son be identified by their first names for fear of retaliation from American immigration authorities.)

The two had been living for months in a shelter in Matamoros, Mexico, waiting for the border to reopen so they could pursue American asylum petitions. But Paola said she had reached her wit's end about the conditions they had been living in, and the fact that her son had not been to school in more than a year. She decided to send Nahum to the United States, hoping American authorities would allow him to join his grandfather and uncles in Los Angeles.

She said she walked the boy to the bridge on Sept. 5 and watched U.S. immigration officials usher him into the American port of entry. Scared that something might go wrong, she said, she stood on the bridge waiting for news. But after about five hours, she was dismayed to see a Mexican government van drive past her with Nahum inside.

Working with American lawyers, Paola contacted Mexico's child welfare agency and learned that her son had been sent back into its custody. She pleaded to see him, but three days went by before she was allowed to pick him up.

Shipping young people back and forth between foreign governments is a sensitive matter, in part because of the bureaucratic red tape that can lead to delays in their release, even in cases like Paola's, when the child's parent is waiting in the same country.

It is unclear how many non-Mexican children have been expelled into Mexico, because both the American and Mexican governments have declined to provide data on the number of cases. U.S. government officials have cited a legal challenge against some of the expulsions that have occurred under the pandemic to explain why they cannot elaborate further. In a tweet on Friday, a spokesman for the Mexican secretary of foreign affairs said that "at the moment" it had no record of minors entering Mexico without accompanying relatives.

"The Mexican government, along with civil society and multilateral organizations, will continue with due investigations," the statement said.



Both the American and Mexican governments have declined to provide data on how many non-Mexican children have been expelled into Mexico. Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

A U.S. Border Patrol official raised alarms about the practice in the internal email that came to light last week. Brian Hastings, chief of the Border Patrol's Rio Grande Valley sector, confirmed the practice had been occurring, and said border agents had been directed to contact the Mexican consular office each time an unaccompanied child who was not Mexican was expelled.

Five people have told The Times that their children or young relatives were expelled into Mexico after entering the United States, in violation of the agreement between the two countries.

Lawyers from KIND, an immigrant advocacy organization, said that they knew of several Central American children who were expelled into Mexico and that some of them were still in custody there. And the Young Center, another such group, confirmed it had appealed to American authorities in two additional cases — two Salvadoran girls, ages 11 and 15, who were expelled into Mexico and eventually allowed into the United States after legal interventions.

“We shouldn’t be encountering these kids at all,” said Jennifer Nagda, policy director for the group. “We have no idea how many cases there are because we’re getting them through word of mouth.”

Some parents have had to wait days or weeks to find out that their children had been sent without their knowledge to Mexico.

Lenis Manzanarez Suazo, a Honduran who has also been waiting in Matamoros for the American border to reopen, said she watched as American immigration authorities walked her 7-year-old daughter, Samantha Manzanarez, into the United States on Sept. 23. She waited for news, assuming that the girl would be reunited with relatives in Florida.



Lenis Manzanarez Suazo and her daughter, Samantha Manzanarez.

“We waited for a call from a family member or something for three, four days,” Ms. Manzanarez Suazo said. “I was nervous. A week passed and still nothing.”

Finally, about eight days later, Ms. Manzanarez Suazo sought help from an immigrant advocacy organization called Every Last One that contacted the Mexican child welfare agency on a hunch that Samantha had been expelled. The hunch was correct. Samantha was in one of the agency’s shelters.

Mexican officials declined to provide her, as well as Paola, with documentation showing that her child had been improperly expelled by the United States into Mexican custody.



The mothers of both Nahum and Samantha sent their children across the border after living in a migrant camp in Matamoros, Mexico. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

A.B., a 17-year-old from El Salvador who asked to be identified by his initials because he did not want to face retaliation in his pending asylum case, said he crossed the border near El Paso on July 14 but was expelled back to Mexico and held in a shelter there for two weeks.

The American officer who processed his case, he said, told him that if he had tried to cross the border before the pandemic, he would have had more success. “We’re sending you back to Mexico,” he said the official told him. “Maybe next time.”

Ms. Acuña’s sister Esther, who is 15, was transferred to a second shelter after being sent back to Mexico, then a third. She was eventually allowed into the United States after American lawyers, working in concert with the Salvadoran consulate, successfully argued that the expulsion had violated both U.S. policy and the diplomatic agreement.

She arrived at a U.S.-operated children’s shelter in Arizona on Oct. 23, about two months after she had been sent back to Mexico.

Eventually, Ms. Acuña said, the family hopes she can be released to family members in Houston. But when that will be, no one knows.