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Children Crossing the Border, Unaccompanied and Undocumented

Ricardo Gambetta takes a seat behind a meticulously arranged desk. Pens and pencils are respectively divided between mugs labeled with South and Central American countries. The low rumbling of a nearby train intimates the story featured in the “Which Way Home” DVD lying on his desk. It is a tale of the harrowing journey unaccompanied child migrants make on a freight train across Mexico to the U.S. The documentary highlights a growing crisis on the U.S./Mexico border; the very crisis Gambetta and others are working diligently to end.

“What is missing is many of these people working on immigration reform must focus more on children because it’s a very important segment of any immigrant population,” says Gambetta, the Director of Immigrant Services at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. “We try to promote children’s issues and we want to ensure any petition in legislation coming from the White House and Congress will include some language in regards to protection of children’s rights. That is our most important agenda right now when we talk about immigration reform.”

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants is a non-profit organization that has been serving persons in forced or voluntary migration around the world since 1911. In 2005, the organization broadened its mission to aid the growing number of unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S./Mexico border.

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are aware how dangerous the whole journey from their country to the United States is. So many of our efforts have been focused on that,” says Gambetta.

To reach the U.S./Mexico border, many immigrants travel on board a freight train referred to as “La Bestia,” or “the beast.” Unaccompanied children riding on the train are especially vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and crime. Many hope to be reunited with their parents in the U.S., while others arrive seeking protection from threatening circumstances in their home country.

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Immigration is emerging today as a key issue in both the White House and Congress. Earlier this month, President Barack Obama mentioned the importance of immigration reform in his State of the Union address, and last month the bi-partisan “gang of eight” released a framework for comprehensive immigration reform.

Immigration first emerged as a major political issue in the 1960’s when the U.S. government locked down the border and created a cap per country basis. The change in policy made the legal path to citizenship much more difficult.

“Going back to when the U.S. was founded it hasn’t been an issue, but then there was a cap put on per country basis,” says a researcher at a think tank. “Because the legal tap is shut off, it’s easier to come here illegally. For instance overstay a visa, or cross the border. Because there’s little incentive not to if you pretty much believe you’re never going to be able to get citizenship coming another way. “

Many immigrants leave behind a struggling economy in Mexico to find better work opportunities in the U.S. In order to do so, many leave behind children to make the long and dangerous journey over the U.S./Mexico border. Many unaccompanied children crossing the border are hoping to be reunited with their family in the U.S.

Marcel Lopez* is one such immigrant who left behind her life in Mexico to create a better one in the U.S. for her daughter. Unlike the parents who leave behind their children to make it across the border first, Lopez made the treacherous journey with her three-year-old daughter alone after she was separated from her brother.

Lopez had nothing but an old truck tire to help her and her daughter swim across the Rio Grande and into the U.S. She relied solely on two coyotes to get her across the border and safely to her brother. She remains in the U.S. without documents and is one of many who come here for a better life.

“In Mexico we say everything happens for a reason,” says Lopez. “In Mexico I had nothing; here I don’t have a big house but I have a little place, and I have my car, and my daughter’s in school, and I have a good job. I wouldn’t change anything to go back to Mexico.”

In the immigration reform discussion today, both Obama and the bi-partisan group made up of eight senators have failed to address the children who are coming across the U.S./Mexico border unaccompanied and without documents.

In December 2008, Congress passed the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection and Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008. The act requires the Department of Homeland Security to interview every unaccompanied minor in order to determine if the child

is a potential victim of trafficking, has not possible claim to asylum, and voluntarily agrees to go back home.

In a 2011 report issued by Appleseed, promises outlined in the TVPRA remain unfulfilled. U.S. Customs and Border Protections apprehend approximately 15,000 unaccompanied minors from Mexico annually. The National System for Integral Family Development, a Mexican public institution where Mexican unaccompanied minors pass through after the U.S. repatriates them, however, released figures in 2010 that indicate a majority of unaccompanied minors who were detained by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol are immediately repatriated.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants is able to help approximately 10 percent of the unaccompanied minors who are detained by U.S. Department of Homeland Security. It's a percentage the organization hopes to see increase this coming year.

“I think this is missing from the picture, the fact that no one is talking about children’s rights,” says Gambetta. “But we believe we can make a difference in the children’s lives.”