Unaccompanied Minors at the Border: Opinions of Latino Adults

Myrna Cintron
Prairie View A & M University, mycintron@pvamu.edu

Michael Nojeim
Prairie View A&M University

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Introduction

Since the summer of 2014, U.S. citizens have become increasingly aware of a new wave of border crossers that includes children who are making the journey alone, without a parent or guardian, and who left their home countries to find their way to the U.S. These children became known by many names on the news, but their official federal label is Unaccompanied Alien Children. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, 86% of these children are between the ages of 13 and 17.

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) office has documented the increase in apprehensions of Unaccompanied Alien Children for several years. The largest numbers of apprehended children come from Central America and Mexico and are being apprehended at the Southwest Border in the Rio Grande Valley. Many articles have documented the circumstances that explain minor border crossers (Gonzalez, 2016; Musalo et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Rodriguez, 2007; Rodriguez, et al., 2004). For example, a study by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2014) of more than 400 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, who were interviewed while in U.S. federal custody, found that a majority of these children believed their home countries were unsafe, while they perceive U.S. as a safe heaven. The report documents a hopeless environment where parents or guardians (grandparents) advised children to leave. In those countries, violent criminal activity is widespread and perceived as out of control; youth have no future, and death is certain. The report also described how youth thought they only had two choices—they could either join a gang or be killed by a gang. And if they join a gang, a rival gang or the police will kill them. In despair, the children perceive no future at home. And so, for many, the only way to reach adulthood is to leave their country. The paper aims to broaden the scope of the immigration discussion by giving a voice to a group of Latino adults who are virtually invisible from empirical studies and national public discussions. This paper conducted three focus groups with 28 Latino adults representing seven Spanish-speaking countries. Seven questions guided the focus group discussions. The findings highlight three themes—the wave of younger immigrants, opinions about unaccompanied
children’s parents, and opinions about U.S. government immigration policies.

**Background**

With the arrival of the 21st century, the Latino population emerged as the largest minority group in the United States. Data from the 2020 Census reported 62.1 million Latinos in the U.S. population. Since the last decennial census count, the Latino-origin population group grew by 23%, while non-Latino groups grew by 4.3%. Between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, slightly more than half (51.1%) of total U.S. population growth came from Latino groups. The Latino population group makes up 18.7% of the U.S. population and is the fastest-growing group in the U.S. (Jones et al., 2021). The U.S. Census Bureau notes that changes made to Latino origin questions might impact these numbers.

While the overwhelming majority of the Latino origin population in the U.S. is of Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban descent, the last decennial census reports that the proportional distribution of these three subpopulation groups decreased (Ennis et al., 2011), giving rise to "new Latino immigrants" coming from Central and South America and the Caribbean. While the Latino origin groups continue to be concentrated in several states (e.g., California, Texas, and Florida), Latinos were the majority of the population in 82 out of 3,143 counties, accounting for 16% of the total Latino population (Ennis et al., 2011, p. 11). When Latino groups are compared with the non-Latino White population, census briefs are not encouraging. As summarized by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2013 (p. 1),

"The data paint a mixed picture. Young Latinos are satisfied with their lives, optimistic about their future, and highly value education, hard work, and career success. Yet they are much more likely than other American youths to drop out of school and become teen-age parents. They are more likely than White and Asian youth to live in poverty. And they have high levels of exposure to gangs."

Significant but negative within-group generational differences have been identified and are called the "immigrant paradox" (Garcia Coll and Marks, 2012), because traditional assumptions about intergenerational progress (education, economic standing, risky sexual behavior, violence, drug abuse, etc.) are not being fulfilled, particularly among the second and
following generations who are not achieving as much as earlier generations. Part of this paradox is the consistent research finding that despite disproportional processing and punishment by the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems, increases in the number of Latino immigrants are generally associated with reductions in crime in their communities, and they are not more likely to commit crimes than American citizens (Arya, et al., 2011, Bersani, 2014; Light and Miller, 2018; Light, et al., 2014; Martinez, 2000; Macdonald & Saunders, 2012). For example, Light and King’s (2014) finding supports the pro-social benefits of immigration, particularly in disadvantaged and racially segregated communities. The authors propose that immigrants bring business and social capital, strengthen community institutions, and increase informal social control in their communities. Their presence might account for reductions in violent crime since the 1990s. While the empirical research findings support their community contributions, immigration policy discussions emphasize illegal border crossings. These discussions also fail to account for the opinions of Latino immigrants (Mendez-Shannon 2010; Sullivan and Rehm 2005; Wright and Rodriguez 2012).

**Literature Review**

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) office has documented the increase in apprehensions of *Unaccompanied Alien Children* for several years. The largest numbers of apprehended children come from Central America and Mexico and are being apprehended at the Southwest Border in the Rio Grande Valley.

The Southwest Border in the Rio Grande Valley is a popular border crossing point because the Valley is a large geographic area and a very difficult landscape to patrol 24 hours a day, every day of the year. This area has historically been used to traffic drugs and people, including children. According to U.S. Border Patrol annual statistics, the apprehension of undocumented children has occurred for years. However, Table 1 shows that since 2012, there has been a substantial increase in the number of apprehended undocumented alien; the numbers have more than doubled since 2014.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year</th>
<th>Unaccompanied Children (0-17)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>621,867</td>
<td>199,442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>8,081</td>
<td>1,391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>19,646</td>
<td>1,114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>18,622</td>
<td>1,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16,067</td>
<td>1,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>24,481</td>
<td>3,835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>38,833</td>
<td>8,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>68,631</td>
<td>17,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>40,035</td>
<td>13,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>59,757</td>
<td>18,926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>41,546</td>
<td>14,855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>50,145</td>
<td>22,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>76,136</td>
<td>30,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>19,657</td>
<td>6,990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>140,230</td>
<td>57,808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Growing number of Children try to enter the U.S., [https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/687](https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/687). Published June 28, 2022.

The table also shows that children apprehended from Central American countries have outpaced those from Mexico, and while COVID-19 decreased the numbers, those countries still outnumber Mexican children arrests. For this 14 year period, different presidential administrations and immigration debates about the border have not diminished the number of border crossers.

The two principal legal bases providing protections to unaccompanied children are the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement and the 2008 William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The Flores Settlement Agreement sets standards for the detention, release, and treatment of migrant children in government custody—provision of food, water, adequate temperature control, the right to be held in the least restrictive setting while in detention, and the right to
be released from custody without delay to parents (family members, or guardians). It applies to children accompanying their parents (must be held together in facilities equipped to properly take care of children) and to unaccompanied children. It also extends detention rights to children, who cannot be detained for more than 20 days. The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) addresses the needs of unaccompanied children who may be victims of human trafficking or who have a credible fear of persecution or torture if returned to their home country. Under the TVPRA, children apprehended by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) whose country of origin is unknown are transferred to the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Once in custody, but within 72 hours of their apprehension, they are screened to determine the credibility of their fear and whether they have been victims of human trafficking.

While these two acts set basic legal requirements, policy strategies rely on long-established child welfare practices, including settings described as in the best interest of the child or youth. These settings include shelters, foster care, group homes, residential treatment centers, and secure restrictive facilities (U.S. Department of Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2022). Even if these are described as “child welfare best practices” (pg 1), it can be argued that these create pathways, very similar to the pipelines found in the juvenile justice system.

While migration patterns are not stable, a significant change has occurred in the composition and character of those crossing the border to the United States. The arrivals from Central American countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, are much larger than anticipated. There are also rising numbers of adult women, girls, and children under 13, while the number of Mexican immigrants has fallen (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014).

Several interrelated reasons help explain why children are showing up at the southern border in large numbers. For purposes of this paper, these reasons are divided into three topic areas—economic and infrastructural problems in Central America, increased and sustained violence intensified by local gang activities and criminal-related behaviors, and a desire to be reunited with their families in the United States.
Most Central American countries are poor rural/agrarian-based economies where entrenched poverty and lack of opportunities (education, employment) have been compounded by years of civil war and violence (e.g., El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Except for a few urban cities, these countries' transportation and communication infrastructure still lag most developed countries' standards. These countries' labor force is low skilled, uneducated, and poorly paid. For example, a high percentage of the population in Honduras (35%), Guatemala (31.9%), El Salvador (40%), and Mexico (20.4%) live on less than two U.S. dollars a day (United Nations, 2020). In addition, two out of every five young people are neither studying nor working, and 55% of the workforce in the region work in the informal economy (United Nations, 2020). This means that, as a group, workers in the region are more likely to be found in low-paying jobs such as farm workers, cleaners, and sweepers. Negative perceptions of the economic situation, whether personal or national, increase fear, including fear of crime, particularly in Central America and Mexico. In this sense, the results seem to support the argument that economic uncertainty contributes to overall public insecurity, making people feel vulnerable about their future (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014; Rodriguez, et al., 2021; Rundle, et al., 2019). For some, the solution is to leave. They come to the U.S. because of strong historical economic ties. During the 20th century, the U.S. was the main purchaser of Central American products (e.g., coffee, bananas). In addition, most of the products Central America purchases come from the United States, creating a strong economic and human link between the two countries (Musalo, et al., 2015).

While economic reasons are still the driving force of migration, violence is often a trigger. Two violent chapters in Central America's history include the presence of multiple paramilitary groups during civil insurrection wars in the region during the 1980s, and by the mid-1990, the presence of criminal gangs increasingly involved in violent crimes, drugs, and human trafficking.

Durand and Massey (2010) and Runde and Schneider (2019) trace the rise in Central American migration back to U.S. policy in the 1980s to ward off communist influence in the region, particularly in Nicaragua. Durand and Massey's (2010) found very little migration from Central America before 1980, followed by an uptick in the 1980s and 1990s. In the mid-2000s, the number of apprehensions and deportations of Central American immigrants from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala soared...
to more than 150,000, even as it remained close to zero among nations where the U.S. had not intervened, like Costa Rica and Belize. Schneider (2019) argued that the current crisis stems from the Central American government's failure to prioritize judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures, and policies to combat inequality in a post-conflict setting. The author adds that the United States also failed to assist Central America in adequately addressing these challenges (Schneider, 2019).

During this time, the U.S. experienced increased juvenile delinquency rates, and tough-on-crime strategies were used to reduce the problem (e.g., three strikes, juvenile waivers, zero tolerance). It has been reported that during this time, immigrants' parents or guardians of delinquents' children decided to send them back to their home countries before they got deeply involved in the American juvenile and criminal justice system.

By the mid-1990s, the wars had ended in Central America, but large weapons were left behind and became available to criminal gangs (like the Mara Salvatruchas in El Salvador). This was a time many criminally involved juveniles and adults were released from U.S. correctional facilities and were deported to Central America. Together, U.S. policies, family decisions, and wars increased the concentration of criminal elements in Central American countries. It was not long before rising rates of human trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and deaths could be traced to gang violence, but governments (on both sides of the border) were unresponsive to the problem. Schneider (2019) emphasized that the region's youth are the most vulnerable to violence.

The above two conditions led to informal family reunification trips. Because parents had crossed the border themselves, they sent for their kids; relatives accepted younger family members to keep them safe and away from gangs. Parents, guardians, or relatives made this decision because they judged that the risks of the journey were not as great as the risks the child faced by remaining in their home countries.

The U.S. is perceived as a safe haven. In a 2022 Pew Research Center survey, most Latinos see the U.S. as better than their country of origin for its access to opportunities for getting ahead, raising children, health care, and treatment of people experiencing poverty. The survey also found that Latinos hold different opinions about life in the U.S., particularly those related to discrimination and family life. Despite this, the
consensus is that “if they had to make the choice again, they would migrate to the U.S.” (Pew Research Survey, 2022, pg. 7).

Because Latinos have a diversity of immigration experiences (for example Puerto Ricans are born U.S. citizens, and many Cubans receive refugee political status), researchers suggest that these immigrant experiences and attitudes shape Latinos’ immigration views, particularly those related to their political and voting preferences (Corral, 2023).

Corral’s (2023) review of the empirical literature on Latinos’ immigration attitudes identified four trends. At first, the studies compared the opinions of Latinos and Whites, where, not surprisingly, Latinos were more likely to reject immigration restrictions than Whites were. In the second, studies explored structural integration dynamics based on generational status. Accordingly, members of the first generation are more likely to support pro-immigrant policies than U.S.-born Latinos. This group of studies has also found differences by national origin groups. For example, Mexicans support pro-immigrant policies more than Cubans or Puerto Ricans (p. 3). The third trend is identified as selective dissociation, “the tendency observed primarily among U.S.-born Latina/os to exclude and marginalize Spanish monolingual immigrants because they feel that immigrants deemed “unacculturated” are responsible for inviting social stigma from the cultural mainstream (p. 3).” Accordingly, this creates a distance among Latinos (us versus them) and leads to ambivalence and restrictionist opinions about immigration. The fourth and most recent but less understood trend is gender dynamics. Corral explains that gendered socialization and social roles, acculturation, and gendered differences in immigration enforcement can explain attitudinal differences among Latino residents in the U.S. For example, the author found evidence that Latinos (males) are more likely to support punitive immigration enforcement and restrictive immigration policies than Latinas (females). Other studies have found evidence of gendered, acculturation, national origin, and generational distinctions among Latinos, particularly in voting patterns (Bejarano 2014; Branton 2007; Corral 2023; Hickel, Rogerio & Deckman 2022; Ocampo & Ocampo 2020; Pew Research Center 2022). However, there is no emphasis on unaccompanied minors in this literature. This work fills the gap in the unaccompanied minor literature.

Using the focus group methodology with 28 Latino adults representing seven Spanish-speaking countries, seven questions guided the focus group discussions. The findings highlight three themes—a wave
of younger immigrants, opinions about the unaccompanied children's parents, and opinions about the U.S. government’s immigration policies.

Method

Three focus groups with Latino adults were conducted to learn their opinions about immigration issues and unaccompanied minors at the U.S. borders. “A focus group is described as a carefully planned discussion, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest. It is conducted in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2009). According to Krueger & Casey (2000) and Stewart & Shamdasani (2014), three reasons make this the preferred methodology: when insights are needed into a new area of research, where the purpose is to investigate topics where opinions or attitudes are conditional, and when researchers need additional information to prepare for a larger-scale study. Seven questions were utilized during the focus groups. The objective of the research and the methodology selected is to provide data findings in an area where little research has been done. Recent research findings underline differences in opinions and attitudes about immigration among Latino residents in the U.S. (Bejarano 2014; Branton 2007; Corral 2023; Hickel, Rogerio & Deckman 2022; Ocampo & Ocampo 2020; Pew Research Center 2022), but there is no emphasis on unaccompanied minors. This work fills the gap in the unaccompanied minor’s literature.

In addition to reading the literature on immigration, newspapers, and television news on the topic helped identify and narrow the list of questions (script) to guide each focus group discussion session. Seven questions guided the discussions. After analysis and review of the findings, the questions were categorized into three specific areas of interest, presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Focus Groups Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. In your opinion, is the issue of unaccompanied minors crossing the U.S.-Mexico border something new? Why yes, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. When did you hear about this first? (i.e., year, where)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Do you know anyone who has sent a minor alone across the border?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. Do you know an adult who has done the crossing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. What do you think? What is your opinion about a parent (guardian) who sends their child alone or with a stranger (coyote) to cross the border? Why do you think they do it?

3. Are you aware do you know what the federal government is doing about this issue?

3a. Whether you know or not and agree with what the federal government is doing, what do you think the government should be doing?

Because the authors were interested in the opinions of Latino adults, they contacted friends and acquaintances as potential participants. These, in turn, helped recruit others that met the Latino adult criteria (snowball). This implies that group dynamics and synergistic relationships among some participants were pre-established. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), this characteristic helps when starting discussions, making self-disclosure statements, and establishing participants’ comfort and trust levels. Krueger (1994) also suggested that participants share similar characteristics such as gender, ethnic and social class background, and age range. While not all participants knew each other before the focus groups, the authors did not notice differences in participation, comfort, and trust levels.

Each focus group took about two weeks to organize and meet the invitee’s schedules. To assure participation, follow-up phone calls were made a day or two before the agreed session. Two groups met in the home of two participants, and one group met in a store on a Sunday when the store was closed for business.

The three focus groups were comprised of five to eight participants; a total of 28 Latino adults represented seven immigrant communities (two from the Dominican Republic, two from Panama, eight from Mexico, three from Venezuela, four from Colombia, four from Guatemala, and six from Honduras). Participants had lived in the U.S. for at least five years. Fifteen of the participants were female, and 14 were males. They ranged in age from 26 to 44.

The sample size and group composition meet the standards accepted for focus groups to gather various perspectives while managing
the discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). An identified limitation is that only one discussion session per group took place, where some authors suggest a minimum of three to four meetings (Burrows & Kendall, 1997). Participants did not receive compensation for their participation. Before departing the meetings, all focus group participants were invited to share a small meal provided by the researchers.

All participants, including one of the researchers, were bilingual. While the focus groups were conducted mostly in English, some Spanish was spoken in all sessions, which lasted about 1 hour 15 minutes. The authors prepared following the methodology described by Krueger and Casey (2000); they introduced themselves, made brief introductory comments about the topic, added transition comments during the conversations, answered questions, and made concluding statements. One of the researchers typed each focus group conversation, while the other conducted the focus group. Each researcher then read the transcriptions to ensure accuracy, while one researcher reviewed and coded the transcriptions using NVivo Version 10.2.1. Data were coded and analyzed for themes, and specific themes and statements were then identified.

Results

The findings highlight three opinion themes—the new wave of immigrants, opinions about the unaccompanied children’s parents, and their opinions about the U.S. government’s immigration policies. All three focus groups elaborated on these themes and provided rich data for analysis.

For the first focus group question, the findings are displayed in Table 3. Two themes were found to describe the consensus of responses.

Table 3: Opinion on whether this is a new wave.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaccompanied Minors is Not a New Problem</td>
<td>“I don’t think it’s new, simply because it’s a border and how many years the U.S. and Mexico have been “battling” over the border? It’s about movement of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
people between two countries; it is natural, it’s not limited in past years. I didn’t know what the border was when growing up."

“Not new but I think the reasons have changed. In Mexico the reasons have changed. More organized crime, violence, murders, kidnapping, spiked. I don’t read the paper, but as far back as I can think those are the reasons. But the reasons are different now—used to be you’re going to have a better future, so cross the border b/c “I know it’s going to be better.” But the reasons today are different they have to leave to survive."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Border Crossers becoming younger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The question is for minors. I don’t know if in the past it was minors. Maybe it's more recent for minors. While probably it's not new, while for minors not recent.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I believe most unaccompanied minors are from C.A. That’s recent, that violence in C.A. is forcing the change. I have a child I’m going to do the best I can to protect him, that’s what you want. The difficult part is that decision “I have to go.” Then, that’s it. That’s a point of no return.”

Most participants agreed that while the current trend is not a new wave, it differs from previous trends. In the past, immigrants were more likely to be young adult males from Mexico, crossing the border to find jobs and send money to their families. Their discussion turned to money transfers (remittances), sending a portion of their wages to their families.
Money transfers boost immigrant families' financial well-being and keep the economies of many towns afloat. The discussion of remittances is important, and financial considerations are very important among immigrants. Not only are they seeking better living conditions for themselves, but they also help those in their countries of origin. It might also shed light on why minors cross without their parents. If parents are already in the U.S., they might be able to afford payments to assist their younger children in crossing the border, despite the risks. Most participants agreed that the proximity of the countries and shared border make possible the seamless movement of people. One participant from Mexico expressed that growing up, she did not know a border was separating Mexico and the U.S., because people crossed from one side to the other daily. Participants expressed that the reason for the new wave is the increase in crime, drug violence, murders, and kidnappings in Mexico and Central America.

Of the 28 participants, 25 became aware through news channels (television, mostly Spanish channels) that children were crossing the border alone, and three heard about it from friends. Twenty knew of adults who had crossed the border; none of the participants personally knew any children who had crossed alone.

The second theme among participants centered on the news they consumed daily. Particularly reports of children who were making the trip alone that were not crossing just one national border, as they cross at least three national borders depending on their Central American country of origin. Participants discussed that the violence in Central America forces families to send their children across the border. One participant stated that parents want what is best for their children, and these parents are making extreme decisions. The groups agreed that no parent should be forced to make this decision.

Table 4 presents responses to the second question Two themes describe parental decisions and the adjectives used to describe the parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental Decision</td>
<td>“I would too, if I see myself in that same situation having my kids in a place they cannot flourish, in a place that they are in danger, at</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
any moment they can die, I would make that decision no matter what. If your kid is going to get out of it, then that’s what you have to do.”

“I think that’s hard. I cannot imagine what that parent is going through. When it’s the parent that has to make that decision, I don’t even begin to imagine what goes in their mind to be pushed to that situation.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjectives used to describe parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“As I said, I would do it too, but I know it is easier to say than do, to me they are “heroes.””</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“These are gutsy parents, I do not even want to think about it, how torn they must be, maybe it’s for the kids benefit, but the separation and the fear of what might happen, anxiety if they don’t make it. This question is difficult, too many thoughts on my brain.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A bittersweet situation, they must think of their child’s future, and they must pray a lot”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-six focus group participants who expressed their opinions had empathy with the parents. They understood it was a difficult decision, but also understood these parents were living in very unusual circumstances.

Participants referred to the stories they heard on television—stories of drug gangs, kidnappings, murders, rapes, and threats to families. Two participants mentioned that the situation in El Salvador is similar to Mexico, where drug gangs are very violent, and murders occur in public places in the middle of the day. One participant described drug gangs as having more powerful weapons than the police. Most participants agreed with the description and added that corruption is high and corrupt police officers are known by residents. Another participant added that the conversation helped him understand why parents allowed their children to cross the border alone. He stated it “seems like it is their only remedy to hopelessness.” The adjectives used to describe parents were gutsy and heroes, dealing with a bittersweet reality.
Participants had no doubts that parents allow children to cross the borders, thinking it is the best they can do for their children, given their situation. One participant expressed that as a group, we might think it was a last resort or extreme solution, but given what happens in many countries, it might be their only solution. A solution they know many others have taken.

The last question addressed federal government strategies and their agreement or disagreement with those strategies.

Table 5: Opinions about what the U.S. government is doing about unaccompanied children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How they get to the U.S.</td>
<td>“I don’t think there is one thing they could do that would fit. This is not a task that can be fixed. It’s something we need to learn how to help each other. If they think they can eliminate all of it, that will never happen, nor can we take everybody in. We have to understand that this is a situation that needs to be on a case by case. It’s not easy. “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“How many people from other countries come legally as tourists or with job; those with papers can return home. But if you are illegal, you are screwed. Many people who have come legally and can’t go back have received help, they have gone through the process of being approved. X amount of years later, they get residency, then citizenship. If you don’t have that step of legal, you can’t do that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Asylum          | There are many parents who left on their own and left their kids back, which complicates it. So, as far as what the government should do about it, I think, a “treaty” like what they have with Cuba as soon as you set foot in USA you get asylum. Why not give that type of policy for others? The problem is everyone and their
brother would try to set foot. What are you going to do?

Table 5 shows the two themes that identified the groups' responses—how immigrants get to the U.S. and asylum seekers. While most focus group participants agree that some must be arrested, they disagree with the strategy of arresting minors. They would like for the government to come up with other solutions, since somebody made the decision and paid to help them cross the border.

The discussion turned to the politics of the border, where national attention is now on unaccompanied minors, but for a long time, the discussion has been about young Mexican males. One group member asked why it is always about one group and the U.S.-Mexico border. Why not the U.S.-Canada border? Why not talk about those who get here on an airplane with a visa and never return to their countries?

The groups did not agree with the federal strategy of arresting border crossers. Instead, it was suggested that some children should be granted asylum based on conditions in their country of origin. The participants understood that not everyone could be granted asylum, but a more humane solution, like DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, known as Dreamers), is needed. Participants agreed these children have rights that should be recognized.

Ten people in the groups disagreed with the majority opinion. They agreed that there are rules and laws, and those must be obeyed. While they did not like to see children arrested, they thought the arrest was because they were not following the rules. The only thing unaccompanied minors and Dreamers have in common is age, but the Dreamers came with their parents as a family unit.

In summary, focus group participants were diverse in gender and national origin. They represented seven Latino immigrant communities living in the U.S. for at least five years. Fifteen participants were female, and 14 were males that ranged in age from 26 to 44. The findings highlight three themes—a wave of younger immigrants, opinions about the unaccompanied children’s parents, and opinions about the U.S. government immigration policies.
Findings underline the interests and knowledge of the participants. Assuming that the mass communication channels provide reliable information, participants were well informed about the issues discussed in the focus groups. It should be noted that, based on the themes, Latino adults have diverse opinions on the topics discussed and explored using three main discussion questions as a script. Generally, the findings showed consensus in the opinions expressed, but the groups’ discussions highlighted topics that need future examination. For example, a lack of consensus was noticeable in the opinions about U.S. federal government immigration policies. There was consensus that the policies ignore historical immigration patterns, criminalize young immigrants, and ignore the conditions that fuel immigration in the first place (e.g., natural disasters, civil wars, corruption, economic downturns, and criminal gangs). However, participants were uncertain about the changes needed to avoid the consequences of current policies.

Discussion and Implications

Since the summer of 2014, U.S. citizens have become aware of a new wave of border crossers, officially labeled unaccompanied alien children, who make the journey alone, without a parent or guardian, and who leave their home countries to find their way to the U.S.

While the Latino origin group makes up 18.7% of the U.S. population, new groups of Latinos (from Central and South America and the Caribbean) are the fastest-growing groups in the U.S. population. At the same time, most of the literature offers broad generalizations about Latinos, and the group has been virtually invisible in national data sets. When present, they are compared with other racial and ethnic groups (Corral, 2023). Few studies rely on the opinions of Latinos alone, and this paper fills this gap. While the opinions of the focus group participants were not homogenous during the discussions, the three focus group participants were critical of the U.S. federal government strategies. In particular, the groups agreed that current immigration practices are not humane (e.g., arrest) and ignore historical regional patterns of migration, particularly because immigrants cross imaginary borders and rely on pathways that have been used for many years, despite the dangers.

The consensus among focus group participants was that minors had crossed the border with their families for many years, but now they are crossing alone, with a stranger (known as ‘coyotes’). Many
participants referred to parents as heroes because it must be difficult to do. The participants understood that parents do not have many other choices. These children come from countries with multiple and complex issues, from natural disasters, civil wars, corruption, economic downturns, and criminal gangs.

These findings have implications for policymakers. Focus group participants agreed that the U.S., other countries, and international organizations should focus on the structural causes of migration and develop sustainable and effective strategies. For example, investing in the region should not be about financial resources for governments; it should also include loan programs for farmers and small business owners, particularly female-owned businesses. Cooperation between countries should also include consulting with the affected communities, as these can identify local needs, which can empower community leaders to tackle problems such as violent gangs.

The findings also have implications for researchers, who should expand their data collection method as the Latino population grows. This should include primary data collection with and about Latino groups. Because Latinos arrived in the U.S. at different times (e.g., generational and intergenerational distinctions), under different sets of immigration statuses (e.g., political refugees), and in different contexts of reception (e.g., favorable versus unfavorable public perceptions), their experiences are unique and provide insightful information. Recent studies have found evidence of gendered, acculturation, national origin, and generational distinctions among Latinos (Bejarano 2014; Branton 2007; Corral 2023; Hickel, Rogerio & Deckman 2022; Ocampo & Ocampo 2020; Pew Research Center 2022).

The study is not without limitations. The type of recruitment and discussion setting selected for the focus groups have been addressed in the literature. The recruitment and location selected have been described as depending too much on the participants' availability, accessibility, and willingness to disclose opinions in public, leading to “volunteer bias” (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The authors did not notice this type of volunteer bias among participants. In addition, while the sample size is acceptable for the analysis, the results are not considered generalizable to the population. Because some participants knew each other, anonymity was not guaranteed, which might have influenced opinions, particularly those against group consensus (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart &
Shamdasani, 2014). Finally, the analysis did not make gendered, national origin, acculturation, or generational distinctions among the participants, as suggested in recent immigration studies (Bejarano 2014; Branton 2007; Corral 2023; Hickel, Rogerio & Deckman 2022; Ocampo & Ocampo 2020; Pew Research Center 2022). However, these studies do not address unaccompanied youth. The focus group's themes provide insight into Latino experiences and opinions about a complex national issue. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the challenges of the immigration debate, particularly opinions about unaccompanied minors.

References


