

More tots, teenagers are crossing border

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NOGALES, Sonora — Salvador's short, skinny legs dangle from a metal chair in a government-run shelter.

He is 4 years old and wears a small Arizona Wildcats sweatshirt from a box of donated clothes. He sucks on a vanilla cookie and stares blankly at the shelter's coordinator, a kind woman running short on patience.

"*Mijo* (My son)," says Calendaria Cruz, leaning in closer, "where's your mama?"

He shakes his head.

Salvador is among a growing number of children and young adolescents caught crossing the Southwestern border. They face the same risks as adults, but their journeys often are compounded by fear and innocence.

The majority of the 85,000 undocumented immigrants under 17 arrested last year were mostly teenagers striking out on their own to find their families or seeking jobs in the United States. But increasingly, U.S. Border Patrol agents are finding children, some too young to tie their shoes, entrusted to strangers, to people smugglers.

Salvador doesn't understand how he ended up in a white-walled migrant youth shelter tucked next to a funeral home on the outskirts of this border town, a staging ground for migrants trying to cross into the United States.

He sips his soda, sucks on his cookie and waits.

Immigration experts say the reason for the increase in children crossing is rooted in a U.S. border policy that has disrupted migration patterns between Mexico and the United States. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. Border Patrol launched a strategy to control the Southwestern border, concentrating agents and technology in popular crossing points, from El Paso to San Diego.

Before the security buildup, undocumented immigrants would work seasonally in the United States and then return home to Mexico or Central America for holidays, funerals or first Communion. They crossed with relative ease, often making the journey without a smuggler.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, undocumented immigrants in the United States found that more towering walls of steel and motion sensors, along with additional border agents, separated them from their children. The cost of returning home had reached more than \$1,000 a head, and smugglers were leading people through increasingly remote areas of the desert.

"It's inconceivable to me that anyone would be willing to knowingly put their child in harm's way," said Paul K. Charlton, U.S. attorney in Phoenix, who is pushing for stiffer penalties for people convicted of child smuggling. "My only guess would be that these people do not truly understand the risk these children are facing."

Some parents don't take the risk and bear the separation so they can send money back

home. For those who do decide to send for their children or pay a smuggler, the wait to be reunited can be years.

Still, those plans don't always work out.

"When they see me, they're going to die of a heart attack," Jonathan Mauricio Cruz Ramirez, 15, said of his parents, who live in New York.

Jonathan was caught by U.S. Border Patrol agents on April 19, but not before he was robbed north of Sonoyta, Mexico, by bandits who took his 1,800 pesos, about \$155, and papers with phone numbers for his aunt in Mexico City and his parents.

He had no money, no way to reach anyone.

The round-faced boy sat on a bunk bed and tapped his foot with nervous energy in the children's shelter on a May afternoon. He cursed to impress the older boys. He told them the best way to ride a train, how to hang on to the top, how to never, ever fall asleep. Three days later, the shelter put him on a bus back to Mexico City, to the aunt who raised him like a son. Even though he was caught the first time, Jonathan said he planned to eventually make it to his family in New York.

"I haven't seen my parents in 14 years," he said. "Fourteen years. All my brothers and sisters, except my oldest brother, they're over there with them. I just want to see them out of pure curiosity. I want to see what happened, why they left me."

Officials on the border who monitor child smuggling say the trend is both brazen and concentrated in Arizona.

The number of children and teenagers has increased slightly since 2000, while overall apprehensions along the Southwestern border dropped more than 43 percent through the end of last year. In 2000, children and teens made up 5 percent of arrests. Last year, that number grew to 9 percent.

Since the start of the federal fiscal year in October, agents have arrested 672,800 undocumented immigrants, including more than 63,700 minors. In all of last year, 85,446 arrests of teens and children were reported.

During the past five years, more than one-third of the undocumented immigrants under 17 caught crossing the border were arrested in Arizona.

On May 10, agents found a 2-year-old girl, delirious in the trunk of a car as the temperature topped 101 degrees outside. A young mother was beaten in March, her baby girl stolen and smuggled into the United States near Douglas. The toddler was missing for more than a day before federal agents on the U.S. side of the border returned her to her mother.

Many teens were counted in last year's casualties. One 16-year-old boy died with a pocketful of candy. A teenage girl who brought a Barbie backpack across the border, was carried out of the desert after she died.

Ignacio Cervantes Pantoja has grown-up dreams but a child's imagination.

On the morning of April 14, during school vacation for Easter week, the gangly 11-year-old left his family's scrap-wood home in San Luis, Sonora, a border town southwest of Yuma.

That afternoon, a social worker came to the house to tell his mother that Ignacio had tried to cross the U.S.-Mexico border again, his third attempt in a month. He was treated at a Mexican clinic for dehydration and then sent home.

"He's stubborn, and he won't listen," Matilde Pantoja said of her son. "He's a child."

The fifth-grader is matter-of-fact when he talks about his future. He has a plan.

He'll leave his family's home and take the dirt road across the street, through the park, and keep going until he reaches the edge of the steel-gate fencing that separates the United States from Mexico. He'll cross the border and find his great-uncle, Alfonso, who lives in Los Angeles.

He'll get a good job, he said, and occasionally he'll return home for visits and bring home presents.

"I'll buy my dad a car," he said. "I'll have a good job, and we'll eat well."

Ignacio's mother listens and cringes. She has eight other children, two still in diapers. Her eldest daughter, Maria Teresa, 15, wears a pink maternity top and flip-flops. The baby is due in two months. The family is trying to get by on Ignacio's father's salary, about \$40-45 a week working two jobs.

Ignacio is struggling in school, but he's smart, she said. He taught himself how to make balloon animals by studying a clown in the town square. Ignacio can make a poodle, a flower or a giraffe to trade tourists for a few pesos. He washes windshields and then gives the money to his mother.

She doesn't know how to stop him from leaving for the United States.

"I told him next time he has to ask permission," she said. "What am I supposed to do?"

Brenda Equihua Olivera, 23, of Buena Vista, Michoacán, arrived at the migrant shelter in a white taxi, crying for her son.

Salvador met her near the driveway, smiling with neat rows of baby teeth.

Equihua explained to Cruz, the shelter's coordinator, that she had turned him over to a female smuggler recommended by a friend more than 17 hours earlier. The woman had promised to take Salvador to Tucson through the Nogales port of entry on the night of April 5, but Equihua waited for a phone call that never came.

The two women, Veronica Guadalupe Leon of Sonora and Maria Jesus Vazquez of Tucson, were arrested at 7 that night on suspicion of smuggling and conspiracy.

"So you didn't know the smuggler?" Cruz pressed, as Equihua sat on the couch with Salvador squirming on her lap. "You should know better than that, to trust him to someone you've never met."

Equihua explained that she and Salvador's father, who works in a restaurant in Los Angeles, thought it would be safer to have the boy cross through the port of entry instead of walking through the desert.

She said she didn't know what to do next.

Salvador interrupted her, tugging on her shirt until she looked at him.

"Mama," he said, louder. "When are we going to see Papa?"