

Dynamics of Violence in Unaccompanied Childhood and Adolescence in Migration Contexts*

[English version]

Dinámicas de violencia en la infancia y la adolescencia
no acompañada en contextos de migración

Dinâmicas de violência na infância e na adolescência
não acompanhada em contextos de migração

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Abstract

Objective: This paper shows the violence faced by unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in Mexico, a matter that influences their recruitment by organized crime. It is based on the question: What circumstances expose unaccompanied minors to be recruited into organized crime? Practices and features of this sector and what makes it a vulnerable group to multiple violence are identified. **Methodology:**

The analysis of national and international documentary sources was used to realize about the violence faced by unaccompanied migrant children; as well as what they experience when they are recruited by criminal groups during their journey. **Results:** The vulnerability of unaccompanied children benefits the incorporation and recruitment into criminal groups, either because of their need for survival, the vulnerability generated by displacement or as an apparent means to achieve a better life. **Conclusions:** It is

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shown that unaccompanied migrant children are victims of multiple types of violence which represents a lot of opportunities for organized crime and the omissions of the State to guarantee the fulfillment of their rights during their transit through the country.

Key words: migration; organized crime; violence, childhood; adolescence (obtained from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

Resumen

Objetivo: el presente artículo muestra la violencia que enfrentan niñas, niños y adolescentes (NNA) migrantes no acompañados en México, aspecto que influye en su reclutamiento por el crimen organizado. Se parte de la pregunta: ¿Cuáles son las situaciones que hacen que NNA no acompañados se vean expuestos a integrarse al crimen organizado? Se identifican prácticas y características que presenta este sector y que lo hacen constituirse en un grupo vulnerable a múltiples violencias. **Metodología:** se recurrió al análisis de fuentes documentales nacionales e internacionales que dieran cuenta de la violencia que enfrentan NNA migrantes no acompañados; así como de la dinámica que experimentan cuando son reclutados por grupos delincuenciales durante su trayecto. **Resultados:** la vulnerabilidad recursiva de NNA no acompañados opera a favor de la incorporación y reclutamiento en grupos delictivos, ya sea por la necesidad de supervivencia, la vulnerabilidad generada por el desplazamiento o como un aparente medio para alcanzar un mejor nivel de vida. **Conclusiones:** se muestra que NNA migrantes no acompañados son víctimas de una multiplicidad de violencias lo que constituye una cadena de oportunidades para el crimen organizado a lo que se suma las omisiones del Estado para garantizar el cumplimiento de sus derechos durante su tránsito por el país.

Palabras clave: migración; crimen organizado; violencia, niñez; adolescencia (obtenidos del Tesoro UNESCO).

Resumo

Objetivo: O presente artigo apresenta a violência enfrentada por meninas, meninos e adolescentes migrantes não acompanhados no México, aspecto que influencia seu recrutamento pelo crime organizado. Parte-se da pergunta: Quais são as situações que fazem com que MNA não acompanhados se vejam expostos a integrar o crime organizado? São identificadas práticas e características apresentadas por esse setor, que o tornam um grupo vulnerável a múltiplas violências. **Metodologia:** Recorreu-se

à análise de fontes documentais nacionais e internacionais que relataram a violência enfrentada por meninas, meninos e adolescentes migrantes não acompanhados, bem como à dinâmica que experienciam quando são recrutados por grupos criminosos durante seu trajeto. **Resultados:** A vulnerabilidade recursiva dos meninas, meninos e adolescentes não acompanhados opera a favor da incorporação e do recrutamento em grupos criminosos, seja por necessidade de sobrevivência, pela vulnerabilidade gerada pelo deslocamento ou como um aparente meio de alcançar um melhor nível de vida. **Conclusões:** Mostra-se que os meninas, meninos e adolescentes migrantes não acompanhados são vítimas de uma multiplicidade de violências, o que constitui uma cadeia de oportunidades para o crime organizado, somada às omissões do Estado para garantir o cumprimento de seus direitos durante seu trânsito pelo país.

Palavras-chave: migração; crime organizado; violência; infância; adolescência (obtidos do Tesouro UNESCO).

Introduction

Nowadays, Mexico faces a security crisis that highlights the rebound in several illegal activities such as trafficking in persons, trafficking in drugs, illegal goods and weapons, armed robbery, money laundering and the increase in criminal activities of organized crime, and expansion of different ways of violence in Mexico. One of the actions that mainly draws attention, and that turns out to be highly worrying, is the recent recruitment of unaccompanied ¹ migrant children and adolescents into organized crime (Vélez et al., 2021).

However, despite these cases are known, as mentioned in the *Recruitment and Use of Children and Adolescents by Criminal Groups Report*, so far there is no in-depth diagnosis of this problem to widely understand the phenomenon and provide an institutional response (Vélez et al., 2021).

Ortega (2022) states that, according to the *Global Report in 2017: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center* (IDMC), the increase in violence caused by organized crime and military actions in the fight against drug trafficking have been the main causes of displacement of thousands of people (National Commission for Human Rights and Humanities Coordination, National Autonomous University of Mexico 2019). The author specifically points that organized crime carries out illegal acts through the threat, subordination and violation of the human rights of migrants and their families, since they can attack and even kill them as a way of forcibly into organized crime, both children and adolescents and adults. Recently, the *Global Report on Internal Displacement*, IDMC (2024), states that displacement in Mexico has increased significantly since it was registered in 2009:

Mexico recorded 11,000 displacements associated with conflict and violence in 2023, 20% more from 2022 but still below the decennial average. Chiapas was the most affected state for clashes between Jalisco New Generation Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel. Historically, both groups have fought for their strongholds in the northern states, but they have expanded their influence throughout Mexico and Guatemala as Chiapas shares a border. The biggest war displacement occurrence in Mexico in 2023 took place in Comalapa, near the Guatemalan border, from May 21 to May 26. About 392,000 people were displaced because the conflict and violence in Mexico². (GRID, 2024, p. 90).

1 *Youth Policy* (2003) states that children are minors up to the age of 11. Adolescents are those minors who are between 12 and 18 years of age.

2 Own translation

Background on the Incorporation and Growth of Children and Adolescents in Organized Crime

Some events of the growth and incorporation of children and adolescents into organized crime can be seen in Valentina Glockner in the state of Guerrero. According to Glockner (2008), the level of marginalization in the region, lack of employment and social inequality have fostered the emergence and growth of drug trafficking and poppy cultivation. The author states that for those years

[...] many of the Mixtec children, boys, mainly, [already knew] are aware of or have already learned about the plantation and harvest of [poppy] the raw material from this flower, or they know the way it is shipped (p. 154).

The author states that some Mixtec families get 500 pesos on average for sowing and collecting raw material for the production of opium and morphine. In this context, many Mixtec children were involved without knowing what planting, caring for the crop and harvesting the poppy meant. Additionally, the author claims that neither they nor their families have real economic options to have a dignified life. Thus, for children and adolescents there were only three paths: planting poppies and/or marijuana, migrating to the United States from a young age or being a day laborer.

In 2015, *Violence, Children and Organized Crime Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights* (IACHR, 2015) warned that:

[...] drug trafficking networks and criminal organizations dedicated to illegal activities in the country use and exploit children and adolescents, such as in intelligence and surveillance actions, production, transfer and sale of drugs, assassination, extortion actions, robberies, kidnappings, and sexual exploitation, among others (p. 70).

It also reports that this situation has led to children and adolescents, especially in poor urban areas and in the context of mobility, to be recruited by organized crime. The research also states that, due to the complexity of the phenomenon, there are no exact and reliable figures on the number of children and adolescents who have been into these criminal groups, and that about half of their members were minors (IACHR, 2015).

IACHR³ (2015) reported that thirty thousand children and adolescents under the age of 18 had been recruited by criminal groups in Mexico. The participation

3 The information presented is derived from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for

of organized groups engaged in criminal activities has become a daily situation in the lives of many people, mainly in children and adolescents, the most vulnerable unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents.

Committee on the Rights of the Child defines unaccompanied or solo migrant children and adolescents as “unaccompanied children” or “unaccompanied minors”. According to this concept, in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, they are those children who are separated from both parents and other relatives, and they are cared or supervised by an adult by law or custom, such care corresponds (CRC, General Comment no. 6, number 3, 2005).

Many of these unaccompanied children may be victims, for example, of extortion by other migrants, Mexican government authorities or some guides or coyotes who carry out the procedures to enter the United States. They also face trafficking in persons, assaults, kidnappings, and several assaults that put their lives at risk. In most migration events, violence by armed groups is observed as a direct cause of migration (Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights —CMDPH—, 2017, p. 12).

In these criminal organizations, children are used and/or abused. Members of these criminal groups consider them “[...] expendable and interchangeable pieces, the last link in the chain, and usually entrust them with activities of greater risk to their personal integrity” (IACHR, 2015, p. 14). This explains why organized crime has hierarchical structures, strict discipline, and many rules of discretion to achieve its criminal goals.

In case of disobedience to the rules and orders of heads of the group, they are punished violently or they can be executed if someone wants to leave the group (IACHR, 2015). In this scenario, the migratory flow becomes an ideal source for the recruitment of people, especially because of the vulnerability of migrants and mainly unaccompanied children and adolescents (Reinserta, 2021).

Migration, Violence and Victimization against Unaccompanied Children and Adolescents

In relation to the rates of violence against children, CRC (2015) states that there is a diversity of illegal activities by organized crime that focuses on children and

Refugees (UNHCR): Children on the Run. Unaccompanied children fleeing Central America and Mexico and the need for international protection. Individual interviews were conducted with 404 unaccompanied or separated children — approximately 100 from each country: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico — who arrived in the United States during or after October 2011.

adolescents; they are the main victims, since they take advantage of their condition of vulnerability. Unfortunately, these criminal organizations are increasingly beginning to build parallel social, political and economic structures, in the face of a weak or failed state (Guerrero, 2021).

It is explained by the ability to establish parallel informal socio-economic systems that replace state institutions. This allows each criminal group to exercise control over its supposed territory and its inhabitants. Members of these groups become leaders in their communities, for example, they participate in donating groceries, provide basic services; even in aspects of community safety or in keeping standards of behavior of the population in contexts of insecurity, poverty and marginalization and, of course, of a weak system of procurement and delivery of justice (Guerrero, 2021; Badillo, 2020).

The unaccompanied and transiting migrant child and adolescent population, as well as those originating from territories where organized crime is active, it becomes as a prolific field to be linked or recruited to criminal gangs (OHCHR, 2022). IACHR (2015) reports that they are recruited in "[...] criminal organizations from 10 or 11 years, or even younger [...] to work for traffickers, either of illegal products (drugs or weapons) or of people (body packers) [...] as to carry out assaults, aggressions and kidnappings" (p. 71).

"Recruitment" is understood as the permanent process of incorporation into organized crime to carry out several illegal activities, as theft, recruitment, threat, intimidation, kidnapping, deception, force use or other ways of coercion, offer of payment or benefits, among others. There are two basic types of recruitment: forced and unforced (Onprenna, 2022).

Some other approaches on the number of children and adolescents who have been recruited by organized crime are those conducted in 2011 by *Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico* (Redim), state that thirty-five thousand children were part of organized criminal groups, five thousand more than IACHR. In 2018, Mexican authorities estimated that there were around 460,000 children and adolescents working in these organized criminal groups. These figures issued by each source highlight the differences between data, also show the absence of monitoring over time (Reinserta, 2021).

On the other hand, *Dangers for Children Index. Indicators for Mexico* (2018), reported by the non-governmental organization *Save the Children*, states that violence threatens children through homicides and displacements by violence, since these build "[...] the maximum expression of violence against children and adolescents" (Save the Children, 2018, p. 7). This Index shows that in the six-year periods (2001-2006) and (2007-2012), the number of deaths of adolescents by homicide between 15 and 19 years old doubled from 871 homicides to 1,743 respectively, throughout the second six-year period. During 2014 to

2015, homicides among those between the ages of 15 and 17 increased by 3.8%. These data are linked to the increase in violence rates in our country as a result of organized crime, and in some violent actions is also by the State itself (Save the Children, 2018).

Mexico does not have official data on the number of child victims of recruitment by criminal groups. This makes more difficult the analysis of this situation because the risks in its measurement and monitoring. However, the lack of precise data to analyze this social problem over time and the need to recognize the importance of the seriousness of the recruitment of children by criminal groups, the National Citizen Observatory and the Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico (2021) proposed a rigorous methodology based on available official information in the report *Recruitment and Use of Children and Adolescents by Criminal Groups*,

The explanatory model of these results is based on Vanessa Bouché (2017) in *An Empirical Analysis of the Intersection of Organized Crime and Human Trafficking in the United States*. In this research, the characteristics of criminal groups and their scope are studied. A typology was generated to analyze human trafficking, the one that is considered for the current research, but is conducted to the analysis of the recruitment and use of children and adolescents. This methodology proposes a "5-S" typology (*size, scope, structure, sophistication and self-identification*), it shows differences and similarities in five criminal groups of human trafficking, and the attributes of each of them. These are the variables for the statistical analysis: number of minor victims (0-17 years old) of intentional homicide, femicide, kidnapping, extortion and trafficking in persons, number of missing and unaccounted for persons (0-17 years old), number of persons (0-17 years old) with injuries by type of violence (physical violence; sexual violence; psychological violence; economic/patrimonial violence and abandonment and/or neglect), number of adolescents in treatment centers (people in jail), number of people in antisocial behaviors (accused adolescents), and number of people involved in antisocial behaviors (adolescent victims of crimes), among other aspects.

As a result, many children and teenagers are vulnerable for being recruited by criminal organizations. In this regard, the following data is reported by federal entity:

Table 1. *Distribution of the Population of Vulnerable Children and Adolescents by State, 2015.*

	Children and Teenagers			Participation in the National Population of Children and Adolescents (%)			Percentage of State Populations of Children and Adolescent
	0-17 years	5 to 17 years	Vulnerable	0-17 years	5 to 17 years	Vulnerable	Vulnerable
Aguascalientes	469,728	344,760	44,293	1.2	1.2	1.1	9.4
Baja California	1,080,357	806,052	112,238	2.8	2.8	2.8	10.4
Baja California Sur	240,054	175,978	18,290	0.6	0.6	0.5	7.6
Campeche	288,796	210,383	27,607	0.8	0.7	0.7	9.6
Coahuila de Zaragoza	981,833	700,480	90,207	2.6	2.5	2.3	9.2
Colima	211,064	157,615	23,867	0.5	0.6	0.6	11.3
Chiapas	2,115,015	1,528,775	301,617	5.5	5.4	7.6	14.3
Chihuahua	1,156,219	858,596	121,558	3.0	3.0	3.1	10.5
Mexico City	2,041,722	1,558,335	178,302	5.3	5.5	4.5	8.7
Durango	619,335	451,086	59,628	1.6	1.6	1.5	9.6
Guanajuato	1,998,454	1,452,883	242,191	5.2	5.1	6.1	12.1
Guerrero	1,240,970	902,380	132,639	3.2	3.2	3.3	10.7
Hidalgo	960,335	721,496	78,762	2.5	2.5	2.0	8.2
Jalisco	2,555,156	1,877,897	309,736	6.7	6.6	7.8	12.1
Mexico	5,017,775	3,737,463	455,218	13.1	13.2	11.4	9.1
Michoacán de Ocampo	1,529,247	1,099,374	196,999	4.0	3.9	5.0	12.9
Morelos	567,180	422,322	60,668	1.5	1.5	1.5	10.7
Nayarit	396,619	294,110	40,237	1.0	1.0	1.0	10.1
Nuevo León	1,653,408	1,200,280	149,085	4.3	4.2	3.7	9.0
Oaxaca	1,364,952	1,003,398	144,834	3.6	3.5	3.6	10.6
Puebla	2,168,581	1,581,460	230,594	5.6	5.6	5.8	10.6
Querétaro	701,691	516,398	71,463	1.8	1.8	1.8	10.2
Quintana Roo	560,611	409,759	56,741	1.5	1.4	1.4	10.1

	Children and Teenagers			Participation in the National Population of Children and Adolescents (%)			Percentage of State Populations of Children and Adolescent
	0-17 years	5 to 17 years	Vulnerable	0-17 years	5 to 17 years	Vulnerable	Vulnerable
San Luis Potosí	880,659	650,730	87,820	2.3	2.3	2.2	10.0
Sinaloa	894,078	658,947	76,880	2.3	2.3	1.9	8.6
Sonora	876,755	656,100	87,964	2.3	2.3	2.2	10.0
Tabasco	771,892	563,107	62,335	2.0	2.0	1.6	8.1
Tamaulipas	1,044,155	770,371	101,934	2.7	2.7	2.6	9.8
Tlaxcala	428,132	315,737	36,921	1.1	1.1	0.9	8.6
Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave	2,389,508	1,787,456	263,944	6.2	6.3	6.6	11.0
Yucatán	670,177	496,413	57,709	1.7	1.8	1.5	8.6
Zacatecas	546,733	393,530	55,133	1.4	1.4	1.4	10.1
	38,421,191	28,303,671	3,977,414	100	100	100	10.4

Source: National Citizen Observatory and Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico (2021). *Recruitment and use of children and adolescents by criminal groups. Data from the 2020 Census Sample, INEGI.*

Table 2. *Distribution of the Population of Vulnerable Children and Adolescents by State, 2015.*

	Children and Adolescents in a Situation of Threat	Participation in the National (%)	Percentage of Children and Adolescents Under Threat Out of the Total Number of Vulnerable
Baja California	15,554	2.0	13.9
Baja California Sur	2,633	0.3	14.4
Campeche	6,254	0.8	22.7
Coahuila de Zaragoza	11,270	1.4	12.5
Colima	4,206	0.5	17.6
Chiapas	64,473	8.1	21.4

	Children and Adolescents in a Situation of Threat	Participation in the National (%)	Percentage of Children and Adolescents Under Threat Out of the Total Number of Vulnerable
Chihuahua	17,246	2.2	14.2
Mexico City	22,396	2.8	12.6
Durango	11,582	1.5	19.4
Guanajuato	58,020	7.3	24.0
Guerrero	27,232	3.4	20.5
Hidalgo	18,639	2.3	23.7
Jalisco	68,196	8.6	22.0
Mexico	76,771	9.7	16.9
Michoacán de Ocampo	51,799	6.5	26.3
Morelos	13,593	1.7	22.4
Nayarit	7,616	1.0	18.9
Nuevo León	24,224	3.1	16.2
Oaxaca	36,244	4.6	25.0
Puebla	62,034	7.8	26.9
Querétaro	14,158	1.8	19.8
Quintana Roo	8,167	1.0	14.4
San Luis Potosí	19,519	2.5	22.2
Sinaloa	13,520	1.7	17.6
Sonora	11,986	1.5	13.6
Tabasco	9,455	1.2	15.2
Tamaulipas	14,468	1.8	14.2
Tlaxcala	8,173	1.0	22.1
Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave	57,245	7.2	21.7
Yucatán	14,291	1.8	24.8
Zacatecas	12,012	1.5	21.8

Source: National Citizen Observatory and Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico (2021). *Recruitment and use of children and adolescents by criminal groups. Data from the 2020 Census Sample, INEGI.*

Table 3. *Distribution of the Population of Vulnerable Children and Adolescents by State, 2015.*

	% of Vulnerable Population				
	Children and Adolescents in a Situation of Threat	Children and Adolescents at Risk (1)	Children and Adolescents at Risk (2)	Children and Adolescents at Risk (1)	Girls, Boys and Adolescents at Risk (2)
Aguascalientes	11,042	3,485	2,014	7.9	4.5
Baja California	15,554	4,908	2,837	4.4	2.5
Baja California Sur	2,633	831	480	4.5	2.6
Campeche	6,254	1,974	1,141	7.1	4.1
Coahuila de Zaragoza	11,270	3,557	2,056	3.9	2.3
Colima	4,206	1,327	767	5.6	3.2
Chiapas	64,473	20,346	11,762	6.7	3.9
Chihuahua	17,246	5,442	3,146	4.5	2.6
Mexico City	22,396	7,068	4,086	4.0	2.3
Durango	11,582	3,655	2,113	6.1	3.5
Guanajuato	58,020	18,310	10,584	7.6	4.4
Guerrero	27,232	8,594	4,968	6.5	3.7
Hidalgo	18,639	5,882	3,400	7.5	4.3
Jalisco	68,196	21,521	12,441	6.9	4.0
Mexico	76,771	24,227	14,005	5.3	3.1
Michoacán de Ocampo	51,799	16,347	9,450	8.3	4.8
Morelos	13,593	4,290	2,480	7.1	4.1

	% of Vulnerable Population				
	Children and Adolescents in a Situation of Threat	Children and Adolescents at Risk (1)	Children and Adolescents at Risk (2)	Children and Adolescents at Risk (1)	Girls, Boys and Adolescents at Risk (2)
Nayarit	7,616	2,403	1,389	6.0	3.5
Nuevo León	24,224	7,645	4,419	5.1	3.0
Oaxaca	36,244	11,438	6,612	7.9	4.6
Puebla	62,034	19,577	11,317	8.5	4.9
Querétaro	14,158	4,468	2,583	6.3	3.6
Quintana Roo	8,167	2,577	1,490	4.5	2.6
San Luis Potosí	19,519	6,160	3,561	7.0	4.1
Sinaloa	13,520	4,267	2,466	5.5	3.2
Sonora	11,986	3,783	2,187	4.3	2.5
Tabasco	9,455	2,984	1,725	4.8	2.8
Tamaulipas	14,468	4,566	2,639	4.5	2.6
Tlaxcala	8,173	2,579	1,491	7.0	4.0
Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave	57,245	18,065	10,443	6.8	4.0
Yucatán	14,291	4,510	2,607	7.8	4.5
Zacatecas	12,012	3,791	2,191	6.9	4.0
	794,018	250,574	144,851	6.3	3.6

Source: National Citizen Observatory and Network for the Rights of Children in Mexico (2021). *Recruitment and use of children and adolescents by criminal groups*. Data from the 2020 Census Sample, INEGI

From the data analysis, the following results highlight the presence of organized crime in the life of children and adolescents:

4 million children and adolescents between of 5 and 17 are in a vulnerable situation of [being] recruited or used by criminal groups [...] it was found that one of five of these children and adolescents (794 thousand) is mainly threatened by not attending school and working simultaneously [...] it was found that between 145 thousand and 250 thousand children and adolescents are at risk of being recruited or used by some criminal group throughout the country (Vélez et al., 2021, p. 94).

Thus, the dynamics of violence in daily life has a negative impact on the lives of children and adolescents, mainly on those who are unaccompanied migrant children, as their development and their own lives are at risk. It has been identified that criminal gangs use children and adolescents to a greater extent to commit crimes due to the absence of sufficiently severe penalties against them, and that the punishments they face do not correspond to the seriousness of their acts (National Law on the Comprehensive Criminal Justice System for Adolescents, 2022).

In addition, violence has intensified and is mainly observed in the number of homicides. In this regard, the population of adolescents and young people have the highest percentages of violence (Onprena, 2022). Men from marginalized groups and in high vulnerability or recursive vulnerability the ones with a greater number of cases reported in children and adolescents' contexts of mobility.

Poverty and Marginalization: Conditions of Childhood and Adolescence in Mexico

In their *paper Attraction or recruitment? Causes that motivate the entry into the gangs of Salvadoran adolescents*, Martínez and Navarro (2018) state that poverty is not the determining factor nor the main cause for unaccompanied migrant children to enter gangs or organized crime groups. However, a pattern of behavior is distinguished in which most members of criminal groups come from marginalization and are disadvantaged by recursive vulnerability.

The emergence and configurations of these groups is more likely in areas of high vulnerability. These criminal groups fill the gap in communities that are abandoned by governments and have few social and economic resources. Unfortunately, they have emerged as major employers of adolescents without educational and employment opportunities. Prieto et al. (2023) mention that together the cartels in Mexico are the fifth largest employer after Femsa, Walmart, Manpower and América Móvil, with 175 thousand employees.

Fuentes and Arellano (2022), in the *Index of Children's Rights*, state that the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (Coneval) estimated, from the 2020 Population and Housing Census of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), that there would be around 126 74 million people in Mexico. Of these, 55.6 million were considered poor and, relatively, represented 43.9% of the national population. They mention that the increase in poverty (Coneval, 2020) affects children more intensely and deeply than other population groups. According to UNICEF, some of the factors that influence this population to migrate are mainly: poverty, violence related to organized crime, lack of educational opportunities and reunification with their family in the destination country (UNICEF, 2023).

To this conflictive context and the high levels of exposure to violence and mobility of migrant children under 12 years of age, increased significantly from 4,985 children in 2020 to 32,309 in 2021 (Save the Children, 2021). According to Forbes (2021), the United States Customs and Border Protection Office in 2021 more than 160,000 adolescent children from Mexico, and from three countries in northern Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), arrived unaccompanied in the United States (Forbes, 2021).

Fuentes and Arellano (2022) state that:

[...] it is the child population that faces the worst conditions of deprivation, but also in greater proportions. Indeed, if 52.6% of children and adolescents in the country in 2020 were considered poor, in the group from zero to five years the incidence was 54.3% (p. 69).

The indicator that is most regularly used to approximate the conditions of violence in a country is intentional homicide. They highlight that, between 2016 and June 2021, INEGI reported that 7,752 children and adolescents between 0 and 17 had lost their lives for injuries caused intentionally. The authors go deeper

[...] in order to carry out an appropriate comparison, the mortality rate for intentional homicide from zero to 17 years was estimated using the population projections of Conapo [National Population Council] for 2016-2020 [...] the national average was 3.6 murders per 100,000 (people) in the age group. To measure what this figure represents, the homicide rate of children under 18 years of age is 2.76 times higher than the average rate of femicides for the same period. According to the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP), is 1.3 victims per 100,000 women. This comparison is relevant because, in absolute numbers, the daily average of femicides is approximately

three victims, while children and adolescents are 3.9 (Fuentes & Arellano, 2022, p. 79).

The high rate of crime against this demographic inside the country is certainly represented by the 3.9 murder rate for children and adolescents. This demonstrates how urgent it is to fight on behalf of this vulnerable group to stop violence against children and the unaccompanied migrant population from joining organized crime. The conditions of inequality, social exclusion and lack of opportunities, and insecurity and daily violence can to some extent favor the phenomenon of recruitment by organized crime in Mexico (CNDH, UNAM and Coordinación de Humanidades, 2019).

In childhood and adolescence in situations of unaccompanied migration, coupled with the violence in several ways, it is also important to consider the condition of victims who have not been provided with the necessary protection according to their age and development, which guarantees the respect and fulfillment of their human rights (Fuentes et al., 2015).

Pérez (2023) states that unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents suffer different violations of their human rights, mainly caused by discrimination and recursive vulnerability they daily face⁴. According to the author, "[...] every act of discrimination implies in itself an act of violence in any of its verbal, physical, psycho-emotional, sexual, social, cultural and political ways" (p. 95), among others. Thus, the author points out that there will always be "[...] effective violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms" (p. 96).

Worsening Conditions of Vulnerability in Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents

The growth and strength of organized crime in recent years has exacerbated the conditions of vulnerability in unaccompanied migrant children. Children suffer violence and abuse in all settings and lack educational alternatives that allow them a better quality of life (Save the Children, 2021).

The lack of opportunities for children and adolescents to develop an autonomous life project is directly related to the structural situations of socioeconomic exclusion and discrimination that Mexico has failed to reverse. They also face obstacles to effectively and completely exercise their human rights. According

4 Discrimination means: select excluding, it means, giving inferior treatment to people or groups, because of their ethnic or national origin, religion, age, gender, opinions, political and sexual preferences, health conditions, disabilities, marital status or other cause (National Human Rights Commission, 2012, pp. 5 [6].

to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2015), violence in childhood and adolescence, migration and the articulation of organized crime, have become the main cause of death in adolescent men in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Mexico is not the exception.

The activities carried out by organized crime are diverse: drug trafficking, but also the theft of raw materials, piracy, car theft or human trafficking (United Nations, 2004, Art. 3). Most people recruited for organized crime are vulnerable and marginalized. This is linked to national and transnational public and private power. These criminal gangs recruit people by force to achieve their goals and generally use children and adolescents because they are easier to persuade and confuse than adults.

Two dimensions are observed on how children and adolescents were mainly recruited: 1) as victims of non-voluntary recruitment, that is, through threats and coercion; and 2) as participants, voluntary or not, in the illegal activities that they are instructed to carry out. The absence of ethical, fair and honest figures and leadership, the gang or criminal groups offer the possibility to find the identity and belonging that the young person, adolescents or children do not find in their family, school or community environment (Ballesteros et al., 2002).

Criminal groups offer the possibility to find protection, companion, relative safety and belonging to a group. In some communities with gangs or criminal groups, joining one of these becomes almost a necessity to survive, mainly in contexts with high levels of violence, marginalization, poverty and social inequality. The gang offers a sense of belonging and access to resources that sometimes do not exist at home or family of origin.

To be a member of a gang becomes a part of identity, social recognition and power through criminal activities. Moreover, sometimes there is no full awareness from children and adolescents of what their participation in these criminal groups mean (Ballesteros et al., 2002).

One of the crimes faced mainly by children and adolescents in a situation of unaccompanied migration is trafficking in persons, as part of the crimes from organized crime. Human trafficking constitutes a way of extreme violence because the victims are stripped of their humanity by being reduced to simple objects of use, change and consumption. This is at the end of a scale of violence that precedes and facilitates it (World Bank, 2023).

Human trafficking is a crime that contributes greatly to the fracturing of communities, since they damage the social fabric, violate and corrupt institutions and generate violence that cause pain, destruction and death to those who suffer from them (World Bank, 2023).

Glockner (2019) clearly presents this situation and mentions that children who travel through the Andean Region, from Central America or from Mexico to

move along the corridor to the United States, experience great challenges, risks and violence: diseases, unsanitary conditions, hunger, various types of violence, abuses of power, accidents, rapes, torture, physical abuse, kidnappings or human trafficking. They are also exposed to crimes such as child prostitution, child sex tourism, child pornography, child labor, murder, disappearance, labor exploitation, begging, servitude, analogous slavery and forced marriage and recruitment of criminal groups, among others (Pérez, 2023).

The routes travelled by migrants, air, sea, land or both- involve facing multiple ways of violence:

[...] perpetrated to a different degree and intensity by the actors operating along this transit zone: to the point that Mexico-USA corridor has become a truly violent preliminary border or "human wall of violence". (Glockner, 2019, p. 53).

Human Rights and Victimization of Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Unaccompanied migrant children in situation of illegality, live a different situation that affect and limit the enjoyment and exercise of their human rights (Pérez, 2023), mainly to the right to a life free of violence and, consequently, their quality of life and integral development. It means the fundamental freedoms and human rights that people must be guaranteed regardless of their immigration status. The right to a life free of violence is mainly distinguished among them, it represents itself in its transit with serious repercussions for its development, security, and of course, its own life. Unfortunately, unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents fall directly into several ways of violence, especially, if they are not with their parents or an adult. Some children and adolescents travel accompanied by their families or alone, which adds one more condition to the vulnerability they experience on a day-to-day basis. According to De la Cruz and Núñez (2018) "[...] in 2015, 170 thousand migrants were detained in the national territory, around 24 thousand were unaccompanied children and adolescents" (p. 2).

As they are children, they are more vulnerable and have less possibility of knowing, recognizing and defending themselves, it makes them almost impossible to demand exercise and enjoyment of their human rights, and the ability to make them justiciable.

According to the *Declaration of Human Rights*, the principle of equality and non-discrimination of any event that jeopardizes the enjoyment and exercise of

their human rights and freedoms implies the condition of equality for children and adolescents, without any distinction based on race, genre, age, language, religion, beliefs, culture, political opinion, economic situation, social, ethnic or national origin, disability, illness, birth or any other condition (CRC, 2013, General Comment No. 14). An aspect closely linked to the need to ensure the best interests of the child, as it is a central aspect in all measures concerning childhood. This in:

their relative immaturity, young children are reliant on responsible authorities to assess and represent their rights and best interests in relation to decisions and actions that affect their well-being, while taking account of their views and evolving capacities (Pérez, 2023, p. 26).

This principle must be applied to all measures affecting children and demands concrete and effective provisions to protect their rights and promote their development, survival, growth and well-being. Parents or other people responsible for fulfillment of the rights of children and adolescents should be assisted (CRC, 2005, General Comment No. 7).

Conclusions

The migration of unaccompanied children and adolescents certainly represents the most dramatic and paradigmatic way of social exclusion and subordination of a highly vulnerable group for the age and the helplessness, its exposures violent local, regional and global power structures of subordination and exclusion. Although there is some progress in legislation to protect human rights at the international level, and in the region of the Americas in favor of the protection of the rights of unaccompanied migrant children, the necessary progress has not been fully achieved to eradicate violence and discrimination still related to age, personal, social, economic, migratory and, in many cases, family conditions or recursive vulnerability.

An aspect that would definitely influence the situation of unaccompanied migrant children and their integration with criminal groups in a positive and preventive sense is to invest in them, it is not only an obligation but a legal, ethical and political necessity. It implies the recognition of their human dignity to provide them with better conditions in their development and in the fight against all ways of violence, and the best ways to prioritize them in the public and political agenda. If not fulfilled, it places this population in a condition of

extreme marginalization. It has to do with a lack of access to justice, and to the fulfillment and protection of their human rights.

The interdependence between human rights demands to promote measures by the State, its actors and members of society so that unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents are guaranteed their human rights and have access to food, clothing, health, education and housing and, above all, that they allow the development of a dignified life, since their lack of access to it affects their physical, psychological, social and emotional development, among other aspects. Children and adolescents must be protected from any behavior, act or omission that endangers their lives or limit them of it.

It is also important to generate data on children and adolescents in a situation of unaccompanied migration that shows the priority of creating new migration policies and public programs from the perspective of children's rights, to protect the fulfillment of their human rights and mainly to guarantee the best interest.

Taking into account this current context and the conditions of vulnerability of this population, it is necessary to deepen and develop research that allows us to know in detail and more specific way the association of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents with organized crime. It is mandatory to document this information with updated data from several statistical, bibliographic and hemerographic sources, to identify the main factors and patterns of behavior by organized crime that influence unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents to end up being recruited. This to provide effective and lasting responses to this problem, and inhibit these types of actions of organized crime that put them at risk.

It is important to study, analyze, monitor and/or create protocols for prevention, care, guidance and repair of harm to provide care for the needs of unaccompanied migrant children. Moreover, it is necessary to deepen the sources of information, and improve the indicators for the measurement and development of statistical databases that allow in-depth knowledge of the subject. To this, institutional actions must be added and reinforced for the protection of migrant children and adolescents and, mainly, for the unaccompanied ones. To generate public policies and effective mechanisms for the comprehensive protection and prevention of violence, and to prevent unaccompanied migrant children from facing several situations that violate their healthy development and put their lives, their best interests, the guarantee and fulfillment of their human rights.

This would not be complete if a solid institutional training campaign is not promoted and carried out to provide care and develop tools to care for children and adolescents who are victims of the recruitment of organized crime groups. Not

to revictimize them, and to prevent risks and develop skills in public personnel to identify and address violence against unaccompanied migrant children.

Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the importance of considering the context, life history, conditions, and circumstances in which these unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents who have already been captured by organized crime live, and who experience the "constellations of power" (Creswell cited by Glockner, 2019, p. 55). In this situation, they suffer abuse and are criminalized, even without their consent to perform illegal behaviors for necessity or when they have been forced, invited, induced or tricked by gangs or organized crime groups.

These institutional measures and those of civil society organizations must seek to guarantee the right to life and survival in this population. The first consists of the right not to be deprived of life, under any circumstances and without being interrupted by any person or external situation. This demands the duty of the State to protect them from actions or omissions of early or provoked death. The right to survival means that children and adolescents in mobility contexts enjoy conditions to access a dignified life and their social rights: health, food, clothing, housing, water and education, among others. In other words, the right to survival as a whole will have to provide children and adolescents with the conditions for their integral development and a life free of violence and without discrimination.

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