

Unaccompanied minors moving to Connecticut in record numbers 952 youths, mostly from Central America, joined sponsors here last year

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For several long hours, Francisco, then 15, sat on the bank of the Rio Grande River in Mexico trying to work up the courage to cross it. On the other side of the river was the United States, and the promise of seeing his mother in Connecticut.

It was September 2018, and Francisco watched as others made the crossing — but he couldn't bring himself to join them. The year before, he watched helplessly as his older brother drowned, pulled under by the current in another river in their home country of Guatemala. "I got scared of rivers," Francisco said through an interpreter on a recent afternoon in Stamford.

He noticed a railroad bridge off in the distance that spanned the river. It would be a long walk in the hot sun, but it was the only option he saw for himself. He took off, hoping that the tracks would offer a safe route.

Francisco — not his real name — is one of 952 unaccompanied minors who were picked up by federal authorities during the fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30, 2019 and released in Connecticut to relatives, friends or other sponsors, according to federal data. That's almost triple the previous year, when there were 332, and more than quadruple the number in 2015, when 206 unaccompanied children came to the state.

The percentage increase in the arrival of unaccompanied minors in Connecticut is higher than the national average, which almost doubled in the past two years. Much of that increase in Connecticut and nationally is attributable to kids like Francisco, who are fleeing violence, poverty and other problems in Central American countries such as Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.



Patricia Marealle, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy center, works with a youth who came to the U.S on his own from Central America. At right is Blanca Bermeo, a paralegal for the Center. The youth did not want to be identified because he is in the midst of seeking legal immigration status.

"They are escaping a lot of violence and horrible experiences, whether gang-related or family issues. It's usually a very scary, life-threatening situation," said Patricia Marealle, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, which has helped more than 200 of these children navigate the immigration process. **"They come here for protection and then they are stuck in this legal system that is not very friendly."**

Marealle asked the CT Mirror not to use either Francisco's real name or his mother's because they are undocumented. The mother and son have separate court cases underway and do not want to anger immigration authorities.

Federal immigration officials did allow Francisco to join his mother, who is called Camila in this story, despite her illegal status. Marealle said this is not unusual, particularly because the mother has not been ordered to leave and may be able to remain in the U.S. for years to come.

The Center for Children's Advocacy works on getting the children a "Special Immigrant Juvenile Status" visa, which is

a pathway to citizenship, Marealle said. She said it would likely take a child from Guatemala about five years to get the visa, and probably another five to seven years to obtain citizenship.

To get that status, a youth must prove all of the following conditions: that he or she has been abandoned, abused or neglected by at least one parent; that he or she is under the age of 21 and unmarried; and that it is not in the child's best interest to be returned to his or her home country.

Marealle said that at any one time the Center has a caseload of 20 to 22 youths in this situation, with a waiting list as long as 25 or 30 more waiting for help. The Center has also trained about 40 lawyers to do the work on a pro bono basis.

She said that usually the youths she works with are from a single-parent household, and that parent has come to the U.S. to get a better job and send money home. A child's decision to leave home, she said, is often triggered by the death or illness of the relative caring for them, or by fear about gang activity. The U.S.-based relative is often shocked to hear that the child has crossed the Southern border and is being held there in a detention center or shelter by immigration authorities.

"Parents break down and cry," Marealle said. Many of the children, mostly teenagers and some younger siblings, have little to eat along their journey north and walk thousands of miles, crossing rivers and hiking through the desert in the middle of the night. The children are often beaten, robbed or raped along the way, she said, and about half of the young clients she is working with reported being assaulted on their trip.

"Most of the kids are coming here with some kind of trauma exposure, whether it's in their country of origin, or they are experiencing trauma in their journey here," said Gail Melanson, executive director of the Child Guidance Center of Mid-Fairfield County. "There's been reports of many teenagers who have been raped. Some have been raped and are pregnant as a result of that."

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Patricia Marealle, Center for Children's Advocacy

Often, the children are picked up by immigration at the border and detained while authorities work to locate family or friends in the United States.

Supply and demand

Several Fairfield County cities have seen a particular influx of unaccompanied minors, including Norwalk, Stamford and Danbury. More than half of Connecticut's unauthorized or undocumented immigrant population live in Fairfield County – about 51,000 people, according to Migration Policy Institute data.

Catalina Horak, executive director of Building One Community in Stamford, an immigrant services agency, said the undocumented population in Fairfield County is probably high because of the greater number of service industry jobs in the wealthy county. Horak speculates that there are simply more restaurant jobs, delivery jobs, and other service jobs available in Fairfield County, "where immigration status is not checked, where the demand is higher than the supply. You don't have enough U.S.-born [workers] willing to do these things for the salary they are willing to pay them. This is a supply-and-demand issue."

In Norwalk, there are about 160 children enrolled in the public schools who entered the U.S. as unaccompanied minors and are now living with a parent, another relative or sponsor, school officials said.

Melanson said that her agency began to get calls from the Norwalk public schools about four years ago, when teachers started to report these students had difficulty focusing and were sharing troubling stories. Since then, the guidance center has started therapeutic groups for the students at Norwalk's high schools and in the elementary schools, as well as offering individual therapy at the center.

"I think by providing these services," Melanson said, "it frees up teachers and social workers to focus on learning and the work they are suppose to be doing ... I think from a mental health perspective, the sooner you can get them help, it increases their chances to lead healthy, productive lives."

Norwalk officials say the need will only become more pressing. Lamond Daniels, the chief of community services, said that he expects an upswing in arrivals when Central American children are out of school for their summer break.

By February, Melanson said the center hopes to have two teams – each with a clinician and a care coordinator – in place to provide therapy to students and help to immigrant families with children in the public schools in Norwalk.

Helene Becker, director of English Language Learners educational program in the Norwalk public schools, said the district also started a special academic program for these students in the last few years, as many of them needed extra help in math, science and of course English to get up to speed in their classes. Many had missed school for a period of time in their home country due to violence or other issues there or while they were traveling north.

Safe in Stamford

Francisco's story is like others shared by young immigrants. In a recent interview conducted through an interpreter, his mother said that Francisco's father left her when she was four months pregnant.

"I was by myself and I didn't have any way to support him" said Camila. "So when [Francisco] was four years old, I decided to come to the United States so I could work and give [her sons] a better life." She left Francisco with her mother in a small town called Puerto Barrios. But seven years later, the grandmother's diabetes worsened and one of her legs had to be amputated, leaving her unable to take care of him. So he went to live with an aunt who lived five hours away in Guatemala City.

"It was scary for me, moving to the city," Francisco said. Soon, he said, older kids in a gang started picking on him during his 45-minute walk to school, trying to bully him into joining. "They would stop me and ask for my money for lunch," said Francisco. "If I don't give them the money, they said they will hurt my family."

Often, he said, he'd give up his money and suffer through a day without lunch. But once he told them no and they hit him. Another time, Francisco said, they beat him up. "They broke my nose, my lip," he said. He and his sister went to the police but were told that it was "difficult to catch these people."

He said he reached a point when he simply wanted to leave Guatemala to be with his mom. He didn't tell anyone, including his aunt, because he knew she would not want him to risk the dangerous journey. But Francisco was convinced it would be safer for him away from the gangs, in Connecticut with his mother. "I was looking for my own safety," he said.

He sneaked out of the house one afternoon with only his school backpack, packed with a couple of pairs of pants. He had saved some money for bus fare. He wasn't sure how to get to the U.S. border, but he asked people as he went. Along the way, he took a boat, many buses and walked for miles. The journey took him about 30 days, during which he often went hungry for long stretches and slept in the streets using his backpack for a pillow.

"I was really scared. I was afraid that anything could happen to me because I was living in the streets. I saved my money to take buses instead of getting a place to sleep," he said. "Thank God all the buses I took were the right buses."

Meanwhile his aunt and mother worried. "We knew he had some issues because his older brother had died in front of him in a river," Camila said. "So he lost a brother, then he lost a grandmother, then these people were harassing him. We knew that he wasn't in a good frame of mind."

"I was really desperate," she added. "I couldn't lose another kid." After deciding that crossing the river was not an option, Francisco walked to the railroad bridge and made his way across. Once in El Paso, he ran until he got to a gas station and stopped to drink some water from a tap. As he did so, he saw two men in orange shirts drive up in a truck and he figured they were immigration officials or police. He took off running, ignoring their shouts to stop.

The men, who worked for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, used a tool they knew would stop him: a taser. Francisco said he fell and couldn't get up because he was in a lot of pain, especially in his joints. "They were laughing at me because I couldn't get up," he said.

The men picked him up, put him in their truck, and drove him to a detention center where he was questioned, Francisco said. They gave him chicken nuggets and rice to eat and called his mother. "I was really happy to know that he was safe," Camila said. "I left him when he was four years old, and I hadn't seen him in over 10 years."

Francisco remembers the detention center as being filled with children of different ages and somewhat chaotic. He remembers sleeping wrapped in a foil blanket on a bench. Soon, however, he was transferred to a shelter in Houston, Texas, where conditions were much better. The children were all around his age; he had a blanket and a bed and, he said, the food was good.

He stayed at the shelter for 45 days, said Marealle. His mother said the delay was largely because the authorities were checking to make sure that she was in a position to take care of him. Finally, his mother was given permission to send Francisco a plane ticket to Connecticut.

Francisco, now 16 and a sophomore in a Stamford high school, has filed for Special Immigration Juvenile Status and is waiting for the multi-step process to move forward. He said he feels much safer in the U.S. and hopes to be able to remain here with his mother.

He is learning English and has developed a new favorite activity that wasn't available in his tropical home: ice hockey.