

Original Paper

The Migratory Journey of Unaccompanied Children

Joseph O. Prewitt Diaz^{1*}

¹ Center for Psychosocial Solutions, Alexandria, VA, USA

* Joseph O. Prewitt Diaz, Center for Psychosocial Solutions, Alexandria, VA, USA

Received: April 7, 2021

Accepted: April 20, 2021

Online Published: May 6, 2021

doi:10.22158/jpbr.v3n2p21

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jpbr.v3n2p21>

Abstract

This article provides a brief discussion on the psychosocial needs of unaccompanied minors crossing the southern border of the United States. It highlights various aspects of migration, and the resulting emotional and psychological impact on unaccompanied minors; it subsequently proposes a resilience approach, in terms of protective behaviors towards increased adjustment and success in a new environment.

Keywords

unaccompanied children, psychological impact, risk, protective factors

Introduction

Recently, through both radio and television, we have come to better understand how a great many children and adolescents are attempting to cross the border. As expected, there was immediate outrage from the pundits about their inhumane treatment in detainment holding areas. The vacuum in its wake left many unanswered questions about this population shift, especially for the psychological well-being of the affected minors, and how we might enhance their protective factors—so they have a viable chance to become more resilient in this country.

The migration stage from one's home country to the border has at least four stages: (1) premigration trauma, characterized by events prior to the migration, serving as the main determinant for relocation; (2) traumatic events during transit; (3) traumatic events while crossing the border and being transferred to a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) facility; and (4) substandard living conditions due to language and cultural diversity, inadequate support, and minority persecution (Perez, 2001). During the migratory process, minors are at risk of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (NeMoyer, Rodrigues, & Alvarez, 2019a).

This article highlights various aspects of migration, and the resulting emotional and psychological impact on unaccompanied minors; it subsequently proposes a resilience approach, in terms of

protective behaviors towards increased adjustment and success in a new environment.

Loss as a Consequence of Movement

These times are replete with turmoil: political, economic, cultural, and environmental chaos, as well as the impact of external events, such as climatic events and the COVID-19 pandemic. A move from one location to another sabotages their mental map, based on their history and environment, forcing migrants to change the old map and reconstruct a new one—based on some new opportunities, along with rigid reprogramming. As they continue to be dislocated and relocated, they will mount an ongoing search for more happiness and an attempt to “fit in”. This may be defined as “a byproduct of being in the right relationship with our souls at any given time” (Hollis, 2020a).

“A 13-year-old Guatemalan boy was taken by his parents to Retalhuleu at the border between Guatemala and Mexico. His father told him to follow the path up north. In the morning, the sun will be on your left, and in the afternoon on your right. When it is going down, find a safe place to spend the night. Don’t stop until you get to the border” (Interview, 2021).

A month later, the above child began to reshape his emotional map in a new place. He talks less about what was left behind and follows what is being taught: learning a new language, new rules, new geography, and a new rhythm....Hollis suggests that “in every passage, something is exhausted, something is lost and irretrievable, but something to replace it is not yet apparent” (Hollis, 2020b).

This passage for unaccompanied children implies that something will be lost cognitively, psychologically, and spiritually. Their daily geography, their language, their past plans to grow up in a special neighborhood, with the wisdom of their elders and their belief systems. This will always tend to erode their well-known protective factors. It will take years to recreate a new world, facilitative tools for everyday living, and protective factors to manage their new existence.

These children have experienced physical and emotional abuse, poverty, as well as exposure to extreme violence. In particular, there were increased rates of violence and homicide in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (American Immigration Council, 2015). Children would rather flee to avoid recruitment into gangs, or exploitation by human smugglers (UNHCR, 2014). Separation from their parents will likely result in significant distress, manifesting as depressive symptoms and other emotional and behavioral problems (NeMoyer, Rodriquez, & Alvarez, 2019b).

The Cost of Replacing What Was Left behind

This migratory move comes at a great cost. With every step, replacement of family, community, customs, and culture loom large. These losses are replaced by a mechanistic and politicized world, in which they are all alone. The protective factors “from back there are lost”, now that they are here. As children move to a new environments in the United States, they encounter additional risks and negative

outcomes, such as discrimination, poverty, acculturation difficulties, and stigmatization from peers and school personnel, within an already highly racist society (NeMoyer, Rodriquez, & Alvarez, 2019c).

Psychosocial needs arise with language and cultural patrimony, as children perceive being part of a more modern world. At some point, though, the loss of connection that had nourished their souls will result in self-doubt, anger, or a sense of betrayal (my parents pushed me away), along with self-medication and related behavior. “Sensation piles on sensation, creating a culture of violence in proportion to the experience of the violence to our souls” (Hollis, 2020b).

The majority of minors will be forced to deal with racial trauma and stress, as they reinvent their futures; this trauma is defined as generating “the physical and psychological symptoms that people of color and cultural or linguistic diversity are continuously exposed to insidious chronic stress” (Wise Rowe, 2020a). Usually, stress reactions lead to ‘fight or flight’ behavior, such that those at the border are in heightened physical and psychological alert mode. “If the risk or traumatic stress is not managed, our brains and bodies cannot fully stand, and we find ourselves in an endless loop. This triggers a physical and emotional response that can only feed our stress”.

Acculturative stress reflects the attempt to integrate into a new culture, while maintaining one’s origin and identity, given the attitudes of the migrants and host groups (Hameed, Sadiq, & Din, 2008). This exemplifies deep loss while adjusting or integrating into a new system of beliefs, routines, and social roles. Other facets of the migrant experience are seen as discriminatory and undermining to their cultural values, which is not limited to the first generation. Regardless of theoretical perspective, social networks and familism are buffers that can help moderate stress, but are still viewed as major stressors in their absence (Caplan, 2007).

Forcibly removing children from their parents’ protection is one of the most profound traumas a child can experience; it damages the pivotal foundation of self-regulation and resilience. Similarly, having children removed without consent, not knowing where they are, and not being able to contact them is many parents’ worst nightmare. Traumatic events become betrayals of trust, and can shatter minors’ notions of safety and security (Kolk, 2014).

An Approach to Facilitate Adjustment When Relocated

With the natural coping process that unfolds, the interventions for needy migrant children can often erode their typical protective mechanisms; they must become vigilant to even minimally adapt, despite a modicum of optimism. Societally protective factors include family adaptability and cohesion, social support, community integration, safety and security, a sense of belonging, and connectedness in school—which are lacking (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012).

Adjustment interventions for unaccompanied minors should be based on the principle of systemic resiliency, and an assumption that (1) resilience is a process; (2) it promotes connectivity; (3) it consists of experimentation and learning; and (4) it includes diversity and participation (Ungar, 2018). In addition

to psychosocial support programs within the community, children must have the opportunity to write about their experiences, read them aloud, and reenact the, either through acting exercises or through openly expressive community groups.

Recent reports (Tello, Castellon, Aguilar, & Sawyer, 2017) suggest that the primary theme of children's narratives include (1) faith—the belief that no matter how difficult things become, God will provide support and shine on the path forward; (2) worries about an uncertain future—feeling alone in the Detention Center; (3) help from others—feeling assisted by “cultural consultants” who instill feelings that they will be successful and help other migrant children with the same issues; and (4) their own self-perception after the migration journey—that is, how so many children over time, will ultimately identify themselves as victorious.

References

- American Immigration Council. (2015). *A guide to children arriving at the border: Laws, policies, and responses* (p. 2). Washington, D.C.
- Caplan, S. (2007). Latinos, Acculturation, and Acculturative Stress: A Dimensional Concept Analysis. *Policy Politics Nursing Practice*, 8, 93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527154407301751>
- Fazel, M., Reed, R. V., Panter-Brick, C., & Stein, A. (2012). Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high income countries: Risk and Protective factors. *The Lancet*, 379(9812), 266-282. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(11\)60051-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60051-2)
- Hameed, S., Sadiq, A., & Din, A. U. (2008). The Increased Vulnerability of Refugee Population to Mental Health Disorders. *Kansas Journal of Medicine*, 11(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.17161/kjm.v11i1.8680>
- Hollis, J. (2020a). Living between worlds: Finding personal resilience in changing times. *Sounds True*. Boulder, CO.
- Hollis, J. (2020b). p. 3.
- NeMoyer, A., Rodriguez, T., & Alvarez, K. (2019a). Psychological practice with unaccompanied immigrant minors: Clinical and legal considerations. *Transatlantic Issues Psychological Sciences*, 5(1), 4-16. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000175>
- NeMoyer, A., Rodriguez, T., & Alvarez, K. (2019b). p. 3.
- NeMoyer, A., Rodriguez, T., & Alvarez, K. (2019c). p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000175>
- Perez Foster, R. M (2001). When Immigration is trauma: Guidelines for the individual and family clinician. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(2), 153-170. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.71.2.153>
- Personal Interview. (2021). *Subject 12, 17 Feb*. Alexandria, VA.

- Tello, A. M., Castellon, N. E., Aguilar, A., & Sawyer, C. B. (2017). Unaccompanied refugee minors from Central America: Understanding their journey and implication for counselors. *The Professional Counselor*, 7(4), 360-374.
- UNHCR. (2014). *Children on the run: Unaccompanied children leaving Central America and Mexico and the need for international protection*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/56fc266f4.html>
- Ungar, M. (2018). Systemic resilience: Principles and process for a science of change in contexts of adversity. *Ecology and Society*, 23(4), 34. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10385-230434>
- Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma*. New York: Viking.
- Wise Rowe, S. (2020a). Healing Racial trauma: The road to resilience. *InterVarsity Press*. Downers Grove, Illinois. p. 10.
- Wise Rowe, S. (2020b). p. 10.