

## UCL Migration Research Unit

This paper may be downloaded for personal research purposes. However any additional reproduction for other purposes, in hard copy or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), the title, the working paper series, the year and the UCL Migration Research Unit as publisher.

This paper was originally submitted as a dissertation in completion of the requirements for the degree Masters in Global Migration. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of UCL's Migration Research Unit.

© 2020 Ricardo Muniz Trejo

UCL Migration Research Unit  
UCL Department of Geography  
University College London  
26 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AP

[www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/mru](http://www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/mru)

## UCL Migration Research Unit Working Papers

No. 2020/2

### Redefining best interests: Understanding the needs of unaccompanied teenage migrants through the lens of non-governmental shelters in Northeastern Mexico

Ricardo Muniz Trejo



Migration Research Unit



**Redefining best interests: Understanding the needs of unaccompanied teenage migrants through the lens of non-governmental shelters in Northeastern Mexico.**

**Ricardo Muniz Trejo**

**Supervisor: Elaine Chase**

**Candidate Number: FBVR5**

**Word Count: 10,743**

**This research dissertation is submitted for the MSc in Global Migration at University College London, 2020.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to start thanking all the friends, colleagues and professors who were by my side during this process. Thanks for your company in the good and the bad moments of the long and stressful quarantine times in which this dissertation began. Also, I would like to thank my supervisor, Elaine Chase, for her unconditional support, advice and patience throughout this time. Gracias Elaine por impulsarme a investigar más, a ignorar menos y sobre todo, a tener confianza en lo que hago.

Thanks to my family for their incredible words of support to achieve this dissertation and for playing a key role in helping me to fulfill the dream of studying this Master's degree. Mira ma', sí se pudo. Above all, thanks to the people who with their testimonies made this dissertation possible, thank you for speaking about the reality of our migratory times in Mexico; sometimes sad, terrible and miserable, but also brilliant, happy and fascinating. Gracias por ser como dijese el poeta Carlos Pellicer, de esos que cantan en la oscuridad porque es la única forma de iluminarla. Muchas gracias.

## **ABSTRACT**

The context of harsh migratory controls and extreme violence in Mexico has had multiple impacts on the lives of unaccompanied minors transiting the country. Even though there have been governmental efforts to engage with and meet the needs of this population, it is still necessary to generate policies that can adapt to local contexts and reconcile the differences that exist within them, taking into account their opinions and perspectives. Focusing on the work of frontline volunteers and staff members from non-governmental shelters in Northeastern Mexico, this dissertation delves into the concept of ‘best interests’ by exploring how these institutions operationalize it in practice and make sense of the needs of a specific group of minors: unaccompanied teenagers. This document begins by exploring the concept of best interests through development, anthropological, feminist, legal and sociological perspectives, to later analyze how it is operationalized by shelters following institutional ideas related to the conceptualizations shelters make about teenagers and their needs, the services they offer and the limitations faced in providing them. Finally, it concludes by reflecting on how the direct experiences and perspectives of non-governmental shelters can be useful in providing bottom up insights that can help operationalize the concept of best interests and inform policy related to unaccompanied minors both in Mexico and globally.

## INDEX

<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 UNACCOMPANIED MINORS: THE HOMOGENEOUS CATEGORIZATION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2 BEST INTERESTS: PROTECTING THE LIVES OF ‘VULNERABLE UNACCOMPANIED MINORS’.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.4 CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>Sampling.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Data collection.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<b>3.3 POSITIONALITY .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4.1 REDEFINING THE BEST INTERESTS OF UNACCOMPANIED TEENAGERS .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>4.1.1 Shelter workers’ understandings of migrant teenagers.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>4.1.2 Conceptualizing best interests.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>4.1.3 Services offered.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<b>4.2 THE LIMITATIONS OF SHELTERS.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>4.2.1 Internal limitations.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>4.2.2 Limitations associated to external factors.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>31</b>

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the migratory context in Mexico for people transiting the country has been characterized by the increase of border securitization, largely as a result of the implementation of bilateral agreements between Mexico and the United States (Leutert 2018). First, the creation of the Southern Border Program (Programa Frontera Sur) launched in 2014 by president Enrique Peña Nieto, had as a consequence the externalization of the United States southern border into Mexico through harsh migratory controls (Olayo-Méndez 2017, Wilson and Valenzuela 2014). Moreover, the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or ‘Remain in Mexico’ program in 2019, has caused the deterrent of surging flows of undocumented migrants mostly coming from Central America that seek to cross the border or ask for asylum in the United States (Chisti and Bolter 2019).

This new era of border controls in Mexico has made the journey for undocumented migrants transiting the country even harder, as it has severely increased detentions and human rights violations. The spread of security checkpoints along the country has made them subjects of abuses from authorities and dubious screening processes that reduce their chances of arriving to destination points or asking for refuge (Treviño Rangel 2020, UNHCR 2014). As a consequence, transit migrants have been pushed to take alternative routes considered as extremely dangerous, making them easy prey for crimes such as kidnapping, extortion, disappearances or murders both from authorities and the organized crime networks that abound in Mexico (Ramírez 2020, París Pombo 2016). For unaccompanied children and young people, these risks and abuses are often catalyzed by the multiple social characteristics that have defined this group such as their age, gender, ethnicity country of origin or the reasons for which they have left their countries (UNHCR 2014).

In response to the current situation, the Mexican government has adopted a discourse that focuses on protecting and guaranteeing migrant minors’ rights according to a principle often seen on international instruments related to children’s rights, the best interests of the child (SEGOB 2019). For this, legal procedures have been established based on this and other principles outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) such as the principles of non-detention, non-refoulment and family reunification (SEGOB 2019, Diario Oficial de la Federación 2011). These actions have focused on protecting migrant children’s wellbeing, knowing their migratory context,

assessing their best interests according to their needs and determining whether they can be subjects of international protection.

Although in theory, there are procedures to follow to guarantee all these principles, the practice indicates that these are not always adequate or adopted. Various international organizations have evidenced the lack of decent facilities and attention to unaccompanied children's needs associated to aspects such as their age, gender, or country of origin; as well as a system that does not favor their access to humanitarian recognition and puts them in detention (CNDH 2018, Human Rights Watch 2016). As an example, the return of unaccompanied migrant minors to their countries of origin increased considerably from 9,116 in 2018 to 11,995 in 2019 (SEGOB 2018, SEGOB 2019).

The discrepancy between theory and practice by the Mexican government, has made the role of non-governmental shelters as aid and protection providers significantly important for this group, as they have functioned as an alternative to young people falling into the hands of governmental authorities while providing important services for minors' needs (Doering-White 2018, Zamora 2015, Aikin and Anaya 2013, Cardiel 2011, Silva 2020).

The history of these organizations has its roots in a civil society initiative – normally from religious organizations – to satisfy the demand generated by the increasing number of migrants arriving and transiting the country, and the lack of adequate governmental responses to this new phenomenon (Zamora 2015). These organizations, are focused in providing humanitarian assistance and legal protection, but also in questioning, denouncing and investigating through reports and the documentation of cases, inadequate governmental policies and programs, as well as the inability of the state to protect migrants in practice (REDODEM 2019, Akin and Anaya 2013).

Although it has been documented that the work of non-governmental shelters has supplanted much of the duty of the Mexican state to protect and assist undocumented migrants (Moreno et al. 2011, Zamora 2015), it is necessary to delve into the role they have played in the trajectory of the various subgroups that make up this population, such as unaccompanied teenagers.

With this in mind, this dissertation seeks to understand how non-governmental migrant shelters conceptualize the best interests of unaccompanied teenagers in Northeastern, Mexico. This region is special not only because it is the closest crossing point for many migrants to the United States (Anguiano and Peña 2007), but also because it is an area with ample job opportunities due

to its industrialization level which has made it an important destination point both from internal and international migrants. Nonetheless, it is also known for being one of the most dangerous regions in the country. To reach here, migrants usually have to take the so-called Gulf route, a transit route highly controlled by organized crime networks, in which being physically assaulted, raped, kidnapped or murdered is common (López Recinos 2013). When these factors are combined with a teenage population characterized for having different goals, responsibilities and for being at a stage of physiological and emotional development (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008), they can have a significant impact not only on their experiences but also on how non-governmental shelters understand and respond to their needs.

This research has a dual purpose. First, it seeks to analyze through the concept of best interests the understandings that non-governmental organizations in Mexico have about the needs of unaccompanied teenage migrants. In this regard, it is important to notice that for the purpose of this research the concept of unaccompanied teenager will not be defined, as this study remains open to understand how this group is perceived and understood by research participants. Finally, this study seeks to use this perspective to underline the importance of getting a bottom-up vision that can help us enhance our understanding of the different subgroups that make up the general category of unaccompanied migrant minors. To achieve the purpose of this research, the following research questions were followed:

- How do non-governmental migrant shelters understand the best interests of unaccompanied teenagers in Northeast Mexico?
  - In which ways have they conceptualized this group?
- What are the everyday practices adopted by non-governmental shelters towards meeting their best interests?
  - What are the limitations in these practices?
- What can this case study contribute to the broader academic discussion on the best interests of unaccompanied migrant minors?

This dissertation begins with a literature review in which the concept of unaccompanied minors and best interests will be addressed. Subsequently, the methodology for this research is discussed focusing on how the literature review was conducted, the use of semi-structured

interviews as a way of gaining empirical evidence, as well as the ethical considerations, positionality of the researcher, and the limitations of this study. In Chapter 4, the empirical results are presented, these explore the way non-governmental shelters in Mexico have understood unaccompanied teenage migrants and their best interests, as well as how they have operationalized this framework and its perceived limitations. Finally, conclusions are drawn highlighting the need to initiate a discussion regarding the differences that exist within unaccompanied migrant minors and what constitutes their ‘best interests’, as well as the importance of looking to actors such as non-governmental shelters to better understand these nuances.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of best interests has been rarely conceptualized in studies and policies related to unaccompanied migrant minors. The complexity of its conceptualization has its roots in the so-far unexplored heterogeneity of this group and in the multiple scenarios that encompass their migratory trajectories (Acuña 2016, Otto 2019). To make the grounds for this dissertation, this chapter draws on the body of academic literature that focuses on the concepts of unaccompanied minors and their best interests.

### **2.1 Unaccompanied minors: the homogeneous categorization**

The way academic literature and legal instruments have defined unaccompanied minors is usually as a group made up of people aged less than 18 years, who travel without family members, legal guardians or any known parent substitutes, that can take responsibility for their social and economic wellbeing (Heidbrink 2013, Zamora 2015, Menjívar and Perreira 2019). This preliminary understanding has resulted in a recent academic effort to keep exploring aspects related to the experience of those who belong to this group in the multiple scenarios and stages of their migratory trajectories. Thus, there has been research focused on understanding the reasons for which they migrate, their agency, the physical and psychological consequences that their journeys entail, the asylum processes they have to endure or the way they integrate into destination communities (Rodríguez et al. 2019, Menjívar and Pereira 2019, Berger Cardoso et al. 2019, Acuña 2016, Mendoza and Salgado 2018).

Although this recent academic effort has generated plenty of valuable insights, it is also important to recognize that much of the work related to this group ascribes to it a homogeneous character that sometimes forgets to acknowledge and reconcile the differences that others have found within migrant minor's flows, in terms of the set of social and political characteristics inherent to them such as their gender, age, race, ethnicity or culture (Acuña 2016, De Berry and Boyden 2008, Kenny and Loughry 2018). Despite this, there are some scholars that have started making efforts to move beyond the adult/minor categorization customarily used to distinguish them from other migrant groups and start exploring the differences within them (Allsopp and Chase 2019, Thompson et al. 2019). Roth and Hartnett (2018) for example, have delved into the push factors that force unaccompanied Salvadorian youth to leave the country, and how

community-based programs that focus on their development can help them improve and move away from the context of violence and poverty that forces them to migrate. Likewise, Meloni (2020) has researched the evolving migration experiences in terms of aspirations and responsibilities, that young Afghan migrants experience once they arrive to the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Chase et al. (2019) have reflected on the challenges and insights gained through their experience working with unaccompanied young people as they transition into adulthood, and have highlighted the importance of developing innovative methodologies to understand this group better.

Notwithstanding the efforts from scholars to start questioning the general categorization of unaccompanied migrant minors, international and national legal bodies still predominantly conceptualize them as a homogeneous group. Many of the reports elaborated by international organizations and national governments limit themselves to the use of statistical data to describe the characteristics related to unaccompanied minors; such as their countries of origin and destination, the reasons for their migration or the number of asylum requests they make (SEGOB 2019). Even though this information is crucial for understanding unaccompanied minors, these institutions focus little on inquiring about minors' experiences and how these may vary depending on the differences that exist between them.

The most significant instrument influencing many national and international regulations related to unaccompanied minors is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1995). This treaty consists of 54 articles that display the rights inherent to children and establishes the responsibility of the signatory governments and non-governmental organizations to guarantee them. Nonetheless its focus on protecting the wellbeing of this group, the CRC is a document that takes the concept of minors as a general category without recognizing the differences within them. Simultaneously, it does not specify any practical ways by which governments and civil society institutions should protect and guarantee minor's rights, which is something that can have several impacts on the lives of specific groups of minors such as unaccompanied migrants. These gaps in academia and international bodies, represent an opportunity to understand what governmental and non-governmental institutions around the world do in practice when they have to deal and make decisions concerning the different groups of unaccompanied migrant minors accessing their services.

## **2.2 Best interests: protecting the lives of ‘vulnerable unaccompanied minors’**

As previously mentioned, the enforcement of unaccompanied minors’ rights is still ambiguously defined. One of the legal principles related to the treatment of unaccompanied migrant minors that evidence this ambiguity, is the principle of the best interests of the child. According to Article 3 of the CRC, ‘in all actions concerning children... the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration’ (United Nations 1995, 2). In terms of the decisions involving migrant minors, this principle takes into account factors such the cultural and familial context, the reasons for which they have left their countries and any fears linked to these decisions (UNHCR 2008). Even though this principle endeavors to guarantee an integral development and a dignified life for the minor (Cillero 1999), there is no associated clear guidance on what should be considered as best interests. Moreover, there is lack of guidance on how this principle could apply to a highly diverse population of unaccompanied minors. Multiple scholars have shed light on practices that inform how this term has been hard to define and operationalize due to the different social, political and cultural considerations surrounding this group before, during and after migrating (Doering-White 2018, Berger Cardoso et al. 2019, Olusese et al. 2018).

The vagueness of the best interests concept and the homogeneous categorization of unaccompanied migrant minors have resulted in the overgeneralization of their experiences and characteristics, as well as in their conceptualization as a purely vulnerable group in need for protection (Lems 2020). This has resulted in governmental and non-governmental institutions around the world using this top-down and ambiguous consideration to come up with paternalistic actions to protect minors. For instance, different governmental institutions around the world have implemented measures focused on the detention or confinement of these minors in shelters, either to grant them refugee status or repatriate them, even in cases where they state that they do not want to stay in these countries or that they may face risky situations in their communities of origin (Doering White 2018, Crock and Benson 2018). The common arguments to justify these actions are centered around the so-called need to protect minors from human smugglers, traffickers or any other actors or situations that might put their integrity in danger (Doering-White 2018, Jani and Reisch 2018). Nevertheless, this justification has been questioned on the basis of whether governments act with the intention of guaranteeing unaccompanied minors’ best interests, or as a way of achieving goals centered on reducing undocumented migration by enforcing controls that

seek to reduce the transit and stay of any undocumented migrant in their territories (Crock and Lenni 2018).

Although it is true that unaccompanied minor migrants have been seen in academic literature as a group that faces multiple risks due to their age, the conditions in which they migrate or the dangers in their transit (Silva 2020, Menjivar and Perreira 2019), scholarship has also highlighted that they are a group with different strengths and resourcefulness inherent in the diverse set of characteristics of its members, which are often invisible in policies and programs related to them (Chase et al. 2019, Belloni 2020, Vacchiano and Jimenez 2012, Schmidt 2017). In their study of migrant children from Central America and Mexico in United States' detention centers, Thompson et al. (2019) evidence how these minors demonstrate a capacity of agency through their actions and strategies. These include but are not limited to presenting themselves in a certain discursive way, hiding information, or claiming rights when they are detained by authorities.

Besides the lack of recognition of some of the capacities portrayed by unaccompanied minors, research has also shed light on how national and international frameworks can depict a different vision to the perception that the members of this group have of themselves and the way in which they understand what is best for them (Otto, 2019). Legal frameworks regularly ignore the fact that unaccompanied migrant minors often seek to achieve goals such as family reunification, sending goods and resources to their families and communities, as well as escaping from violent contexts or incorporating to the job market in destination communities (Doering-White 2018, Heidbrink 2018). These goals are usually rooted in cultural, economic and social expectations surrounding them, and they play a big role in the way in which unaccompanied minors receive and adapt to the policies and programs that pretend to protect them (Crock and Lenni 2018). Cabrera et al (2014) for example, have evidenced this clash of perceptions by looking at how educational programs in Spain's reception centers hinder the desire of young unaccompanied African migrants to integrate into the country's workforce.

The inability to fulfill minors' migratory expectations and goals can have several consequences which may be detrimental to them. Triggs (2018) has shown how, as a consequence of detaining migrants against their will, detention centers in Australia have triggered many psychosocial harms such as a sense of abandonment and mistrust in authorities. Aside from these consequences, the detention of minor migrants has caused them to avoid these actors and resort to

alternatives in which they can get protection and care, but also pursue their own goals and expectations (Allsopp and Chase 2019, Olusese et al. 2018).

Among the multiple alternatives for care and support that unaccompanied migrant minors have found are non-governmental aid organizations such as shelters from the civil society. These institutions have emerged as an alternative to detention and as spaces that allow the mobility of these migrants while providing them with goods and resources such as a place to sleep, legal counselling, medical treatment, or food (Doering-White 2018, Mishra et al. 2020, Silva 2020).

Overall, these academic and institutional insights highlight the importance of paying attention to the actors dealing with unaccompanied migrant minors, not only to learn how these actors perceive and understand what is best for them, but also to shed light on new ways of understanding this heterogeneous group, and how to reconcile their need for protection as well as their strengths and resourcefulness.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

In this literature review, I have explored the existing research related to the concepts of unaccompanied minors and best interests and linked these to what is depicted in literature about the legal body and institutions that deal with unaccompanied minors in Mexico. The review not only allows me to situate this dissertation within the relevant debates about the topic, but it also elucidates how this study can be a potential tool to start filling the gaps related to the conceptualization and operationalization of the concept of best interests, in relation to the different groups of migrants that fall into the category of unaccompanied minors.

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Literature review**

For this dissertation, the way of conducting the literature review started by searching material related to unaccompanied teenagers and shelters in Mexico and around the world in databases such as The Social Sciences Citation Index and Google Scholar, and in journals such as the Children and Youth Services Review, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies and Geopolitics. The timeframe for the search remained open, nevertheless an important focus was given to literature generated after 2014 which is when the so-called minors migrant crisis started to be addressed by international organizations and governments in Mexico and the region (Villafuerte Solis and Garcia Aguilar 2016, Ziebarth 2015, Musalo and Lee 2017).

As a consequence of the lack of specific literature related to teenagers, the focus was shifted to the general category of unaccompanied minors. In this manner, this research started to delve into the way these minors have been conceptualized and characterized in academic literature and legal instruments. By doing this, different concepts were discovered, these included family reunification, liminality, durable solutions and best interests. In the end it was decided to put emphasis on the last concept as it often referred in regulations, policies and academic literature as a key principle used in decisions that involve migrant minors (CRC 1995, Diario Oficial de la Federación 2011, Diario Oficial de la Federación 2017, SIPINNA 2020). Therefore, it was thought to be the appropriate concept to explore the ways in which non-governmental shelters understand the needs and assist unaccompanied teenagers.

Finally, the concepts of best interests and unaccompanied minors were explored within the work of non-governmental shelters in Mexico. To do this, literature related to the migratory context in Mexico and the work of these institutions was searched. Likewise, an attempt was made to find literature that could associate unaccompanied teenagers to the work of non-governmental shelters, however it was scarce both in English and Spanish.

### **3.2 Semi-structured interviews**

The data collected for this dissertation was gathered using semi-structured interviews. This method was used due to its potential in social sciences to delve into the experiences and views of

the respondents in specific matters, and for allowing the researcher to have a planned yet flexible interview schedule divided into categories that could enable him to create new questions and explore new themes according to the answers given by the participants throughout a fluid dialogue (Mason 1996, Díaz Bravo et al. 2013).

### *Sampling*

A total number of 11 interviews were conducted during the months of July and August of 2020 with current and past-staff members from non-governmental shelters in Northeastern, Mexico. The participants were contacted through previous connections held by the researcher with shelters in this region, as well as by using the snowball sampling technique. All interviewees held a position in shelters either as temporarily volunteers, frontline workers or directors. Of the 11 interviewees, 7 were women and 4 men. Further details such as the age and position of the participants, as well as the names of the shelters in which they work will be kept anonymous, as a way of protecting the integrity of the participants and these organizations from the risks mentioned in the introduction and literature review. Only one of the participants expressly requested that himself and the organization he directs should not be anonymized, this is the case of the director and founder of *Casa Monarca*, Luis Eduardo Zavala.

### *Data collection*

The interviews were conducted through the video conference platform *Zoom*. This represented a challenge due to the unfamiliarity of some the participants with technological tools, as well as the researcher's inability to establish non-verbal communication with them, as some decided not to use their web cameras. Even though the type of questions asked during the interviews depended on how the conversation with the interviewees and their answers unfolded, all of them were centered on exploring the 5 main categories from the interview guide previously designed by the researcher. These focused on knowing the role of the participants in the shelters and its relation with unaccompanied teenagers, the services provided to this population, the perception of the participants about these services and the existent governmental policies, as well as how it has been to work with unaccompanied teenagers in emergency situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the migrant caravans that have characterized the Mexican migratory context in recent years.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and all of them were recorded, transcribed and analyzed in the same language. The analysis was done through the thematic analysis method, which is ‘the process of identifying patterns and themes within the data’ (Evans and Lee 2018, 1) that are relevant for the research questions proposed. Thus, 4 main categories were elaborated: how shelters understand unaccompanied teenagers, how they understand their needs and conceptualize their best interests, the services offered for this, and the limitations of the services provided. The main categories were later subdivided into topics that fall within them.

It is important to mention that the information collected during this research is limited regarding the number of participants and shelters included. Likewise, it does not intend to generalize the ideas or practices from non-governmental shelters in the region or in Mexico, but rather to provide some in-depth insights into the range of issues emerging from the perspectives of participants working in a small sample of shelters in the North East Region.

### **3.3 Positionality**

It is important to take into consideration that during the planning of this dissertation and particularly while performing and analyzing the interviews, the researcher was aware of his position as a Mexican brown male with previous experience working in non-governmental shelters for migrants in Mexico and the impact this may have on the research. Although efforts were made to maintain impartiality during the interviews, sharing traits of identity with the interviewees such as ethnicity, citizenship and socioeconomic status, as well as similar experiences in their work for these places, could have influenced the way in which respondents presented themselves, the responses given, and the interpretations made from the empirical material gathered.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

The positionality of the researcher as someone with similar identity marks and experiences to the people he was interviewing, made him realize that experiences of past trauma could have been addressed during interviews. For that, every effort was made to make participants feel comfortable and all participants were made aware that they could stop participating in the interview and decline to answer any question whenever they felt uncomfortable. In addition, the researcher kept information from a professional support line that participants could call in case they required any further support as a result of issues arising during the interview or past experiences in the

shelters. Finally, a consent form was given to each participant to be signed: this form explained the purpose of the interview, the anonymity of the participants and the option to refrain from participating at any stage of the research.

## CHAPTER 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The next chapter is divided into two sections. The first seeks to discuss the way participants working in non-governmental migrant shelters understand and conceptualize unaccompanied teenagers, as well as what they understand is best for them and the services offered to meet these understandings. The second, seeks to analyze the limitations that shelters face in providing services that seek to help this group, focusing on limitations associated directly to internal and external factors.

### 4.1 Redefining the best interests of unaccompanied teenagers

#### 4.1.1 Shelter workers' understandings of migrant teenagers

The difficulty of serving a population such as unaccompanied teenagers lies not only in the specific needs that arise when the risks inherent to irregular migration are reinforced as a consequence of belonging to this group (Cernadas et al. 2014), but also in the complexity of establishing who belongs to it and who does not. In studies related to unaccompanied teenagers, we can observe a variation in the understandings that different fields have about teenager's years, which are often constrained by the physical, psychological, legal, social and cultural aspects taken into consideration (Ajdukovic 1998, Bruce 2001, Erikson 1968, Derluyn and Broekaert 2008). When narrating their experiences and interactions with unaccompanied teenagers, the conceptualizations that respondents made about this group also followed different patterns.

The general differentiator utilized to define this group, lies in the legal conception of the term '*unaccompanied children*' contained in Mexican legislation and various international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is directly associated to someone who's age is below 18. Pablo<sup>1</sup> for example, mentioned that although he does not know when adolescence or teenage years begin, legal criteria is key to defining when this stage is supposed to end for unaccompanied minors regardless of other factors. On the other hand, while narrating her work with this population, Guadalupe started her conversation by using the definitions drawn on the CRC to refer to unaccompanied teenagers as part of the category of migrant children. Thus, even though she exemplified how migrant shelters start making differences

---

<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of participants, all names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

between children and teenagers by the age of 12, she also mentioned how this recognition of teenagers as minors abruptly ends once they turn 18.

Assuming teenagers as minors, also implies that whenever shelters come into contact or provide any service to them, they must assume the obligations that emanate from these legal instruments. These obligations involve channeling teenagers before the Federal Prosecutor's Office for the Protection of Minors, which is the governmental office responsible for protecting and taking care of migrant minors whilst they await migratory resolution (Diario Oficial de la Federación 2011, SIPINNA 2020). As stated by the respondents this is something that has been controversial for many shelters as some of them have contradictory perceptions on how to take care or protect this group of migrants.

Another way in which teenagers have been understood, is by placing them within a transition stage between childhood and adulthood. A sort of limbo previously explored through the concept of liminality (Kaukko and Wernesjö 2017, Daskalaki and Leivaditi 2018, Eide et al. 2020), which places 'social actors within a phase of ambiguity or a rite of transition from one sociocultural state or condition to another' (Turner 1974, 57). Thus, interviewees spoke in ways which indicated that they considered teenagers as social actors possessing attributes both of a child and an adult, gathered prior to their trip, in transit and during settling. Ideas of childhood were associated to how emotional and shy teenagers are; to their vulnerability; to the irrationality by which they refuse to follow advice, as well as the way they play, joke or make sense of their own stories. The adult attributes were reflected in the maturity perceived by the interviewees, which in their words allows them to overcome the hard experiences they faced in their countries of origin and in their journeys. This is associated to the strategies they use; the way they stick to their goals; their courage, their faith and in many, in the physical characteristics that make them look like older people.

This sort of limbo or liminal stage is depicted by Yuridia and María who when talking about the behavior of teenagers in shelters makes sense of this by mentioning that at a first glance and in the first interactions, these young people seem to have a maturity induced by a context usually plagued with hard experiences, which makes them have a different perspective of things and in many cases, live the adolescence stage in a very different way from how they themselves had lived it. Nonetheless, they also recognized that by interacting with them constantly, they noticed in them characteristics that are typical of a child or teenagers, or in the words of María, of

a young spirit. These include the struggle they have to interact with other people or make friends, the containment of their emotions, the way they enjoy playing or making certain activities in the shelters, or how much they care about their appearance. Maria for example recounted:

*‘There are also moments very representative of teenage years and being young... There are moments when they put a movie and you are extremely happy, or you have a speaker and you listen to reggaeton and it also makes you super happy, or you have perfume and makes you feel attractive, that turns a little the whole complicated context of the situation.’*

#### *4.1.2 Conceptualizing best interests*

Although many shelters work as a network to carry out certain activities together (Aikin and Anaya 2013), the way in which they understand and meet the needs of migrants varies significantly. This has its origin not only in the diversity of conceptualizations that shelters make about the various sub-groups that make up the migratory flow, but also in the particular visions that the leaders and staff members of these shelters have about how to assist young people, based on academic, religious or humanistic approaches.

Thus, in the case of dealing with unaccompanied teenage migrants, the participants provided perceptions on what should be the best for them, that add up to the academic conversations remarking how defining best interests varies in relation to the processes minors endure, the places in which they are located and the discretion of those in charge of making that decision (Humphris and Sigona 2019, Otto 2019) and gave a meaning to the ambiguity that has characterized the way of operationalizing the best interests of unaccompanied minors.

In one of these understandings, the participants acknowledged that shelters try to comply strictly with their legal obligations of redirecting unaccompanied teenagers to the authorities in order to prevent these minors from suffering or keep suffering from the lack of rights that characterize undocumented migration in the country, this includes the lack of access to health, education or housing (González 2018). In this imaginary, shelters recognize their responsibility to put teenagers in the hands of the Federal Prosecutor’s Office for the Protection of Minors and the DIF system. Usually, interviewees adopting this position recognized that governmental shelters

have the capacity to meet teenagers' needs based on the services they offer and the spaces they have, which in most of the cases exceeds what non-governmental shelters can offer to these minors. Sandra for example, acknowledged that one of the government shelters she had the opportunity to visit, had at least in theory: trained social workers, medical staff, educational programs, as well as sports facilities for its residents.

Within the conception of complying with their legal responsibilities it is recognized that the role of non-governmental shelters should be one in which they accompany the Mexican State in its obligation to manage the migratory flow in the country, supervising that it does its job respecting the rights that correspond to any migrant. Luis Eduardo, for example, claimed that in order to serve the migrant population in Mexico, it is no longer enough just to have a good will, for that, shelters need to have a trained and sensitive staff able to respond to the current migratory phenomenon. Thus, those who agree with this perspective focus on generating a discussion between the different actors that help managing the migratory phenomenon in Mexico, in order to gain insights on how to enhance the wellbeing and protection of unaccompanied teenagers. In this manner, they recognize that the role of shelters regarding this group should be centered on influencing and monitoring that the State locate and reintegrate these teenagers with their families, provide education or ensure that the regularization processes for them in Mexico are carried out effectively. As Guadalupe stated:

*'We must have clear what is the role of one and the other, it is very true that in a country like Mexico, many civil society organizations do what the state cannot or does not want to do, but is also true that there is a responsibility that the state should assume... If you are a shelter, and you want a child to stay in Mexico, start the process of regularization for humanitarian reasons which can lead to a refugee request. I am very keen to that, to have an accompaniment with the government's institutions.'*

On the other hand, there are shelters that try to make their own assessments of teenagers in order to know their needs and context, before deciding what should happen to them, reinforcing the idea as Otto (2019, 373) recounts, that 'best interest is laid out in (international) legal

frameworks and conventions need not necessarily coincide with everyday understandings of what constitutes (best) interests, even though (unintentional) overlaps occur’.

As recounted by the participants, the evaluation made to teenagers once they arrive is initially made before they are allowed to enter the shelters and involves initial interviews and a constant monitoring of their actions, which focus on knowing certain characteristics of these migrants such as their demographic data; medical condition; their reasons for migrating; their objectives, as well as the experience lived while transiting Mexico. Furthermore, once this is done, teenagers are monitored continuously by staff members during their stay in order to keep discovering things that may have been omitted in the initial interviews and talks as a consequence of the strategies that teenagers perform, fear or the inability to understand what is being asked. As Ernesto explained:

*When they arrive at the shelter many of them just got off the train, suffering from what happened or scared of what may happen... so they don't tell you everything the first time. They think you will take them with the DIF and it is not like that... but once they eat and take a shower... they also start joking, they even talk more, and that's when you get to know a bit more about them.'*

To carry out this monitoring, shelters generally focus first on creating a comfortable environment or, in the words of Ernesto and Yuridia, a genuine environment in which young people get to express themselves more freely. In this way, respondents recognized it is easier to observe their behavior and hold informal conversations with them that allow shelters to better understand their contexts, their behavior, their fears, as well as their goals and their capacity to achieve them.

In some cases, when it is determined that teenagers have specific needs that shelters are not able to meet, that they are at risk of suffering a severe harm or that the staff resolves that the minor does not have enough capacity to be self-sufficient, authorities are normally notified about the presence of a minor either to take care of them or to monitor their stay in shelters when authorities deem it necessary for teenagers to remain in them. In other cases, the communication with the authorities occurs by the desire of teenagers to return to their home countries pushed by the lack of money, the inability to find a job or a bad experience. Ernesto made sense of this by

recounting the story of a teenager that had to be handed over to the immigration authorities to be returned to Honduras because he was being chased by members of the organized crime networks in Mexico.

On the other hand, when teenagers are granted stay in shelters without notifying the immigration authorities, the attention on them is usually centered on helping them to achieve what they want to do, as long as it is something in which shelters can provide assistance and does not involve compromising their internal regulations, security and the integrity of teenagers. This vision follows a perspective in which teenagers should have the freedom to shape their own lives, and is rooted in two reasons. First, because some teenagers are deemed capable of fending themselves, based on the assessment made by staff members in which they recognize in teenagers, characteristics such as being mature or appearing to have exceptional agency.

Even though Pablo recognized how subjective assessments in shelters may be, he gave the example of how a teenager who is 17 years old, that has tried the journey on multiple occasions, who has many connections, resources and shows an agentic conduct even greater than some adults, would be allowed to stay in a shelter. Secondly, not notifying an authority about the presence of a teenager originates from the perception that authorities do not do their job or that they have a vision that differs from the goals or objectives teenagers and shelters have. The former is seen in the abuses by the police and migration authorities reported by teenagers and staff members; in the lack of training that migration officers and DIF members which is often reflected in how they treat these minors or how they do not inform them about their rights; as well as in the high level of corruption ingrained in many of the governmental institutions that treat migrant teenagers. Ernesto exemplified this by recounting how he once witnessed how a young boy arrived at the shelter he works for still with handcuffs, as he was escaping from the police who had brutally beaten him.

Furthermore, regarding the difference that exists between the vision of the authorities and that of the teenagers, staff from shelters reported that while the objective of teenagers is centered on continuing with their transit to the United States or remain in Mexico to search for a job, the governmental vision concentrates in what they call a 'forced repatriation'. This response is rooted in the enforcement of migratory controls that prevents the possibility of properly determining the best interests of these teenagers, which many times can include accessing refuge in Mexico. Violeta who had the opportunity to collaborate as a volunteer in both non-governmental and governmental shelters exemplified this difference in visions by stating:

*'I feel like in the shelter X kids are still hopeful because they can still carry on with their dreams, meanwhile in shelter Z they might feel safer but are resigned by knowing that those dreams are not going to happen and that most likely they will be returned to their countries.'*

#### *4.1.3 Services offered*

As previously noted, there are diverse perspectives in different shelters on what to do with the teenagers that arrive to them. Nonetheless, in all these shelters there are certain services and attention provided that seek to ensure the wellbeing of this population (Vogt 2016, Huerta 2016). In the cases when it is perceived to be best for these young people to be redirected to government authorities, services are normally provided immediately on the arrival of the teenagers, while the redirection process happens, and once they are under the protection of authorities. Under the first two categories of services, shelters are focused on providing food; a place to rest, bathe and wash their belongings; access medical and psychological services, as well as legal advice and information on the rights they have and how to enforce them.

The third category is focused on follow-up services that allow shelters to monitor that authorities comply with their obligations. Thus, shelters supervise that the legal principles of family reunification and non-detention are respected, that the procedures for requesting refuge in Mexico are followed when applicable, that education is provided and that teenagers have a safe return to their home countries when this is deemed necessary. Luis Eduardo for example, mentioned that one of the tasks that *Casa Monarca* decided to exercise is that of pushing the DIF system in Nuevo Leon to begin with the awareness of the educational system in the state, in order to create educational programs and train professors so unaccompanied teenagers in governmental shelters can attend school or get educated.

In cases where shelters are focused on ensuring that teenagers can meet their own objectives, the services and attention provided are meant to be granted for longer periods of time and with special consideration for unaccompanied teenagers based on a conception that has defined them as extremely vulnerable. Services and attention generally include humanitarian aid as well

as legal counsel. Nonetheless, many also offer recreational services provided by volunteers or other non-governmental institutions that have established some type of agreement with the shelters.

The most important according to interviewees is lodging, this service is provided for indefinite periods of time as its goal is to safeguard young people while they recover from their journey or any other problem, find a place to settle, continue with their transit or decide to return to their countries. In many cases, when it is estimated that teenagers arrive in a state of extreme vulnerability, they are accommodated in separate spaces in order to protect them from the rest of the migrant community. Lodging in shelters may also include daily food at least once a day, the supply of clothing and footwear, personal hygiene and cleaning kits, as well as medical and psychological attention. These last two services are sometimes provided by external actors or volunteers such as the medical brigades from 'Doctors without borders' or by university students who do their social service in these spaces a few days a week. In one of these shelters, staff members reported having an agreement with a public health center close by, in order to deal with any medical emergency that the shelter cannot cover.

As noticed by the participants, shelters also serve as spaces for the protection of teenagers from the risks of being at mercy of organized crime or human smuggling and trafficking networks, and to know and claim the rights that correspond to them. Nicolás described shelters as a place of realization and empowerment in which teenagers can access rights that were not exercised during their journeys, either because they did not perceive themselves as part of a group that has them or due to simple ignorance. The knowledge and exercise of rights is facilitated via legal advice provided by lawyers from these shelters or UNHCR, and by the large amount of information supplied by shelters in posters, screens or pamphlets. The former can help teenagers to apply for refuge in the country or signpost them to institutions such as their consulates when they require any type of document or return to their countries. The latter, serve as a resource to prepare migrants for risky situations in their transit such as weather conditions or what to do when they face detention from authorities or a crime. As Ana exemplified, the shelter where she volunteered had a large number of posters and even a screen with maps of the train lines and shelters in Mexico, as well as information related to what to expect during their crossing to the U.S. or how to claim for asylum in Mexico.

Although the role of shelters is primarily to provide services related to humanitarian assistance and protection, interviewees recognized that shelters can also influence the wellbeing

of teenagers in other ways. Many spoke about the moral and emotional support that certain moments or recreational activities in the shelters may provide such as watching films or participating in games and dynamics organized by volunteers or staff members. As noticed by Yuridia, the shelter where she volunteers offers a mini library to look at or read books. In addition, in some shelters, teenagers have the opportunity to access services with a religious nature, such as talks that members from the Catholic Church give and, in some cases, can enter small chapels within the shelters or attend the churches presided by the leaders of these institutions. The religious services, as noted by the interviewees, play a really important role in the wellbeing of teenagers since Catholicism is the most common religion among them.

Moreover, all the services provided in shelters bring the opportunity for teenagers to build networks with other migrants, volunteers and staff members through the daily moments shared inside these shelters. This has helped these young people to meet people in their situation with whom they can travel or settle within Mexico, or who can help them achieve their goals of continuing with their transit, settle in the region, maintain communication with their families or find a job.

Besides the services outlined, shelters also have the ability to indirectly impact the welfare of teenagers in other ways. Many, for example, conduct their own research and generate statistical data about the migratory context in Mexico. With this, they have been able to understand better the characteristics of migrants in the country, generate reports, as well as present proposals for improvements and file complaints to government authorities supported through the networks that shelters have built between them or with other organizations. This has helped to make visible the different groups that make up the migratory flow in Mexico, such as teenagers, and evidencing their contexts, characteristics, their multiple needs and the many abuses committed against them. As Maria mentioned:

*'I believe that these spaces are places in which migrants appear... migrants tend to disappear in their transit and appear in shelters... So I think shelters are positive in terms of allowing a reality that needs specific and differentiated attention to become visible.'*

## 4.2 The limitations of shelters

### 4.2.1 Internal limitations

Even though it has been evidenced that shelters make efforts to help teenagers in different ways, the interviews showed that these have several limitations. As stated by the respondents, the most common struggle that shelters face in providing help to migrants, is the lack of resources. This has its roots in the inability of shelters to be self-sufficient, which makes them dependent on the aid provided by international organizations, private sponsors and volunteers and thus rendering services temporary and often inadequate. In this manner, shelters are spaces with limited facilities and a low number of staff members usually performing multiple tasks that often exceed their capabilities.

As an example of the multiple activities staff members perform, Yuridia reported doing at the same time and on the same day, the evaluation of new members, the supervision of the shelter's cleaning, generating statistical reports, providing migrants with clothes and cleaning kits, as well as helping in any matter that may arise at the time such as making food or dealing with a medical emergency. This, she said, compromised her ability to focus properly on just one task, which many had as a consequence not meeting the needs of the people she served. Furthermore, relying on others causes many services to be provided only a few days a week, for a certain amount of time and in limited quantities. For example, items of clothing given to migrants is something that two of these shelters only acquired through private donations. Similarly, in some cases respondents reported that the legal advisory services as well as medical and psychological care were only provided once or twice a week since they depended on the services of pro bono lawyers from UNHCR, psychology students or health brigades that are not permanent. This reportedly leads to many of the unaccompanied teenagers arriving at the shelters going unnoticed or not receiving proper treatment. When this lack of resources is mixed with certain characteristics that interviewees used to define this group such as looking or acting like adults or not disclosing their age as a strategy to protect themselves, the inability to provide any type of help or services is exacerbated. As Georgina explained:

*'That is why the psychology department is important... there were cases in which I suspected that they were under 18... but I'm not a psychologist, no matter how*

*much I have the experience of talking to people I couldn't know... And if you add to this that many times you talk to people in very reduced spaces where there's no privacy and neither you or the teenager feel comfortable, the less they will tell you.'*

Added to the lack of resources, most of the interviewees confirmed the lack of protocols addressing the unaccompanied teenage population. This was evidenced by the reported lack of knowledge about the existence of protocols, the variations in their application or in reports of not receiving training on how to deal with this population or any other migrant. Interviewees spoke of how they frequently had to improvise to meet the needs of teenagers, sometimes departing from their own perspectives of what is best for them. As noticed, the scarcity of protocols and training gives rise to the possibility of providing care with extremely vertical logics that can ignore the perspectives of minors or lead them to things they do not desire. Thus, care is provided sometimes following subjective perspectives of providers that are rooted in personal, religious or academic beliefs of what is best for teenagers. This was said to result in a lack of active listening to what teenagers want or think, the provision of services thought for the general migrant population and not young-person centered, and the creation of internal regulations that distinguish between what is good and what is bad under idiosyncratic views from the leaders or staff from these places. As María pointed out:

*'I believe that there are two challenges... the expertise of people and their charity, which creates characters who believe themselves to be the saviors of the world... that impose and end up crushing the desires of people... Not because you have done a thesis or worked for Amnesty International, or you are a charitable person through whom God works, it means that you have the solution for people, be that teenagers, men or women... you put the options but you shouldn't take the decisions for anyone, I believe that making this ends up positioning migrants from a top down perspective.'*

Additionally, shelters can also be spaces in which young people may be at risk. As reported by the respondents, despite the existence of security protocols, the infiltration of members from the organized crime, as well as human trafficking and smuggling networks is something that happens

in shelters. This occurs either because there are criminal organizations looking to recruit or abuse migrants, or because migrants themselves resort to their services to be able to continue with their transit. Many of the interviewees reported having witnessed the expulsion of people from these spaces for being part of these networks, or having interacted with teenagers who claimed they were accompanied by family members, when in reality the people accompanying them were later discovered to be a member of a human trafficking or smuggling network.

At the same time, interviewees reported the existence of certain internal dynamics within migrants which have the potential of assigning certain roles to teenagers that can end up making them easy targets of abuse, sexual harassment, bullying or theft by the migrant community itself. Even though it is important to highlight that teenagers may act in agentic ways to resist and prevent dangers caused by these limitations (Thompson et al. 2019), these factors can play an important role in shaping the ways the trajectories of unaccompanied teenagers are constructed, by preventing them from accessing services or resources, or by inflicting on them several harms.

#### *4.2.2 Limitations associated to external factors*

In addition to the internal limitations that shelters present, the interviewees also identified other external obstacles that prevent them from carrying out their work with teenagers. One of them has to do with the freedom of movement that these young people have, to enter and leave these spaces either temporarily or permanently in order to continue with their transit, look for a job, communicate with their families or spend moments of leisure outside. However, this is considered as something positive, there are also negative impacts for teenagers that may arise, preventing them from staying in shelters, and these spaces from providing any type of service or attention. Among the positive impacts -and according to the interviewees the most common - are that these young people continue with their transit, or find another place to live or work. Nicolás for example explained how in many cases he had not even had the chance to say goodbye to teenagers who left the shelters very fast as they have found opportunities that they could not miss. These included finding a ride to the border with the U.S. or a job in the construction industry.

On the other hand, the negative situations were related to the fact that teenagers can be repatriated by authorities, threatened or victimized by the organized crime networks, as well as being at the mercy of falling into addictions or becoming part of criminal groups. Ernesto explained

that outside these shelters there are always other migrants or people who can exert some type of influence on these teenagers to use drugs or engage in illicit activities.

*‘Sometimes they get desperate of being here, so they go out... And there is always someone who offers them drugs or some activity that looks easy but is bad, and they end up falling into that. Unfortunately you can’t do anything for them anymore.’*

In both scenarios, the support that shelters can provide stops abruptly. This is the case of services such as those of psychological attention or legal counseling, which require periodic follow-up sessions to be effective. In addition, many of the respondents stated that this has also restricted the ability of shelters to create programs for teenagers that can adjust to this situation of constant mobility.

Besides these common challenges, in recent years shelters have had to respond to new situations that could be called emergencies or ‘crises’, such as the rapid growth in caravans of Central American migrants entering Mexico or the coronavirus pandemic. According to the participants, these have jeopardized the existence of these spaces or have limited their ability to provide services to migrants, as they have surpassed the capacities of shelters to adapt to these situations.

In the case of the migrant caravans, which are massive movements that emerge as a strategy to transit Mexico in order to face the increase of migratory controls and defend themselves from the violence inflicted on them (Varela and McLean 2018), shelters have had to deal with the sudden increase in migrants reaching them, which has exacerbated the lack of available resources. As noticed by the respondents, this has posed a great challenge for shelters since they frequently do not have enough space to accommodate the large number of migrants arriving, enough staff and volunteers to listen, evaluate and fulfill their needs, or even enough food or clothing to provide. Nicolás recounted that during the 2018 caravan, the work he had to do in a few days was greater than he would normally complete in months, as there were days in which he had to welcome more than a hundred migrants. Moreover, Yuridia reported that the increase in the lack of resources was also accentuated by the negative and xenophobic reaction that society had towards this phenomenon, which reduced the number of private donations received, and the number of people

willing to help in these spaces that were now considered as extremely dangerous due to the increase in the number of people. With the increase of people overwhelming shelters, the resources and services available to young people became scarce and there was reduced capacity to evaluate and attend the specific needs of this group. Some respondents mentioned that this emergency situation meant that many initial interviews carried out by shelters were done in a very short time and by people not trained for them.

Similarly, the coronavirus pandemic has also been a game changer for shelters. The health measures that these spaces now have to adopt, as well as the economic and social instability generated by the pandemic, have not only increased the lack of economic and in-kind donations received, but have also changed the way they operate. According to the respondents, many shelters are now barely subsisting, they have had to close the offices where they provide services and for those that host people, this has meant having to close their doors with a certain number of migrants inside, with whom they have had to lockdown following a policy in which no one enters and no one leaves unless it is permanently. Thus, there have been multiple implications that can also affect unaccompanied teenagers, like the fact that many of them cannot stay in shelters and receive their services, and for those who are inside, this has meant receiving a much reduced quality of services. As Yuridia pointed out:

*‘Everything changed with the pandemic in shelter X, we needed to modify the internal regulations to have new protocols of entry and to know how to clean the shelter... Now we have to host migrants more permanently and we have to sanitize the shelter and their belongings more often... this has also meant the use of more resources that the shelter sometimes does not have.’*

Although it is true that phenomena such as the migrant caravans and the coronavirus pandemic have generated many limitations for shelters, the respondents acknowledged that these situations have also represented opportunities to observe and improve the deficiencies of these spaces which can be beneficial for unaccompanied teenagers too. Thus, this has resulted in the creation of health and attention protocols to detect the needs of an increasingly diversified migrant population. Nicolás for example, explained how during the arrival of the migrant caravan to the shelter in he used to volunteer, it became evident how certain groups of migrants vulnerable to

violence such as women, minors or members of the LGBT+ community needed to be allocated in specific spaces.

Additionally, emergency situations have allowed the strengthening of the relationships between shelters and other national and international organizations such as universities, the UNCHR, the Red Cross, etc. Pablo for example, recounted how during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, the shelter where he collaborates managed to create a partnership with the Red Cross to receive multivitamin beverages for the migrants inside this space. Likewise, Luis Eduardo mentioned how the shelter he directs started working with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) to help protecting and create research related to the increasing number of unaccompanied minors arriving to the city where the shelter he directs is located.

Nevertheless, shelters have made efforts to resist and counteract both internal and external limitations, respondents evidence what Humphris and Sigona (2019) analyze in their study of the governance of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the U.K., which is that the best interests of unaccompanied migrant children, can be redefined in scenarios where hostility from migration systems prevails and resources tend to be scant.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the narratives elaborated by volunteers and staff members from non-governmental shelters in Northeastern Mexico, this study has shown the different ways in which these institutions understand what is best for a specific group of migrant minors: unaccompanied teenagers. Influenced by academic, humanistic, religious and legal views, as well as a context of violence, securitization, hostility and multiple economic limitations these institutions have built specific forms of understanding this group and how they should assist them. On the one hand, some shelters consider these teenagers as subjects in need of specific protection and assistance that these institutions are unable to provide and so believe that they should comply with their legal obligations of redirecting them to governmental authorities. Thus, shelters limit themselves to providing immediate services such as food, lodging or medical attention, and supporting and supervising the Mexican government in its obligation to protect and meet their needs. In contrast, other shelters adopt a vision that focuses on supporting these young people achieve their goals and objectives. Justifying themselves in the inability of the Mexican government to help and protect teenagers, as well as in recognizing their maturity and agency, those who adopt this vision focus on providing services that allow these young people to continue with their transit, reunify with their families or find a job.

Through the analysis of the different visions of shelters, besides shedding light on this dichotomy, this study has evidenced the difficulties that shelter workers have encountered in meeting the needs of unaccompanied teenagers and how this may have an impact on teenagers' best interests. The mobility, heterogeneity and contexts that have defined this group, as well as the limitations faced by shelters, associated to the lack of resources, protocols and the influence of external factors such as the upsurge of migrant caravans and the coronavirus pandemic, have had different consequences. As a result, shelters have been unable to secure and provide the adequate support to meet the needs of this group, something that has undoubtedly played against their conceptualizations of what is perceived to be in their best interests.

From the perspectives of frontline workers in non-governmental migrant shelters in Northeastern Mexico, this dissertation addresses a gap in the existing literature around the operationalization of the best interests of unaccompanied minors and offers new ways of making sense of the needs of one of the multiple subgroups that make up this category. Even though this

study is limited to a specific geographical area, it has shown that when defining unaccompanied minor's best interests, it is important to consider aspects such as the differences that exist within this group, the contexts surrounding how best interests are determined and the diverse conceptualizations of best interests adopted by frontline workers. Therefore, this study opens the door to further the research on how different actors who work directly with unaccompanied minors, understand and meet their needs, not only in other areas of Mexico but in the world. This study exemplifies how bottom-up insights from different contexts can illuminate the ambiguities and complexity that surround the ways of understanding and operating the concept of best interests in relation to unaccompanied migrant minors and their implications for policy and practice.

## REFERENCES

- Acuña, G (2016). 'Estructura y agencia en la migración infantil centroamericana', *Cuadernos Intercambio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe*, 13,1, 45-65.
- Aikin, O., and A. Anaya (2013). 'Crisis de derechos humanos de las personas migrantes en tránsito por México: redes y presión internacional'. *Foro Internacional*, 53, 1, 143-181.
- Ajdukovic, M., and D. Ajdukovic (1998). 'Impact of displacement on the psychological well-being of refugee children', *International Review of Psychiatry*, 10, 3, 186–195.
- Allsopp, J. and E. Chase (2019). 'Best interests, durable solutions and belonging: policy discourses shaping the futures of unaccompanied migrant and refugee minors coming of age in Europe', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45,2, 293–311.
- Amnesty International (2010). 'Víctimas invisibles. Migrantes en Movimiento en México' (WWW) Madrid, España: Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/>; 3 April 2020).
- Anguiano, M.E. and A. Peña (2007). 'Políticas de seguridad fronteriza y nuevas rutas de movilidad de migrantes mexicanos y guatemaltecos'. *Liminar*, 5, 2, .47-65.
- Belloni, M. (2020). 'Family project or individual choice? Exploring agency in young Eritreans' migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, 2, 336-353.
- Berger Cardoso, J., K. Brabeck, D. Stinchcomb, L. Heidbrink., O. Acosta, O. Gil, T. Crea and L. Zayas (2019). 'Integration of unaccompanied migrant youth in the United States: a call for research', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: Special Issue: Undocumented & Unaccompanied: Children of Migration in the European Union and the United States*, 45, 2, 273–292.
- De Berry, J. and J. Boyden (2000). 'Children in adversity', *Forced Migration Review*, 9, 33-36.
- Bruce, B. (2001). 'Toward mediating the impact of forced migration and displacement among children affected by armed conflict', *Journal of International Affairs*, 55,1, 35–57.
- Cabrera, L., M. Montero and V. Voyer (2014). 'Chasing the European Dream: Unaccompanied African Youths' Educational Experience in a Canary Islands' Reception Centre and Beyond', *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22,76, 2-23.
- Cándiz, G. and D. Belanger (2018). 'Del tránsito a la espera: el rol de las casas del migrante en México en las trayectorias de los migrantes centroamericanos'. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 43, 2, 277–297.
- Cardiel, J. (2011). 'Pensando en clase psicosocial y confesional. Testimonios dentro de los albergues de migrantes'. *La voz de los actores*, 16, 30, 179-192.

- Cernadas, P.C., L. García and A.G. Salas (2014). 'Niñez y adolescencia en el contexto de la migración: principios, avances y desafíos en la protección de sus derechos en América Latina y el Caribe', *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinaria da Mobilidade Humana*, 22,42, 9-28.
- Chase, E., L. Otto, M. Belloni, A. Lems and U. Wernesjö (2020). 'Methodological innovations, reflections and dilemmas: The hidden sides of research with migrant young people classified as unaccompanied minors.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, 2,457-473.
- Chisti, M., and J Bolter (2019). 'Remain in Mexico Plan Echoes Earlier U.S. Policy to Deter Haitian Migration' (WWW) Brussels: *Migration Policy Institute* (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/>; 30 June 2020).
- Cillero, M. (1999). 'El interés superior del niño en el marco de la Convención Internacional sobre los Derechos del Niño', *Justicia y Derechos del Niño*, 1, 125-142.
- CNDH (2018). 'Informe sobre la política de niñas, niños y adolescentes centroamericanos en contexto de migración internacional no acompañados en su tránsito por México, y con necesidades de protección internacional'. (WWW) México: CNDH (<https://www.cndh.org.mx/>; 16 May 2020).
- Crock, M. and L. Benson (Eds.) (2018). *Protecting Migrant Children: In Search of Best Practice*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.
- Daskalaki, I. and N. Leivaditi (2018). 'Education and hospitality in liminal locations for unaccompanied refugee youths in Lesbos', *Migration and Society*, 1, 1, 51-65.
- Diario Oficial de la Federación (2011). Ley de Migración (WWW) México, DF: Cámara de Diputados del Congreso de la Unión (<http://dof.gob.mx/>; 30 June 2020).
- Diario Oficial de la Federación (2017). Ley General de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (WWW) México, DF: Cámara de Diputados del Congreso de la Unión (<http://dof.gob.mx/>; 30 June 2020).
- Doering-White, J. (2018). 'Evidencing Violence and Care along the Central American Migrant Trail through Mexico', *Social Service Review*, 92,3, 432-469.
- Doering-White, J. (2018). 'The shifting boundaries of "best interest": Sheltering unaccompanied Central American minors in transit through Mexico', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 92, 4, 39-47.
- Derluyn, I. and E. Broekaert (2008). 'Unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents: The glaring contrast between a legal and a psychological perspective' *International journal of law and psychiatry*, 31,4, 319-330.

- Díaz-Bravo, L., U. Torruco, M. Martínez and M. Varela (2013). 'La entrevista, recurso flexible y dinámico', *Investigación en Educación Médica*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 2, 7, 162-167.
- Eide, K., H. Lidén, B. Haugland, T. Fladstad and H.A. Hauge (2020). 'Trajectories of ambivalence and trust: experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors resettling in Norway', *European Journal of Social Work*, 23, 4, 554-565.
- Espinoza, M. (2019). Between depoliticisation and path dependence: the role of Mexico in regional migration governance in North America. In *The Dynamics of Regional Migration Governance*. Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing, 166-185.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Evans, C. and Lewis, J., 2018. '*Analysing semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis: exploring voluntary civic participation among adults.*' SAGE Publications Limited.
- González, G.C. (2018). 'La migración centroamericana en su tránsito por México hacia los Estados Unidos', *Alegatos*, 27,83, 169-194.
- Gill, P., K. Stewart, Treasure E., and B. Chadwick (2008). 'Methods of data collection in qualitative research: interviews and focus groups' *British Dental Journal*, 204,6, 291-295.
- Heidbrink, L. (2013). 'Criminal Alien or Humanitarian Refugee?: The Social Agency of Migrant Youth', *Children's Legal Rights Journal*, 33,1, 133-190.
- Heidbrink, L. (2018). 'Circulation of care among unaccompanied migrant youth from Guatemala. *Children and Youth Services Review*', 92, 30-38.
- Hernández, Ó.M. (2016). 'Riesgos en la migración irregular de menores mexicanos a Estados Unidos', *Norteamérica*, 11,2, 63-83.
- Huerta, A.V., (2016). 'Luchas migrantes en contextos de tránsito migratorio, el caso del movimiento migrante centroamericano', *REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, 24,48, 31-44.
- Human Rights Watch (2016). 'Closed doors: Mexico's failure to protect Central American refugees and migrant children' (WWW) New York: Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org>; 30 June 2020).
- Humphris, R., and N., Sigona (2019). 'Outsourcing the 'best interests' of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the era of austerity' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45, 2, 312-330.
- IOM (2011). 'Unaccompanied Children on the Move' (WWW) Geneva: International Organization for Migration (<https://publications.iom.int/>; 19 May 2020).

- IOM (2018). ‘*Directorio de Casas y Albergues para Personas Migrantes*’ (WWW) México D.F.: International Organization for Migration (<https://www.iom.org/>; 3 April 2020).
- James, N., H. Busher, R. Kitto, J. Barnett and J. Salmons (2012). Hybrid on-and Offline Interviews: Videoconference, Text, Meeting Tools, E-Mail, and Face-to-Face Interviews. *Cases in online interview research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Limited.
- Jani, J.S. and M. Reisch (2018). ‘Assisting the least among us: Social work's historical response to unaccompanied immigrant and refugee youth’. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 92, 4–14.
- Kaukko, M. and U. Wernesjö (2017). ‘Belonging and participation in liminality: Unaccompanied children in Finland and Sweden.’ *Childhood*, 24,1, 7-20.
- Kenny, M., and Loughry, M. (2018). ‘These don’t look like children to me: age assessment of unaccompanied and separated children’. In *Protecting Migrant Children*, Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing, 321- 333.
- Lems, A. (2020). ‘Being inside out: the slippery slope between inclusion and exclusion in a Swiss educational project for unaccompanied refugee youth’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: Special Issue: Children of the Crisis: Ethnographic Perspectives on Unaccompanied Refugee Youth in and En Route to Europe*, 46,2, 405–422.
- Leutert, S. (2018). *The Impact of Securitization on Central American Migrants*. PRP 199: LBJ School of Public Affairs.
- López Recinos, V. (2013). ‘Desarrollo, migración y seguridad: El caso de la migración hondureña hacia Estados Unidos’, *Migración y desarrollo*, 11,21, 65-105.
- Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative researching.*, London: SAGE.
- Meloni, F. (2020). ‘The limits of freedom: migration as a space of freedom and loneliness among Afghan unaccompanied migrant youth’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, 2., 423-438.
- Menjívar, C. and K.M. Pereira (2019). ‘Undocumented and unaccompanied: children of migration in the European Union and the United States’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: Special Issue: Undocumented & Unaccompanied: Children of Migration in the European Union and the United States*, 45,2, 197–217.
- Mendoza, K. and M. Salgado (2018). ‘Doing Masculinity: The “Look” of Unaccompanied Male Migrant Teenagers from the Maghreb’, *Men and Masculinities*, 21,3, 403–42.

- Mishra D., P. Spiegel, L. Vasileia, P. Winch (2020). 'Interpretation of vulnerability and cumulative disadvantage among unaccompanied adolescent migrants in Greece: A qualitative study'. *PLoS medicine*, 17,3,1-18.
- Moberg, M. and A. Källström (2020). 'Making sense of places: Belonging among "unaccompanied" young migrants in kinship care in a Swedish suburb' *Child & Family Social Work*, 1-9.
- Moreno, J.A., M. Barajas and L. Figueroa (2011). Estructura, funcionamiento y modelos de atención de las organizaciones civiles de apoyo a los migrantes en la frontera norte de México. In *IV Congreso de la Red Internacional de Migración y Desarrollo. Crisis Global y Estrategias Migratorias: hacia la redefinición de las políticas de movilidad*. Quito Ecuador: Flacso.
- Moreno J.A., and L., Niño (2013). 'Una mirada hacia las organizaciones civiles de apoyo al migrante en Baja California y Sonora', *Región y Sociedad*, 57, 61-96.
- Musalo, K. and E. Lee (2018). 'Seeking a Rational Approach to a Regional Refugee Crisis: Lessons from the Summer 2014 "Surge" of Central American Women and Children at the US-Mexico Border' *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 5, 1, 137-179.
- Olayo-Méndez, A. (2017). 'Programa de la Frontera Sur and Interdiction. *Peace Review: The Global Refugee Crisis*', 29,1, 24–30.
- Oluse, A., E. Odhiambo and P. Shamm (2018). Under siege: Alternative care for urban unaccompanied and separated refugee children in Kenya. In M. Crock and L. Benson (eds.) *Protecting Migrant Children: In Search of Best Practice*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 163–188.
- Otto, L. (2019). 'Children, adults or both? Negotiating adult minors and interests in a state care facility in Malta'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46,2, 1–17.
- París Pombo, M.D. (2016). 'Políticas migratorias restrictivas y violencia institucional contra los migrantes', *Revista Ecuador Debate*, 97, 85-102.
- Ramírez, G.C. (2020). 'Migración forzada y procesos de violencia: Los migrantes centroamericanos en su paso por México'. *Revista Española de Educación Comparada*, 35, 14-33.
- REDODEM (2019). '*Nuevos rostros, mismas dinámicas*' México D.F.: Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes.
- Rodriguez, N., X. Urrutia-Rojas and L.R. Gonzalez (2019). 'Unaccompanied minors from the Northern Central American countries in the migrant stream: social differentials and institutional contexts', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: Special Issue: Undocumented & Unaccompanied: Children of Migration in the European Union and the United States*, 45,2, 218–234.

- Roth, B.J. and C.S. Hartnett (2018). ‘Creating reasons to stay? Unaccompanied youth migration, community-based programs, and the power of “push” factors in El Salvador’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 92, 48-55.
- Schmidt, S. (2017). “They need to give us a voice”: Lessons from listening to unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children on helping children like themselves’, *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 5,1,57-81.
- SEGOB (2018). ‘Estadística Migratorias. Síntesis 2018’. (WWW) México, D.F.:SEGOB (<http://portales.segob.gob.mx/>; 16 May 2020).
- SEGOB (2019). ‘Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias’. (WWW) México, D.F.:SEGOB (<http://portales.segob.gob.mx/>; 16 May 2020).
- SEGOB (2019). ‘Trabjará Gobierno de México en la Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes en Situación de Migración’. (WWW) México, D.F.:SEGOB (<http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/>; 16 May 2020).
- Silva, A. (2020). *Migración Adolescente No Acompañada: Estrategias de movilidad en el corredor Centroamérica – México- Estados Unidos*. Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.
- SIPINNA (2020). ‘Ruta de protección integral de los derechos de niñas, niños y adolescentes en situación de migración’. (WWW) México, D.F.: SIPINNA (<https://www.gob.mx/sipinna/articulos/ruta-de-proteccion-integral-de-los-derechos-de-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-en-situacion-de-migracion>; 16 May 2020).
- Söderqvist, Å., Y. Sjöblom, and P., Bülow (2016). Home sweet home? Professionals’ understanding of ‘home’ within residential care for unaccompanied youths in Sweden’, *Child and Family Social Work*, 21, 4, 591-599.
- Thompson, A., R. Torres, K. Swanson, S. Blue and O. Hernández (2019). ‘Re-conceptualizing agency in migrant children from Central America and Mexico’. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45,2, 235–252.
- Treviño Rangel, J. (2020). Mercancías desechables: políticas de muerte y migración internacional en México. In A. Varela (ed.), *Necropolítica y migración en la frontera vertical mexicana: Un ejercicio de conocimiento situado*. México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 105 – 142.
- Triggs, G. (2018). ‘The impact of detention on the health, wellbeing and development of children: findings from the second National Inquiry into Immigration Detention’, in M. Crock and L. Benson (eds.) *Protecting Migrant Children: In Search of Best Practice*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 396-419.

- Turner, V. (1974). 'Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology', *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies*, 60,3, 53-92.
- UNICEF and United Nations, 1995. *The convention on the rights of the child*: London: UK Committee for UNICEF.
- UNICEF (2019). 'Protecting Children Affected by Migration' (WWW) New York: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (<https://www.unicef.org/>; 21 May 2020).
- UNHCR (1997). *Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum*. Geneva: United Nations High Commission for Refugees (<http://www.unhcr.org>, 16 May 2020).
- UNHCR (2008). 'UNHCR guidelines on determining the best interests of the Child'. Geneva: United Nations High Commission for Refugees (<http://www.unhcr.org>, 16 May 2020).
- UNHCR (2014). 'Arrancados de raíz'. Ciudad de México: United Nations High Commission for Refugees (<http://www.unhcr.org>, 16 May 2020).
- Vacchiano, F. and M. Jiménez (2012). 'Between agency and repression: Moroccan children on the edge' *Children's geographies*, 10,4, 457-471.
- Varela, A., and Mclean, L. (2019). 'Caravanas de migrantes en México: una nueva forma de autodefensa y transmigración', *CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, 122, 163-185.
- Villafuerte Solís, D., and M. C., García Aguilar (2016). 'De la crisis de los niños migrantes a la crisis de la migración cubana: intereses geopolíticos y expresiones sociales de la crisis del sistema migratorio Centroamérica-México-Estados Unidos entre 2014 y 2015', *Boletín de Antropología Universidad de Antioquia*, 31,52,15-33.
- Vogt, W. (2016). 'Stuck in the middle with you: The intimate labours of mobility and smuggling along Mexico's migrant route', *Geopolitics*, 21,2, 366-386.
- Walton, R. (1976). 'The Best Interests of the Child'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 6,3, 307 – 313.
- Wilson, C. and P. Valenzuela (2014). 'Mexico's Southern Border Strategy: Programa Frontera Sur' (WWW). Washington: Wilson Center (<http://www.wilsoncenter.org>: 16 May 2020).
- Zamora, G. (2015). 'Apoyo humanitario a niñas y niños repatriados: las Casas YMCA para menores migrantes'. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, 13,1, 209-222.
- Ziebarth, A. (2015). 'Broken systems: the 2014 humanitarian crisis in the US and policy insights for Europe', *European View*, 14, 2, 191 – 200.

