

TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ, Mexico — Oscar and Jennifer Cruz knew that crossing the border would be the easy part.

The Salvadoran brother and sister made their way over the international line between Guatemala and Mexico with the help of a smuggler who guided them through the jungle. But soon afterward, Mexican immigration officers arrested the clean-cut teenagers on a bus in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of the southernmost Mexican state, Chiapas.

Like many other Central American youths who migrate on their own, Oscar, 16, and Jennifer, 13, were pushed by the danger of street gangs and pulled by hopes of joining their parents, who left El Salvador when their children were very young and settled in Las Vegas. The brother and sister embarked on the trek to the United States despite the horror stories about migrants getting robbed, raped, kidnapped or killed in transit across Mexico.

"We wanted to be with my parents," Oscar, a devout Christian, said in an interview at a detention center. "And there was also the threat from the gangs. Once I started high school, they tried to recruit me. What worried me most were the threats. The gangs fight for turf, do extortion, threaten families and deal drugs. The police are scared of them — kids my age."

Oscar and Jennifer crossed a lawless, long-neglected border between Guatemala and Mexico, a 540-mile boundary snaking through mountains, jungles and rivers. It is a hotbed of threats: smuggling of people, drugs, arms and cash; abuse of migrants by criminals and security forces; violence and corruption that menace institutions and create fertile turf for mafias.

The border is also a window into the future. Profound shifts in economics, demographics and crime are transforming immigration patterns and causing upheaval in Central and North America. After decades in which Mexicans dominated illegal immigration to the United States, the overall number of immigrants has dropped and the profile has changed.

Although Mexicans remain the largest group, U.S.-bound migrants today are increasingly likely to be young Central Americans fleeing violence as well as poverty, or migrants from remote locales such as India and Africa who pay top smuggling fees. They journey through a gantlet of predators.

Mexico's southern frontier has become a national security concern for U.S., Mexican and Central American leaders. Interviews with U.S. and Mexican government officials, human rights advocates and migrants by a ProPublica reporter visiting the border showed how these converging trends are raising alarms.

"It is becoming imperative and urgent to immediately initiate and develop in the next few years a serious and coordinated regional strategic plan in the areas of security, control and development to prevent this border from sliding out of control and generating an experience with enormous gravity for the region," said Gustavo Mohar, a veteran immigration and intelligence official who ended his tenure last week as Mexico's interior sub-secretary for migration issues.

"The same way that it took the United States 30 years to reach a point of physical control on its border, Mexico needs a medium-range strategy," Mohar said. "But we will control it better with a strategic vision that part of the problem is Central American poverty and the drug trade."

The new Mexican administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto inherits repercussions of the transformation at the better-known, aggressively policed U.S.-Mexico border. Although the U.S. political debate often gives a contrary impression, illegal crossing at Mexico's northern border has plummeted.

Until 2007, the U.S. Border Patrol made an average of about 1 million arrests a year at the line, the overwhelming majority of them Mexicans. But there has been a marked decline since. Patrol statistics through July indicate U.S. agents made about 355,000 apprehensions at the border in the fiscal year that ended in September. An expected figure of about 260,000 arrests of Mexicans would be the lowest in more than a decade.

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