Immigrants or children? The expulsion of unaccompanied minors from two California towns

Olivia Ruiz
Department of Cultural Studies,
El Colegio de la Frontera Norte,
Carretera Escénica Tijuana-Ensenada,
Km. 18.5, San Antonio del Mar,
C.P. 22560, Tijuana, Mexico
Email: oruiz@colef.mx

Abstract: This article analyses civic mobilisations to oppose and welcome the arrival of unaccompanied children and adolescents from Central America and Mexico to two California towns in the summer of 2014. At first glance, the mobilisations appear to adhere to protectionist and humanitarian positions that have defined much recent debate concerning international migration. Digging deeper, however, it becomes clear that the dispute centred on disagreements concerning the young migrants’ identity – on the one hand, as immigrants, on the other, as children and the association of both ascriptions with risk and vulnerability. To make their claims, contesting camps in the dispute drew on narratives about immigration as well as narratives about children and childhood. Ultimately, arguments that the young Central Americans and Mexicans posed a risk trumped appeals to their vulnerability as children. This article attempts to explain why and how that occurred.

Keywords: immigrant children; risk and vulnerability; narratives of immigration; narratives of childhood.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Ruiz, O. (2018) ‘Immigrants or children? The expulsion of unaccompanied minors from two California towns’, Int. J. Migration and Border Studies, Vol. 4, Nos. 1/2, pp.89–102.

Biographical notes: Olivia Ruiz, a cultural anthropologist, is a Professor in Department of Cultural Studies at the El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. Her research focuses on associations of risk and vulnerability with immigration at the US-Mexico and US-Central American borders.

1 Introduction

The voices protesting the arrival of unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children in the southern California cities of Escondido and Murrieta were strident. “Send them back! Send them back!” shouted a crowd at a meeting in Murrieta to inform the community of the children’s arrival (Fox News, 2014a). In Escondido, a crowd booed and jeered when a commissioner pleaded with them to reconsider their opposition to building a shelter for young immigrants (The Washington Times, 2014). Ultimately, in
both cities, those opposed to the arrival of the unaccompanied minors got their way. In Escondido, the city council scrapped plans to build a shelter to house the boys and girls waiting for their day in court. In Murrieta, between 200 and 300 people gathered on 1 July and blocked the arrival of buses bringing the children to be housed in a detention centre in the city.

Children and adolescents have always been part of immigration to the USA, so it was not their presence per se that stood out in the summer of 2014. What galvanised so much attention, locally as well as nationally, was their unprecedented numbers and that they were crossing without parents or guardians. As Table 1 shows, in FYI 2014 more than 68,000 unaccompanied minors crossed into the USA, twice the number in the previous year and four times that for 2011. More than 98% came from Central America and Mexico (USCBP, 2016a and 2016b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal year</th>
<th>UAC³</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16,067</td>
<td>24,481</td>
<td>38,833</td>
<td>68,339</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America and Mexico</td>
<td>15,701</td>
<td>24,120</td>
<td>38,045</td>
<td>67,339</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America and Mexico (percentage of total)</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>97.9</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* USCBP (2016a and 2016b)

As the numbers of immigrants rose, heated discussions ensued at all levels of government. In Arizona, the governor accused the federal government of turning a blind eye to the situation of the young immigrants, whose sheer numbers, she claimed, put her state’s border security at risk. Similarly, Texas’ governor asked the Obama administration to send the National Guard to protect its border with Mexico. In contrast, the governor of California, going over the heads of some members of the state congress, set aside three million dollars to help cover the minors’ legal expenses. Finally, in June, President Obama announced he would destine four billion dollars to care for the children and adolescents, cover the costs of their detention and expedite their legal processes.

Given the political climate, the surge of mobilisations in favour and against the minors in towns and cities throughout the Southwest came as no surprise. In San Diego, the Border Angels, a national non-profit immigrant rights group, and churches of various denominations organised collections of food and clothing. Other groups denounced the mistreatment the young Central Americans and Mexicans were receiving in detention centres. Meanwhile, the Federation for US Immigration Reform voiced its opposition to offering any aid. It was in this cauldron of support and opposition that the events in Escondido and Murrieta took place.

At first glance, the mobilisations that summer appeared to adhere to two narratives that have defined much of the recent debate concerning immigration to the country. One, protectionist and hostile to immigration, has prioritised national borders, security and identity and portrayed immigrants as a threat to all three. The other, humanitarian and more welcoming in outlook, has underscored immigrants’ needs and suffering. If both narratives found their voice in Escondido and Murrieta, in the end, humanitarian appeals failed to draw sufficient support and protectionist sentiments held sway.

While different in content and aim, both narratives have been constructed on perceptions of risk and vulnerability. These perceptions drove the disputes in both cities –
that is, whether the children and adolescents presented a risk to the community or whether they were themselves at risk and in need of help. Protectionist demands to turn away the minors portrayed them as a threat not only to the community but also to the fabric of ‘US’ socio-cultural, political and economic life. Humanitarians, in contrast, argued that the minors deserved empathy and support as victims of poverty and societal violence. In this sense, at the root of the two conflicting associations of the young minors with risk and vulnerability lay questions regarding who they were.

2 Who were they?

From the beginning, arguments concerning the young migrants’ identity were levelled at two competing ascriptions, since they were both immigrants and minors. Those protesting from protectionist positions focused on the children’s and adolescents’ undocumented status, thus quickly turning the issue of their presence into a question of their ‘illegality’, held up as an affront to the nation and the ‘rule of law’. By contrast, humanitarians focused on the minors’ youth and vulnerability and the role the USA should play in championing the needs and rights of those fleeing violence and persecution.

By raising issues regarding what immigrants should have the right to stay in the country and what kind of immigrants should be expelled, both protectionists and humanitarians tapped into historical legacies regarding immigration in the country. In particular, the debate highlighted the uneasy and shifting balance among four narratives about immigrants that have shaped the country’s cultural normativity and legal tools regarding them. These are, immigrants as: a threat to national security and identity; labourers; victims of persecution in need of humanitarian aid; close family members of citizens. As I discuss below, the protests and counter-protests in Escondido and Murrieta turned time and again to these narratives, wielding them to argue either in favour or against the minors’ presence.

Due to their age, the Central Americans and Mexicans were legally minors and, consequently, other sets of juridical and socio-cultural norms applied when deciding their fate. Humanitarians may have emphasised their age, but protectionists did not ignore it. Yet, as in the debates surrounding the group’s identity as immigrants, claims to their status as children and adolescents proved to be rife with conflicting, if not antagonistic, views, all of which began to centre around narratives of the child, especially, what I refer to here as the narrative of the innocent child. In both Escondido and Murrieta protesters and counter-protesters argued over to what degree the young migrants conformed to that narrative. As I propose to show, the children’s ‘failure’ to live up to the narrative’s expectations made them appear unchild-like and suspect, placing them squarely in the category of illegal immigrant and undeserving of sympathy and humanitarian aid and protection, thus leading to their expulsion from both cities. What follows is a first attempt to examine how that occurred.

The essay is divided into four parts. It begins with a review of narratives about immigrants that have influenced and been reflected in immigration policy, and, as a result, played a critical role in the reception of foreigners seeking to live in the USA. There follows a discussion of the meaning of the term ‘minor’ and the narrative of the innocent child. Section 5 covers the protests and counter-protests in Escondido and
Murrieta and highlights prevailing themes during the days of mobilisations. In light of the narratives discussed, Section 6 turns once more to the protests and counter-protests.

Methodology consisted of a review of on-line news outlets about the mobilisations in Escondido and Murrieta; it accessed local, regional, national and international sources. The majority of the accounts were in English, except for two in Spanish, and all offered both press and online formats. Thirteen of the accounts were written by journalists in situ with a claim to authorship, the other eight written by anonymous sources and published in news agencies such as La Prensa and Fox News.

3 Narratives about immigrants

Given the centrality of immigration in US history, it is not surprising that it has given rise to multiple understandings and sentiments concerning immigrants and their place in the country. Over time a few have given rise to narratives that have influenced the treatment of immigrants. I suggest that four of these have become central, due to the role they have played in the past and the influence they continue to exert. They conceptualise the immigrant as either a threat to national security and identity; a labourer; a victim of persecution in need of humanitarian aid; or a close family member of a citizen. All four have played an important role throughout the nation’s history and been critical in shaping socio-cultural and political-legal norms with respect to immigration, especially regarding whether foreigners will be welcomed or rejected and the juridical terms of that inclusion or exclusion.

The power of these narratives, I suggest, resides in their association with risk and vulnerability. That is, each one builds on the potential for harm (or absence thereof) to ‘the native’ – population, culture, ethnic and racial makeup, for example. In other words, each one is rooted in perceptions of presumed risks that immigrants pose to what is considered inherently ‘US’ – its population, culture and social fabric.

The narrative of the immigrant as a threat to national security and identity, for example, assumes that the presence of foreigners endangers the values, institutions and ethnic and racial make-up of the USA. It underlies hegemonic historical and contemporary racial projects in the country and is reflected in laws to exclude and marginalise racialised peoples [Johnson, (1998), p.1115]. It drove efforts to restrict the arrival of Chinese in the late 19th century and eventually expel them. It set the course for the 1924 quota system restricting the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans and Africans and banning Arabs and Asians.

The narrative of the immigrant as a labourer has assumed a risk for some (sectors of the US workforce, for example), but not for others for whom, on the contrary, immigrants have been a financial boon (owners of large agribusiness, for instance). The 1910 Dillingham commission’s recommendation to recruit Mexican labour, the bracero program (1942–1964) and the US Federation of Labour’s opposition to foreign labour in the early part of the 20th century reflect the complex narrative of the immigrant worker.

The narrative of the refugee dates to the second half of the 20th century and the USA rise to global dominance. With roots in human rights, liberal aspirations of the enlightenment and religious traditions, the narrative rests on universal notions of humanity and the equality of all human beings, regardless of citizenship. The narrative emerged in the aftermath of WWII in light of the failure to help victims of the Nazi regime. In the
Immigrants or children?

In the post-war years, the USA relaxed its national origins quotas. In 1952, Congress passed the Refugee Relief Act, admitting 214,000 refugees [Weissbrodt and Danielson, (2011), p.13]. Today, the spirit of that narrative is reflected in portrayals of immigrant suffering and sympathy for their plight as well as in laws to extend humanitarian protection – special juvenile immigration status (SJIS), for example.

The narrative is closely tied to another, also grounded in humanitarian considerations – that of family unity and reunification. Foreign wives and offspring of US citizens, for example, did not fall under the 1924 quota system. Similarly, the War Brides Act of 1945 and the Fiancées Act of 1946 allowed for 123,000 brides, bridegrooms, wives, husbands, and offspring to immigrate to the country. In 1965, the Hart-Cellar Act, the blueprint for subsequent immigration law, protected family ties, an allowance that reappeared in the 1990 Immigration Legislation [Ruiz, (2014), p.399].

At the same time, the balance among all four is continually shifting. In economically prosperous times or when labor has been scarce, the narrative of the immigrant as a ready and reliable worker has often overshadowed the perceived risk he or she presents to the country’s security and identity. During economic slumps, in contrast, images of immigrant threats have generally outweighed any potential benefit, even dampened attempts to extend humanitarian aid. In a similar vein, perceptions of risk change according to place. Throughout US history, attitudes about immigrants have varied from city to city, state to state, region to region – some places proving more welcoming, others less so or not at all.

Underlying these narratives (and ultimately what they all share) is a binary construction of ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ in which immigrants are portrayed as inherently distinct and different from ‘natives’ and where, with few exceptions, the wellbeing and interests of the ‘native’ population outweigh those of immigrants. As such, immigrants and immigration are imbued with risk and everything ‘native’ inherently vulnerable.

4 The meaning of ‘minor’ and the narrative of the innocent child

Of equal importance, the young Central Americans and Mexicans scheduled to arrive in Escondido and Murrieta were minors. Thus, any analysis of their reception and treatment needs to explore the weight each side in the dispute assigned that status. As I hope to show, that determination came to rest to a large degree on the narrative of the innocent child.

The term minor is itself complex and contradictory. To begin, it covers a diverse population, from newborns to adolescents on the brink of young adulthood. It is also ephemeral, since in time (barring death) a person ceases to be one. Arneil (2002) [cited in Aitken, (2001), pp.119–126] refers to this quality as the shifting notion of the scope of childhood.

The concept of ‘minor’ has roots in a developmental approach to childhood and adolescence. In the USA, the term refers to those under the age of 18. When applied to unaccompanied children, it influences and conditions norms governing inclusion in or exclusion from the USA and the implementation of those norms. For example, immigrants not yet 18 are housed separately from those 18 or older. Some legal tools are only applicable to those under 18 – special juvenile immigrant status, for instance. Immigrants 18 and older, in the legal lingo, ‘age out’.
At the same time the term invokes wider narratives about children and adolescents. It draws especially on one, that of the innocent child, which I suggest still shapes understandings and sentiments about infancy, childhood and adolescence in the USA. From the perspective of the innocent child, the term ‘minor’ is a negation: minors are non-adults. As such, it is in relation to adults and adulthood that the term acquires its particular traits and characteristics. Only adults are deemed to have the capacity to think and act rationally and exercise full autonomy; full citizenship, with all its rights and obligations before society and the state, is possible only to them. Minors, in contrast, deemed not yet able to think and reason as adults, lack autonomy. Thus, they live not only in relation to but dependent upon adults, especially those in their immediate families. In this sense their identity is fundamentally relational and dependent. Fathers and mothers are expected to act on their children’s behalf, or, in the words of Pasquerella (2004, p.491), they are the child’s agents.

Given the minor’s dependence on family, his or her needs and fate are considered primarily a domestic and private matter and are thus out of the hands of the state. Minors belong to and in the domestic sphere. Only in cases of negligence or abuse, when family members fail to meet their responsibilities and obligations to the minor, may the state intervene. Only then may it mobilise its resources and override family authority. Given this delicate balance, one of the thorniest issues concerns precisely what family circumstances merit state intervention.

As minors, children and adolescents also embody deeply felt cultural ideals about moral goodness. In a Weberian sense, infants, children and adolescents are ideal types of human potential, reserves of ‘virtue’ embodying intangibles such as hope, purity and promise that exist at once secluded in the home and as models of human worthiness in the public eye. Despite the wide range of evidence that has brought down many of the borders separating childhood from adulthood – child workers and soldiers, teen mothers and street children – one litmus test of a child’s authenticity still lies in the ideal of the child’s inherent innocence, which sets him or her morally apart from an adult.

This begs the question: what happens to the children and adolescents who do not live with families or those who hold jobs? Moreover, where do those minors who do not conform to the narrative of the innocent child stand in the eyes of civil society and the state? I suggest that at best they become mired in ambiguity, their vulnerability suspect. At worst, they are perceived as dangerous and a threat to the community. In other words, to varying degrees they are seen and portrayed as transgressors. Their inability to live up to the definition of the ideal type of child and adolescent, to embody innocence, puts in doubt, or out rightly denies, their authenticity as minors. No longer vulnerable, those labelled transgressors embody risk and, like all risks, are seen as needing to be contained, set apart and, if possible, expelled. In the end, stigmatised, shunned or shut away, they receive minimal protection, if at all.

I argue that in the summer of 2014 the narratives described above proved to be critical forces behind the mobilisations in Escondido and Murrieta. As the following account shows, they surfaced time and again among protesters and counter-protesters in their efforts to welcome and to expel the unaccompanied minors.
5 Protests and counter-protests: Escondido and Murrieta, California, 2014

On 24 June 2014, the planning commission of Escondido, a city of 150,000 to the northeast of San Diego, met to discuss a petition from the federal government to open a shelter for unaccompanied immigrant children waiting for their day in court. The city council opened the meeting to the public, and some 400 people showed up. A heated discussion ensued. At the end of the session the commission voted unanimously to reject the petition (Phillips, 2014; Replogle, 2014a). In July, the planning commission met again to evaluate the petition and again rejected it.

The other incident took place in Murrieta, California, a city of 104,000 located in Riverside county to the east of Los Angeles. As in the case of Escondido, the federal government, by way of immigration and customs enforcement (ICE), contracted with city officials to house 140 unaccompanied migrant children in a detention centre run by the border patrol. On June 30, Murrieta’s mayor staged an open press conference to announce the minors’ arrival. There was vociferous opposition to the proposal. On 1 July the day set for the young Central American and Mexican’s arrival, some 200 to 300 residents (along with people from other towns and cities – San Diego, for example) gathered to block the buses bringing the young migrants to the city. The human blockade forced the buses, with the minors on board, to be rerouted to San Diego.

From the beginning, others came out to defend the children and adolescents in both cities. They came to the 24th June meeting in Escondido to explain how the centre would work, answer questions and address concerns about housing the young immigrants in the city. In Murrieta, they mobilised after the 1 July protest to defend the minors’ right to seek asylum and to speak out against those calling for their expulsion.

In what follows, I explore some of the principle objections to as well as arguments in favour of providing shelter for the minors, as these appeals and demands appeared in press releases describing events in both cities. Despite the two sides’ opposing views, the language both camps employed to argue or defend their positions drew on established narratives about immigrants, children and adolescents and their associations with risk and vulnerability.

5.1 The protests

From the beginning, those who objected to the minors’ arrival underscored that they were undocumented. In the eyes of the protesters, that alone made them ‘illegal’ and guilty of committing a crime, a judgment rendering them ‘criminals’ by default. An Escondido commissioner asked rhetorically if the children had violated any federal or local law; the answer was a resounding ‘yes’ (Ocaño, 2014). Likewise, in the words of the Murrieta’s mayor, “Murrieta expects our government to enforce our laws, including the deportation of illegal immigrants caught crossing our borders, not disperse them in our local communities” (Hansen and Boster, 2014). One recurring sign read “proud legal American” (Fox News, 2014b).
Protesters complained crime rates would rise. Escondido’s mayor said he worried that the minors would not be properly vetted for criminal histories (Phillips, 2014). Others feared they would escape the shelter and commit crimes. A person attending the meeting said the population of young Central Americans and Mexicans included 22 year-old criminals, so they were not all children. Another announced that most belonged to Central American gangs and speculated that rape would increase in the city (Frank, 2014). In the words of one resident of Escondido, the shelter was actually a federal detention centre for youth (Phillips, 2014). In Murrieta, a protester from San Diego, assuming the children would commit crimes, asked: “what kind of criminality will happen?” (Hansen and Boster, 2014). In both cities, the mayors compared the migrant shelters to prisons (Hansen and Boster, 2014).

The children were portrayed as a health risk. In Escondido, the mayor worried that the minors would not have to pass a health inspection before coming to the city (Phillips, 2014). The assistant director of planning said he had received a number of letters and e-mails from city residents mentioning the health risks the children posed (Replogle, 2014a). One of the most strident voices that of the congressman representing the district containing Escondido, declared the minors would spread tuberculosis and measles (Walker, 2014). In a similar vein, Murrieta’s mayor said the city’s residents were concerned about the diseases the children would bring with them (Los Angeles Times, 2014). Fears about illness reached a climax when the chief of the border patrol mentioned that four of the children had been hospitalised with scabies and fever (Fox News, 2014a).

Other objections, focusing on costs, claimed that housing the young immigrants would put a financial strain on the city. In Escondido, some complained the construction of a shelter would lower real estate values (Replogle, 2014b). A county supervisor wanted confirmation that the minors’ presence would not depress the tax base and drain the city’s financial reserves (Replogle, 2014b). In Murrieta, protesters asked who would pay for housing and medical care, and the mayor said he planned to keep an eye on costs then send Washington a ‘big fat bill’ (Fox News, 2014a).

Demands followed to safeguard the community. In Escondido, those backing the proposal to build a shelter assured the people in attendance that the minors’ movements would be restricted to the installation: they would not leave the premises, save for religious or medical reasons or a few carefully supervised recreational and educational outings. The building proposal included raising a six-foot fence around the facility to prevent the children from fleeing (Replogle, 2014a). Even so, a flyer warned that nothing would prevent the young migrants from escaping and making their way throughout the region (Jones, 2014). In a similar vein, Murrieta’s mayor doubted whether the border patrol could contain the young immigrants’ movements (Los Angeles Times, 2014). Reiterating his opposition to their arrival, he stated, “I can say, without equivocation, that Murrieta will remain safe” (Hansen and Boster, 2014).

Demands to secure the safety of the two cities led to calls to strengthen the nation’s borders and immigration laws. In Escondido, the minors’ presence was characterised as one more proof of the need to fortify the nation’s borders against national security
threats. In Murrieta, a Riverside county official echoed that concern to the rousing approval of protesters (Fox News, 2014c). In the words of a resident of a town outside Murrieta, “the government’s main job is to secure our borders and protect us – and they’re doing neither” (Hamilton, 2014). Addressing the crowd, Murrieta’s mayor said the city “expects our government to enforce our laws – including the deportation of illegal immigrants” (Hansen and Boster, 2014), a sentiment echoed in another protester’s accusation that “this is not just a Murrieta situation. It’s a national situation” (Kumar and Audi, 2014). A reporter observed that, “local politicians calling for secure borders” held more sway with the crowd than appeals to consider the needs and welfare of the young immigrants (Fox News, 2014a).

From there, anger turned against the federal government and President Obama. In Escondido, a city official called the minors’ presence a disaster of the Obama administration (Ocaño, 2014). Others called it more generally “a human disaster that the government has created” (Hansen and Boster, 2014). Murrieta’s mayor encouraged the city’s residents to send their protests directly to Washington (Hansen and Boster, 2014). One protester accused Obama and the democratic party of political strategising, since Latinos tended to vote democratic (Hansen and Boster, 2014).

Nativist sentiments surfaced throughout. In this, Murrieta was exemplary. The buses carrying the children and adolescents were met by a flurry of US flags and signs calling to ‘stop illegal immigration’ and warning ‘illegal outs!’ (Hansen and Boster, 2014; Fox News, 2014d). Others shouted, “send them back!” (Fox News, 2014a). The representative of a group known for its anti-immigrant positions said that opening the borders would allow immigrants to “ruin everything we’ve built” (La Prensa, 2014).

Nativist sentiments became racialised along Latino and non-Latino lines. At the June meeting in Escondido, the ten people who arrived to defend the construction of a migrant shelter were all Latinos (Jones, 2014). A resident of Murrieta, a citizen of Mexican origin, said he joined the counter-protest after driving by the mobilisation; someone had shouted “illegal” at him and told him to go back to his country (Hansen and Boster, 2014).

5.2 The counter-protest

Perhaps in an attempt to distance the minors from the narrative of the undocumented immigrant, the counter-protesters from the start referred to the minors as children. The only Latina on Escondido’s city council said the children and adolescents’ presence should not be treated as an immigration issue because that would deadlock any attempt to solve the problem (Ocaño, 2014). As such, in both Escondido and Murrieta those defending the children’s right to stay emphasised on their youth. In Escondido, signs appeared telling the crowd “don’t be afraid of the children” (The Washington Times, 2014). As one of those attending the mobilisation said, “the children should be given a chance” (Hansen and Boster, 2014). “It doesn’t matter where the child is from. He deserves respect and help because he is a child”, argued a counter-protester (Kumar and Audi, 2014). Another asked, “how can a five year old defend himself?” (Hansen and Boster, 2014). Another insisted, “I don’t think we should push a child out of our country” (Hansen and Boster, 2014).

Accordingly, they emphasised the minors’ young age. Many referred to them as five-year old children (Hansen and Boster, 2014) and used the diminutive ‘little kids’
when referring to them (Fox News, 2014d). To be sure, those who came out in support generally used the term ‘kid’, even though many of the immigrants were older than 16.

Counter-protesters underlined the children and adolescents’ vulnerability to predators. Some portrayed them as pawns of organised crime – human trafficking, the drug trade and slavery (Horsey, 2014). The ACLU argued that the minors were not only children but also refugees and defended their right to due process (Latin American Herald Tribune, 2014). A priest noted that some showed signs of trauma (Llorente, 2014). “They’re not criminals”, said a minister from a neighbouring city, “they are refugees” (Llorente, 2014).

Nativist and racist slogans came under attack. In Murrieta, some denounced what they saw as openly racist attacks on the minors (Hansen and Boster, 2014). Responding to racist language, those who came out in defence of the minors shouted “go back to Europe!” in reference to the history of European immigration to the USA as well as to the European phenotype that predominated among the protesters (Hamilton, 2014). Others brought Mexican flags (Hansen and Boster, 2014). Still others spoke of the need to look beyond national interests and focus on the minors’ suffering. In Murrieta, one sign read ‘shame on you’ and another, echoing the demands of the ‘black lives matter’ movement, read ‘migrant lives matter’ (Los Angeles Times, 2014).

6 Reflection

In the end, Escondido’s city council rejected plans to build a shelter, and protesters in Murrieta forced the buses carrying the minors to leave the city. The narrative of the immigrant as a threat trumped attempts to portray the young Central Americans and Mexicans as vulnerable. In the protesters’ narrative of the immigrant threat, the minors had entered illegally, thus violating the rule of the law, which made them criminals. Following that logic, what else could residents of Escondido and Murrieta expect but more threats to their way of life – the spread of disease, an increase in crime and economic decline. The children and adolescents became harbingers of worse things to come, of even greater harm – to the country’s borders and national security and identity – if they and others like them, were not detained and expelled.

To repeat, I suggest that the portrayal and ultimate rejection of the children and adolescents lay in narratives that harboured understandings and sentiments about risk and vulnerability – as immigrants, on the one hand, and as minors, on the other. As undocumented migrants, they raised the spectre of a foreign menace to the country’s national security and identity, a narrative with deep roots in the country’s history and its legacy of racial violence.

In effect, they appeared un-childlike. The young migrants did not fit the criteria of what it meant to be a ‘minor’. Alone, or in the company of others their age, and with no
apparent relation to any adult, much less an adult family member, they lived independently and exercised personal autonomy. By migrating to the USA and crossing the border on their own, they were ‘out of place’ occupying spaces reserved for adults, where only by thinking, behaving and acting like adults could they have survived, thus violating central and deeply held beliefs underlying the narrative of the innocent child [O’Connell, (2011), p.462; Mainwaring, (2016), p.2]. In the end, their vulnerability and need for protection became suspect. As a consequence, their identity as undocumented immigrants endured, placing them squarely within the narrative of the immigrant as a risk to national security and identity.

In that sense, it is worth remembering some of the slogans and charges aimed at the young migrants. On the heels of “they’re illegal” and “they violate the law” followed imputations that many were older than 18 and that they would escape from the shelters, infect locals with dangerous diseases and commit crimes (even rape). The minors’ isolation in detention centres only added to the suspicion that even the authorities believed them to be dangerous.

These accusations erected a figure in stark contrast to the innocent child or adolescent rooted in the private space of family and home, dependent on adults (preferably his or her parents), inherently vulnerable and worthy of compassion and aid. Instead, the lives the young migrants led put in doubt their authenticity as minors. Although under the age of full legal responsibility, they had not lived up to the norms central to the ideal of the child, and were thus rendered a risk to the communities.

7 Final remarks

In response to the growing numbers of unaccompanied boys and girls and to protests and appeals across the country, the Obama administration drew up a refugee program aimed at providing relief for unaccompanied migrant children. So far, however, the results have been disappointing. Of the 5,429 applicants for asylum, not one has been accepted to date. The administration also put in place measures to speed the passage of young people through the immigration system, in an effort to cap the flow of migrants. While apprehensions dropped between FY 2014 and FY 2015, they began to rise again in FY 2015 at rates surpassing those that first caught the public’s attention during the summer of mobilisations in Escondido and Murrieta.

Driven by interests of its own and under pressure from the USA, in late 2014, the Mexican government began to step up its pursuit of undocumented Central American entering Mexico. Apprehensions had been growing steadily for some time, by approximately 13,000 a year between 2011 and 2014; however, they jumped almost 350% between 2014 and 2015. Those numbers will most likely continue to rise as long as the causes driving the flight – poverty and societal violence, especially – continue to wreak havoc on these young people’s communities and families.

At the time of writing, conditions in the USA do not offer much promise for unaccompanied youth. Public attitudes towards immigration reform and immigrants (especially if undocumented) reveal an entrenched hostility towards both. Preoccupation with national security among the electorate in the present presidential campaign has made any mention of engaging in genuine immigration reform almost impossible. Given the realities in Central America, Mexico and the USA, the future for children and adolescents migrating north looks uncertain at best.
References
Immigrants or children?


Notes

1 Recent years have witnessed a growing and often heated debate regarding how to refer to immigrants crossing without appropriate legal documents into the USA, whether to call them ‘undocumented’ or ‘irregular’, for example. While I acknowledge the implications of each term, I refrain from entering the discussion here and will refer to immigrant children and adolescents as undocumented.

2 I use minor for the following reasons: it was the criteria US customs and border protection (under the Department of Homeland Security) used to group a disparate assembly of young people already in immigration proceedings during the time period examined; it appeared during the mobilisations in Escondido and Murrieta, and thus became contested ground and part of the dispute; finally, the term appears in contemporary debates regarding newborns, children and adolescents, if not youth in general. Having said that, I recognise the term’s limitations and criticisms of its use (for further discussion see González et al., 2012; Silva, 2014).

3 The Department of Homeland Security uses unaccompanied alien children, or UAC, to refer to the Central American and Mexican immigrant minors. That is also the term US customs and border protection uses for statistical purposes. While I do not use term here, it is the statistical category I referenced for this essay.

4 I define risk as “the exposure of a person or a group of people to a thing or an individual (or things or individuals)” that can potentially cause irreversible harm or damage (Ruiz, 2001, 2005).

5 Aitken places these understandings and sentiments about childhood and adolescence within a western liberal Anglo-Saxon tradition. I do not use that term here, but both Escondido and Murrieta fall well within the socio-cultural parameters she refers to.

6 Submitted by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the centre was to be run by Southwest key, a non-profit organisation that contracts with the federal government to house undocumented migrant minors waiting for their day in immigration court or to be reunited with their families.

7 This appeared to be a conscious decision on the part of the counter-protesters, since ‘youth’ or ‘juvenile’ doesn’t carry the same degree of vulnerability and dependency that ‘child’ does. Also, juvenile is often associated with juvenile delinquency and juvenile halls with their connotations of criminal behaviour and responsibility.