



# The Chilean Dream: the case of Jesus, an unaccompanied young migrant. An ethnographic note

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## Abstract

The migration of unaccompanied children and adolescents from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Venezuela to countries such as the United States, Mexico and Chile has raised concerns due to the unique challenges they face. These adolescents are seeking opportunities for education, work and family reunification, fleeing adverse contexts in their places of origin. The political crisis in Venezuela has increased the emigration of unaccompanied adolescents to countries such as Colombia, Chile and the United States. Research has examined the factors that influence migration decisions, mental health challenges and coping strategies of these young people. The vulnerability of these children is exacerbated by the lack of legal frameworks and essential services. The case of Jesús, a young Venezuelan migrant, illustrates the difficulties faced by Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFMs) on their journey. Improving child protection mechanisms, ensuring access to education and health care, and creating a supportive environment are crucial steps to ensure the well-being of this vulnerable population. International cooperation, improved policies and sustainable solutions are essential to protect the rights and dignity of all migrant children.

**Keywords:** Migration; Youth; Unaccompanied Foreign Minors; Human Rights; International Cooperation; Venezuela; Chile

## Introduction

The phenomenon of unaccompanied migrant children has received considerable attention in recent years due to its complex and multifaceted nature. It is well known that unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have been present at the US-Mexico border for several years [1]. A US law stipulates that those from neighboring countries (Mexico and Canada) are immediately returned to their countries of origin without an asylum procedure, which is not the case for other nationalities [1]. Most studies agree that this group comprises boys between fourteen and seventeen who undertake migratory journeys with different objectives, such as seeking educational or employment opportunities, family

reunification, or fleeing adverse contexts [2].

According to the Venezuelan Migration Observatory (hereafter OVM) [3] the political crisis in Venezuela has led to the departure of 25,000 unaccompanied children and adolescents from the Caribbean country. The main destinations are Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Panama, the United States, and Colombia, the latter being the country where almost 20,000 unaccompanied children and adolescents are expected to arrive. The demographic characteristics point to adolescents between the ages of twelve and seventeen, traveling on foot with groups of friends or adult acquaintances; this is a highly masculinized group, but some adolescent girls have also been observed. The migration project aims to reunite them with their parents or to escape



situations of social and domestic violence [3].

The phenomenon of unaccompanied migration of children and adolescents first appears in the media. In April 2021, the press announced 30, 31, or 34 cases of unaccompanied children and adolescents who had entered Chile and who, after being placed in public shelters (Mejor Niñez, Better Childhood in English), had escaped from them, including a pregnant adolescent. On this occasion, Judge Troncoso [4] recognized the precariousness of the Chilean institutional system, which was not prepared to respond to the current reality. In the case of Chile, requests for refuge and asylum by children and adolescents have so far been rare, which does not mean that the phenomenon does not exist. Only in December 2021 the Supreme Court of Justice published the Protocol for the Protection of Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Adolescents in the Context of Migration and in Need of International Protection [4].

However, the Chilean state's response still appears inadequate, failing to achieve the protection expected at the international level. On the one hand, there are numerous documented cases of runaways from public residences (Aguilar et al., 2023). On the other hand, there is an apparent lack of plans for the protection and integration of children and adolescents, considering the particularities of this new migratory profile in the country. In this sense, unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents are in a condition of multiple vulnerability because they are minors, foreigners, poor, and irregular [5]. This group experiences discrimination and racism [6] because of a criminalized stereotype, both from the press and State institutions. Evidence shows that the condition of foreigners and irregular status prevails over that of children or adolescents [7]. Overall, the academic literature on unaccompanied migrant children provides valuable insights into their experiences, needs, and rights and informs policies and interventions aimed at promoting their well-being and protection in host countries.

## Theoretical framework

The United Nations, in General Comment N°6 on the Rights of the Child [8] defines the group of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents as those "who have been separated from both parents and other family members and are not cared for by an adult who is responsible for them by law or custom" (p.5). In Spanish, this group of children and adolescents is usually referred to as "Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados" (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors), an acronym with pejorative connotations that carries several labels or stigmas, such as the controversial status of "minor" [9].

Researchers have addressed different aspects of the issue, ranging from the causes and consequences of migration

to the challenges and opportunities these vulnerable populations face. For example, Farris's study [10] examines the push and pulls factors that influence children's decisions to migrate alone, highlighting the role of violence, poverty, and family reunification as key drivers. Similarly, Corona et al [11] examine the experiences of unaccompanied minors upon arrival in destination countries, shedding light on their access to education, health care, and legal protection.

Researchers have also focused on the psychological and emotional well-being of unaccompanied migrant children, recognizing the unique stressors and traumas they experience during their journey Song [12] examines. The mental health challenges faced by these children, highlighting the importance of trauma-informed care and psychosocial support services. In addition, Grupp (2022) explores the resilience and coping strategies that unaccompanied minors use to navigate the complexities of migration and adaptation in unfamiliar environments.

A complex interplay of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors often drives unaccompanied child migration. Recent research by García and Birman [13] highlights the role of poverty, inequality, and lack of economic opportunities in sending countries as primary push factors that lead children to migrate alone. Moreover political instability, armed conflict, and human rights violations, as highlighted by Andrade, et al. [14] contribute to the displacement of children, forcing them to flee in search of safety and protection. In addition, environmental factors such as natural disasters and climate change, as discussed by Purnomon, et al. [15] further exacerbate vulnerability and displace children and their families from their homes and communities.

Despite the recognized vulnerability of unaccompanied migrant children, their access to protection and legal frameworks remains limited. Research by Iusmen [16] highlights the need for more existing legal mechanisms and policies to provide comprehensive protection for these children, resulting in gaps in their access to essential services and safeguards. Furthermore, García and Birman [13] highlight the challenges that unaccompanied children face in navigating complex legal processes and obtaining legal recognition of their rights, often resulting in their exclusion from essential support systems and pathways to regularization.

Unaccompanied migrant children often experience trauma and mental health problems because of their migration experience. Recent studies by Gatt, et al. [17-19] draw special attention to the prevalence of psychological distress, anxiety, and depression among unaccompanied children and underline the urgent need for trauma-informed

care and mental health support services. However, access to such services is often limited or inaccessible, particularly in transit and destination countries, exacerbating the long-term consequences of trauma on children's well-being and development.

Despite the myriad challenges they face, unaccompanied migrant children demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency in their efforts to survive and thrive. Research by Rodriguez and Dobler [20] underscores the resourcefulness and adaptability of these children as they navigate unfamiliar environments and forge new pathways for themselves. Similarly, Thompson, et al. [21] place emphasis on the importance of recognizing and amplifying the voices of unaccompanied children, empowering them to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and advocating for their rights and dignity within migration and asylum systems. From a sociological point of view, James and Prout [22-26] point out that children and young people are social agents whose agency is expressed in contexts that can both limit and provide opportunities for social action. For his part, Mayall (2009, p. 21) argues that they are agents "because they act, produce knowledge and experience, but children's action has meaning and develops in a different way from adult action". According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the forms of children's actions are covered by the principle of "progressive autonomy" enshrined in Art. 5 of the Convention. All of these insights collectively bring to the fore that the resilience, adaptability, and active participation of unaccompanied migrant children are key expressions of their agency, validating their role as capable social agents despite the adversities they face.

### Jesus Case

Jesus (pseudonym) is the young wanderer's name. His brown eyes and thick lips contrast with his delicate jawline. His dark skin is cracked at the cheekbones, evidence of exposure to the American sun. His curly hair is tied back in a ponytail. His clothes look dirty or neglected. He wears a cotton shirt that was once white, now marked with revealing stains, torn jeans, and broken trainers. He has walked more than five thousand kilometers from Venezuela to reach Chile. Jesus says there is no future there, and he has his whole life ahead of him. At 16, he has already developed muscles and a good build. He wants to work and help his mother and three younger siblings because his father was never there, and the crisis shows no mercy. He calls and writes to his mother daily to tell her about his journey and to find out how the children are doing.

Jesus is one of millions of Venezuelans who have been forced to emigrate because of an unprecedented political crisis in the Latin American region. Most people migrate in

search of better living conditions for their children, and this migration has a strong family character. Recently, the border city of Cucuta has witnessed the arrival of large masses of people on their way to Colombia, where they receive assistance in shelters run by religious congregations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments implemented various measures to prevent its spread, such as quarantines and border closures. However, this alone does not stop migratory flows; on the contrary, it leads to the search for alternatives, which often involves the intervention of criminal gangs dedicated to the trafficking of migrants, such as the so-called "coyotes". These armed groups charge for the crossing or entry of foreigners through unauthorized crossings or where there are no police or military guards. Jesus and impoverished migrants like him know that using coyotes means committing a crime and facing deportation if they are caught. However, they have nothing to lose because they have already lost everything; they have been left in precarious situations at home and in transit, with only an unkempt, hungry body, tired of walking, and willing to do anything to achieve the golden dream.

At the Cucuta migrant center, Jesus meets some boys who are alone, just like him. They decide to join a caravan of migrants to cross the Colombian jungle. Along the way, paramilitary guerrillas threaten them with machine guns, babies cry, and women scream, forcing the men to fight. Jesus runs without looking back, loses his friends and some of his belongings, but manages to escape. He then crosses into Ecuador, where he works as a car guard and survives, alternating with other migrant companions, providing each other company and protection. As usual, he calls his mother, but he softens the scene and creates a real adventure in the imagination of his siblings; he wants them to see him as solid and protective. According to the Royal Spanish Academy, an arepa is a type of circular bread prepared in Colombia and Venezuela, which is made from corn softened by slow cooking and then ground, or from pre-cooked corn flour, which is cooked on a griddle or hotplate. In Peru, he is shouted at: "Arepa, go back to your country" and "Police, be careful with this ragged boy, he's probably stealing". To cross the border into Bolivia, the coyotes ask for his mobile phone, and Jesus must hand it over because it is the only valuable thing he carries.

He manages to reach the last Bolivian town, Písiga Bolívar and crosses the border into Chile before the little lock on the iron gate of the Colchane border complex is put in place at six o'clock on the dot. First, he enters customs to be inspected by the Agricultural and Livestock Service (SAG), but they find nothing suspicious about his clothes; he has no luggage. Then, he is seen by the Investigation Police (PDI), but they cannot check his details online. The boy is

undocumented; he has no papers, and the photocopy of his identity card was reduced to a handful of wet and crumpled pieces when he crossed a river at a distant border. Tearful and sobbing, he tells the officer on duty that he was robbed by criminal gangs along the way, that they stole his backpack and mobile phone, and that he gradually lost his personal belongings until he was left with only the clothes on his back.

The police use a standard questionnaire and inform the Pozo Almonte Guarantee Court that he may be an unaccompanied minor. The judge decides that Jesus is a teenager separated from his family and entrusts his temporary protection to the Colchane Transitional Facility, set up next to the border complex. Tonight, Jesus spends the night in Chile's first refugee camp. It is a facility managed by the regional government of Tarapacá and supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations (UN, UNHCR, among others).

The young migrant is given a snack: a cup of boiling tea in a cardboard cup and a roll with margarine and Gouda cheese wrapped in a napkin. He is told that he can bathe and sleep in a bunk bed because he has been granted refugee accommodation. At the same time, he is waiting for the court decision that will determine his placement in a public shelter for children or for a voucher to buy a bus ticket to Santiago, where he could be reunited with distant relatives who assure him that they will take him in. Colchane is a hamlet in the middle of the desert and the highlands, more than four thousand meters above sea level. There, oxygen is scarce, and breathing and even the simplest everyday tasks become challenging. The weather also scorches during the day and is below-freezing at night. The area is sparsely populated, most inhabitants being Aymara natives who practice transhumance, moving around the land with their animals in search of food. Colchane is strategically located and built to establish a foothold on Chile's northern border.

In recent years, Venezuelans have been arriving in Chile. In the early days of the diaspora, these were middle-class professionals whose situation had been affected by the crisis, arriving by air with a straightforward migration plan that included work and housing. However, during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period, the migration pattern has changed, and it is now expected to see impoverished people and even minors arriving on foot through the Southern Cone, who could be considered refugees, as in the case of Jesus.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of unaccompanied migrant children remains a pressing concern that requires continued research, advocacy, and action. While significant progress has been made in understanding their experiences and

addressing their needs, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring access to education, health care, and legal protection. Going forward, policymakers, practitioners, and advocates must prioritize the rights and well-being of unaccompanied migrant children and foster inclusive and supportive environments that enable them to thrive and fulfill their potential.

Given the ongoing global migration crisis and the increasing number of unaccompanied minors seeking refuge, concerted efforts are needed to strengthen international cooperation, improve child protection mechanisms, and promote sustainable solutions that uphold the dignity and rights of all migrant children, regardless of their legal status or background.

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