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Attention to Migrant Children and Adolescents in Sonora: Experiences from CSOs and the State

Atención a NNA migrantes en Sonora: experiencias desde las OSC y el Estado

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to analyze the experiences in caring for migrant children and adolescents on the northern border of Mexico based on the work carried out by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and a Social Assistance Center (CAS) in the state of Sonora, which in turn allows the identification of the main problems faced by the international migration in its transit through this state. From a qualitative methodology that includes interviews, analysis of government documents, and ethnographic work carried out in shelters between 2020 and 2022, it is observed that the main factors affecting the integral care for migrant children and adolescents are the detention by agents of the National Institute of Migration (INM), the dismantling of the State regarding the activities carried out by CSOs, the lack of economic resources for the organizations themselves, and the deficiencies in care models.

Keywords: 1. children, 2. migration, 3. Mexico, 4. civil society, 5. State.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las experiencias en la atención hacia niñas, niños y adolescentes (NNA) migrantes en la frontera norte de México, a partir del trabajo realizado por organizaciones de la sociedad civil (OSC) y por un Centro de Asistencia Social (CAS) en el estado de Sonora. Esto permite identificar las principales problemáticas que enfrenta la migración internacional en su tránsito por la entidad. A partir de una metodología cualitativa que incluye entrevistas, análisis de documentos gubernamentales y trabajo etnográfico desarrollado en albergues entre 2020 y 2022, se observa que los principales factores que afectan la atención integral a la niñez y adolescencia migrante son la detención por parte de los agentes del Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), la desarticulación del Estado respecto a las actividades de las OSC, la falta de recursos económicos de las propias organizaciones y las deficiencias en los modelos de atención.

Palabras clave: 1. infancias, 2. migración, 3. México, 4. sociedad civil, 5. Estado.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, international migration in Latin America and the Caribbean has gained unprecedented prominence due to political and economic crises, climate change-related natural disasters, violence, and persecution, particularly in the region's most disadvantaged countries. These factors have contributed to a significant rise in the number of individuals living outside their country of birth. In this context, McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou (2021) report that "there were around 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population" (p. xii), reflecting an increase of approximately 60 million since 2010.

Given the dynamic nature of current migration trends, the group of children and adolescents (NNA)[2] (Hernández Hernández & Curiel Sedeño, 2022) is the most vulnerable among those involved in international migration. For this reason, considering the widespread violence across Mexican territory, it is essential to prioritize the protection of this population and ensure their access to fundamental rights (García-Jiménez, 2020; González Arias & Araluce, 2021; Moreno Villa, 2021; Roldán Andrade, 2021).

Until just over a decade ago, migration figures and the specific experiences of minority groups, such as NNAs, had been largely overlooked (García Vidalez et al., 2008). Over time, the visibility of minors in migratory contexts has increased, reinforcing the understanding that migrant children and adolescents are agents with their own capacity for decision-making and capable of undertaking migratory journeys (Chavez & Menjívar, 2010; Vega Villaseñor & Camus Bergareche, 2021). In this regard, Hernández Hernández and Curiel Sedeño (2022) contend:

> Over the last five years, the phenomenon of migration has become more complex, massively involving girls, boys, adolescents, and young people, who have joined recent migratory flows, witnessing the contrasts between openness and rejection from official policies by States as well as societies. (p. 17)

Based on data regarding the flow of foreign NNAs in Mexico presented by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM),[3] the number of cases recorded was 31 717 in 2018, rising sharply to 53 507 in 2019 (Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas [UPMRIP], 2023b). Notably, 2019 recorded the highest number of minors reported to the Institute during the second half of the decade, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, in 2020 the number of minors detained decreased significantly to 11 262. However, the figure increased again to 75 592 in 2021, followed by 71 207 in 2022, and 113 660 in 2023 (Rodríguez Ordoñez, 2024).

In Sonora, statistics on irregular migration involving NNAs indicate a notable increase beginning in 2018, with 396 cases recorded that year compared to 4 160 cases registered by December 2023. It is important to highlight that the subgroup of girls and boys aged 0 to 11 years, primarily accompanied

[2] The acronym NNA refers to girls, boys, and adolescents (in Spanish: *niñas, niños y adolescentes*) in a context of mobility, ranging in age from 0 to 17 years.

[3] National Institute of Migration (unofficial translation).

by guardians, experienced the most significant growth. While 179 cases were documented in this age group in 2018, the number rose sharply to 2 676 by 2023 (UPMRIP, 2022b).

Table 1 illustrates a sustained increase since 2018 in the number of individuals undertaking migratory journeys at increasingly younger ages. This trend underscores the urgent need to strengthen protection protocols and support pathways at the state level, a concern that has been consistently highlighted by civil society organizations and international bodies (Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración [IMUMI], 2022).

Table 1. Events of NNAs in Irregular Migration Status in Sonora, 2018-2023

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
From 12 to 17 years old	183	638	364	435	991	1 470
Accompanied	70	360	95	168	589	1 081
Unaccompanied	113	278	269	267	402	389
From 0 to 11 years old	186	627	278	1 803	1 816	2 690
Accompanied	179	617	269	1 772	1 805	2 676
Unaccompanied	7	10	9	31	11	14
Total	396	1 265	642	2 238	2 807	4 160

Source: Own elaboration using data from UPMRIP (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022a, 2023a).

The sustained increase in migration statistics recorded in Sonora since 2021 is linked to reforms enacted in November 2020 to the Migration Law (Ley de Migración, 2011) and the Ley sobre Refugiados, Protección Complementaria y Asilo Político (LRPCAP,[4] 2011). A key provision of these reforms is the prohibition of detaining children and adolescents in situations of mobility. However, despite this legal framework, detentions of minors continue to be documented in various regions across Mexico, leading to ongoing disputes in practice (Ortega Velázquez, 2023).

In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in providing care to migrant NNAs in transit through Mexico (Garkisch et al., 2017; Vega Villaseñor & Camus Bergareche, 2021), with a particular focus on the state of Sonora (Landeros Jaime & Gómez Johnson, 2023). These organizations primarily lead initiatives aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of the migratory journey, bearing witness to the physical and emotional harm caused by violence, poverty, and marginalization among migrant populations. Notably, such social interventions predate the current efforts of the State (García Borja & Viales Mora, 2021), which are implemented through the Centros de Asistencia Social (CAS).[5] The primary objective of these centers is to protect people in mobility using state-provided resources.

[4] Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum (unofficial translation).
[5] Social Assistance Centers (unofficial translation).

Although the purposes of both actors may appear similar, it is essential to distinguish between the services provided by the State and those delivered by organized civil society, based on the perspectives of those offering support. Accordingly, this article aims to analyze the experiences of migrant children and adolescents regarding the care they receive at Mexico's northern border, with a focus on the work of CSOs and a CAS in the state of Sonora. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the primary challenges faced by this population during their transit through the border region.

The following section provides a conceptual overview of CSOs to offer a comprehensive understanding of their work. It also describes the main characteristics of the CAS operating in Sonora. Subsequently, the relevant Mexican legislation on international migration concerning children and adolescents is reviewed, followed by a presentation of the methodological approach, the main findings, and, finally, the conclusions.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF CSOs AND CAS IN SONORA

For over three decades, CSOs[6] have played a vital role in providing care to migrant populations transiting through Sonora. While these organizations initially focused on humanitarian assistance, their work has progressively expanded to include legal counseling and human rights advocacy. This evolution responds to increasing migratory flows and a diversification of migration drivers, which primarily involve violence, persecution, harassment, poverty, and marginalization (García-Jiménez, 2020; Landeros Jaime & Gómez Johnson, 2023).

In addition to diversifying their activities, the number of CSOs serving migrants in Sonora has increased substantially. In 2015, 11 organizations were reported across the cities of Agua Prieta, Nogales, and San Luis Río Colorado (Moreno Mena & Niño Contreras, 2013). By 2023, this number had more than doubled to 23. Moreover, their presence expanded to include the municipalities of Hermosillo, Ciudad Obregón, Altar, Caborca, and Guaymas, which are strategically significant due to the migratory routes used by individuals transiting through Sonora (Llanos Reynoso, 2023).

Social Assistance Centers (CAS) represent another key actor in the care of migrant children and adolescents. These residential facilities provide shelter for minors who lack parental or family care. CAS include both public and private institutions and are regulated by the Procuraduría de Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (PPNNA)[7] in Sonora. Their principal mandate is to uphold the best interests of the child. As Ortega Velázquez (2023) explains, it is within CAS "where migrant girls, boys, and adolescents will remain during the administrative procedure to determine their migratory status in the country" (p. 352). It is also important to highlight that, from the perspective of both academia and civil society organizations, CAS are often viewed as

[6] In this article, CSOs are defined as "groups of people that emerge from society, who share ideas, objectives, and goals, and whose primary activities are aimed at addressing specific needs without profit motives, with the main purpose of benefiting society" (Landeros Jaime & Gómez Johnson, 2023, pp. 32-33).

[7] Office for the Protection of Girls, Boys, and Adolescents (unofficial translation).

transitional spaces that precede the deportation of migrant children and adolescents fleeing violence and marginalization in their places of origin (Ortega Velázquez, 2023; Saiz Valenzuela, 2023).

In Sonora, the enactment of the Ley General de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (LGDNNA,[8] 2014) led to the creation of the Dirección General de Regulación de Centros de Asistencia Social,[9] under the authority of the PPNNA. However, it was not until 2018 that the official guidelines for the authorization, registration, certification, and supervision of CAS in the state were published in the Boletín Oficial del Estado de Sonora.[10] According to documents from the Sistema para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia[11] (DIF Sonora, 2023b), there are currently 33 CAS operating across various municipalities in the state. Among them is the Tin Otoch shelter, which began operations in 2018 in the city of Hermosillo. Its primary objective is to provide temporary residential care to migrant children and adolescents referred by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM),[12] with the aim of determining their best interest while prioritizing family unity.

Based on the conceptual framework of CSOs and the characteristics of CAS, it is important to emphasize that although both organized civil society and the State aim to ensure the emotional and physical well-being of migrant children and adolescents, substantial differences exist in their operation and administration. These differences are particularly evident in areas such as access to financial resources, models of care, the overall vision of public protection policies, institutional response capacity, and the nature of their obligations and responsibilities.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES REGARDING THE MIGRATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MEXICO

Since the enactment of the LGDNNA (2014), the detention of migrant children and adolescents has been formally prohibited in Mexico. Nevertheless, the INM continued to detain and deport minors, as the Migration Law (Ley de Migración, 2011) still permitted such practices: “Given that the detention of migrants in Mexico is the norm, the INM refused to release children until the Migration Law was reformed” (IMUMI, 2021, p. 2). Within this context, civil society organizations operating across various regions of the country and assisting migrant populations advocated for the effective termination of detention practices involving migrant children and adolescents.

Thus, on November 11, 2020, Congress approved amendments to the Migration Law (Ley de Migración, 2011) and the LRPCAP (2011), explicitly prohibiting migrant NNA from being held in immigration detention centers (or migration stations, MS). The reforms also established the issuance

[8] General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (unofficial translation).
[9] General Directorate for the Regulation of Social Assistance Centers (unofficial translation).
[10] Official Gazette of the State of Sonora (unofficial translation).
[11] System for the Integral Development of the Family (unofficial translation).
[12] National Migration Institute (unofficial translation).

of the visitor card for humanitarian reasons, including for their family members, in order to ensure the full exercise of their rights in Mexico (Decree of 2020).

According to the Red de Documentación de Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes[13] (REDODEM, 2022), there is a discrepancy between the provisions established by law and the everyday practices of actors involved in international migration, which undermines the legislative progress achieved in Mexico. This gap is evidenced by the documentation and systematization of cases conducted by organizations across the country (IMUMI, 2021).

It is important to emphasize that after the approval of the 2020 legislative amendments, federal entities were given a 60-day period to adopt the new guidelines. However, according to the civil society organizations analyzed, this deadline has not yet been met. This situation endangers the physical and emotional integrity of migrant NNAs, who are detained by immigration authorities, then referred to CAS, and subsequently, in many cases, deported (Ortega Velázquez, 2023; Saiz Valenzuela, 2023).

In this regard, it becomes evident that the State's intervention and its efforts to contain international migration, not only along its route through Sonora but throughout Mexican territory, are, to some extent, counterbalanced by the humanitarian and legal assistance offered by CSOs, which consistently uphold human rights principles for people in mobility, despite the limitations discussed below.

Thus, the momentum generated by academia (Valdéz-Gardea, 2008), civil society organizations (IMUMI, 2021), and international bodies (Álvarez Gutiérrez & Castillo Koschnick, 2019) has initiated a series of conceptual and operational changes within the State concerning NNA (Secretaría de Gobernación y Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes [SIPINNA], 2022). It is also important to underscore that the concept of agency is critical for understanding the migratory trajectories of children and adolescents (Chavez & Menjívar, 2010; Hernández Hernández & Curiel Sedeño, 2022), particularly given the pervasive violence in various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. This context has driven improvements in the documentation and systematization of cases involving violence affecting this migrant population (Álvarez Gutiérrez & Castillo Koschnick, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative methodological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff at the Tin Otoch CAS, located in Hermosillo and managed by DIF Sonora. Additionally, data and information were gathered from individuals providing care to migrants through CSOS based in Hermosillo, Nogales, San Luis Río Colorado, and Agua Prieta. This ethnographic research (Guber, 2001) was carried out between September 2020 and December 2022, incorporating both interviews and direct observation sessions.

[13] Network for Documentation of Migrant Defense Organizations (unofficial translation).

In the case of the Tin Otoch CAS, initial contact was established through visits prior to fieldwork, aimed at understanding the experiences of Central American migrant families regarding access to education. Subsequently, formal contact was made with CAS management, as well as the psychology and social work departments, and some staff from the dining area, all of whom agreed to participate in interviews. It is important to note that this article also draws on data collected during visits and training sessions for CAS staff, in which the author participated as part of the migrant childhood team at the Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración A. C. (IMUMI).

Regarding contact with CSOs providing care to the migrant population in Sonora, the initial phase involved mapping these organizations across the state's municipalities. After identifying those that had served NNAs in recent years, contact was established through email, phone calls, and messages. Additionally, this study draws on data collected from observation sessions, training, workshops, and pro bono work, primarily related to research and legal advocacy conducted for some of these organizations.

Regarding the characteristics of the study participants, it is noteworthy that most individuals working within CSOs reported extensive experience in providing care to migrant populations, with some tracing their involvement back to the 1980s. In contrast, certain professionals at the CAS managed by DIF Sonora reported comparatively less experience in humanitarian assistance for vulnerable groups.

The academic backgrounds of the participants were diverse, including lawyers, psychologists, specialists in commerce and marketing, and social workers. Additionally, the group included a pastor, a priest, and a teacher. It is important to note that some testimonies presented here come from individuals who chose not to disclose details about their academic qualifications, emphasizing instead that the willingness to serve those living in vulnerable conditions is more important "beyond credentials" (P. Dolores, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Regarding the thematic categories of interest (Kuckartz, 2014; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019), the inquiry focused on the main challenges encountered in providing care to the migrant NNA population. These included the harms experienced during migration due to detentions; the existence of collaborative networks between the State and organized civil society concerning NNA; issues of violence; and models of care. Additionally, public information requests were submitted via the Plataforma Nacional de Transparencia,[14] and inquiries were made regarding social programs, the operational guidelines of CAS in Sonora, and regulations governing the allocation of material resources for these centers. Field notes were also utilized to integrate ethnographic and sociological analysis with a literary style (Landeros Jaime, 2020).

[14] The agencies that responded to the information requests through the National Transparency Platform (unofficial translation), included: the INM (2020), the Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Social (INDESOL, 2020), the Dirección General de Atención a Grupos Prioritarios y Migrantes (2020), the Secretaría de Gobierno del Estado de Sonora (2022a, 2022b), and the DIF Sonora (2024).

The analysis of data collected during fieldwork and documentary research was supported using the qualitative and mixed-method analysis software Maxqda2020 (Kuckartz, 2014; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). This facilitated systematic data triangulation, enabling the identification of highly relevant emerging categories.

In preparing this article, the author adopted the ethical stance of a researcher, as a member of a multidisciplinary university group focused on analyzing international migration. Additionally, the author is involved with civil organizations and collectives that aim to generate knowledge to support advocacy initiatives designed and implemented by CSOs, with the goal of improving the quality of life for people in mobility, like other professionals working in migration contexts (Vega Villaseñor & Camus Bergareche, 2021). The main findings are presented below.

CHALLENGES IN THE CARE OF MIGRANT NNA IN SONORA

Life at the Tin Otoch CAS unfolds quietly, with few people visible. The high temperatures characteristic of Sonora's summer lead individuals to avoid prolonged exposure to the sun, often seeking refuge in air-conditioned spaces to alleviate the heat. This pattern is evident within the CAS. Amidst feelings of sadness, anxiety, and despair, the migrant NNAs await the passage of time necessary to heal both the physical and emotional wounds incurred during their migratory journey from their place of origin to Mexico's northern border.

Within the shelter, a television area offers a space where a group of adolescents can be seen smiling while watching cartoons. A large dining hall serves as a common area for conversations between migrant girls and the women preparing lunch. Far from being noisy, the atmosphere is characterized by a pervasive silence. However, for Adalberto,[15] a 14-year-old youth from Guatemala, it is precisely sound that brings him peace and tranquility. In a secluded corner, with the director's permission, he listens to Spanish-language rap music on a cell phone and speaker at a moderate volume.

This adolescent, of slender build and short stature, fled his country of origin due to gang-related issues. His family sent him to seek better opportunities elsewhere, providing instructions on what to say if detained by immigration authorities, as eventually occurred. Throughout his journey, he encountered violence, drug-related challenges, and other hardships, which have adversely affected him. According to staff at Tin Otoch, he has repeatedly run away from the CAS. "But days later, he returns determined to recover. He always tells us that he feels the urge to use drugs, which is why he asked us for a speaker. Music is his way to distract himself" (S3, personal communication, October 8, 2020).

As with other migrant groups (Landeros Jaime, 2021, 2022; Landeros Jaime et al., 2022), the violence Adalberto experienced both in his place of origin and during his journey was reproduced upon arrival due to the insecurity prevalent in various regions of Mexico. Despite detention by the

[15] The real names of individuals participating in this study who are affiliated with government institutions have been withheld. Interviews with public administration staff are identified using an initial letter followed by the interview number. In contrast, pseudonyms are employed to refer to those working within organized civil society.

INM, this violence "continues due to the lack of comprehensive care from the authorities" (Jesús, personal communication, November 10, 2020).

Adalberto's story exemplifies a recurring cycle of violence impacting migrant NNAs, whose documentation and care become increasingly complex. In this context, key obstacles to providing comprehensive care to migrant NNA have been identified based on the experiences of those offering assistance through CSOs and the State. These challenges include: *1)* detention by INM agents; *2)* a lack of coordination between the State and CSO activities; *3)* insufficient financial resources within these organizations; and *4)* shortcomings in existing care models.

Detention of NNA in Migration Stations and its Impacts

Most migrant NNAs housed at the Hermosillo CAS have experienced various forms of violence in their countries of origin, during their migratory journey, and even upon arrival, often at the hands of Mexican authorities. This has been documented by the team of psychologists at Tin Otoch through interviews conducted with girls, boys, and adolescents entering the shelter following detention by INM agents in multiple municipalities across Sonora. Despite current legislation designed to prioritize the best interests of migrant children during their stay in migration stations (MS) throughout the country, this population continues to face violations by state authorities, as reported by the NNA themselves upon entry to the CAS and corroborated by documents provided by DIF Sonora in early 2024 (DIF Sonora, 2024).

This situation overlooks a critical legal fact: the detention of migrant NNAs in MS is explicitly prohibited within Mexican territory (LGDNNA, 2014). Nonetheless, the practice persists despite repeated denunciations from organized civil society (Kuhner, 2022), academia (Ortega Velázquez, 2023; Saiz Valenzuela, 2023), and international organizations. In this context, staff at the Tin Otoch CAS report that the physical and emotional deterioration observed in migrant NNA upon entering the MSs is exacerbated by "deplorable care, especially in terms of health and nutrition, provided in those places" (M1, personal communication, October 17, 2020).

> [The situation worsens] because there's no space. The population held in INM migration stations is not being provided with adequate facilities. If they're taken [to the hospital], it's because their health condition has already become critical; otherwise, they don't get access. Some get sick and there's no one to care for them. (M1, personal communication, October 17, 2020)

> Yes, only individuals who were admitted to the migration station. We've treated around 135 people. What the minors tell me is that they are just locked up. The main issue is confinement in the MSs. (V2, personal communication, November 10, 2020)

The contrast between existing legislation and reported practices highlights the complex realities faced by people in mobility, particularly migrant NNA. While there are efforts to improve their living conditions, at least during their stay in Sonora, it is widely recognized that admission to MS constitutes one of the primary challenges affecting this population. As one CAS staff member

explained, “Improvisation is necessary due to the limited space in the MS” (M1, personal communication, October 8, 2020).

According to the care team at the Tin Otoch CAS, their primary mission is to protect, shelter, and stabilize migrant children and adolescents, while ensuring that their human rights are upheld. This aligns with the principles set forth in the LGDNNA (2014), as well as the regulatory guidelines for CAS issued by the PPNNA and implemented through local procedures (DIF Sonora, 2023b). However, testimonies from public officials indicate that, in practice, most of these processes ultimately lead to the deportation of NNA (Aoyama & Gutiérrez, 2017), justified by claims that such actions comply with international human rights and migration standards to which Mexico is a signatory (IMUMI, 2021; El Diario de Sonora, 2024).

> The fact that they are here, in the shelter, does not change their immigration status; the number of days they will remain here is the same as if they were in a migration station. [For example,] if there is a support network in the country of origin, the girl is returned. (V2, personal communication, November 25, 2020)

It is important to emphasize that the greater the number of actors involved in the migratory journey of people on the move, the more complex and challenging the process becomes (Landeros Jaime & Maas Pérez, 2022). This complexity is evident in the case of children and adolescents arriving in the border state of Sonora, whose transit through state child protection offices and migration stations, before ultimately reaching a CAS, marks the start of a new journey that often culminates in their imminent return to their place of origin. This occurs regardless of whether their lives are at risk due to widespread violence, particularly in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Such is the case of Adalberto, who, according to staff at the Tin Otoch CAS, is currently awaiting the commencement of this deportation and return process.

Despite the numerous challenges faced by NNAs during their migratory journey, many choose to continue migrating toward the United States. As noted in an awareness workshop at Tin Otoch, “the 17 adolescent males who made up the group were determined to return and attempt to cross the border again, even those without support networks” (field notes, August 3, 2022). In this context, it is crucial to recognize the agency of NNAs, as emphasized by Chavez and Menjívar (2010), and to understand the social imagination that links migration to family history as both a life achievement and a strategy to confront economic hardship, violence, persecution, and harassment experienced in their place of origin. It is only through this lens that the needs of these migrant groups can be systematically identified and addressed.

If authorities deport Adalberto to Guatemala, it is highly likely that, after a period of physical and psychological recovery, he will attempt the migratory journey to the border again, either alone or as part of a caravan, seeking an opportunity to cross into U.S. territory irregularly, albeit “without a real certainty of achieving his goal” (Hernández Hernández & Curiel Sedeño, 2022, p. 18).

> For these children and adolescents, the goal is to grow up and migrate to the United States. Their economic circumstances compel them to leave, while threats from gangs targeting their families

> often result in their being sent to relatives in the United States. Alternatively, some have parents living abroad and seek family reunification, having previously lived with their grandmothers. Opportunities for personal advancement in their place of origin are severely limited. (V2, personal communication, November 25, 2020)

Given the multiple factors contributing to the vulnerability of migrant NNAs—including detention in migration stations, persecution by criminal gangs, economic hardship, and the pursuit of family reunification (González Arias & Araluce, 2021; Vega Villaseñor & Camus Bergareche, 2021; García Borja & Viales Mora, 2021)—the work of CSOs is invaluable. These organizations provide legal and psychosocial case follow-up to help mitigate the challenges faced by this population in Mexico (Javier, personal communication, November 1, 2020). However, because their care operates independently from the State, some CSOs face barriers when attempting to develop programs and initiatives that offer comprehensive support.

Impacts of the Distance Between the State and CSOs

The care provided to migrant children and adolescents (NNA) in Sonora requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort involving organized civil society actors, government institutions, international organizations, and academia. Such collaboration is essential to develop initiatives that uphold the best interests of the child. Without this joint effort, protecting this vulnerable population becomes increasingly difficult amid the pervasive violence that characterizes the current Mexican context.

Personnel working in CSOs in Sonora report a distancing by the State from the activities carried out by civil society, often in collaboration with international organizations and academia. This distancing is attributed to the interruption of federal financial support previously provided through the government of Sonora in 2019, resulting in uncertainty and a lack of continuity in the provision of legal and humanitarian assistance.

Between 2019 and 2023, the government of Sonora did not establish any collaboration agreements with civil society associations or organizations. Furthermore, according to data obtained from the National Transparency Platform, 2018 was the last year in which certain civil society shelters received federal funding through the Fondo de Apoyo a Migrantes (FAM)[16] based on formal agreements. It is important to note, however, that some of these shelters did not exclusively serve populations in mobility (Secretaría de Gobierno del Estado de Sonora, 2023). The same report indicates an exception in 2022, when only four civil society organizations—out of a total of 22 providing services to migrants in Sonora—received financial support from the Dirección General de Atención a Grupos Prioritarios y Migrantes.[17]

The limited support provided by government entities to organized civil society assisting migrants in Sonora contrasts with the increased resources allocated to CAS in recent years. As illustrated in Table 2, the budget executed and allocated for the period 2018-2024 shows that Tin Otoch CAS, the

[16] Migrant Support Fund (unofficial translation).
[17] General Directorate for Attention to Priority Groups and Migrants (unofficial translation).

focus of the ethnographic study, experienced a substantial increase in financial resources between 2018 and 2022.

Table 2. Budget spent and allocated to the CAS in Sonora (MXN), 2018-2024

Social Assistance Centers (CAS)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*
Temporary Shelter and Module for Migrating NNA in San Luis Río Colorado	867 731.11	4 851 237.39	4 316 985.98	4 172 240	12 381 302.98	8 755 511.24	4 999 341
Temporary Shelter and Module for Migrating NNA in San Luis Río Colorado	98 342.86	531 892.01	583 043.9	522 910.73	511 854.66	680 218.34	769 796
Tin Otoch CAS Hermosillo	861 435.46	6 447 447.48	6 957 008.10	7 979 248.36	48 532 684.46	21 138 950.71	9 303 290

*Authorized. Modified as of March 6, 2024.

Source: DIF Sonora (2024).

According to CSOs, the increased budget allocated to CAS in Sonora prompted some shelters to diversify their activities or close their facilities altogether: "The State opened shelters, such as Tin Otoch, and referrals to CSOs ceased; consequently, the support they received for each person sheltered or assisted also disappeared" (field notes, September 23, 2021).

A few weeks before the shelter that "Graciela" managed in San Luis Río Colorado closed, she described what had happened:

> About four years ago, all relations ended; it was transferred to Nogales. There is a very large shelter there managed by the state DIF, [therefore] fewer minors were sent here. The State moved everything to Nogales, Sonora. The number of minors decreased, so ways were sought to help socially, to diversify. Now, for example, talks are held for prisoners and general assistance is provided. Here, everything was done. In December, we are going to close everything completely. (Graciela, personal communication, November 8, 2020)

As support options in the state decreased, the greatest impact was felt by the very groups of NNAs, particularly in a context where humanitarian aid and advocacy provided by CSOs had previously made a difference for some minors (Glockner Fagetti, 2019). "The CAS do not receive migrant NNA referred by CSOs in Sonora. As psychologists indicated in an interview, only those detained by the INM are admitted" (field notes, January 22, 2021). "Occasionally, when children arrive accompanied by their mother, authorities at Tin Otoch reach out to shelters in the city of Hermosillo. The promise is to provide support during their stay, but what CSOs denounce is that this promise is not fulfilled" (field notes, September 12, 2021). In light of this, two public administration workers were asked whether they accept cases referred by CSOs in the state, and their responses were:

> No, but we would not refuse to provide care if the situation arose, although up to this point there have been no referrals from shelters, soup kitchens, or similar organizations. The majority of admissions come from the INM and the Attorney General's Office. (V2, personal communication, November 3, 2020)

> There is no coordination with civil society organizations that assist migrants. There is a regulatory area for CAS, but it is not focused on migration. State shelters seek partnerships with government entities or departments. Agreements are made with academic institutions, but not with soup kitchens or shelters. We have no collaboration. (M1, personal communication, November 10, 2020)

This lack of coordination among the actors involved in providing care to migrant NNAs in the region underscores a significant divergence between the agendas of the State and those of CSOs. Although CSOs currently serve as a fundamental pillar in supporting this migrant population (Perelló Carrascosa & Lacomba, 2020; Garkisch et al., 2017; París Pombo, 2018; París Pombo & Müller, 2016; Torre Cantalapiedra et al., 2021), they are not incorporated into the care pathways designed by governmental authorities. While both sectors aim to safeguard the best interests of children, this fragmented scenario exposes migrant NNAs to the pervasive aggression and violence present in Mexico. It is crucial to emphasize that, as noted earlier, the State holds the financial resources and institutional infrastructure necessary to implement a systematic care pathway that fully respects the human rights of NNAs.

Lack of Resources and Violence Along the Migratory Route

The violence experienced by NNAs during their migratory journeys to Mexico's northern border underscores the urgent need to strengthen protection protocols and care pathways implemented by authorities and other actors involved in migration. CSOs have documented the violent practices endured by NNAs in transit, particularly those of Central American origin, along their route from the southern border to the state of Sonora. As one organization representative explained, "They suffer physical and mental violence; they're locked in safe houses, deceived. They arrive dehydrated or with colds. With scrapes all over their bodies" (M1, personal communication, November 4, 2020). On this matter, the REDODEM observes that:

> Most migrants regard their journey through southern Mexico (from Chiapas to the State of Mexico) as a high-risk corridor. While the perceived level of violence tends to diminish as they move through the central region of the country, it increases once again upon reaching the northern region, where the strong presence of organized crime is a determining factor. (REDODEM, 2022, p. 197)

In this context of violence and diminishing economic resources, civil society organizations (CSOs) have focused their efforts on securing financial support from international agencies, private companies, donations, and foundations based abroad. While this has provided a degree of short-term stability, it does not address the long-term needs necessary to implement sustained and wide-reaching projects.

> The priority is community donations, which are intended for emergency responses. But in order to maintain operations, we've sought funding through other organizations. Two are currently supporting us, one is based in the United States and the other in Mexico City. Foreign funders

> are aware of the conditions in which Mexico currently finds itself (Javier, personal communication, November 6, 2020).

While the CAS dedicate all their financial and human resources to assisting migrant children and adolescents, the CSOs featured in this article, operating across various border cities in the state, must provide support to the broader migrant population,[18] including women, men, girls, boys, and adolescents. This occurs within a context in which the organizations themselves report that the State is a significant perpetrator of violent practices against migrants in Mexico (REDODEM, 2022).

In addition to the international migratory flow of NNAs, internal forced displacement in Mexico is steadily increasing due to violence, harassment, and persecution: "Here in the border region, many children arrive accompanied by their families because of the violence; there are many people who have just arrived from Sinaloa to the border" (Mariano, personal communication, November 6, 2020). This situation also poses an additional challenge for CSOs, which must diversify their services to include populations beyond NNA, since the CAS that serve migrants, at least according to the interviewees, do not admit internally displaced migrants.

> It used to be forced migration; now it is displaced migration. Due to criminal groups [gangs or organized crime], this population we are seeing, those currently staying here, has been displaced from their land, from their homes. The objective is always to provide care to the migrant population and not to forget them (Javier, personal communication, November 25, 2020).

The same "Javier," who directs an CSO in San Luis Río Colorado, notes that "in previous administrations, or past six-year terms, we were able to coordinate and sit down to talk. The issue is that the INM does not recognize the work done by civil society organizations" (Javier, personal communication, November 25, 2020). This lack of coordination forces them to work in isolation, generally addressing the broader population, which diminishes their capacity to provide targeted support to people in mobility who belong to minority groups, such as NNA.

As a result of the fragmentation and lack of resources reported by interviewees, the care model implemented by the State excludes civil society actors who support migrant children and adolescents. This exclusion places children and adolescents at risk, given the overcrowded conditions, limited access to healthcare, and inadequate nutrition they face in Migration Stations (EM). At the same time, space at the CAS in Hermosillo is reserved for migrant children detained by the INM and referred to this shelter, managed by DIF Sonora, through the PPNNA.

The Care Model and the Urgency of Protocols

Adalberto's arrival at the Tin Otoch CAS marked the final stage prior to initiating the deportation process to Guatemala. This process was managed by the CAS staff in coordination with DIF Sonora, the Office for the PPNNA, the INM, and the Consulate of the adolescent's country of origin, based on information he provided to psychologists and social workers: "family members in the place of origin are located to coordinate and mitigate risks" (M2, personal communication, November 6,

[18] Only the shelter managed by Graciela focused exclusively on migration involving children and adolescents.

2020). Between 2018 and 2022, the Tin Otoch CAS attended a total of 1,159 NNA originating from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, India, Ecuador, Cuba, and Peru (DIF Sonora, 2023a).

While the NNA remain at the Tin Otoch CAS in Hermosillo, they receive psychosocial support and continuous monitoring of their needs through the social work and legal departments. Additionally, recreational activities are organized and scheduled by education professionals and administrative staff at the CAS. "All of this is part of the model that Tin Otoch follows to care for the migrant population composed of NNA prior to repatriation" (M2, personal communication, November 6, 2020).

There is also the option to request recognition as a refugee before the *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance; Comar), although "generally, those who enter the state shelter are repatriated" (Graciela, personal communication, November 8, 2020), a situation that has also been noted in other studies (Aoyama & Gutiérrez, 2017). Seventeen adolescents residing at the CAS in Hermosillo, who participated in activities during training sessions provided to the Tin Otoch staff, were in the same situation as Adalberto. "I'm leaving Tuesday on the plane with them. But then I'm going to come back to try crossing again," stated a 17-year-old youth from Guatemala (field journal, May 17, 2021).

To avoid undergoing this process, migrant minors detained by immigration agents sometimes feel compelled to conceal their true identity in order to achieve their initial goal: reaching their destination, usually the United States, either to find employment that improves their family's living conditions in their country of origin or to reunite with relatives who previously made the same journey.

> We used to assist only migrant minors; they would pass as Mexicans, and immigration [referring to the INM] would transfer them to the shelter [until about three years ago]. That was the last step where we spoke directly with their families. However, if we could not speak with the families, the minors themselves would inform us that they were not Mexican (Graciela, personal communication, November 6, 2020).

As a preamble to the deportation process of migrant children and adolescents (NNA) in Sonora, they must have undertaken a long and arduous journey marked by various hardships, as described by a member of the CAS Tin Otoch team:

> They travel by bus, changing vehicles in each state; the person accompanying them also changes. Those I receive were detected at some point in Sonora by INM agents, whether on the train, highway, or at the border before crossing. Once apprehended, administrative paperwork is completed at the MS, and the PPNNA is notified to arrange their placement in the shelter. Then we begin our work and receive the NNAs. If they are detected at the border, they arrive accompanied by an official document. (M1, personal communication, November 12, 2020)

Admission to MS and subsequent deportation cause severe physical and emotional harm to NNAs. This issue was repeatedly highlighted not only by the staff at Tin Otoch but also by various organizations operating throughout Mexico that have promoted initiatives aimed at preventing the

detention of NNAs, a practice that, despite being prohibited by recent legislative reforms, continues to occur in the actions of authorities (El Diario de Sonora, 2024). Moreover, these authorities lack adequate training to attend to minority groups. This concern is echoed by "María," who has provided support to migrants since 2016 through the Legal Clinic of a civil society organization: "There are no specialized personnel. At most, you might find one or two; that is not enough" (María, personal communication, October 9, 2021).

As a result, CSOs emphasize the urgent need to design protocols that genuinely ensure the protection of vulnerable groups, such as migrant NNAs. This requires comprehensive involvement from all government agencies working in coordination with civil society. In this regard, María highlights that these protocols should not only focus on providing shelter but also on assisting individuals in resolving their migratory status within the country—offering both humanitarian support and legal advocacy (París Pombo & Müller, 2016). Such measures are critically important to uphold the principle of the best interests of the child:

> Protocols are lacking. For example, at COMAR there was no officer specialized in attending to migrant NNAs, which caused processes to take the same amount of time as for adults and prevented the implementation of measures specifically tailored to this group. In 2020, COMAR designated a single officer to handle NNA cases, but this was unofficial. This person provided follow-up, and clearly, if specialized attention were available for each group, the situation would improve significantly. (María, personal communication, October 9, 2021)

In the context of evolving migration dynamics, particularly concerning minority groups such as children and adolescents (NNA), it is essential that all actors involved design, implement, and evaluate comprehensive projects grounded in direct care proposals for migrant populations. Likewise, the relevance of current care models must be critically assessed, given the urgent need to standardize updates to regulations and existing laws regarding the responsibilities of authorities in migration matters.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of providing care to migrant NNAs at Mexico's northern border, as reported by CSOs and the Tin Otoch CAS, reveal key challenges faced by international migration transiting through Sonora. These accounts also emphasize the urgent need to develop public policies that protect children and adolescents from environments characterized by violence, harassment, persecution, poverty, and marginalization, problems that extend beyond Mexico to numerous locations worldwide.

Although the 2020 amendments to Mexican legislation concerning children and adolescents represent a significant advancement, it is necessary to adapt these legal provisions to the specific contexts of each federal entity, particularly those bordering the United States. This is the case in Sonora, where the collaboration of civil society organizations, international bodies, academia, and government is essential for implementing strategies that extend beyond the local level and address the global factors driving the forced migration of NNA.

It is important to note that the care pathway at the CAS, which involves the participation of the INM, DIF Sonora, the PPNNA, and the consulate of the migrant's country of origin, functions as a precursor to deportation, since the majority of those admitted to Tin Otoch return to their home countries, as confirmed by fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2022. Although the detention of migrant NNA in migration stations has been prohibited since 2020, the care pathway remains essentially unchanged; the only difference being that the time previously spent detained in an MS now occurs at the CAS.

In contrast to the above, it is important to emphasize that CSOs, through their humanitarian and advocacy efforts, expand the options available to migrant girls, boys, and adolescents passing through Sonora. For these organizations, shielding this population from the violence they face in their countries of origin is essential, making return one of the last options in their care pathway. Nonetheless, the support provided by CSOs is limited by a lack of financial resources necessary to develop long-term strategies. Conversely, the CAS located in Hermosillo receives increasing financial support each year, and its activities are more closely aligned with migration control, which, as interviewees indicate, culminates in deportation, a process that represents a traumatic experience for the NNA population.

The fragmented collaboration between the government and civil society organizations reported by informants in this article limits the respect for rights, access to dignified treatment, and, above all, the protection that migrant children and adolescents require in today's context of pervasive violence. It is essential that the State formally include the CSOs operating within the region, as they possess the necessary knowledge and experience to ensure that the best interests of the child constitute a cross-cutting priority, explicitly reflected in all action pathways implemented at the state level.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the insights presented here provide a foundation for revising the strategies implemented by both civil society and the State in recent years, recognizing that migration is a dynamic phenomenon necessitating approaches that adapt to the continual changes observed in migratory flows.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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