

# ***Many Families Torn Apart at the Southern Border Face a Long and Uncertain Wait***

Some parents are opting to try, once again, the dangerous trek north to rejoin the children who were kept in the U.S. by the Trump administration.



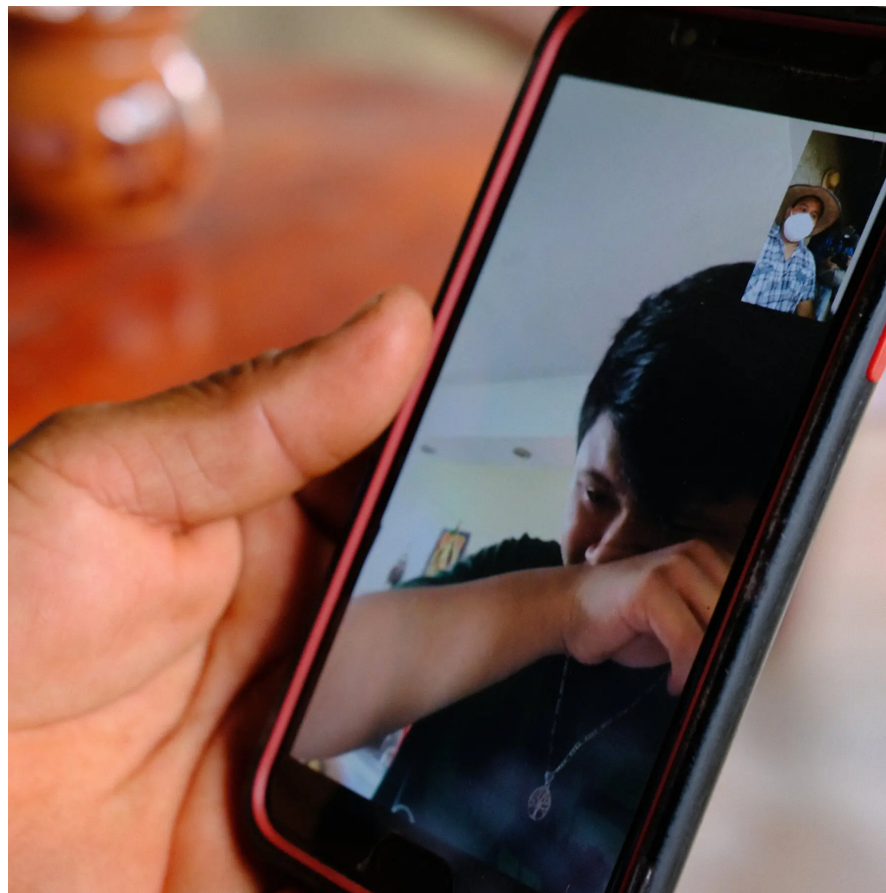
By **Brent McDonald**

May 4, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

HUEHUETENANGO, Guatemala — In a small village in the Guatemalan highlands, a father smiled into the tiny screen of a cellphone and held up a soccer jersey for the camera, pointing to the name emblazoned on the back: Adelso.

In Boca Raton, Fla., on the other end of the video chat, his son — Adelso — started to cry.

“I’ll send it to you,” the father, David, said during the call in March. “You need to be strong. We’re going to hug and talk together again. Everything’s going to be fine.”



David, in Guatemala, speaking with his son, Adelso, in Florida, over a video call. Brent McDonald/The New York Times

David, who asked that his family's last name not be published because he is facing death threats in Guatemala, has not seen Adelso in person in over three years, since they and about 5,500 other families were separated at the U.S.-Mexico border under [the Trump administration's most controversial immigration policy](#).

The distance and the uncertainty of a reunion prevent adults and children from rebuilding lives broken apart at the border, deepening the trauma caused by the separation, experts said. And in some cases, the pain of separation without an end in sight has encouraged parents to try, again, the dangerous trek over the U.S. border. Those who do, in a desperate effort to be with their children again, are re-enacting the crossing that cost them their children in the first place.

More than 5,500 migrant families were pulled apart at the southwest border beginning in 2017, under a policy later known as "zero tolerance." Adelso, now 15, is one of the more than 1,100 [migrant children](#) who are in the United States but separated from their parents, according to lawyers working on the issue. There are at least [another 445](#) who were taken from parents who have not been located.

The separated families received a jolt of hope in early February when President Biden signed an executive order to reunify the migrant families by bringing the deported parents into the United States.

This week, as migrant apprehensions at the southwest border approach a near 20-year high, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it would bring a handful of separated parents to the U.S. in the coming days. The process of reunifying them all could take months or years, and questions remain about what benefits will be offered to each of those families.

Adelso has lived the last three years with his aunt, Teresa Quiñónez, in Boca Raton, Fla., where she works as a real estate agent. She had come to the United States herself at 17, without her parents.

“I still remember him coming out of the airport, and his little face,” Ms. Quiñónez said, recalling when Adelso was released after two months in a shelter. “It’s heartbreaking.”

On most days, Adelso leads a normal teenage life, attending the local junior high school, playing soccer and going to the beach.



Adelso in Boca Raton, Fla., where he lives with his aunt. Brent McDonald/The New York Times

And then there are the days when the memories yank him back to the time, three years ago, when he and his father set off from their mountain town to escape death threats from people trying to extort David by targeting Adelso, perhaps because they mistook David for the owner of the trucking company where he works.

On those days, Adelso said, he struggles to function.

“Sometimes the feeling comes on strong, and I wonder why it had to happen on that day, when I am trying to do something,” he said. “And because of those memories, I do it wrong. It feels bad. I feel really awful.”

And then there are the nightmares. One in particular haunts him, in which his father is kidnapped and held for ransom — a nightmare he’s had many times since they were separated at the border, and always with the same ending.

“In my dream, I try to do something to help keep him alive, but I can never do it,” Adelso said. “In my dream they always kill him. And I’m afraid that it could be real.”

Once a month, Adelso has an hourlong session with a licensed child psychologist, Natalia Falcón-Banchs, with Florida State University’s Center for Child Stress and Health. The service is paid for by a government settlement of a lawsuit on behalf of separated migrant families.

“Those recurring memories, flashbacks of that traumatic event,” Dr. Falcón-Banchs said, are “one of the main symptoms of PTSD.”





The countryside near the Guatemalan town where David now lives after fleeing to avoid death threats. Brent McDonald/The New York Times

According to [a 2020 investigation by Physicians for Human Rights](#), many children separated from a parent at the border exhibited symptoms and behavior consistent with trauma: post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder. In some cases, the trauma stemmed partly from experiences in the child's home country, but researchers found it was likely linked to the separation itself.

Dr. Falcón-Banchs currently treats eight children between the ages of 6 and 16 who were separated from a parent in 2017 and 2018. Five of those children received a diagnosis of PTSD, anxiety and-or depression. Adolfo is faring better and has shown resilience and coping skills, she said.

In one case, a boy from Honduras who is now 13 suffered severe anxiety and PTSD after being separated from his mother for several months and placed in foster care. Being reunited with her didn't improve his condition right away, Falcón-Banchs said.

"When his mom first took him to school in the U.S., his brain responded in such a way that he began screaming and panicking and wanted to leave," she said. "When he was separated, he was told that he was 'lost in the system' and wouldn't be able to be reunited with his mom. So he was just crying, perhaps because of that association."

One factor that can deepen childhood trauma is prolonged separation of child and parent.

On Monday, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced that it would reunite four mothers and children who were "cruelly" and "intentionally" separated at the U.S.-Mexico border under the Trump administration.

"We continue to work tirelessly to reunite many more children with their parents in the weeks and months ahead," said Alejandro Mayorkas, the homeland security secretary. "Our team is dedicated to finding every family and giving them an opportunity to reunite and heal."

A status report from President Biden's reunification task force is expected on June 2 and may include plans for reunifying more families. The task force is also in settlement negotiations with the American Civil Liberties Union over its class-action lawsuit seeking relief for separated migrant families.

Lawyers with the A.C.L.U. and Al Otro Lado, a California-based group that provides legal support to migrants, say they had submitted David's name to the task force to be included in a trial run of some 35 reunifications to happen in the coming weeks.

"We don't anticipate any issues with the government granting return, but cannot say definitively at the moment," said Carol Anne Donohoe, David's lawyer with Al Otro Lado.

But before the government can reunify all families, it must first locate the hundreds who are still missing.



David near his home in Guatemala. Brent McDonald/The New York Times

Since 2018, lawyers and migrant advocate groups working in the United States and other countries have searched for parents and children whom [the Trump administration](#) did not track after separation.

And many families whose whereabouts were known have since moved or changed phone numbers, compounding the challenge of possible reunification.

Further complicating the task is that most migrants come from Central America, and three countries there — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — have experienced lockdowns during the pandemic, as well as widespread internal displacement from two hurricanes, Eta and Iota.

“We must find every last family and will not stop until we do,” said Lee Gelernt, the lead attorney for immigrant rights at the A.C.L.U.

But the process has been “extremely difficult and slow,” he said, adding that “many of the parents can only be found through on-the-ground searches.”

During a visit to a small Guatemalan town, a Times reporter learned of three parents who said they were forcibly separated from their children by U.S. border officials in 2018 and then deported. Two had already made the perilous return trip to the U.S., spending \$15,000 on a journey to reunite with their children in Florida.

“They returned for the kids, because they were left alone there,” said Eusevia Quiñónez, whose husband, Juan Bernardo, left with his older brother for Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Jan. 8. “Thank God, they arrived OK.”

Another father, Melvin Jacinto, was contacted by KIND, a children’s defense group, more than a year ago, but he doubts they will be able to help him. He again wants to try to enter the United States to reunite with his son, Rosendo, in Minneapolis and to find work to support his family. He said talking on the phone with his son, who turned 18 last month and from whom he has been separated for three years, is emotionally difficult for him. He can’t help but cry.



Melvin Jacinto, right, wants to try to enter the United States to reunite with his son, Melvin, after they were separated in 2018. Brent McDonald/The New York Times

“It’s like I’m traumatized or something,” Mr. Jacinto said. “I’m not good. I don’t sleep, not at all.”

Psychologists working with separated families say that family reunification is just one step in the healing process, and that the parents have as much need for mental health counseling as the children. Many parents blame themselves for the separation, and after reunification the children, too, often blame the parents.

David, who has suffered from stress-induced gastritis and other health complications since the separation, said he had also considered hiring a smuggler to get back to the U.S. to reunite with Adelso.

“I need to see my son,” he said. “And he needs me.”