[<**'I Want To Be Sure My Son Is Safe': Asylum-Seekers Send Children Across Border Alone**](https://www.npr.org/2019/11/27/783360378/i-want-to-be-sure-my-son-is-safe-asylum-seekers-send-children-across-border-alon)

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ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

Here's an unthinkable choice - stay together as a family in a dangerous and squalid refugee camp on the U.S.-Mexico border, or give your child up in the hope that he or she has a shot at asylum. This is the choice that some migrant parents are making. They're stuck in Mexico because of President Trump's asylum policies, and they are sending their unaccompanied children across a bridge that connects the two countries.

NPR's John Burnett has been tracking their journey, and he joins us now from Texas near the Mexico border. Hi, John.

JOHN BURNETT, BYLINE: Hey, Ari.

SHAPIRO: How bad do circumstances have to be for a parent to do this, send their child alone across a bridge into an unknown country?

BURNETT: It's both an act of desperation and of love. You have to understand the conditions in this makeshift refugee camp that sprang up in Matamoros, just across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas. Two-thousand people are living in Coleman camping tents that were designed for weekends at the lake, not as a winter refuge for a family for many months. When it rains, they leak. When a cold front blows in, they shiver. The camp is filthy. People are sick. The Porta-Johns are overflowing. There are criminals everywhere. And under an asylum policy called Remain in Mexico, applicants have to wait up to six months in these grim conditions before they get a hearing in U.S. immigration court. And then nearly all their claims are being rejected.

SHAPIRO: So why aren't parents crossing the border with their children?

BURNETT: Well, adults and families who apply for asylum together are sent back to Mexico. But the federal rules are different for unaccompanied kids. They can't be returned to Mexico, so the parents take advantage of that.

SHAPIRO: OK. Well, let's listen to your story about some of these parents.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BURNETT: I met three very sad Honduran fathers, who recently decided to send their sons across the international bridge. In the camp, people call it la separacion. I walked up on Alexis Martinez when he was on his cell phone trying to talk to his sons in the U.S.

ALEXIS MARTINEZ: (Speaking Spanish).

BURNETT: Unfortunately, the call drops. Martinez last saw his two sons - 7-year-old Osiel and 5-year-old Benjamin - on November 17. They were holding hands, their faces streaked with tears, bravely walking across the Gateway International Bridge. The father says he had to send them. Little Benjamin had been gravely sick, and Martinez couldn't afford any more antibiotics.

MARTINEZ: (Through interpreter) They were sleeping on the ground in the cold. On one occasion, my youngest contracted bronchial pneumonia. These tents are not good for children because the cold goes right through them. Sometimes you do things not because you're a bad father, but because you want what's good for them. And you don't want to see them suffer.

BURNETT: His sons are now being held in a juvenile shelter in Philadelphia, overseen by the Federal Office of Refugee Resettlement. Martinez hopes his boys will be released to live with their mother in New York City. He and his wife are estranged.

These ORR shelters have been criticized for their rigid rules and extended confinement. But conditions there are a dramatic improvement over life in the camp. A good example is the lack of medical care.

MAURA SAMMON: What's happening down here is breaking my heart. These are some of the most vulnerable people on the planet.

BURNETT: Dr. Maura Sammon is on the faculty at Temple University. She's volunteering at a pop-up clinic in the Matamoras camp. She says the Mexican state provides no health care to the migrants. A vivid example, she says she recently diagnosed an 8-year-old boy from Chiapas, Mexico with acute appendicitis. They sent him to a Mexican hospital, and the hospital sent him back untreated. He got worse. Volunteers frantically tried to get U.S. immigration officials to accept the child and his father so he could be treated at a Texas hospital.

SAMMON: Because of the delay in his care, us having to go through all of the legal hoops to try to get him across, his appendix ruptured.

BURNETT: The child eventually made it to a Texas hospital, and Sammon says he's doing well. The Homeland Security Department did not respond to a request for comment. When questioned before about appalling conditions in Mexican border towns where asylum seekers are waiting, senior DHS officials have replied that parents should not bring children on these harrowing journeys in the first place. And further, they say Mexico has assured the Trump administration that migrants are being taken care of.

Marvin Yobani Zelaya disagrees. He and his 17-year-old son, Marvin Joel, fled to Tegucigalpa because he says MS-13 gangsters were trying to recruit the teenager. Now the same thing is happening with thugs who hang around the Matamoras encampment. Zelaya said goodbye to Marvin Jr. two weeks ago. His son crossed the border, and he's now in a child shelter. His father hopes he'll be released into the care of a great uncle in Dallas.

MARVIN YOBANI ZELAYA: (Through interpreter) I don't know what's going to happen to the parents. I don't know if the laws will ever permit us to reunite with our children. What happens to us is in God's hands. But I want to make sure my son is safe.

BURNETT: The third father I met in the Matamoras camp who sent his child away was Delmer Lopez.

DELMER LOPEZ: (Through interpreter) How do I say it? This was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.

BURNETT: Three weeks ago, he told his 10-year-old, Jose Armando, to cross the bridge alone to be with his mother and little sister who live in Houston. The parents are divorced.

LOPEZ: (Through interpreter) I told him don't worry. I'm coming. He said, promise me, Papi. I had to tell him a white lie. He had his little backpack, and inside was his favorite toy, a stuffed turtle, and his jacket, his passport, and his mother's phone number. We walked to the bridge, and I gave him five pesos to cross. He walked away and turned around and waved. The last thing I saw was my son being escorted away by two American officials.

SHAPIRO: John Burnett is still with us. And, John, what happens to these parents?

BURNETT: So, Ari, in the case of Delmer Lopez, he's already lost his asylum case. And he doesn't know what he'll do now, and he's too afraid to return to Honduras. He says thugs threatened to kill him there. And all of these parents know if they lose their asylum cases as a family, their children will never get to the U.S. At least if the child goes alone, they have a shot.

SHAPIRO: Have you been able to figure out how many parents are doing this?

BURNETT: We don't actually know. Jodi Goodwin is a longtime immigration lawyer in the Rio Grande Valley, and she says she has four clients in the Matamoras camp who've sent their kids to live in the U.S., including Delmer Lopez, who we just heard from. I met her in a coffee shop, and we talked about this painful choice.

JODI GOODWIN: That haunts me at night. And I'm snuggled in bed and hugging my 7-year-old. I can't imagine. I mean, I had one mom that sent her 3-year-old. How do you push a 3-year-old across a bridge and say, go, (speaking Spanish), go. This is better for you.

BURNETT: And she said something else. Goodwin was involved in lots of family separation cases. Remember; that's when the administration decided to punish parents for crossing the border illegally by physically removing their children from them. She told me those cases were wrenching, but when a parent decides my child is better off without me, Goodwin said, that's so much worse.

SHAPIRO: That's NPR's John Burnett on the Texas-Mexico border.

Thank you, John.

BURNETT: You bet, Ari.

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