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He crossed the border illegally but wasn't deported — because he brought his child

By [Jessica Contrera](#) June 25 at 6:03 PM



Undocumented immigrants from El Salvador leave the Catholic Charities respite center in McAllen, Tex., on May 30. The respite center once took in hundreds of immigrants each day. Now, they see only a few families, or none at all. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

McALLEN, Tex. — The 3-year-old girl takes her father's hand and follows him up the steps of a bus. He leads her down the aisle to a row near the back, picks her up and sets her in a window seat, so that when the bus starts to move, she can look out at her new country, the one they had crossed into illegally the day before.

"Estás cansada?" he asks her. Are you tired?

"No," she says, pressing her hand against the window.

He slides his backpack beneath his seat, beside the GPS monitor that had just been locked onto his ankle by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He and his daughter had been arrested near the Rio Grande. But instead of being deported or kept in detention, they found themselves here, on a Greyhound bus, with documents from ICE that say they are Miguel, 23, and Sandra, 3, of El Salvador — "aliens," as the documents call them, who

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have been released with a monitor, an assigned court date and permission to continue into the United States.

The bus backs out of the station, turns right onto a busy road, and begins a journey that used to be commonplace in this part of the country. If Miguel, who asked that he and his daughter be identified only by their first names, had crossed the Rio Grande six months earlier, before Donald Trump became president, this bus would have been packed with other families who had been detained and released by ICE as well. Now, they are practically alone.

Along the border, the impacts of Trump's immigration policies are visible everywhere: At the river, the number of people crossing into the United States has plummeted. At the detention facilities, fewer people are being detained. And at the McAllen bus station — a place where ICE has released more than 30,000 families since 2014, sometimes hundreds a day — the number of people coming in each day is sometimes down to just an overwhelmed man and his only child, with tickets that will take them 1,700 miles and 46 hours north to live with a relative in Cleveland.

“Look at the dresses,” Sandra says as the bus passes a clothing store.

Miguel looks instead at her. She must be tired, he thinks. Or at least hungry. He reaches for a bag carrying the only food they have for the trip. It had been given to them not by ICE, but by a stranger at the bus station. She had run up to them just before they boarded and passed them the bag, which was full of snacks and sandwiches. Miguel hands a sandwich to Sandra. She takes a bite. He does not know who the stranger was, only that she seemed to be in a hurry, and now there are seven sandwiches left and 46 hours to go.



Gabriela Lopez, who works with Catholic Charities, loads groceries in her car in McAllen on June 1. Gabriela buys groceries that the charity uses to make sack lunches for migrants moving north from throughout Latin America. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

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The stranger was Gabriela Lopez, a 19-year-old woman who works in a church a few blocks away, at the center of an operation that had become yet another example of the effects of Trump's presidency in this place. Inside the church was the Humanitarian Respite Center, founded by Catholic Charities in 2014, when a flood of people crossing the Texas border meant a flood of families released by ICE in McAllen. While they waited for their buses, the families could come to the respite center to eat, shower and call their relatives to announce that after weeks or months of traveling, they had reached the Rio Grande, climbed into inflatable rafts, cupped their hands and paddled to the United States.

Gabriela had given thousands of sandwiches to thousands of these families. She used to walk into work and find the respite center packed with parents and children, sometimes more than 300 in a day. On the afternoon she met Miguel and Sandra, she arrived at work to find the room nearly silent. She checked the sign-in sheet for families and saw just one name.

"Quien es Linda?" she asked her manager. Who is Linda?

"The girl that was here earlier," he told her. "She already left."

"Oh," Gabriela said. She put on her uniform, a vest that said Disaster Response across the back. Then she pulled out her iPhone, stared at it for a while, and began another day with no disaster to respond to.

In the months since Trump took office, the sign-in sheet had fewer names with each passing week. For a time, the respite center staff wondered if the families would stop being released completely. "Under my administration," Trump had said during his campaign, "anyone who illegally crosses the border will be detained until they are removed out of our country." He railed against the very policy that had allowed the families to come here: a policy critics have long called "catch and release." It was a routine developed for ICE and Border Patrol to handle the overwhelming number of parents and children, mostly from Central America, crossing the border to ask for asylum. Each released family would be allowed to go live with their relatives in the United States, as long as they appeared at the check-ins and court dates that would eventually determine whether they would be deported.

On his sixth day in office, Trump issued an executive order declaring the "termination" of catch and release. It has not been as simple as that declaration, though; there are laws and judicial orders in place that limit how long ICE can detain children, and in most cases, when a child is released, at least one of their parents is, too.

For the time being, catch and release was still happening, and Gabriela was still showing up at work every day, never knowing if it would be the one when the surge of people returns, or another when so few people cross the border, no families show up at the respite center at all.

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“We even used to complain about how many people were coming through. It would start at 8 a.m. — 60 people, 80 people, 90-people groups. So we were tired,” was how she described what the job once was. “But now, oh my God, we miss those groups.”

Gabriela tapped her fingers on the desk. The clothes to give the families were already organized. The ham-and-cheese sandwiches were already packed. She opened up Facebook and started to scroll, on a phone filled with photos of how her time used to be spent:

A photo of a young girl from Honduras whose mother was pregnant and had to be rushed to the hospital. Gabriela took her home and cooked her eggs for dinner.

A photo of another girl, this one also from Honduras, where anti-gang laws punish minors less harshly, so gangs send children as young as 8 to collect extortion payments. Gabriela gave her blue ribbons to pin back her hair.

There were dozens of photos, all of which reminded her of who she was before she came to this country. She grew up just across the border, in Reynosa, Mexico, in a big house with a driveway where she would write her name in chalk. It was safe for a while, and then there were gangs, and gunshots, and a lesson from her mother on hiding in a closet away from the windows. Then she was 11, and her parents were packing up the house, explaining that because her father was an American citizen, they could move to the United States.

The doors of the respite center opened, and Gabriela looked up. In came not a family, but a friend who used to volunteer here, carrying a shopping bag.

“What did you bring?” Gabriela asked.

“Donations,” the friend said, and Gabriela pointed to where she could set them, not mentioning that lately they’d been trying to get *rid* of the donations they already had, because there were so few people to give them to. Just the day before, Gabriela had packed a car trunk full of canned green beans, tampons and baby food so a woman could take them across the border, to a shelter in Reynosa taking in people who have been deported there. Lately, that shelter had been nearly as busy as the respite center used to be.



The donations are plentiful, but there are few migrants at the Catholic Charities respite center in McAllen on June 1. The numbers of migrants crossing through the Rio Grande Valley has dropped dramatically in the past few months. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

“Maybe you will come, too, to Reynosa?” the woman had asked, and Gabriela had shaken her head.

Now she watched her friend leave and started scrolling again. In the next few months, the respite center was scheduled to move to a smaller location. Gabriela’s manager would go with it, to help Catholic Charities transition to using some of its resources to aid the local homeless population. Another staff member she had become friends with had applied for a job with Border Patrol, hoping to end up on the team of agents who rescue migrants crossing Texas ranchland from dehydration and death. Gabriela was not sure what her plans were. Maybe things would change, and the respite center would become busy again. She set her phone on the desk, and then it rang.

Michelle, a Catholic Charities staffer who had been waiting at the bus station, started talking before Gabriela could say hello.

“Cuantos?” Gabriela asked. How many?

“Okay,” she said. “Bye.”

The ICE van had arrived. Gabriela jumped out of her chair, ran to her car and sped to the bus station, where Michelle was at the ticket counter, realizing that there would not be

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time for the family who had been released to come back to the respite center. Their bus was leaving in less than 20 minutes.

“They don’t have any food,” Michelle told Gabriela. “They don’t have any money.”

Gabriela turned around. Back to her car, back to the respite center.

“Hey,” she yelled to a volunteer in the kitchen. “Can you get four sandwich bags for us, please?”

“Teo,” she called to another. “Can you please get me two hygiene packs, with extra toothbrushes?”

Back to her car, back to the bus station. She did not need Michelle to point out where to take the sandwiches. Thousands of ICE drop-offs here, thousands of families like this one, and now Gabriela could spot them with just a glance around the room: There was a man who looked scared, and a small girl, following him out to the bus.



Yaquelin Corvera Perez holds her 4-month-old son, Bryan, as she and her daughter, Carla Beatrice, 3, board a bus June 1 in McAllen bound for Dallas, and eventually, New York. The family had traveled overland from El Salvador. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

“Trucks,” the small girl is saying now as the bus passes a car dealership.

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“Lobos,” her father tells her, the name for that model of truck in El Salvador. Sandra pushes herself up in her seat to see them better.

“Lobos,” she says. “Lobos. Lobos.”

The trucks disappear as the bus turns left, taking a ramp onto the highway. The first stretch of their trip to Cleveland will take 11 hours: through Austin, through San Antonio and on to Dallas, where they will need to change buses.

Sandra keeps her eyes fixed out the window and Miguel, for the first time in what seems like days, closes his. Sandra could not fall asleep in the detention facility the night before, which meant he did not sleep either. He had been warned that the detention centers were nicknamed “hieleras.” Iceboxes. He and Sandra had never spent the night in air conditioning before.

In El Salvador, they lived in a two-room house crowded with Miguel’s family, in a part of the country known for high poverty, few job opportunities and gang violence. Miguel says this was the case with his life. An overnight bakery job that paid \$5 per shift. A child to support on his own after he and Sandra’s mother split up. All things he could cope with, until it was his family, his daughter, who a gang began threatening. In El Salvador, a country smaller than New Hampshire, more than 500 children were killed in 2015.

So Miguel called his uncle in Cleveland, who said he would help with the cost, packed two changes of Sandra’s clothes into a backpack, and left. Through Guatemala, through Mexico, a 31-hour journey by car he says took them 20 days by bus and on foot. They met other families heading north, including a mother who kept promising her son that if he was good, if they made it to the United States, she would buy him a tablet, like an iPad. Soon Sandra was telling Miguel that she is going to have *three* tablets in her backpack when she goes to school in the United States.

Miguel, who attended school for four years when he was growing up and never learned to read, feels Sandra bump against his side and opens his eyes.

“Were you standing on the seat?” he asks. “You can’t do that.”

She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses his cheek. He rubs her back and looks out the window. The scenery has changed from storefronts to ranchland, fences and fields that seem to stretch all the way to the horizon.

They enter Brooks County, where the sandy terrain with thick brush has long been one of the most dangerous stretches of illegal journeys north. Sixty-one dead migrant bodies were found in the county last year, mostly people in their 20s and 30s, most from Guatemala and El Salvador. This year, since Trump’s inauguration, things have slowed. Just 16 bodies so far, the most recent one found 34 days before.

Miguel says he does not know much about Trump or his policies but had heard that people caught bringing children with them into the United States were allowed to live with their

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relatives. But now that he and Sandra have made it this far, he knows nothing about what life will be, or how long they will be allowed to stay. A year? Forever? Until they appear in court? Until they meet someone — Border Patrol, police, anyone — who does not like them? Would he be allowed to work? Who would hire someone with an ankle monitor? If he cannot work, how will he feed Sandra? If he cannot stay, will he go to prison, or just be sent back? If he is sent back, can Sandra stay?

Forty-five hours to go. Eighty miles from the border now. Miguel takes out a sandwich and eats it, and then the bus is slowing, and then the bus is stopped.

“Are we there?” Sandra asks.

Outside the window, Miguel can see cars pulled over beneath a tall metal arch over the highway. He can see green uniforms.

“I don’t know, little girl,” he says.

The bus doors open. Two Border Patrol agents step on board and start coming toward the back of the bus, where Miguel is telling Sandra, “Sit down,” even though she is already sitting. He sits up straighter and presses his hands into his lap. One agent stops halfway down the aisle. The other walks past Miguel, to the very last row of the bus.

“U.S. citizen?” he asks the man sitting there, who shows him a driver’s license.

“U.S. citizen?” he asks a woman wrapped in a blanket.



A bus originating in Mexico is inspected by Border Patrol agents, including Capt. L. Rinker, center, at a checkpoint south of Falfurrias, Tex., on June 2. Border Patrol agents always check the identification of northbound passengers. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

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Quickly, Miguel ducks down to retrieve the envelope holding his documents from ICE before the agent appears by his side.

“Where are you going?” the agent asks in Spanish, recognizing the envelope.

Miguel hands it to him, keeping his eyes on the seat in front of him. The agent slides the papers out and begins examining them.

“What is your daughter’s name?” he asks.

“Sandra,” Miguel says. Sandra mimics her father, looking straight ahead.

“When did you cross?”

“Yesterday.”

The agent flips a page.

“Through where?”

“Mexico.”

He glances over the papers for a few more moments, then without a word, slides them back into the envelope, hands them to Miguel, and turns to the passenger directly across the aisle, so the gun clipped to his belt is just a few inches away from Miguel’s face. Miguel stares at it, even as the agent moves down the aisle, checking each passenger. Then the agent is gone, and the bus is on the highway again. Miguel rubs his eyes and hands Sandra a pack of crackers. She tries to bite into them before he can take the plastic off.

He places his hands on the seat in front of him, lays his forehead against his elbow, and eventually, closes his eyes again.

The border keeps receding. The sky gets dark, and the view out Sandra’s window becomes a series of brightly lit signs: Macaroni Grill and DaVita Dialysis, Tractor Supply Company and Cavender’s Boot City, Adult Megaplex and La-Z-Boy.

Every few hours, the bus makes a stop and more people board. The lights flip on, the driver makes announcements in English, and Miguel wakes up. When Sandra finally looks sleepy, he drapes his sweatshirt across her like a blanket, leans her head against his side, and closes his eyes again.

At 3:20 a.m., 512 miles from the border, with 35 hours to go and six sandwiches left, the bus stops again. Outside Sandra’s window, a sign reads “Bienvenidos a Dallas.”



Highway traffic passes a dilapidated sign along Highway 281 south of Encino, Tex., on May 31. The highway is a major northbound artery for coyotes who smuggle migrants into the country. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

The driver's voice comes over the loudspeaker: "Everyone will have to transfer here. Take all your personal belongings with you, and watch your step."

Miguel does not open his eyes. Sandra keeps sleeping. The other passengers gather their luggage and blankets and shuffle down the aisle.

When the bus has emptied out, an employee steps on.

"You are in downtown Dallas," he calls to the back of the bus. "You have to get off this bus. This bus is going to a garage."

Miguel opens his eyes but does not get up. Agitated, the employee turns around, steps off the bus and sends on a woman in a yellow traffic vest.

"Come on," she shouts in Spanish. "Let's go. Now."

Miguel shakes Sandra awake and grabs the bags at his feet. He pulls her by the hand and follows the woman, off the bus and into a crowded terminal, where people are asleep on the floor, draped over metal benches and in line to buy sodas. He stands in the middle of it all, looking around. Sandra leans against his leg, closing her eyes.

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After a few minutes, the woman in the yellow vest comes back and asks to see his ticket. “Okay, there is a clock up there, you see that?” she says, pointing it out and talking quickly. “Where it says 3:33? When it is 5:30, you’re going to go to Lane D, do you see that, where there is a D and a line? You’re going to go all the way straight, and that’s where your bus is going to come. Now I need you to go take a seat.”

Miguel takes back his ticket, picks up his bags, and leads Sandra to the boarding area the woman had pointed to. He is confused when he sees a few dozen people already in line. Maybe the bus has come early?

He looks back to ask the woman in the vest, but she is already gone. He walks over to a man in line. “Is this the D line?” he asks in Spanish.

The man shakes his head. “I don’t understand you,” he says.

Another person in line overhears. “What does your ticket say?” she asks in Spanish, but as he pulls it out to show her, the line starts moving, and she follows it out the door. He watches through the window as they file onto a bus.

If he and Sandra get on the wrong bus, and don’t show up in Cleveland when they are supposed to, his ankle monitor will notify ICE.

He walks back to the terminal, searching the crowd for a yellow vest, then back to the boarding area. So many families like his had made this journey, but now it is down to one man figuring out what to do on his own. There are vending machines, and TVs showing basketball, and signs he can’t read, and three buses outside. There is much to be unsure of in America, so he stands, and waits, while Sandra holds his hand.



A bandanna sits on the side of a county road often used by northbound immigrants in Falfurrias, Tex., on May 31. The harsh terrain of Brooks County, Tex., is where many migrants die because of thirst and exposure. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)