

Unaccompanied children crossing the Darién Gap

Margaret Hunter

While there is much international attention paid to the treacherous journeys of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, both the media and international aid community have overlooked one of the deadliest migratory routes in the world: the Darién Gap.

I first became aware of the existence of the Darién Gap when I began working in 2015 as a psychotherapist for unaccompanied children arriving in the United States (US). The vast majority of these children were fleeing persecution in their countries of origin and many had crossed into the US from Central America. During the initial assessment and subsequent counselling sessions, the conversations with my

adolescent clients inevitably focused on crossing 'the jungle' between Colombia and Panama. My clients consistently described this stretch of the voyage as the worst part of their migration journey; the desperation and fear that they felt in the jungle was common to all their narratives.

At the northern border of Colombia they discover why the world's longest road – the 48,000-km Pan-American Highway – has a

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100-km break in it: the Darién Gap. The dense jungle of the Darién Gap, which covers part of Panama's Darién Province and the northern portion of Colombia's Chocó Department, separates Colombia from Panama and prevents overland travel between South and Central America. While development has sprung up on the edges of the rainforest of the Darién, the many attempts over the years to build a traversable road have failed.

The dense 100-km stretch of rainforest, with its rugged mountain peaks, swamplands and many deadly species of animals, has served as host to FARC combatants¹ and now hosts drug traffickers. It has also hosted increasing numbers of migrants and refugees attempting to walk across one of the world's most dangerous stretches of land. The total number of people setting out to cross the Darién Gap increased from 3,078 in 2013 to 7,278 in 2014; Cubans and Haitians make up a large percentage, entering Colombia by boat and continuing the rest of the journey through the Darién Gap on foot.²

The trauma of surviving

As a therapist, I had the job of helping my clients to express their experiences of trauma and help them to regain a sense of safety following their journey. Children spoke of seeing the jungle floor strewn with the possessions of other asylum seekers who had grown too weak or sick to carry them; many spoke of encountering dead bodies along the route. Some children spoke of witnessing death at first hand in the jungle; they described fellow travellers who had drowned in the river or died of poisonous snake bites, dehydration and even an attack by a large animal. Many described their personal experience of robbery or extortion by smugglers. Some smugglers promised to lead them through the jungle, claiming that it would only take a day, only to abandon them with days still to walk without food or water. As a therapist, it was profoundly difficult to hear how ubiquitous this trauma was among these children and to see little evidence of aid to the area.

Many of those crossing the Darién Gap qualify as refugees under international

law, and are entitled to protection and assistance. The lack of communication between governments and non-governmental actors and the lack of political will to assist this invisible population can result in such people – some of whom are unaccompanied children – being overlooked, with highly damaging results.

Unaccompanied children are a particularly vulnerable population, and for those travelling to the US from Central America, the experience of the Darién Gap is a formative and crucial piece of their story. Many of the mental health symptoms that I encountered in my client population appeared to stem from traumatic experiences in the jungle. It is an aspect of the contemporary migration landscape that cannot be ignored.

Margaret Hunter mjhunter0@gmail.com
 Psychotherapist, Heartland Alliance
www.heartlandalliance.org

1. Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)

2. Miraglia P (2016) 'The Invisible Migrants of the Darién Gap: Evolving Immigration Routes in the Americas', Council on Hemispheric Affairs <http://bit.ly/Miraglia-Darien-2016>



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