

As Texas traffic grows, solo minor immigrants drop in Arizona

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By Aubree Abril

WASHINGTON – The number of unaccompanied minors crossing the Southwest border has skyrocketed in the past year, but fewer of these immigrants are coming through Arizona, the most recent government figures show.

The change for youths is part of a larger shift of illegal immigration eastward, toward Texas, which is easier to reach for the immigrants increasingly coming from Central America, and where they are likely to face less border enforcement.

“The Rio Grande Valley ... is the closest geographic point from Central America and the end point for the rail lines from southern Mexico that many of these children are assumed to use to cross Mexico,” said Randy Capps, senior policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, in an emailed statement.

“With almost all of the rise in child migration coming from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in the last couple years, Arizona is not a major crossing point for these children,” Capps said.

The latest numbers from Customs and Border Protection bear that out.

Where more than 80 percent of unaccompanied minors that the agency apprehended on the Southwest border as recently as 2010 were coming from Mexico, that number has fallen to only about 25 percent this year. The other three-quarters are coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

But immigration of minors overall is still way up, creating what President Barack Obama on Monday called an “urgent humanitarian situation.”

[CBP said](#) that as of May 31, more 47,017 unaccompanied minors had been detained in fiscal 2014, more than 33,000 of them in the Rio Grande sector of the border. At this time last year, the Rio Grande border patrol sector had detained just 12,484 youths.

Arizona sectors, by comparison, saw the number of unaccompanied minor immigrants drop slightly, from 6,766 last May 31 to 6,518 this year.

“I’m not terribly surprised in terms of overall drop in Arizona young people because border enforcement has such a big priority in this region for the past several years,” said James Garcia, co-founder of the Real Arizona Coalition.

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, agreed that increased in enforcement on the ground in Arizona has played a part in the shift.

“An unauthorized immigrant is going to enter at the point where it’s easiest and cheapest for him or her to enter so that has shifted from Arizona now to Texas,” Nowrasteh said Tuesday.

Garcia called the heavier federal presence on the Arizona border a response to laws like the state’s SB 1070, which aimed to crack down on illegal immigration.

“All of that attention essentially forced, in many ways, the federal government to say, ‘OK, OK, we’re going to really try and do something along the Arizona-Mexico border,’” he said.

Wherever they are coming across, the federal government is now scrambling to respond, with number of unaccompanied minors predicted to hit as many as 60,000 this year.

In [a memorandum](#) Monday, the president directed the Department of Homeland Security to develop a coordinated plan between federal agencies to respond to the surge. The Federal Emergency Management Agency was tapped to coordinate the response, which is expected to involve the departments of Defense, Health and Human Services and others.

Cecilia Munoz, White House director of domestic policy, said in a press call Monday that reasons contributing to the surge in minors from Central American countries include “economic conditions in those countries, increased and sustained violence in those countries as well as the desire to be reunited with their families in the United States.”

Nowraste said immigration patterns “come in waves and cycles.”

“Mexican unauthorized immigration has decreased a lot, so a lot of these numbers are people from Central and South America,” he said. “People from other countries and the points where they’re entering are different, too.”