



SPECIAL REPORT-Teen risked all to flee Guatemala. Her payoff: grueling job in U.S. chicken plant

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ENTERPRISE, Alabama, Feb 7 (Reuters) - At age 16, when most kids in the United States are halfway through high school, Amelia Domingo found herself working on chicken processing machines in this farm town and deep in debt to loan sharks in her native Guatemala.

After borrowing \$10,000 for smugglers to get her through Mexico, Amelia crossed into Arizona last February and turned herself over to immigration officials. They led her, she said, from a crowded border facility to a shelter for unaccompanied minors. After about a month, officials from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees shelters for migrant children, released her to a sister here in Alabama.

Amelia is part of a current spike in migration by minors from Central America to the United States, as young people risk the treacherous trek northward in hopes they can find a better life for themselves and the means to help their families back home. "There's almost no opportunity," Amelia said, describing the lack of prospects for youths in her highland village in western Guatemala. "Most people my age have to leave."

A spokesperson at the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, said the agency can't comment on any individual migrant's case.

At Amelia's request, Reuters agreed not to identify her hometown, the chicken plant where she now works, or the exact job she performs there. The news agency also is not disclosing her full name or that of her adult sister, Rosa, with whom she now lives in Enterprise.

Both sisters work in the Alabama town, using false identities and fake dates of birth obtained for them by illegal brokers who forge or otherwise secure such documentation for undocumented migrants.

With those credentials, they got jobs through staffing agencies of the type that help poultry plants here, like industries elsewhere across the United States, recruit staff and fulfill paperwork meant to ensure that employers comply with state and federal regulations.

An influx of minors like Amelia to Enterprise and surrounding Coffee County last year led at least three different federal agencies to investigate whether immigration or labor laws are being violated, people familiar with the investigations told Reuters.

Among other queries, these people said, authorities have sought to determine if any of the migrants in the area have been victims of human trafficking. The investigations, some details of which were reported [here](#) by Bloomberg Law last year, haven't yet led to any charges, these people said.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection in 2021 intercepted unaccompanied minors more than 169,000 times at the southern border, five times more than a year earlier. Part of a record 1.95 million apprehensions of people seeking to cross that border illegally last year, the spike comes as migrants seek to flee hardship at home and take advantage of changing U.S. policy, especially towards those under 18.

Last year, President Joe Biden exempted unaccompanied children from a policy introduced by the Trump administration that, at the onset of the Covid pandemic, required immigration officials to rapidly expel most unauthorized migrants, regardless of age.

With the influx come growing concerns about the fate of migrant minors in the United States. Unaccompanied minors, like Amelia, are allowed to remain in the country and are released to sponsors, usually relatives, while immigration authorities resolve their requests for refuge in the United States.

But authorities are struggling with long-term follow-up to ensure minors aren't sucked into a vast network of enablers, including labor contractors, who recruit workers for big plants and other employers and at times have steered kids into jobs that are illegal, grueling and meant for adults.

Graft, violence and misrule are among the factors leading many migrants to join the record flow of departures from Central America. The lure of opportunity in places like Enterprise – despite the dangers they face on the journey and the legal uncertainty for them once they arrive – helps show what pulls them northward.

Undocumented workers have long formed a crucial part of the workforce of some U.S. industries, from agriculture to construction to meat processing. But immigration and labor experts fear that some companies, and the support industries that serve them, are exploiting the growing number of migrant minors.

“It's much more reprehensible for those who make use of the vulnerability of minors to profit,” said Michael Felsen, a veteran attorney for the U.S. Department of Labor who retired in 2018.

Amelia was one of 78 unaccompanied minors released from shelters in the twelve months ending Sept. 30 to Coffee County, in southeastern Alabama, government data show. The releases were the highest there since the government in 2015 began tracking the data by county, showing that Enterprise, with its booming chicken industry, had become a hotspot destination.

The plants around Enterprise help meet demand for America's favorite protein, churning out chicken around the clock and employing hundreds of workers per shift. Nearby chicken farms, which supply fowl for the plants, also offer ample, if laborious and low-paid, job opportunities, mostly catching birds for slaughter.

The state's poultry industry, according to the Alabama Poultry and Egg Association, is responsible for 86,000 jobs.

Filling those jobs is both a challenge and a lucrative business opportunity for a growing network of contractors who vet and hire workers they later outsource to the plants. The practice is legal and considered vital for an industry facing heavy employee shortages and soaring U.S. demand for poultry. The country now consumes about 8 billion chickens each year, more than twice the volume of the 1970s.

More than a dozen migrants and other poultry industry employees in Coffee Country say that undocumented workers, including minors like Amelia, regularly find jobs at area plants. "Enterprise welcomes us," said Rosa, Amelia's older sister, who arrived in Alabama over a decade ago and has watched the community of fellow migrants grow. "The jobs are just waiting for us."

The biggest chicken plants near Enterprise are owned by Wayne Farms LLC, a Georgia based poultry producer, and Pilgrim's, a brand controlled by Brazilian food multinational JBS SA. Neither company has been contacted by authorities about workers at their plants, they said, nor have they been accused of wrongdoing in the probes. Both told Reuters that they follow local, state and federal regulations.

Migrants with false documentation generally lie low, reluctant to complain about their work conditions. With loans to pay off, and families to help back home, many fear losing their jobs or, worse, deportation.

For minors like Amelia, the pressure to make money quickly also keeps them from enrolling in school, which is both mandatory for anyone under 17 in Alabama and something federal authorities seek to ensure once they release a child to a sponsor.

"School isn't for me," Amelia told Reuters. "I have debts."

"WHAT AGE DO YOU WANT TO BE?"

Before her move to the United States, Amelia was already used to hard work.

To help her family survive, she took a job at age 11 in a clothing shop, earning about \$5 a day. Rosa, her sister, by then was in Enterprise, having made the journey years earlier. Now 28 years old, Rosa has held a variety of jobs, with false documentation, and has worked in the chicken industry for roughly a decade, she said.

She now has two children, both U.S. citizens, but no clear path to citizenship herself.

Census figures show that the number of Central Americans living in Enterprise, population 28,000, jumped by 52%, to 536, between 2010 and 2019. More recent census data isn't available, and immigration scholars say undocumented residents are often undercounted. Officials at the county health department told Reuters that one in five people it now serves is Hispanic.

Near the trailer park where Amelia and Rosa live, a dozen lively young children on a recent afternoon stepped off a schoolbus speaking a mix of Spanish, English and indigenous Central American languages.

During a series of interviews inside the sisters' trailer, Amelia, a shy but smiley teenager, gave few details about her travel from Guatemala. She said she was determined to get here because Rosa told her she could find work quickly. Rosa herself first came to Enterprise because an uncle was already in the area, working at a chicken plant.

Amelia said she arrived in Enterprise in April, after Rosa sent documentation to officials at HHS proving their relationship and that she in fact had a home where Amelia could stay. Under U.S. policy, unaccompanied minors can be released to family even if the relative is in the country illegally.

Rosa also sent authorities about \$800 for airfare to Alabama from Arizona, where Amelia was staying at a shelter after arriving in the United States. The authorities put Amelia on a flight.

In the first few weeks after Amelia reached Alabama, the sisters told Reuters, personnel from the Arizona shelter called a few times to ask Rosa about Amelia's wellbeing. Such calls to sponsors are supposed to be made within 30 days after a minor is released, according to current policy at HHS, which along with the shelters manages follow-up monitoring of migrant minors.

About 20% of those calls went unanswered in a recent quarter, the department told Congress.

A couple of social workers, the sisters said, also arrived to ask whether they needed help enrolling Amelia in school. The sisters said they told them no. Reuters couldn't determine what agency, local or federal, may have sent the workers. Since that day, the sisters said, they have received no other calls or visits by any authorities.

Immediately, Amelia began a swift process to obtain fake credentials and a job.

With help from Rosa and the family's existing network of contacts, she reached out to brokers whose full identity the sisters said they don't know and with whom they only interacted via phone calls and the WhatsApp messaging platform. For \$1,500, one broker obtained Amelia a social security number and the other secured an I.D.

Rosa paid the fee via cell phone from her savings.

The man procuring the I.D. requested a digital photo and asked Amelia, "What age do you want to be?" The question is important: Because of potential hazards – from sharp tools to heavy

machinery to chemical exposure – federal law prohibits companies from hiring minors for many jobs in industrial settings.

A few days later, Amelia received an authentic-looking I.D. from a distant state. The document, reviewed by Reuters, bears her photo, a false name and the fake adult age. Reuters couldn't determine how the brokers got the I.D. or the social security number.

The broker, the sisters said, told them the documentation would link an authentic social security number with the name on the fake I.D. The link would mean that Amelia's assumed identity could pass E-Verify, a federal system designed to allow employers to check whether prospective employees are allowed to work legally. Alabama is one of 22 states that requires employers to use E-Verify.

Amelia provided her new credentials to a staffing firm that supplies laborers to a local chicken plant, she said. She described the process on the condition the recruiting firm not be identified. Soon, she had a shift at one of the chicken plants and a job-site access badge, also reviewed by Reuters, bearing the same name as the one on her phony I.D.

She'd been in Enterprise for less than a month.

"Everybody around here knows how this works," Rosa said.

Critics have long complained that E-Verify, operated by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS, is easy to game. The system checks whether a social security number is valid, but can't always confirm that the identification presented along with it actually belongs to the person submitting it.

E-Verify is "politically expedient," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, who has researched the system. The platform, he added, allows government officials to act tough on immigration without hurting businesses that rely on undocumented workers.

Matthew Bourke, a USCIS spokesperson, said the agency has sought "to strengthen security measures" for E-Verify and that the system remains "the only service of its kind" for employers to check identification documents. Among other measures, the system can "lock" social security numbers that appear fraudulent.

Around Enterprise, many Central American workers know each other by the fake names they use at their workplaces. Sometimes, if a false I.D. expires or otherwise presents a problem, workers suddenly change names. "It meant their previous false identity stopped working," said one former manager of a local poultry plant, a U.S. citizen who spoke on condition of anonymity.

By June, Amelia was accustomed to her new job.

During eight-hour shifts, five or six days a week, she toils on a frigid plant floor. It's mind-numbing and malodorous work, she said, but for each hour of wages, \$10, she makes twice as much as friends and family back home do in a day.

“HIGH ALERT”

As she settled in, federal authorities along the U.S.-Mexico border grew suspicious of the spike in releases of minors to Enterprise.

Already, the broader surge in arrivals of minors at the border had led the government to erect around a dozen emergency shelters to bolster capacity. As they rushed to release kids to sponsors, some federal officials started looking more closely at some of the hotspots to where minors were headed.

In June, according to internal HHS emails reviewed by Reuters, the department took an unusual step: It temporarily halted the release of minors to Enterprise and the surrounding area. Officials, the emails show, had grown concerned that some of the kids could be at risk of trafficking or exploitation.

“We continue to look into cases of UC released to sponsors in that area,” wrote one official, using the department shorthand for “unaccompanied children.”

Soon, the department dispatched representatives to Enterprise to track down some of the minors released there. It isn't clear whether Amelia was among those they tried to reach.

Some of the representatives met with community officials and visited homes, inquiring about the kids and trying to ensure they had access to support services and schools. They were unable to find some of the minors, four people familiar with the operations said.

By mid-August, the department lifted the ban. It resumed some releases to the area, albeit with further scrutiny, including visits to the homes of potential sponsors of minors in Coffee County.

Around Enterprise, the bustle of the chicken plants continued.

On a recent afternoon, during a shift change outside a Wayne Farms plant, hundreds of white, Black and Latino workers came and went. Many of the Hispanic workers filed in and out of white vans, deployed by local staffing firms to get them to and from the plant. Some firms deduct as much as \$40 a week from employees' paychecks for the service, four workers told Reuters.

As rumors spread here of federal investigations over the summer, plant operators said they took steps to ensure no unauthorized workers had slipped into their workforce.

Wayne Farms told Reuters it placed plant managers on “high alert” for underage workers, conducted anti-fraud training with human resources staff and warned contractors to avoid any

questionable hires. Pilgrim's said it too remained vigilant, telling Reuters it relies on staffing firms infrequently and that it only works with "reputable agencies."

The plants' growing demand for staff is clear.

A Wayne Farms billboard near Enterprise recently advertised sign-up bonuses of \$1,500 for new workers. Pilgrim's told Reuters at times it has offered a bonus of up to \$3,000 for new hires on its graveyard shift. The bonuses, though, are only for direct employees, not the workers who cycle through via staffing agencies.

In Enterprise, signs for half a dozen staffing firms offer area jobs, posted at strip malls and other local office spaces.

Some of those firms operate through limited liability corporations registered to the family of Jaime Castillo, a local businessman and longtime resident originally from Nicaragua.

A LinkedIn profile for Jaime Castillo Jr, his son, recently said the family businesses employ more than 2,000 workers in the poultry industry. Among the facilities the Castillos provide workers for, according to people familiar with their contracts, is the plant operated by Wayne Farms near Enterprise.

The Castillo operations are under investigation by the Department of Labor, or DOL, for potential violations involving migrant labor, according to two people with knowledge of the probes. It's unclear whether the investigation has led to conclusive findings. Reuters found no public record of any wrongdoing by the Castillo businesses.

A DOL spokesperson declined to comment on any ongoing investigation.

In a written statement to Reuters, Jaime Castillo Jr. said his family's businesses have built a "vested relationship with the community" over two decades. The businesses, he added, ensure "no wage disparity, compliance with all federal and state laws, and compliance with all agencies inquiring about the welfare and/or fair treatment of employees."

He didn't respond to a question specifically inquiring about the federal probe.

Despite the scrutiny, it's business as usual in Enterprise.

Migrants and longtime locals live and work alongside one another with little trouble, even if authorities are increasingly aware of the growing number of minors like Amelia. "Hardly a week goes by when we don't discover a child who has never been in school," Judy Crowley, executive director of the Coffee County family services center, a local nonprofit, told Reuters.

Amelia said she is aware of the risks she faces – legal problems, loss of income, deportation – but is resolved to keep working. She rarely leaves Rosa's trailer except to head to and from the chicken plant. When not working, she scrolls her phone in the dark rooms of the trailer.

One day, she said, she hopes to return to Guatemala. First, though, she must continue wiring most of her wages home, where her parents pay off the loan sharks and what she said is a dizzying interest rate of 10% per month. She'll return, she said, "if I ever have the means."