



5

FOURYEAR-OLD ADAM* shakily stands to his feet, rising to his tiptoes to peer out at the room. An adult smiles reassuringly as he mumbles a few words. But this is not a scene from a classroom, this is a court in the US. Adam, who was smuggled from El Salvador by traffickers, has no parent by his side and yet what he says to this court of judges and lawyers will determine whether he remains in the States or is sent back to a life of danger.

'I've seen children as young as four having to represent themselves in Baltimore,' says Susan Cruz, a forensic social worker and advocate who gives ad hoc training to these immigrant children who usually speak little English. With no access to legal aid, the frightened youngsters are given crib sheets in lieu of legal expertise. Jack H Weil, one of America's longest-serving immigration judges who supports this system, says, 'I've taught immigration law to three-year-olds. It takes a lot of time and patience. It's not the most efficient, but it can be done.'

The number of children arriving into America from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras has risen by 78% in 2016** and any immigrant, regardless of age, must pay for their own legal support in every state. And with president-elect Trump threatening to build a wall between the US and Mexico and send back three million illegal immigrants in his first year, these children are stuck between a country that doesn't want them and a legal system that won't pay for them.

El Salvador is the murder capital of the world, with a homicide every hour. The UN Refugee Agency has said urgent action is

★ AMERICA'S *courtroom kids*

needed to protect the country's children. Desperate parents attempt to smuggle their kids through Mexico using people traffickers. Susan Cruz says, 'The drug cartels have now crossed over from smuggling drugs or guns to smuggling people. These gangs can just slaughter and dump anyone who becomes inconvenient, as they are almost traceless.'

At least once a month, Cruz will field calls from desperate parents in Central America pleading for help to find their children, who they thought had been smuggled to safety but are instead awaiting deportation trials. 'These parents pay up to \$10,000 – often all they have – to have their kids smuggled into America, but then they lose touch,' she says. 'Families call me out of the blue, asking if I can find their child. Some are sat in courts, others are kept by

Fleeing violence and poverty, children as young as three are being trafficked into the United States – and it is up to them to plead for their right to stay. Andy Jones reports on a desperate situation



Young children are trafficked into the US from El Salvador, where the police struggle to crack down on criminal gangs (above right)

the cartels and used to commit crimes, sold into prostitution or held to ransom.'

Cruz has been working on these cases for 17 years free of charge, as part of her work with Sin Fronteras, a not-for-profit organisation that advocates for immigrant children. A case starts with a call from police or social workers asking if she can help a child in need. On occasion, she can convince a lawyer to work for the child pro bono, but often she has to begin the tragic business of attempting to teach a child the intricacies of immigration law.

There are so many young cases to get through that many courts hold 'child only' days to process them, during which the youngsters can often be seen sitting in lines outside the building with sandwiches and cartons of milk.

Cruz's situation is made harder by the fact that she is from El Salvador. 'You could never raise a child in that country,' she says. 'I'm not allowed to be maternal, even though I have two teenage children myself. These kids have been so betrayed, you can't give them anything but honesty. Often, all I can do is sit in silence with them. We have uncomfortable conversations about the realities of them being sent back. It's like talking to your elderly relatives about their funeral plans, yet these are just kids.'

The children who are sent home face a nightmarish reality. Cruz says, 'In El Salvador, when they get undocumented immigrant kids sent back, they just put their faces in the paper and ask for people to collect them – like lost luggage. There was a one-year-old girl in the paper. How can the US authorities send her back without knowing where she's going? How can they vet the people that collected her?'