GRASS GROW

Karen Warren / Chronicle

cover the playing surface in the new downtown baseball stadium. The grass is the same type originally installed in the Astrodome. Astroturf was spawned when the turf died under the stadium's translucent dome.

Field that they tried in the Dome.

"We certainly hope we have learned a lot in these last 35 years," said team owner Drayton McLane Jr.

Along with the nationwide renaissance of downtown sports facilities has come a retreat from domed stadiums, with their carpets much reviled by baseball purists. Enron Field in downtown Houston, with its retractable roof, follows the trend. The scientists are again promising the grass will grow.

Yet only two baseball stadiums, Bank One Ballpark in Phoenix and Safeco Field in Seattle, have tried growing grass beneath a roof that opens only part time.

The ballpark in Arizona, which opened in 1998, has had serious problems. Three kinds of grass have been tried, after the turf wore out too quickly or required more sunlight. The Seattle stadium opened for the second half of the

See GRASS on Page 18A.

Held by INS, kids endure limbo in U.S.

Authorities detain hundreds a year on Mexican border

By JAMES PINKERTON
Houston Chronicle Rio Grande Valley Bureau

LOS FRESNOS – An excited smile crossed Eber Sandoval's boyish face as someone called out, "B-13!"

He placed a pinto bean on his bingo card, as he and 20 other kids took a break from their school work one afternoon. For a moment, Eber was a carefree 11-year-old, eager to win one of the chocolate cupcakes given as prizes at the juvenile detention facility operated by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

And for the moment, the big worries this small boy carries inside him were forgotten. But they are never very far away.

Eber is a boy between two worlds, one of hundreds of unaccompanied juveniles who are detained each year along the Texas-Mexico border after they are caught entering this country without documents. Because he has no family who wants him — either back home in Honduras or here — Eber has been in detention since last summer.

And his lawyer, Steven Lang, with the nonprofit ProBar immigration clinic, said Eber's case is a good example of why these children need more services.

"There is no (background) investigation going on," Lang said. "It just comes down to me and the INS, who is taking care of him but is also trying to deport him.

See DETENTION on Page 18A.
Detention

Continued from Page 1A.

"If it hadn’t been for a nonprofit, volunteer agency getting involved, he’d be back in Honduras, living who knows where and doing who knows what," said Wendy Young, staff attorney for the New York–based Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

"We’re seeing increasing numbers of kids entering the United States by themselves," said Young, "and some are fleeing armed conflicts and human rights abuses, and there are no ways to join family that are already here in the United States, and as they get older, they are vulnerable to harassment and abuse by the authorities and by gangs, and there’s no one there to protect them.

"And the immigration system is really working for the children. There is no assistance the kids really deserve," Young said. "The bottom line is immigration proceedings are for everyone, but not for children. It’s really too dangerous for them."

Since the government’s current fiscal year began last October, there have been 1,667 juvenile detainees placed in INS detention facilities throughout the nation, including 538 children in Texas.

In 1999, there were 4,107 unaccompanied minors under age 18 entering this country, well over a third of those in Texas.

Annie Wilson, vice president of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service in Baltimore, said her group has pressed the INS for 20 years to keep immigrant children out of jail-like detention facilities.

"I understand from recent conversations with the INS that on a given day they’ve got 350 kids in shelter homes, some in Los Angeles, and they have another 150 kids in juvenile correction facilities. If they run out of beds in the shelter facility, their position is that they have to put them somewhere, so they put them in jail," Wilson said.

"We use the least restrictive setting possible for kids," responded John Pogash, national juvenile coordinator at INS headquarters. He said the vast majority are housed in foster care, group homes or open facilities that do not resemble jail.

Most of the children detained, INS officials say, are quickly reunited with relatives already in the United States. Others are deported, or agree to return voluntarily to their homeland.

Roben Gallegos, executive director of International Educational Services Inc., which operates the juvenile facility in Los Angeles, said the influx of children from Central America for the past 10 years has been significant.

"The INS facility is located on a quiet wooded tract outside the city. The facility can house up to 40 boys, while girls who arrive alone are placed by the INS in local foster homes until their immigration status is determined.

Although the INS compound is a residential structure with a high brick wall around the front, there are no locks on the doors or bars on the windows. The INS staff provides classes during the day, and the children detainees can use a large swimming pool, a gymnasium, a basketball court and a large soccer field.

Local church groups visit with the boys in the evenings, and they watch movies and eat pizza in Friday nights. On weekends they play in the facility’s blue van and visit nearby Harlingen and Brownsville.

Jose Enrique, left, and Jose Luis Oliva-Rosa, 16-year-old twins from Honduras, head to a political asylum hearing in Harlingen last week with their attorney, Steven Lang. A decision on their request to remain in the United States is pending.

Before coming north, he said he was an apprentice to an automobile mechanic. "I want to learn how to fix a car, to find out what parts are bad, and put it back together again," he says in Spanish.

Young detainees

In fiscal 1999, there were 1,753 juvenile detainees reported by the state’s six district offices of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.
say they were abandoned three weeks after birth and left Honduran to escape abusive relatives. A decision in the twins' case is expected soon.

In recent months, immigration judges in South Texas have granted political asylum in a handful of cases where children from Honduras said they were afraid to return home because they would end up homeless and on the streets.

Immigration lawyers say the children's fears are real, and note that the U.S. State Department cited estimates by the Honduran government that the population of street children had increased to 1,000,000, and only half of those had shelter. More than 100 street children or gang members had been murdered, including some that human rights groups say were killed by out-of-uniform security forces.

Larg and other refugee experts say these thousands of children — some of whom have nowhere to go — deserve more attention.

Larg said the INS has neither the mandate nor the resources to decide what is a child's best interest.

"Only a child specialist can do this," he said. "It shows the need for some kind of international agency to look into these cases and determine what the (futuro) situation is with these kids."

"The problem is money," said Anne Wilson of Luther refugee services, who believes the INS could get around the existing congressional ban on providing legal services for undocumented immigrants.

The "budget far detention is so huge, and the cost of finding attorneys for a few hundred kids a year — that's a drop in the bucket compared to the millions they're spending detaining people," Wilson said.

"In a case like this, which accompanied children really need the help of a guardian, somebody who is a child welfare professional who can establish trust with the kids, help them understand the proceedings they've been placed in, and help the child articulate their own desires for the future," she said.

However, INS officials say they are bound by Congress to pay for representation of illegal immigrants.

"The argument these people have not been placed within the INS," said a gas. "These people need to approach their representatives on Capitol Hill.

In Los Angeles, the INS said it, but only with a hint of patience to me. In fact, one immigration judge decides his future later this spring.

Immigration lawyers say the contrast in treatment in L. B.'s case and that of 6-year-old Edan Gonzales, the Cuban boy at the center of an international custody dispute, is "just so ironic," said Wilson. "It's here you got one kid where the entire United States is looking at the question of whether the situation waiting for him in Cuba is appropriate or not while lots of kids are returned without our government being sure there is a family waiting there."

In a case like this, the law must be approached. The law of the land should be approached.

In a case like this, the law must be approached. The law of the land should be approached.
On May 26, 17-year-old Elvin Alexander Nunez Padilla and his father Santiago Nunez Rivera deserted their small town in Honduras and headed for Texas. They left behind Elvin’s mother and two sisters. There simply isn’t any work to be found where he lives, Elvin explains. “The only way we could move forward was by coming [here],” he says matter-of-factly. After a harrowing journey that included a shakedown by the Mexican Judicial police, who robbed each of them of 300 pesos (about $30 dollars), they crossed the Rio Grande and entered the United States on June 21. Fifteen minutes later the Immigration and Naturalization Service caught them.

The INS separated Elvin and his father, sending the boy to a juvenile detention center in Los Fresnos. The boy hasn’t seen or spoken with his father since that day. Elvin’s lawyer does not know where Santiago Rivera was sent. At the juvenile facility, Elvin was treated like the kid he is. He took educational classes including English, played sports outside, and wore regular clothes.

Five days after arriving, his teacher took Elvin and three other kids to the dentist. The dentist examined Elvin’s molars, but didn’t say anything to him. After the visit, all three were sent by the INS to the Port Isabel Service Processing Center, an adult facility in Los Fresnos. The dentist, by looking at X-rays of Elvin’s teeth, had determined that he was lying about his age and was in fact 18 years old. Elvin’s birthday is October 31, 1985. "I told them when I was born but they wouldn’t listen," he says of his guards, whom he calls the verdes for the green uniforms they wear.

Until recently, Elvin was incarcerated in the adult facility with older men, some of whom are possibly dangerous criminals. There, he says, all they do is sleep and eat, going from their bunk beds to the cafeteria and back. There are no classes. There are no sports. Elvin, along with the other undocumented immigration detainees, must wear a blue prison jumpsuit.

Both the British Medical Association and the chairman of the radiology department at New York University
are on record saying that it is impossible to assess whether a child is 18 or older by examining their teeth. The INS is not deterred by the fact that using teeth to determine age is based on questionable science. "I don't think the INS has ever claimed or maintained that these processes are exact," says Russ Bergeron, the chief press officer for the agency. Bergeron argues that the dental exams, while not perfect, are the best technology available. He also insists that the exams are just one of several methods the INS uses to determine age.

The fact is, putting kids in adult facilities is cheaper, which seems to be what the INS wants. An estimated 5,000 illegal immigrant children are detained by the INS each year. Juvenile facilities are about twice as expensive as those that house detainees who are over 18. The INS spends roughly $200 a day to incarcerate children versus $70 to $80 a day for adults, according to INS Public Affairs Specialist Karen Kraushaar. The INS does not pay for the dental exams, which can run upwards of $200 a patient. That bill is footed by the U.S. Public Health Service.

The INS does not know exactly how many dental examinations are performed each year on juvenile detainees. No one at the INS seems to know how long the agency has been using dental exams to date the age of children. Nor does anyone seem to have records of how many kids examined were determined to be adults, or whether they were sent to county jails as many adult detainees are. When asked if any of these minors ended up in jail, Kraushaar replied dismissively: "Sure, and would you like to know if they were wearing red hats or green?"

Elvin, along with two other Honduran boys, Jose de Jésus Guifarro Cardona and Wilmer Alexander Ortez Pineda—all detained at the Port Isabel facility—were lucky. Out of thousands, they are among the rare cases of minors detained by the INS who got access to lawyers. Their counsel, Meredith Linsky, Coordinator for the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project (PROBAR) has managed to track down birth certificates for all three. After she presented them to the INS along with documentation questioning the validity of dental aging, all three boys were sent to juvenile facilities.

There might soon be hope for more children caught by the INS. Folded into the proposed legislation creating the new Homeland Security Department are provisions that would transfer jurisdiction over custody and release decisions regarding unaccompanied minors in detention from the INS to the Department of Health and Human Services. It would also take responsibility for foster care and shelter care facilities. In addition, it would guarantee guardians ad litem and court-appointed lawyers for each minor detained. Finally the legislation would require new procedures to more accurately determine the age of an unaccompanied alien child rather than relying solely on X-rays.

Successful passage of the legislation would be welcomed by advocates like PROBAR's Linsky. "The consequences of erroneously finding a minor to be an adult are grave, and mistakes happen regularly," she notes. "We need a more child-friendly atmosphere, not an enforcement mindset."
nuch growth
to get utility connections much faster through self-help projects

involves the city rather than waiting for the city to do the whole job, he said.

Drainage problems on the city’s south side that had gone to court were solved through a cooperative project with the Frontera Audubon Society and other property owners, so that a wetlands area could be created and provide a place for storm water runoff, he said.

“We developed a partnership with the folks in that area,” Castellanos said.

Financially, Weslaco is in good shape, he said. Asked if some of the city’s cash reserves could be used for a major project, such as the Weslaco portion of the World Birding Center, he said it may be possible if the political will is there, but that is a decision for elected leaders.

Asylum trial ends for twin orphans

By FERNANDO DEL VALLE
Valley Morning Star
HARLINGEN — The asylum trial of orphaned Honduran twins seeking asylum in the United States closed Thursday, with their attorney arguing they faced death as street children if deported.

The plight of the 15-year-old boys has drawn parallels to the case of Elian Gonzalez, a 6-year-old shipwrecked Cuban boy at the center of a political tug of war between the United States and Cuba.

In a trial that started Monday, attorney Steven Lang argued Jose Luis and Jose Enrique Oliva could face death at the hands of gangs or death squads who target street children on the streets of Honduras.

“We would like all unaccompanied minors treated with as much consideration,” Lang said, referring to the Gonzalez case. “We think their best interests should be considered in other cases as well.”

Monday, immigration Judge Meg Burkhart is expected to deliver a ruling.

Precedent exists to grant the twins asylum, said Lang, an attorney for the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation Project in Harlingen.

“We’re hoping the court will find they have been persecuted in the past and have a well-founded fear of persecution based on their past as street children,” Lang said.

“They are indeed orphaned, abandoned and abused in their homeland. Those children end up on the street, often persecuted by gangs, police, vigilante groups and death squads,” Lang said, referring to the death squads who clear neighborhoods of street children.

The twins, who were abandoned by their single mother when they were 3 weeks old, ran away from relatives who beat them, Lang said. Last summer, they journeyed from the central Honduran city of Siguatepeque, Lang said. Seven weeks later, they crossed the border in the United States. The twins have been held at International Educational Services in Los Fresnos, an agency contracted by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

2K problem results in high water bills

The resident ended up paying his normal bill for the month of January, which amounted to $83.

His hunch concerning a possible millennium glitch was somewhat on the mark, said Lopez.

She said her department has received at least four inquiries, including the man’s, who requested that she look into possible discrepancies with higher than usual water bills.

“Our hand-held meter readers seem to be having some problems exchanging information with our main frame computer in certain zones,” she said. “It seems like the breakdown occurred right after the New Year.

“If people have questions about their bills we encourage them to call us and we’ll look into the matter.”

Cruz said the Public Works Director Chuck Jalano is exploring the idea of purchasing two new readers.

“We had the old readers for about 10 years and I think we may need to buy some new ones after some of the problems that we have had,” she said.

CORRECTION
Because of a copy-editing error, the wrong temperatures were printed in Larry James’ Five-Day Valley Forecast.

The Star regrets the error.

CORRECTION POLICY
The Valley Morning Star is committed to accuracy in its news reports.

Although safeguards are taken to ensure accurate reporting and spelling, mistakes can occur.

rt gets $1.7M improvement grant

istor said, “I am certain that this $1.7 million grant will go a long way in meeting the transportation needs of this area, especially as they impact the Mid-Valley Airport. More importantly, I believe not just the city of Weslaco.”

The grant will be used for the construction phase of the project to improve runways, taxiways and apron (aircraft parking) areas, Federal Aviation Administration officials said.
Children crossing border alone

Border Patrol detains more than 9,000 kids over past 2 years

BY JAMES PINKERTON
Houston Chronicle
Rio Grande Valley Bureau

HARLINGEN — While the future of a 6-year-old Cuban immigrant has gathered worldwide attention, along the border in South Texas, deciding the fate of children arrested while trying to illegally enter the United States alone is a routine, weekly occurrence.

Take the immigration court case begun Monday for Jose Enrique and Jose Luis Oliva-Rosa, 16-year-old identical twins from Honduras who have been in a detention facility since they were caught after swimming the Rio Grande last summer. They say they will become street kids if deported back home, and have asked for political asylum.

And while the twin’s case has not garnered the attention given Elian Gonzalez, the young Cuban immigrant in Miami, South Texas immigration attorneys say the plight of the Honduran twins and others among the thousands of minors who make the long, hazardous journey alone are perhaps more critical. Elian has relatives in Miami and Havana who desperately want to take care of him, the lawyers note.

But some children who arrive in South Texas have no living parents or have been abandoned and lived on the streets until they fled to the United States.

Border Patrol officers who apprehend the children swimming the shallow Rio Grande or wandering Texas bordertowns call them “unaccompanied minors,” and place them in the custody of

See CHILDREN on Page 6A.
Free 27" Color TV
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Sunrooms - Screenrooms - Patio Rooms - Pool Enclosures
Visit 5 S. Carlen Free 27" Color Television Purchase of Sunroom or Patio Room, Exp. 1/31/80

Children

Continued from Page 1A.

the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Most of the children are quickly reunited with relatives in the United States, pending a hearing, and others agree to a voluntary return and take an airline flight home, at their government's expense.

But recently, lawyers have had some success in convincing immigration judges that a few of the unaccompanied children deserve political asylum, although they have no connection to political groups or activities in their homeland.

Instead, the lawyers argue they are a distinct social group of children who will likely fall victim to street gangs, vigilante groups and police death squads if they are deported.

The twins are represented by attorney Steven Lang and other volunteer attorneys with ProBar, a nonprofit immigration law project funded by lawyers.

The two Honduran brothers were among the 4,607 undocumented juveniles under age 18 who were detained after entering this country by themselves in 1999, according to INS records. The year before, 4,457 juveniles were detained.

On Monday afternoon, attorneys for the Oliva-Rosa brothers began the courtroom phase of a legal fight to keep them from being deported.

"If I go back to Honduras I will have to live in the streets," Jose Luis told the immigration judge as he sat next to his brother.

"If you don't join the street gangs, they will kill you," the youth testified. "... and if you're on the streets ... the very police will kill you."

The boy, under questioning from a Minnesota law student and ProBar volunteer Rishi Garg, said he and his brother were abandoned by their mother when they were 22 days old and sent to live with their grandmother. He testified he doesn't know who his father is, adding he's been told his mother lives in Los Angeles.

Jose Luis testified that at age seven, his grandmother sent him to live with various aunts and uncles in Honduras. He recounted a series of violent beatings with clubs, sticks, kitchen utensils, stones and metal bats. He also described how his machete-wielding aunt attempted to murder him several times, lack of food and other deprivations and hardships meted out.

Lang said among thousands of unaccompanied children detained each year, there is a small group like the twins — perhaps 100 to 300 children a year, who have no relatives in the United States and no place to live back home except the streets.

"Our clients very often are fleeing from gang violence, from life on the streets, from incredibly abusive (home) environments. And in countries like Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, you don't have a child protective services to run to," Lang said, before the judge interrupted.

"You can't just go to them and say, 'Hey, so and so is being abused.' Or 'Hey, look at him, he's living on the streets and eating out of a dumpster, and snuffing glue everyday and selling himself in prostitution.' There's no state agency that's going to pick him up and put him into a boys home."

Lang noted that while the INS provides funds to house, clothe, and educate the detained children while they await the outcome of immigration proceedings, it provides no legal services.

"We're not talking about thousands of kids every year who would go on the social (services) rolls. We're not talking about a tidal wave," he said.

"I believe it's time we re-examine our responsibility in these proceedings and that we should consider providing adltem guardians or appointed counsel at government expense," Lang said.

Immigrant kids without adults

In 1999, most unaccompanied juveniles came to the United States from these countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>1,055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for all countries</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,607</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service

Fossil

Continued from Page 1A.

around 100 million years ago, Carter said. The Big Bend find, however, is dated to about 65 million years ago.

Dr. Homer Montgomery of UTD's department of science education said the nearest relative of the Big Bend creature is from Argentina.

"So, we want to know not only why this big guy existed, but how it got here," he said.

Montgomery and his students had been excavating the remains of a juvenile alamosaurus since 1998 when, at a nearby site, Carter discovered evidence of the larger specimen. He and two colleagues began digging at that location early in 1999.

By autumn, they had found 10 articulated neck vertebrae that, together, measure 23 feet in length.

"Never before has an articulated neck of this length and quality of preservation been found anywhere in the world from the Cretaceous Period," Carter said. "It is extremely rare. Only a partial cervical vertebra of an adult alamosaur has been found before in the late Cretaceous."

The head and first two vertebrae appear to be missing, but other adult sauropod bones, including dorsal vertebrae, ribs and partial sacrum have been found nearby and may be part of the same giant dinosaur, Carter said.

The dinosaur is lying on its left side in a curved position. That suggests it was buried soon after it died, which may account for the quality of its preservation. The bones are encased in a calcite-rich coating up to three inches thick, Carter said.

Three of the smaller fossils, which weigh up to 467 pounds, have been removed, but others, which weigh up to 1,290 pounds, remain at the site.

Vehicles are prohibited in the wilderness area of the park where the fossils were found. A method of removing them will not be determined until after the National Park Service completes an environmental-impact study.

"We will do an assessment and

Crash

Continued from Page 1A.

of the MD-80 series aircraft built by McDonnell Douglas, now part of Boeing, said John Thom, a spokesman for Boeing's Douglas aircraft unit. The plane that crashed was delivered to Alaska Airlines in 1992, Thom said.

The jet's crew had reported mechanical difficulties and asked to land at Los Angeles, said Ron Wilson, a spokesman for the San Francisco airport.

"Radar indicates it fell from 17,000 feet and then was lost from

The stabilizer is brought into balance, or "trimmed," by spinning a wheel in the cockpit. When the plane has the proper trim, its nose will fly level, instead of pitching up or down.

Evans said the aircraft had no previous stabilizer trim problems. He also said the plane had a low level service check on Jan. 11 and a more thorough check as part of normal maintenance last January.

Alaska Airlines, which has a distinctive image of an Eskimo painted on the tail of its planes, has an excellent safety record. It serves more than 40 cities in Alaska, Canada, Mexico and four Western states.
Oscar
A Boy Without A Country
by Michelle Billeter
His name is Oscar—at least that’s the name he has picked up in his 13 or 14 years of life. Last July, he sat in a juvenile detention center in Brownsville, Texas, looking at people, his large brown eyes somehow sadder, somehow much more grown-up, than a boy’s eyes should be.

Oscar is an orphan street kid—a child who works and lives on the streets—who once lived on the streets of San Pedro States, should they be sent back to the violent and poverty-ridden streets from which they fled? Or should they be allowed to stay in the United States to search for a better life?

An immigration judge handed down a decision in January that Oscar should be sent back to Honduras. But Oscar’s lawyers have appealed that decision to the U.S. Immigration Appeals Board asking that the board grant Oscar asylum, or legal protection, in the United States. They say that as a street kid, Oscar faces violent conditions that could eventually threaten his life if he is returned to Honduras.

How Oscar’s case is decided could have major repercussions. If Oscar wins and is allowed asylum in the United States, the decision would set a precedent (serve as a model or new rule) for other cases like Fund estimates that half the population of street kids in Latin America—20 million children—are addicted to sniffing glue. Glue is cheap, easily available, and sniffing it creates a “high” that helps fight the gnawing hunger that often afflicts street kids. However, sniffing glue can also cause brain damage or even death.

In Oscar’s home country of Honduras, an estimated 80 percent of the population lives in poverty; their most basic needs for food and shelter are not met. Of Honduras’ population of 5.6 million people, an estimated 4,500 are street kids. The Honduran government has opened shelters for some homeless kids, but the problem is too detention of minors with adults, and to vigilante violence against, and police abuse of, street children.”

Casa Alianza, an organization dedicated to children’s rights, has documented cases of violence against minors in a number of Latin American nations and plans to provide legal aid to ensure that some cases go to court. In October, 1997, Casa Alianza brought charges before a Honduran court against members of Honduras’s armed forces and police for allegedly torturing 63 street children, 35 of whom were reportedly murdered, since 1990.

Many street children flee Honduras in search of something better, which they...
hope they can find in Mexico or another 
country. Oscar was one of the more adven-
turous kids; he left Honduras with an ulti-
mate goal of reaching the United States.

**Oscar’s Incredible Journey**

When Oscar was 4 years old, his father 
died and his mother abandoned him. Left 
alone, Oscar began living on the streets. 
There, he found other kids like himself 
and began living among those friends— 
sleeping on sidewalks, begging for food, 
fighting with gangs, and sniffing glue. 
When Oscar was about 7 years old, he 
heard about the United States from 
friends. Oscar says the more he heard 
about “El Norte,” as the United States 
is called in much of Mexico and Central 
America, the more he wished to go there. 
Finally, he asked, “Which way is America?” and began his journey to the 
U.S. (Follow his trail on the map at left.)

Oscar started by walking from San 
Pedro Sula to Chalatenango, El Salvador. 
Then he made his way to San Salvador, El 
Salvador’s capital, where he stayed for a 
few years, living with other kids he had 
met along the way. They survived by beg-
ging and picking pockets.

“Sometimes it was OK, and other times 
I’d get beat up, and other times I’d cry 
because it wasn’t nothing how I wanted it 
to be, or how people said it was going to 
be,” Oscar told a National Public Radio 
reporter last July. Eventually, Oscar moved 
into Sonsonate, another city in El Salvador. 
A policeman and his wife took Oscar into 
their home, and he attended school for the 
first time. But family problems eventually 
forced Oscar to leave, and after a year, he 
got to Santa Ana, El Salvador.

From Santa Ana, Oscar spent three 
months walking to Talisman, on the 
border of Guatemala, then crossed a river 
separating El Salvador from Guatemala. 
He soon walked from Guatemala to 
Mexico. He spent three years in Mexico 
living with other street kids. Eventually, 
Mexican officials caught Oscar and sent 
him back to Tapachula, but he quickly left 
Guatemala again for Mexico.

**To the Texas Border**

After moving from place to place in 
Southern Mexico, Oscar hopped on a cargo 
train that took him to Mexico City, then to 
Monterrey, and eventually to Matamoros, 
which is on the border of Texas. Oscar was 
finally close to his dream of crossing over 
into the United States. He waded across 
the Rio Grande and found himself in 
Brownsville, Texas.

About three weeks later, U.S. immigra-
tion officials picked up Oscar at the 
Saritas checkpoint north of Brownsville. 
Oscar was placed with a foster family in 
Brownville, but he was soon taken from 
the family because of problems, and put 
into a shelter for illegal immigrants. 
Because Oscar tried to escape from the 
shelter, authorities moved him to a juve-
nile detention center for young criminal 
offenders. Oscar said he didn’t mind stay-
ing in the detention center. He explained, 
“I felt better there because I don’t feel— 
I’m not in danger, like I was on the 
streets, and I don’t feel the need to be on 
drugs any more. I’ve forgotten all that.”

Meanwhile, authorities had begun the 
process of sending Oscar back to 
Honduras. It was then that Oscar’s case 
came to the attention of ProBAR, a group 
of attorneys who work with detained immi-
grants who may be eligible for asylum.

In arguing for Oscar’s asylum, ProBAR 
lawyer Stephen Lang argued that Oscar, 
as a member of the social class of street chil-
CURRENT EVENTS

SPECIAL REPORT

children, would face physical danger if he were sent back to Honduras. Lang pointed to cases with evidence of police brutality against street children in Honduras.

Lang further argued that U.S. immigration officials “can’t let immigrants into the [United States] just because they’re poor and miserable, but officials can grant what they call asylum.” They can provide a safe haven to people who are persecuted because of their religious beliefs, political views, or ethnic background. Officials should add a new group of victims to their list. They should grant asylum to Oscar because he’s a street kid.”

How Much Compassion?
Russ Bergeron, an INS spokesperson, said recently that he is concerned that the Immigration Appeals Board may allow Oscar to stay in the United States.

“On the surface it seems compassionate to allow a street kid like Oscar to live in America,” said Bergeron. “But if his lawyers win this case, where will U.S. compassion end? Will we have to give asylum to every street child from Honduras? What about street kids from Mexico? What about street kids from India?”

The uncertainty about the outcome of Oscar’s case may partially explain Oscar’s most recent move. After the media learned of Oscar’s plight last July, his lawyers were able to argue that Oscar should be moved out of the juvenile detention center and into a shelter. Oscar was moved from Texas to a shelter in San Diego, Calif., in July. Officials thought Oscar would be better off in California, away from friends who might help him try to escape. Within three weeks of moving to California, however, Oscar escaped—and is still at large.

Today, Oscar remains at large, perhaps once again a victim of the feelings of loneliness that have always given him nightmares. “The nightmare I’m having ... ,” Oscar told a reporter in July, “I’m awakened, but everybody else is walking around, I can see them, but they can’t see me, and I can’t move around or anything, I’m just there, lost.”

If you were a member of the Immigration Appeals Board, how would you decide in Oscar’s case? What would be the large implications of your decision?

Worldwide Problem

There are 100 Million Street Kids in the World.

What can be done to help street kids such as Oscar? The answer to that question is not easy because there are more than 100 million street children worldwide. Street children live in rich as well as poor countries, but the majority of them live in the poor nations of Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Here are facts about street kids:

- In Latin America, about 40 million children make the streets their home.
- In Asia, there are about 25 million street kids; in Africa, an estimated 10 million.
- Street children have different names in different countries. They are called chinchas (bedbugs) in Colombia, saligoma (nasty kids) in Rwanda, and bui doi (dust children) in Vietnam.

As the world’s population grows, so too will the number of street kids, UNICEF reports. By the year 2000, there will be 247 million children ages 5 to 19 living in the world’s cities. As a result, UNICEF warns, “The number of children living on the streets is destined to grow by tens of millions.”