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Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy

Recent Trends

An estimated 250,000-300,000 people have left the Northern Triangle region of Central America (composed of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) in each of the past five years, with the majority bound for the United States. According to the digital publication *Lawfare*, trends through the first five months of FY2019 suggest that the number of people leaving the region could double this year. Although total U.S. apprehensions of unauthorized migrants have been near historic lows in recent years, the arrival at the Southwest border of a growing number of Central American families and children, many of whom are seeking asylum, reportedly has strained the U.S. immigration system. Congress has sought to understand and address the root causes of these migration trends.

Figure 1. Northern Triangle of Central America



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

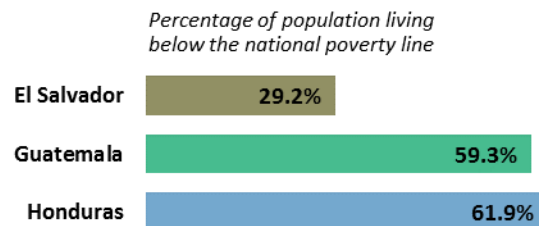
Root Causes

Most analysts characterize this flow as mixed migration, with some individuals traveling north for economic opportunity, others seeking refuge from violence and insecurity, and many in search of both. In October 2018, the International Organization for Migration conducted a rapid survey of a group of Salvadoran migrants who had banded together into a “caravan” to make the journey north. It found that nearly 52% cited economic opportunity as their motive for leaving the region, 18% cited violence and insecurity, 2% cited family reunification, and 28% cited a combination of those factors. Although motives vary by individual, difficult socioeconomic and security conditions—exacerbated by natural disasters and poor governance—appear to be the most important drivers of the current mixed migration flow. A 2017 Center for Global Development study suggests that migration may be self-reinforcing, as those who leave the region can share their experiences and provide migration assistance to those who remain behind through social networks or other means.

Socioeconomic Conditions

The Northern Triangle includes some of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere. Land ownership and economic power historically have been concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites, leaving behind a legacy of extreme inequality. Although the adoption of market-oriented economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s produced greater macroeconomic stability and facilitated the diversification of the region’s once predominantly agricultural economies, the economic gains have not translated into improved living conditions for many of the region’s residents (see **Figure 2**). In the Western Highlands of Guatemala, where significant out-migration has occurred over the past year, 76% of the population lives in poverty and 27% lives in extreme poverty according to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Figure 2. Poverty Rates in the Northern Triangle



Source: World Bank, *DataBank*, accessed in March 2019.

Note: Data from most recent year available: 2017 for El Salvador, 2014 for Guatemala, and 2018 for Honduras.

According to the World Bank, approximately 47% of Salvadorans, 56% of Guatemalans, and 52% of Hondurans are under the age of 25. Because of their relatively young populations, all three countries are expected to see a continued rise in their prime working age populations over the next two decades. Although this presents a window of opportunity to boost economic growth, the region is failing to generate sufficient employment to absorb the growing labor supply. In 2017, for example, the Northern Triangle’s labor force increased by more than 353,000 people, but fewer than 35,000 jobs were created in the formal economy, according to the Inter-American Dialogue, an international affairs think tank. The vast majority of new workers were left to work in the unregulated informal sector, without job protections or benefits, or search for opportunity elsewhere.

Vulnerability to Natural Disasters

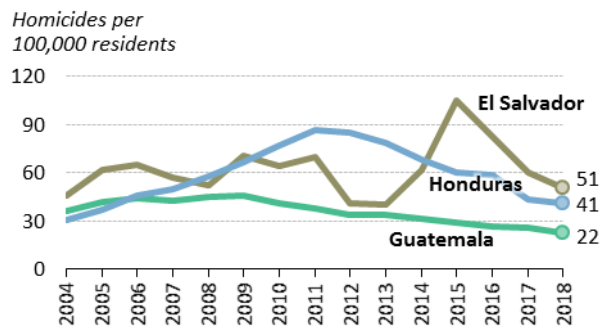
External shocks have exacerbated the difficult socioeconomic conditions in the region. According to the 2018 World Risk Index, El Salvador and Guatemala are among the 15 countries in the world most at risk from natural disasters, due to their frequent exposure and weak response capacity. The Central American Dry Corridor,

which encompasses 58% of El Salvador, 38% of Guatemala, and 21% of Honduras, is extremely susceptible to irregular rainfall. According to a 2017 United Nations World Food Programme study, repeated droughts since 2014 have destroyed crops and resulted in “levels of food insecurity [that] have not been previously seen in the region.” This reportedly has forced households to engage in extreme coping strategies, such as taking on debt, selling off land, and migrating.

Security Conditions

Although violence has long plagued the Northern Triangle, homicide rates rose rapidly in the 2000s as the region became the primary transit corridor for South American narcotics bound for the United States. Transnational criminal organizations have sought to secure trafficking routes through Central America by battling one another and local affiliates and seeking to intimidate and infiltrate government institutions. Gangs, such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th street gang (M-18), have engaged in neighborhood turf wars to control local drug distribution, extortion, and other illicit activities. High levels of poverty, fragmented families, and a lack of legitimate employment opportunities leave many youth in the region susceptible to recruitment by these organizations.

Figure 3. Homicide Rates in the Northern Triangle



Sources: Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social and Insight Crime (El Salvador); Diálogos (Guatemala); and Observatorio de la Violencia (Honduras).

Homicide rates have fallen every year since 2015 (see **Figure 3**), but they remain high by global standards. Other crime is also widespread. According to the Latin American Public Opinion Project, nearly a quarter of Northern Triangle residents surveyed in 2017 reported they had been victims of crime in the past year. A study published in the *Latin American Research Review* in 2018 found that the probability that an individual intends to migrate is 10-15 percentage points higher for Salvadorans and Hondurans who have been victims of multiple crimes than for those who have not.

Governance

Northern Triangle governments have struggled to address the region’s difficult socioeconomic and security conditions. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all have long histories of autocratic rule. Since the regional civil wars in the 1970s to 1990s, their transitions to democracy have faced several challenges. A lack of political will and capacity, rampant bribery and embezzlement of state funds,

and some of the lowest tax collection rates in Latin America all contribute to underfunded state institutions. This has depleted state coffers of funding for social services, contributing to low educational attainment, persistent poverty, and social instability. Weak institutions also limit these countries’ abilities to protect citizens or prevent or prosecute crimes. Without a strong state presence, their border areas are vulnerable to criminal trafficking of people, drugs, and arms. Citizens in the region express low levels of confidence in nearly all of their government institutions according to polling by Latinobarómetro.

U.S. Policy

Over the past five years, the U.S. government has worked with partners in the region to deter migration in several ways. The U.S. and Northern Triangle governments have engaged in public awareness campaigns to inform the region about the potential dangers of unauthorized migration and to correct possible misperceptions about U.S. immigration policies. These campaigns have included billboard, radio, television, and social media advertisements across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Some analysts have questioned the effectiveness of such deterrence campaigns. A 2018 study published in the *Latin America Research Review* found that Hondurans’ “views of the dangers of migration to the United States, or the likelihood of deportation, do not seem to influence their emigration plans in any meaningful way.”

The U.S. government is also providing foreign assistance to partners in the region to combat smuggling operations and address the root causes of migration. For example, the U.S. State Department has allocated more than \$100 million since FY2014 to help Mexico control migration through its territory. Under the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, for which Congress has appropriated more than \$2.6 billion since FY2016, the United States is supporting efforts to promote economic prosperity, improve security, and strengthen governance in the region. Some analysts are skeptical of such efforts given the Northern Triangle governments’ corruption and resistance to reform. Others argue that previous U.S. assistance has contributed to improvements in the region and further progress will require concerted, long-term U.S. support. It is too early to assess the full impact of the current strategy since many of the activities funded by the initiative are less than two years into implementation.

Additional Analysis

For further analysis of conditions in the region and U.S. policy, see CRS Report R43616, *El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations*; CRS Report R42580, *Guatemala: Political and Socioeconomic Conditions and U.S. Relations*; CRS Report RL34027, *Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations*; CRS In Focus IF10215, *Mexico’s Immigration Control Efforts*; and CRS Report R44812, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress*.

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