

Updated March 31, 2022

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

Recent Trends

According to a model developed at the University of Texas at Austin's Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law, an estimated 407,000 people, on average, left the Northern Triangle region of Central America (see **Figure 1**) annually from FY2018 to FY2021, with the majority bound for the United States. Flows have varied from year to year, with an estimated 691,000 people leaving the region in FY2019 and an estimated 112,000 people leaving the region in FY2020. Surveys conducted in 2020 found many potential migrants had postponed their plans in the midst of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic but intended to undertake their journeys once governments lifted cross-border travel restrictions.

Figure 1. Northern Triangle of Central America



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

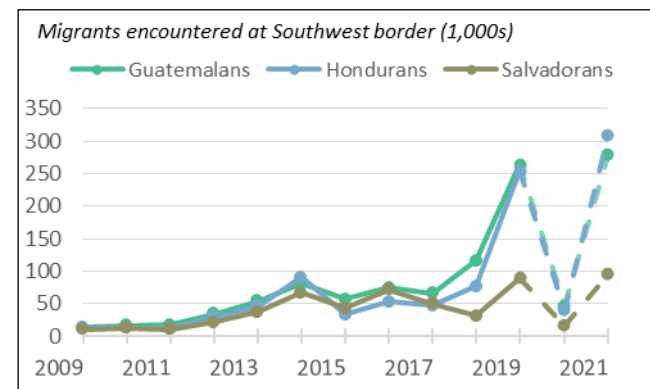
In FY2021, U.S. Border Patrol encountered nearly 684,000 foreign nationals from the Northern Triangle at the U.S. Southwest border, including 309,000 Hondurans, 279,000 Guatemalans, and 96,000 Salvadorans (see **Figure 2**). The Border Patrol apprehended 287,000 of those individuals under Title 8 of the *U.S. Code* (immigration) and expelled nearly 397,000 under Title 42 of the *U.S. Code* (public health). According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the use of Title 42 has corresponded with an increase in recidivism, with repeat encounters accounting for more than 33% of total encounters in FY2021, compared with about 13% prior to the pandemic. Of those encountered from the Northern Triangle, about 17% were unaccompanied children, 39% were traveling with family members, and 45% were single adults.

Root Causes

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 this mixed flow of economic migrants and asylum-seekers. Research suggests such flows can become self-reinforcing over time, as families seek

reunification and those who leave their communities serve as examples for, and share their experiences and resources with, those who remain behind.

Figure 2. U.S. Border Patrol Apprehensions and Expulsions of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran Nationals at the Southwest Border: FY2011-FY2021



Source: U.S. Border Patrol data.

Note: Figures for FY2020 and FY2021 include Title 42 public health expulsions in addition to Title 8 apprehensions and are not strictly comparable to prior years.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Land ownership and economic power in the Northern Triangle historically have been concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites, leaving a legacy of extreme inequality and widespread poverty. Although market-oriented economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s produced greater macroeconomic stability and facilitated the diversification of the region's once predominantly agricultural economies, those moderate economic gains have not translated into improved living conditions for many in the Northern Triangle. Analysts expect the working-age populations of all three Northern Triangle countries will continue to grow over the next two decades, since approximately 45% of Guatemalans, 42% of Hondurans, and 36% of Salvadorans are under the age of 20. Without improved job creation, new workers may have to choose between pursuing limited, precarious employment opportunities in the unregulated informal sector and seeking opportunity elsewhere.

Natural Disasters

Environmental shocks have aggravated the already difficult living conditions in the region. Some scientific studies indicate that Central America has become significantly hotter and drier in recent decades, and portions of the region have struggled with a series of prolonged droughts since 2014. In addition to facing repeated crop losses, some rural communities have experienced declining employment opportunities in the coffee sector, which typically provides

a crucial source of seasonal income for about 1.3 million families in the Northern Triangle. The spread of coffee leaf rust (a fungus) since 2012 has reduced production, and low international coffee prices have made it difficult for coffee farmers to pay off debts and replenish diseased coffee trees.

Many rural families already had been selling off land and migrating when the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricanes Eta and Iota struck the region in 2020. The International Monetary Fund estimates those crises contributed to annual economic contractions of nearly 9% in Honduras, 7.9% in El Salvador, and 1.5% in Guatemala. According to the World Food Program, the number of food insecure people in the Northern Triangle nearly tripled from 2.2 million in 2019 to about 6.4 million in late 2021. A World Food Program internet survey of the region found that individuals experiencing moderate or severe hunger were two to three times more likely to be making concrete preparations to migrate than those who were not.

Security Conditions

Violence has long plagued the Northern Triangle, but 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 by intimidating and infiltrating government institutions. Gangs, such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th street gang (M-18), frequently resort to violence while engaging in neighborhood turf wars to control local drug distribution, extortion, and other illicit activities. The region also experiences widespread sexual and gender-based violence and community violence—unplanned, impulsive violence arising from interpersonal disputes.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, at least 71,500 Salvadorans and 247,000 Hondurans had been displaced internally by violence as of 2018; similar data for Guatemala are unavailable because the government does not recognize internal displacement associated with violence. In the absence of effective government responses, victims may be displaced multiple times or may feel compelled to leave their countries. Research has found that Salvadorans and Hondurans who have been victims of multiple crimes have significantly higher migration intentions than those who have not.

Governance

Northern Triangle governments have struggled to address the region's difficult socioeconomic and security conditions and to respond to natural disasters. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have long histories of autocratic rule, and their transitions to democracy have been uneven. Failures to reform and dedicate sufficient resources to the public sector have left government institutions weak and unable to carry out their mandates. Public investment is particularly low in Guatemala, which collects about 12% of gross domestic product in tax revenue—the lowest level in Latin America. Systemic corruption has exacerbated problems in the region by diverting scarce resources and permitting criminals to co-opt state institutions. Pervasive corruption also may

undermine confidence among citizens of the region that conditions could ever improve.

U.S. Policy

In July 2021, the Biden Administration released a new Collaborative Migration Management Strategy intended to build a regional framework for safe, orderly, and humane migration in North and Central America. The strategy calls for a surge of humanitarian assistance to alleviate conditions in the region; messaging campaigns to deter irregular migration; support for partner governments' efforts to manage their borders, provide protection to vulnerable populations, and reintegrate returned migrants; and expanded access to legal migration and protection pathways in the United States and third countries. In accordance with the strategy, the Administration allocated nearly \$252 million of humanitarian assistance to the region in FY2021. It also reestablished the Central American Minors program, which reunites eligible minors in the Northern Triangle with parents in the United States, and has made available several thousand supplemental H-2B temporary nonagricultural worker visas for Northern Triangle nationals.

In addition to those short-term migration management policies, the Biden Administration developed a new U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America that focuses on long-term socioeconomic, security, and governance challenges. The root causes strategy is similar to the prior U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, for which Congress appropriated more than \$3.7 billion from FY2016 to FY2021. The Trump Administration effectively halted that strategy in March 2019—less than two years into implementation—by suspending most new foreign assistance to the Northern Triangle and reprogramming \$396 million to other countries in response to continued migration from the region. According to the Government Accountability Office, the 14-month suspension adversely affected about 56% of U.S.-funded projects in the Northern Triangle and U.S. Agency for International Development officials do not expect field operations to return to pre-suspension levels until at least FY2023.

The Biden Administration intends to scale up U.S. assistance programs in the region once again and to improve the effectiveness of U.S. efforts by using migration data to better target programs, placing greater emphasis on host-country governance, and enhancing partnerships with local organizations. The Administration has proposed allocating \$4 billion to Central America over four years, including \$860.6 million in FY2022. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103), does not designate an overall funding level for Central America, but it provides “not less than” \$100 million for locally led development programs, \$70 million to reduce violence against women and girls, and \$61.5 million for anti-corruption activities in the region. The Administration is requesting \$986.8 million for Central America in FY2023.

Peter J. Meyer, Specialist in Latin American and Canadian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.