



THE CENTER ON IMMIGRATION AND CHILD WELFARE



Why Do People Migrate?:

The Context of Migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States

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[RESEARCH BRIEF]

Introduction

The immigration crisis that has separated children from their parents, kept families in detention, and placed children in temporary shelters at our U.S.-Mexico border for the past several months, has renewed questioning about why so many people attempt to migrate to the U.S. Changing motives for which people immigrate, in tandem with economic and policy shifts on both sides of U.S.-Mexico border, have resulted in fluctuating patterns of migration over time. Policy initiatives like the Bracero Program of the 1940's, which recruited workers from Mexico to fill temporary employment opportunities, solidified labor market niches for immigrant workers and deepened the networks to support their continued supply.¹ At the same time, civil wars and worsening economic conditions in Central America have coincided with increases in gang violence that push people to seek safety and opportunity in the U.S.^{2,3} Understanding how the current flow of Mexican and Central American immigration has developed and changed over the last several decades, along with the factors that draw people to the U.S., is crucial for those interested in supporting immigrants and for developing responsible policy solutions to address the challenges they face.

WHY DO INDIVIDUALS IMMIGRATE?

A dynamic interplay of forces at both ends of a migratory axis impacts the decision to migrate. The push-pull theory of migration proposes political, social, economic, legal, historical, cultural and educational forces that shape patterns of movement across borders. Push factors generally emerge from the area of origin, while pull factors materialize in the area of destination.

Opportunity

Families are drawn to immigrate to the U.S. from Central America and Mexico by the promise of safety and economic opportunity or to join other family members, and by the compulsion to leave violence or to overcome poverty. The need for workers, particularly in the agriculture and construction industries, yields employment options that pay higher wages, serving as pull factors to strengthen immigrant families' economic security.⁴ Educational opportunities are another pull factor that can ultimately improve job attainment and lead to higher wages.⁵ Along with seeking employment and educational opportunities, long-established networks of family and friends draw immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico border to reunite.^{6, 7}

Violence

In addition to these pulls, factors such as increasing violence in Central America and Mexico also push individuals and families to undertake the journey north. Violence in the forms of political and gang violence, as well as domestic violence and sexual abuse, in Central America and Mexico, serve as a primary push toward immigration.

Homicide

An estimated 3 million Latino immigrant residents in the U.S. are from the "northern triangle" region of Central America that includes El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁸ Despite their vast strengths that include rich cultural and economic resources and international contributions,⁹ all three of these countries make the top ten list for per capita homicide and two of them (El Salvador and Honduras) suffer the highest per capita rates worldwide.¹⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly, a study with 234 immigrant adults from the northern triangle countries found that 83% reported that violence motivated them to leave home.¹¹ Of these, the majority (69%) indicated that they did not report this violence due to fear of corruption and retaliation, while 90% reported being fearful of returning home. Not only do victims fear retaliation by gang members, but a shortage of police officers renders law enforcement ineffective even when crimes are reported.¹²

Gang Violence

Increasing violence has also led youth from these countries to travel unaccompanied by adult family members. In 2014, 57,000 youth from the northern triangle countries arrived at the U.S. border, twice the number of youth as in 2013.¹³ Youth flee to avoid physical assault, rape, kidnapping, and other forms of violence. Much of youth-related violence centers on gang involvement.¹⁴ Young men are recruited as members, while females are recruited both as members and as girlfriends of gang members.^{15, 16} Youth who refuse to join gangs endanger their own, as well as their families' lives. As dangerous as the immigration journey may be, many youth would prefer to "try" rather than "stay and die," in the face of daily threats.¹⁷

Gender-based violence

Young women and girls also flee gender-related violence, including domestic assault and femicide.¹² Mexico and Central American nations have been found to be among the most violent countries for women.¹⁸ While some policies protecting women exist, such laws are often not enforced.¹⁹ Even in light of the prevalence of gang-related violence, women are at the greatest risk of harm in their own homes.²⁰ According to the Pan American Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,²¹ 27.6% of Guatemalan and 26.3% of Salvadoran women have experienced physical or sexual violence at some point by a partner and 9.9% of Honduran women reported enduring physical or sexual assault during the past 12 months. Youth are also at risk. According to one study, 42% of women and 62% of men surveyed in El Salvador, and 35% of women and 46% of men surveyed in Guatemala, had experienced physical violence before the age of 15.²²

LGBT-related Violence

Adults and youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) often seek asylum to protect their families, as well themselves. An estimated 275 LGBT-identified individuals were murdered in Honduras between 2009 and 2017. Risk of sexual, physical, and emotional assault – and even death – for individuals identifying as LGBT and as transgender is high, as authorities in the region offer little to no protections for this community.²³

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Poverty

Individuals also choose to come to the U.S. to escape extreme poverty and limited employment opportunities. Historically, economic growth in Latin America has been volatile, with periods of major instability.²⁴ This situation of unstableness is not universal in the Latin America, but at different times it has affected certain countries significantly. The periodic fluctuations, combined with differences between countries and inequalities within countries, increases vulnerability in much of the population. In Mexico, an estimated 43% of people live below the poverty line.²⁵ In the northern triangle countries, 61% of Hondurans, 59% of Guatemalans, and 38% of Salvadorans fall below their nations' poverty lines. Inequality in wealth corresponds to inequality in land distribution, which has only been further concentrated in the hands of elites as global demand for sugar cane and palm oil have spiked in the past decades. It is therefore not surprising that a part of experiencing extreme poverty is malnourishment and food insecurity. Guatemala has the sixth-highest rate of chronic malnutrition (stunting or low height-for-age) in the world—at 47%—with the prevalence reaching around 70% in several highly indigenous areas of the country.²⁶

Natural Disasters

In addition to already being limited in opportunity for economic advancement, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica are among those countries most at risk for disasters such as hurricanes, floods, and drought,²⁷ disasters which interrupt the food supply, elevate risks for food insecurity,²⁸ and increase general economic strain. Between 2005 and 2014, Central American nations collectively lost approximately \$5.8 billion as a result of natural disasters.²⁹ Further, natural disasters during this time period displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Indeed, Honduras has been identified as the nation “hardest hit” by natural disasters over the past 20 years³⁰ and Guatemala and Nicaragua are among the top ten. Crop and farmland loss is predicted to increase in Central America over the coming years due to rising temperatures, indicating that an already urgent issue

may get worse over time.³¹ Without available infrastructure to rebuild, many individuals are left with no choice but to leave.



CONCLUSION

Reasons for migrating to the United States—from violence, discrimination, poverty, food insecurity and natural disasters, to opportunities to pursue a better life—frequently outweigh the dangers of the journey. Upon reaching the U.S. border, parents and youth have already endured extraordinary stress and trauma that poses long-term risk to health and well-being. Rather than inflicting further suffering, it is imperative that we actively care for the health and safety of families and children who have made this difficult choice and perilous journey in order to escape extreme danger.

The traumas associated with socio-economic conditions that lead migrants to leave home, in addition to the potential traumatic events experienced along the migratory path and further risk of detention, violence and trauma upon arrival, create an urgent need for mental health services. The humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border represents an opportunity to partner with community agencies and other faith-based non-profit organizations to address migrant family needs.

With respect to policy implications, studies from the U.S. and abroad have pointed to a need to promote long-term economic and social development in the countries from which migrants are fleeing. People want to remain in their homelands if they feel safe and see a viable future for their children. Many have called for an end to the U.S. government's zero-tolerance policy that has closed the doors of opportunity and safety for many migrants. In its place, migrant/refugee resettlement programming can be used to help traumatized migrant families relocate and access housing, food and other mental health services to address their needs. New guest worker programs should be structured so that undocumented immigrants can legally work in the U.S. Such policies would recognize an informal migration cycle that already exists and is a critical component of the U.S. economy and social environment.

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