

Migrants at the Southwest Border: Push Factors & Policy Solutions

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Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Meijer, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am grateful for the Subcommittee’s interest in Central American and Mexican migration and to have this opportunity to discuss U.S. policy options to address this chronic issue. As always, I am eager to hear your advice and answer any questions.

Between January and April of 2021, CBP apprehended 570,000 people, a mix of individuals and families, at the southwest U.S. border.¹ If this pace continues, 2021 apprehensions will exceed previous recent peaks in 2019 and 2014-2015, though still remain below those of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The migration spikes of the last decade have been largely driven by the rising movement of Central Americans. Today roughly half of the individuals, and nine out of ten of the families, that arrive at the southern U.S. border come from Central America’s Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This exodus results from a number of chronic push factors. It also results from the pull of a recovering U.S. economy and the deep familial and community ties between the United States and the sending nations.

Economic Insecurity, Violence, and Bad Governance Push Central Americans North

One of the biggest challenges is economic insecurity. These economies have expanded more slowly than many other emerging markets in recent years. Tepid growth rates reflect the direct and indirect costs of violence, corruption, extortion, and poor governance, which has limited local and foreign investment and formal sector job opportunities.

¹ U.S. Customs and Border Protection. “CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2021,” April 2021.

<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics/>.

Calculations based on Customs and Border Protection (U.S. Border Patrol and Office of Field Operations) data.

COVID-19 hit the three economies hard, the IMF estimating declines of 2 percent in Guatemala, 9 percent in El Salvador, and nearly 7 percent in Honduras. Millions in the region have fallen into poverty, and hunger and malnutrition are on the rise.

Extreme weather and climate changes have exacerbated these economic difficulties, pushing more Central Americans to leave. Tropical Storm Eta and Hurricane Iota, both dubbed once in a century storms that hit just 2 weeks apart in November 2020, directly displaced over 100,000 people and, according to the United Nations, affected over 7 million more as mudslides buried homes and fields, shut down hospitals, and cut off access to clean water.²

Significant swathes of El Salvador and Honduras, along with portions of Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, make up what has come to be called the “Dry Corridor,” an agricultural area hit hard by a years’ long drought. The UN World Food Programme estimates that nearly one million farmers are now facing severe crises. Losing crops and often titles to land fuels migration.

Violence too pushes tens of thousands to leave. The Northern Triangle remains one of the most dangerous places in the world. Homicides rates in Guatemala and Honduras routinely top 20 and 44 per 100,000 citizens respectively. El Salvador’s murder rate has declined in recently years, but still counted some 36 murders per 100,000 in 2019. Gangs, some of them transnational in nature, effectively control significant territory in many of these nations, robbing, kidnapping, extorting, and assaulting fellow citizens. The lack of legal options or protections for citizens if pressured or preyed upon spurs migration as well. Michael Clemens at the Center for Global Development has found that violence promotes child and unaccompanied minor migration in particular, calculating that six more homicides in Central America led to nearly 4 additional children to be apprehended at the U.S. border.³ Gender-based violence is another driver, particularly for the women and children presenting themselves at the U.S. border. The three Central American nations have the highest rates of femicide in the hemisphere.

Corruption and poor governance more broadly drive migration. They lead to poorly executed infrastructure that is more likely to crumble in the face of natural disasters, building codes ignored for a price. Funds to alleviate tragedies or provide benefits and opportunities to citizens are instead siphoned off. Corruption and impunity permit and enable violence, leaving individuals fearful for their or their loved ones’ lives, and often without a choice except to flee. And the injustice and discrimination between those on the take or those not weaken the community ties that can keep individuals from leaving.

Family Ties and Economic Opportunities Pull Central Americans North

Two factors in particular pull migrants north. U.S. economic growth and the promise of job opportunities encourage people to come. Studies show that immigrants find jobs once here, and are more likely to be employed than U.S.-born

² “Central America: Tropical Storm Eta & Hurricane Iota - Six Weeks Later (as of 22 December 2020).” OCHA, December 22, 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2020-12-23%20W%20After%20%28ENG%29.pdf>.

³Clemens, Michael A. “Violence, Development, and Migration Waves: Evidence from Central American Child Migrant Apprehensions.” CGD Working Paper 459. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. July 2017. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/violence-development-and-migration-waves-evidence-central-american-child-migrant>.

workers.⁴ And Central Americans have deep family roots in the United States. For unaccompanied minors arriving at the border, a strong majority have a parent or close relative that lives in the United States.⁵

Mexican Migration is on the Rise

While the main U.S. focus today is on Central America, we shouldn't overlook the rise in Mexican migration to the United States. For nearly a decade, net Mexican migration north has been flat or negative. According to data from the DHS and the Migration Policy Institute, the number of unauthorized Mexicans living in the United States fell by nearly 800,000 during the 2010s.⁶

This trajectory has now changed. From April 2020 until February of this year, Mexicans, mostly single adults, outnumbered all other nationalities apprehended at the Southern border. They continue to represent nearly half of those crossing the border irregularly. And the factors pushing the reversal of earlier trends show few signs of lessening.

Mexico's migrants are largely driven by the push of economic insecurity at home, and the pull of economic opportunity here. Mexico's economy was stagnating before the pandemic in 2019. It has become one of the hardest hit by COVID-19, its GDP falling 8.2 percent in 2020. The IMF estimates it will be one of the slowest to recover in Latin America: the combination of limited fiscal stimulus and falling investment mean the economy won't recoup its pre-pandemic size until 2023. Meanwhile, the United States is recovering: first quarter GDP surged more than 10 percent, and economists expect the economy to surpass its pre-COVID-19 size by the end of this year. Job openings are rising, particularly in food service, hospitality, construction, and other sectors traditionally open to migrants.

Violence too displaces Mexican individuals, families, and at times whole communities from their hometowns. Homicide rates hover near record highs, and the geographic spread and fragmentation of organized crime and gangs has left Mexicans increasingly vulnerable as prey. The government's inability or unwillingness to stand up competent police and security forces and bolster effective justice systems to enforce the rule of law leaves criminal activity largely unchecked in parts of the nation. This too drives Mexicans north.

Combined with continued corruption, decreasing transparency, and poor governance, many Mexican citizens are less hopeful that the difficulties they face at home will lessen or end, leading more to consider leaving.

What the United States Can Do

U.S. efforts can and should focus on the immediate challenges accelerating the exodus of people from Central America and Mexico. Food and shelter are critical concerns. The United States can and should provide immediate support for those displaced from their homes by natural disasters and other events, and help those suffering from rising hunger and malnutrition find basic necessities without having to leave their country.

⁴Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics —2019." News Release. U.S. Department of Labor, May 15, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf>.

⁵ Zak, Danilo. "Fact Sheet: Unaccompanied Migrant Children (UACs)." National Immigration Forum, November 2, 2020. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-unaccompanied-migrant-children-uacs/>.

⁶ Migration Policy Institute Data Hub. "U.S. Immigration Trends," 2019. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends>. See: "Mexican-Born Population Over Time, 1850-Present."

Baker, Bryan. "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2015–January 2018." Population Estimates. U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics, January 2021. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/Pop_Estimate/UnauthImmigrant/unauthorized_immigrant_population_estimates_2015_-_2018.pdf.

Diminishing the devastating effects of COVID-19 for personal health and for the health of these economies is vital to change the migration calculations of individuals and families. Mexico and Central American nations should be given priority in U.S. vaccine diplomacy, protecting their citizens and enabling their economies to reopen faster.

Aid to safely reopen schools and extend educational opportunities in a COVID-19 world is vital. For over a year the vast majority of students in these nations have had no in person schooling, and the quality and access to remote alternatives has been uneven. Getting the nations' young people back into the classroom will help staunch immediate migratory exits by getting children off the streets and providing them with renewed purpose and ties at home. It is also a path to address longer term root causes of migration, helping build skills, knowledge, self-confidence, and community roots in the voters and workers of the future.

The United States has a track record of programs that have tackled some of the root causes of migration. Many of these have found success in helping improve local lives -- often at the neighborhood or municipal level -- of Central Americans. While many of these were halted under the previous administration, these types of efforts to better conditions on the ground can and should be restarted and expanded. Neighborhood and school based programs that work to reduce gang violence through counseling, tutoring, and community service opportunities show promise in reducing violence and shifting the calculations of young people as to what their future can hold at home. So too do efforts to train young people in professional and life skills, and to connect them to their communities through local projects, cultural events, and economic opportunities.

Programs to help farmers adjust to drought conditions, such as introducing irrigation systems or rust resistant coffee seedlings, can help them keep their living and land at home, making it less necessary to leave. Programs designed to connect them directly to markets or to upgrade the profitability of the crops they grow can also ensure a more sustainable future at home. Other programs providing seed money and training for entrepreneurs have at times succeeded in creating economic opportunities, improving people's prospects at home and shifting their mindset about moving.

As the United States invests in these local community programs, it needs to focus on and push for fundamental changes in the ways these nations are governed. Without significant shifts in governance, the push for citizens to leave will remain strong. This can and should start with reinstating anti-corruption efforts, including backing internationally supported investigatory bodies similar to those shuttered in recent years in Guatemala and Honduras. It means pushing for transparency in the use of international and taxpayer funds. And it means turning directly to local civil society and non-governmental organizations as partners for U.S. backed programs, particularly in countries where the national government is an unreliable partner. It can also mean searching out and supporting subnational government administrations and/or national level reformers in the quest to improve governance. And more broadly, it means defending democratic checks and balances and democracy in these nations.

The United States can play an important role in denying corrupt leaders the ability to visit the United States or to use its financial system to hold ill gotten gains. And it can help prosecutors in these countries build cases against corrupt elites.

The hundreds of thousands of Central Americans and Mexicans crossing the southwestern U.S. border result from a similar number of wrenching decisions: individuals and families being forced to choose to leave their homes, friends, and communities. While no single program or approach will quickly change these calculations, a combination of immediate and long term investments, of national political reforms and micro-level neighborhood interventions, and of multi-pronged programs to address the myriad reasons for leaving is the best way to alter these choices.

Migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States has been going on for decades. Whatever the United States does, it will not end either the deep inequalities or the deep familial ties between the nations. But concerted efforts and investments at home can give more Mexicans and Central Americans a choice when they consider migration, rather than making it a necessity for them and their families to survive.