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

U.S. policy toward Central America has been a subject of significant debate and oversight over the past decade as Congress has sought to address the underlying factors driving migration from the region to the United States.

Recent Trends

According to a model developed at the University of Texas at Austin, an average of 407,000 people left the *Northern Triangle* 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 692,000 people leaving the region in FY2019, followed by 113,000 in FY2020, and 521,000 in FY2021. Some 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.

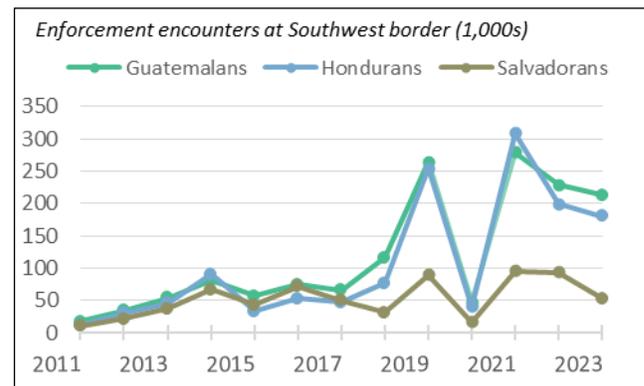
In FY2023, U.S. Border Patrol encountered more than 447,000 foreign nationals from the Northern Triangle crossing the U.S. Southwest border between ports of entry, including 213,000 Guatemalans; 181,000 Hondurans; and 53,000 Salvadorans (see **Figure 2**). Of those encountered, the Border Patrol placed 309,000 into removal proceedings under Title 8 of the *U.S. Code*, where they could potentially seek asylum or related relief, and expelled 138,000 from the United States under Title 42 for public health reasons. About 40% of these enforcement encounters involved single adults, 39% involved individuals traveling with family members, and 21% involved unaccompanied minors.

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. Some 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 Encounters with Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran Nationals at the Southwest Border: FY2011-FY2023



Sources: U.S. Border Patrol documents and data portal.

Note: Figures for FY2020-FY2023 include Title 42 public health expulsions in addition to Title 8 apprehensions.

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, moderate economic gains have not translated into improved living conditions for many in the region. Analysts expect working-age populations in the Northern Triangle will continue to grow over the next two decades, since approximately 44% of Guatemalans, 42% of Hondurans, and 36% of Salvadorans are under the age of 20. Without improved job creation, those entering the workforce may have to choose between pursuing limited, precarious employment opportunities in the unregulated informal sector or seeking opportunity elsewhere.

Natural Disasters

Environmental shocks have aggravated the already difficult living conditions in the region. Some scientific studies indicate that extreme warm temperatures have increased in Central America since the mid-20th century, 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 more than 1 million families in the Northern Triangle.

Some 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. Those crises contributed to gross domestic product (GDP) contractions of 9.0% in Honduras, 7.9% in El Salvador, and 1.8% in Guatemala in 2020. 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; an estimated 5.5 million Guatemalans and Hondurans were food insecure as of late 2023. 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 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 so-called 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. Some 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

Governments in the Northern Triangle 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 14.2% of GDP in tax revenue—among the lowest levels 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 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 \$216.3 million of humanitarian assistance to address the needs of vulnerable populations in Central America in FY2022 and \$139.9 million for those purposes in FY2023. It also issued nearly 19,000 temporary worker (H-2A and H-2B) visas to nationals from the Northern Triangle in FY2022, doubling the FY2021 total.

In addition to those short-term migration management policies, the Biden Administration developed a 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 \$396.2 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.

The Biden Administration has begun to scale up U.S. assistance programs in the region while seeking to improve their effectiveness by using migration data to target programs, placing greater emphasis on host-country governance, and enhancing partnerships with local organizations. The Administration has proposed allocating \$4.0 billion to Central America over four years, including at least \$945.8 million in FY2024. The Administration also has sought to mobilize private-sector investment in Central America, securing more than \$4.2 billion in commitments through Vice President Harris's *Central America Forward* (formerly *Call to Action*) initiative.

Neither the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103), nor the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328), designated overall funding levels for Central America. After consulting with Congress, the State Department allocated \$695.5 million in bilateral and regional foreign assistance to Central America in FY2022 and \$673.0 million in FY2023. Including humanitarian aid and centrally managed funds, \$1.87 billion in U.S. assistance was allocated to the region over the past two fiscal years. The House-passed (H.R. 4665/H.Rept. 118-146) and Senate-reported (S. 2438/S.Rept. 118-71) FY2024 foreign assistance appropriations bills do not include specific funding levels for Central America. They would designate funds for certain priorities, however, and maintain some restrictions on aid for the Northern Triangle.

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