Charting a New Regional Course of Action

The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration

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Executive Summary

Influenced by an array of pull and push factors, the movement of Central Americans toward the United States has shaped the migration landscape in the region for decades. Yet, changes over the past five years in the volume and characteristics of those on the move have drawn an unprecedented level of attention from regional governments seeking to reduce irregular migration. The U.S. Border Patrol recorded approximately 1.8 million encounters of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras at the U.S.-Mexico border between fiscal years 2017 and 2021, and in four of the last five fiscal years encounters of migrants from these three countries surpassed those involving Mexican migrants. Since 2018, the region has also witnessed larger and more frequent mass movements, including those composed of significant shares of families and unaccompanied children, primarily bound for the United States and motivated by a mix of employment opportunities, family reunification, and humanitarian protection needs.

At the same time, there has been renewed political interest in countries stretching from Panama to Canada in collaboratively addressing the unabating root causes of migration and displacement. This has led to the advancement of regional frameworks that seek to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration with the goal of benefiting migrants and origin and destination communities alike, while contributing to sustainable development and making migration an option but not the only resort to escape adverse conditions. If this interest can be leveraged and translated into action, governments in the region have a unique and timely opportunity to shift from an enforcement-centered strategy to a more multifaceted migration management system rooted in cooperation.

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To inform strategic discussions about how best to address root causes and manage Central American migration, this report—a collaboration between the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), UN World Food Programme (WFP), and Civic Data Design Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)—explores the factors that drive people in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to consider and decide to migrate irregularly or regularly, as well as the costs and economic implications of migration for households and communities throughout the region.

The report's findings draw from a unique, face-to-face survey of nearly 5,000 households in 12 departments across these three countries, complemented by a nationally representative online survey with more than 6,000 individual responses, to understand these factors and the emerging needs of migrant and nonmigrant communities in countries of origin. Conducted in Spring 2021 during a dynamic period of economic instability and changing migration policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these surveys capture a snapshot of migration decision-making processes in this period and make a compelling case for future research to document changes in migration desires and motivations.

Among the key findings of this study are:

1 **Central Americans' desire to migrate internationally is on the rise, but only a fraction of the surveyed population planned and prepared to do so.** Survey respondents in approximately four out of every ten households (43 percent) indicated in 2021 a desire to migrate permanently to another country within a year, compared to 8 percent in 2019. Still, less than one in ten households (6 percent) reported making plans to do so, and an even smaller 3 percent reported making concrete preparations. Notably, individuals experiencing food insecurity were more likely (23 percent) to make concrete preparations to migrate than those who were food secure (7 percent).

2 **Violence, insecurity, and natural disasters have been complex and longstanding triggers of migration, but economic factors were participants' primary motivation for desiring to emigrate.** Low wages, unemployment, and insufficient income to cover basic necessities directly affected people's livelihoods and contributed significantly to the desire to emigrate. At the same time, these conditions were the most-cited impediments preventing them for starting the migration journey.

3 **Family ties and positive perceptions of safety and belonging were key reasons why Central Americans decided not to migrate.** Households' top reason for not desiring to migrate was to avoid being separated from family in their country of origin. Other factors motivating people to stay were perceptions of safety in Guatemala and Honduras and a notable sense of belonging and rootedness *(arraigo)* in El Salvador.

4 **Households' likelihood to have had a member migrate within the last five years was similar across household income levels.** In contrast to prior studies, which have generally found that households with more resources are more likely to be able to migrate, respondents in this survey from households with the lowest income level were nearly as likely to report that a member had migrated as those from households with mid- to high income levels.

5 **Most but not all migrants relied on irregular channels to migrate, and one-third had returned voluntarily or involuntarily to their origin country.** In the households where survey respondents reported a member had migrated within the last five years, more than half (55 percent) of these migrants were said to have traveled irregularly and contracted a smuggler, nearly one-quarter (22 percent) traveled irregularly on their own or in a caravan, and about one-fifth (19 percent) used regular migration pathways. However, only 57 percent had reportedly reached and were residing in the destination country at the time of the survey, and 33 percent had returned either voluntarily or involuntarily to their origin country. The United States was cited as the intended destination for nine out of ten recent migrants.

6 **Although economic factors were the primary motivators for seeking to migrate, there were notable differences across departments in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** The top three departments of origin of reported migrants were: Usulután, El Salvador (15 percent of households that reported a member migrating recently); Huehuetenango, Guatemala (12 percent); and Yoro, Honduras (12 percent). Notably, respondents in Usulután were more likely to report insecurity and

family reunification as migration factors than was the case in other departments. In terms of migration desires, climate events and family reunification were notable drivers in Cortés, Honduras, and in Cabañas, El Salvador, respectively, though economic factors ranked higher in both departments.

7   **Reported costs to contract smugglers were not only significantly higher than the costs of using regular mechanisms but also comprised the majority of total annual migration costs.** Based on the amounts survey respondents reported their household members had spent on different types of migration, this analysis estimates that migrants from these three countries spent USD 2.2 billion annually on the costs involved in migrating regularly and irregularly to the United States over the past five years. Because of the significant costs associated with contracting a smuggler, an estimated USD 1.7 billion of this total was spent annually by migrants traveling irregularly with a smuggler.

8   **The volume of migrant remittances varied by country yet represented an important means of survival across households.** Nearly three out of every ten households (29 percent) reported regularly receiving remittances from abroad. On average, Guatemalan households received a monthly amount of USD 350, while Honduran and Salvadoran households received USD 170 and USD 150, respectively. The surveyed households reported that remittances were a lifeline primarily used to meet subsistence costs and immediate expenses, rather than a means to contribute to savings or invest in personal or community projects, though such uses are often discussed by policymakers and researchers as potential catalysts of development.

Based on these findings, and building on emerging regional collaboration efforts, policymakers may wish to consider the following strategies to address the drivers of irregular migration and lay the foundation for a sustainable migration management system that promotes safe, orderly, and regular movement:

1   **Expand national social protection programs and stimulate investments to increase economic opportunities, eradicate hunger, and alleviate poverty for at-risk populations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** Despite small differences across each country, households reported that the lack of economic prosperity and difficulty meeting basic needs had significant and far-reaching impacts on decisions to migrate. Social protection programs that address unemployment and offer work training are pivotal to reaching vulnerable populations who may consider emigrating. Additionally, taking steps to address these conditions should go hand in hand with supporting programs that build resilience and address violence, insecurity, and climate change, prioritizing and expanding those programs that also create economic opportunities.

2   **Tailor ongoing economic development and investment initiatives to municipal-level conditions with robust monitoring and evaluation metrics.** Even as the survey's results overwhelmingly underscored the effect economic factors have on migration desires, they also pointed to small but notable differences across municipalities. Internal and external development efforts and investments to address the root causes of migration—for instance, agricultural programs to build resilience to climate events or anti-gang programming for youth—will be most effective if tailored to these local circumstances, based on information gathered through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

3 **Create incentives and opportunities for diasporas to invest in the development of local communities and to become agents of change in their countries of origin or ancestry.**
Remittances are a lifeline that mitigates local economic instability for Central American households—in effect, buffering against economic migration pressures. But to amplify the impact of remittances beyond individual households, governments and international organizations should consider diasporas as potential agents of economic development and governance. Creating incentives for members of a diaspora to invest in public works can magnify the reach of government efforts while simultaneously enriching transnational partnerships to improve governance, for example by matching diaspora donations with transparent and accountable commitments from national, departmental, and municipal governments.

4 **Incorporate programs and initiatives that underscore the positive conditions that give people the option to seek opportunities at home into broader migration management strategies.**
Governments and civil-society leaders alike can influence how migration is portrayed publicly by investing in programs that build family unity, highlight existing perceptions of safety, and foster a sense of belonging to local communities. Highlighting these positive aspects of local life and targeting efforts to groups most likely to migrate irregularly (e.g., households with members who migrated recently) can foster hope and bolster socioeconomic investments, such as entrepreneurial and infrastructure projects. To improve their chances of shaping migration decision-making, such initiatives must be paired with efforts to address the concrete drivers of irregular migration, with the aim of giving people the possibility to choose.

5 **Expand legal pathways for Central Americans interested in migrating to the United States and other destination countries to redirect migration from irregular to regular channels.**
Coordinated efforts to increase access to temporary employment visas, for example, could help meet the overwhelming demand for employment opportunities abroad. Shifting even a fraction of irregular migration to regular channels would decrease the estimated USD 1.7 billion that Central Americans spend annually on irregular migration with a smuggler and instead increase state revenues—for instance, through reasonable application fees—which can then be invested in initiatives to address other drivers of irregular migration.

Facing unabating push factors and limited access to regular migration channels, many Central Americans resort to irregular migration to improve their livelihoods in the United States. By implementing the aforementioned recommendations with concrete and measurable commitments, however, regional governments, UN agencies, civil-society organizations, and the private sector have a unique opportunity to establish a new approach to addressing irregular migration's root causes and to promote safe, orderly, and lawful movement. While reconfiguring U.S. immigration policies is fundamental to pursuing the aim of creating legal alternatives to irregular migration, the ultimate success of this approach will depend on efforts and initiatives led by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The in-depth analyses of migration drivers and migrants' sociodemographic profiles in this report provide governments a blueprint to design tailored programs and initiatives for populations most likely to migrate irregularly, and to link these efforts to much-needed economic recovery measures. Charting this new regional course of action is undoubtedly a long-term strategy that must adapt to future changes, but one that even in the near term promises to encourage stronger local communities and ameliorate income inequality, hunger, and poverty as the key drivers of migration.

1   Introduction

Central American migration to the United States has shaped regional migration dynamics for decades,[1] but recent changes in the volume and characteristics of those on the move have drawn unprecedented attention from governments in the region and spurred renewed interest in cooperating to reduce irregular migration. Combined encounters of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras at the U.S.-Mexico border reached approximately 1.8 million between fiscal years 2017 and 2021, and the number of encounters involving nationals of these countries surpassed the number involving Mexicans in four of the last five fiscal years.[2] The region has also experienced larger and more frequent mass migration events since 2018, including significant shares of families and unaccompanied minors, primarily bound for the United States and motivated by an array of push and pull factors—from the prospect of better employment opportunities than existed in their origin countries to a desire for family reunification and humanitarian protection needs.

Though no single factor drives migration on its own, economic stagnation in Central America has been a persistent feature and one that has worsened because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each year, the number of young people entering the labor market surpasses the number of jobs available, and many who do not find jobs decide to migrate instead.[3] In 2020, the economic pressures were even more extreme, as GDP contracted by 2 percent in Guatemala, 8 percent in El Salvador, and 9 percent in Honduras.[4] That same year, projections from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean suggested that more than half of Guatemalans and Hondurans and nearly 40 percent of Salvadorans lived in poverty.[5]

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The effects of poverty and the pandemic have also magnified levels of food insecurity in the region. According to the UN World Food Programme, the number of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans affected by moderate or severe food insecurity nearly quadrupled from 4.8 million in 2019 to 17.3 million by Fall 2020. Over the same period, the share of households in the three countries who reported an intention to migrate increased from 8 percent to 15 percent.[6]

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