

Updated December 12, 2022

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 estimated 377,000 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 651,000 people leaving the region in FY2019, followed by 92,400 in FY2020, and 486,600 in FY2021. 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.

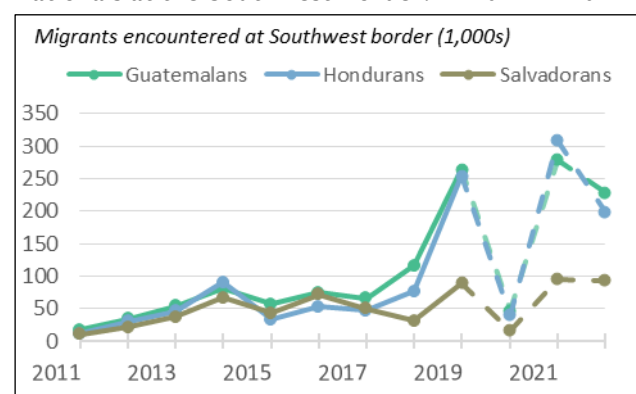
In FY2022, U.S. Border Patrol encountered nearly 521,000 foreign nationals from the Northern Triangle at the U.S. Southwest border, including 199,000 Hondurans, 228,000 Guatemalans, and 93,000 Salvadorans (see **Figure 2**). The Border Patrol apprehended 177,000 of those individuals under Title 8 of the *U.S. Code* (immigration) and expelled nearly 344,000 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 26.5% of total encounters in FY2020 and FY2021, compared with an average of 11.8% in FY2015 through FY2019. Of those encountered from the Northern Triangle in FY2022, about 22% were unaccompanied minors, 24% were traveling with family members, and 54% 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-FY2022



Source: U.S. Border Patrol data.

Note: Figures for FY2020-FY2022, marked in dashed lines, 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, 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 44% of Guatemalans, 40% of Hondurans, and 35% 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 or 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 and Nicaragua.

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. Those crises contributed to annual economic contractions of nearly 9.0% in Honduras, 8.2% in El Salvador, and 1.8% 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; an estimated 7.2 million Guatemalans and Hondurans were food insecure as of mid-2022. 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. 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 12.4% 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 \$295.6 million of humanitarian assistance to address the needs of vulnerable populations in Central America and Mexico in FY2022. It also issued more than 19,000 seasonal labor H-2B visas to Northern Triangle nationals in FY2022, up from 9,800 in FY2021, among other actions.

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.

The Biden Administration has begun to scale up U.S. assistance programs in the region once again 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 \$860.6 million in FY2022 and \$986.8 million in FY2023. The Administration has also sought to mobilize private-sector investment in the Northern Triangle, securing more than \$3.2 billion in commitments through Vice President Harris's "Call to Action" initiative as of June 2022.

Thus far, Congress has opted not to fully fund the Administration's root causes strategy. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103), did not designate an overall funding amount for Central America but the State Department allocated an estimated \$676.2 million to the region after consulting with appropriators. The FY2023 foreign aid appropriations bills reported in the House (H.R. 8282) and introduced in the Senate (S. 4662) would provide funding for Central America to reduce violence against women and to combat corruption, among other purposes, but would not specify a comprehensive total for the region.

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