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

Recent Trends

According to a model developed by academics at the University of Texas at Austin, an estimated 311,000 people, on average, left the Northern Triangle region of Central America (see **Figure 1**) annually from FY2014 to FY2020, with the majority bound for the United States. Flows have varied from year to year, however, with an estimated 709,000 people leaving the region in FY2019 followed by an estimated 139,000 people leaving the region in FY2020. Surveys conducted in 2020 found that many potential migrants in the region 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



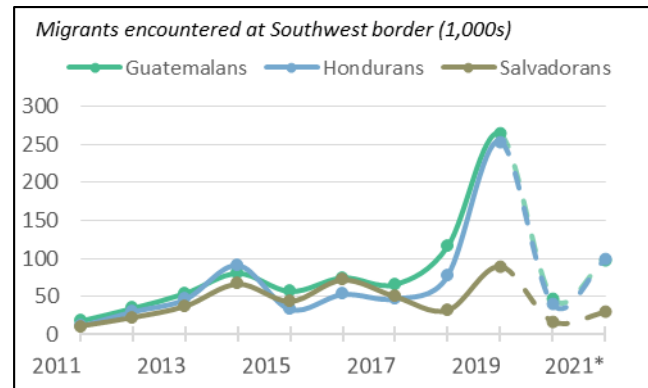
Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS.

Anecdotal reports and recent data collected at the Southwest U.S. border suggest migrants are once again on the move. U.S. Customs and Border Protection personnel encountered (apprehended or expelled under a public health authority) more foreign nationals from the Northern Triangle through the first half of FY2021 than they did in all of FY2020 (see **Figure 2**). Approximately 34,000 of the nearly 226,000 Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans encountered at the border this fiscal year have been unaccompanied minors—a category of migrants that the Biden Administration has exempted from immediate public health expulsions.

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 that 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. Apprehensions and Expulsions of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran Nationals at the Southwest Border: FY2011-FY2021



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection data.

Notes: *FY2021 includes six months, from October 1, 2020, through March 31, 2021. Figures for FY2020 and FY2021 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 and facilitated the diversification of the region's once predominantly agricultural economies, those moderate economic gains have not translated into improved living conditions for many in the Northern Triangle. In areas such as the western highlands of Guatemala, residents continue to contend with high levels of malnutrition and low levels of education that limit their lifelong skill and earning capacities. Analysts expect the working-age populations of all three Northern Triangle countries will continue to increase over the next two decades, since approximately 45% of Guatemalans, 42% of Hondurans, and 36% of Salvadorans are under the age of 20. Without improved job creation, however, new workers may be forced 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 dryer 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. The spread of coffee leaf rust (a fungus) since 2012 has reduced production, and low international coffee prices have made it difficult for coffee farmers to pay off debts and replenish diseased coffee trees.

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. The International Monetary Fund estimates those crises contributed to annual economic contractions of 8.6% in El Salvador, 8% in Honduras, and 1.5% in Guatemala. According to the World Food Programme, approximately 8 million people in the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua are facing hunger, including 1.7 million contending with emergency levels of food insecurity. Nearly 15% of the people surveyed by the World Food Programme in January 2021 reportedly were making concrete plans to migrate, up from 8% in 2018.

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 local affiliates 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 community violence—unplanned, impulsive violence arising from interpersonal disputes. Although the pandemic and government lockdowns initially disrupted criminal activities, reports suggest domestic violence increased and gangs and illicit trafficking groups quickly adapted.

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 ultimately 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 about 12% 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

The Biden Administration is implementing a multipronged approach intended to address the challenges posed by irregular migration flows from the Northern Triangle. Similar to the Obama and Trump Administrations, it has sought to deter short-term migration flows with public messaging campaigns and by urging governments in Central America and Mexico to block and disperse migrants moving through the region. The Biden Administration also has deployed a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Disaster Assistance Response Team to the Northern Triangle to scale up emergency food assistance, income support programs, protection for vulnerable individuals, and other humanitarian efforts. As of April 6, 2021, USAID had allocated \$112 million of FY2021 and prior-year resources to ongoing humanitarian assistance efforts in the region.

On February 5, 2021, President Biden issued Executive Order 14010, calling for a comprehensive regional framework to manage migration flows that would “facilitate access to protection and other lawful immigration avenues, in both the United States and partner countries, as close to migrants’ homes as possible.” To expand access to the U.S. asylum system, the Administration has suspended three asylum cooperative agreements (also known as *safe third country agreements*), which the Trump Administration had negotiated in 2019 to allow the United States to transfer certain asylum-seekers to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to apply for protection in those countries rather than in the United States. (Guatemala had already suspended its agreement in March 2020, and the other two agreements were never implemented). The Biden Administration also is reestablishing the Central American Minors program, which the Trump Administration halted in 2017, to reunite eligible minors in the Northern Triangle with parents in the United States.

For FY2022, the Biden Administration is requesting \$861 million in foreign assistance for Central America as part of its proposed four-year, \$4 billion plan to address the root causes of migration. It appears as though the requested assistance would build on the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, for which Congress appropriated more than \$3.6 billion between FY2016 and FY2021. U.S. agencies significantly scaled back many of the programs funded through that strategy less than two years into implementation due to the Trump Administration’s decision to suspend most foreign assistance to the Northern Triangle and reprogram \$396 million to other foreign policy priorities. As of January 2021, USAID programs in the region were reaching fewer than half as many people as they did prior to the March 2019 aid suspension. (For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10371, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview*.)

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