



Institutional and Political Drivers of Migration in Central America

Interim Report and Recommendations

North and Central American Task Force on Migration

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The **North and Central American Task Force on Migration** is a non-governmental forum of academics, civil society and business leaders, and former policymakers in dialogue with current government officials created to facilitate a broadly driven solution dialogue among the countries involved in the crisis of migration and forced displacement in the region. Initiated by the World Refugee & Migration Council with the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, El Colegio de México, the Migration Policy Institute and the Inter-American Dialogue, the task force will issue concrete recommendations for collective, regional action based on evidentiary research to promote responsibility sharing across North and Central America. This report is part of the Task Force's series of interim reports on the following topics available at wrmcouncil.org/TaskForce:

- Humanitarian protection in the region, particularly for women and children who are at greatest risk, including addressing needs of internally displaced persons and building asylum/reception capacity in Central America and Mexico.
- Co-responsibility and cooperation for managing migration, focusing on enhancing regional approaches to migration in the region.
- Institutional frameworks and domestic political considerations, including rule of law, governance, corruption and accountability.
- Investment in long-term development to address violence and gangs, poverty and inequality, and the impacts of climate change.
- Strengthening regular pathways for migration as an alternative to irregular migration, including private sponsorship, family reunification and labor migration.

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Interim Report on Institutional and Political Drivers of Migration in Central America¹

When Central American migrants are asked why they decided to leave their countries, they give a variety of responses; they're seeking better economic opportunities, family reunification, protection from extortion and criminal violence, hope for a better future for their children. Often it is a combination of factors that drive migration, and the drivers of migration are themselves linked. Criminal gangs are linked with corruption. Poverty is exacerbated – or caused – by poor governance. Low economic growth is tied to weaknesses in rule of law and lack of accountability. Because of corruption and entrenched elite interests, tax revenues are insufficient to provide adequate public services. Even the effects of environmental hazards are shaped by poverty and political factors. It is hard to separate out the political drivers of migration – corruption, lack of accountability, criminal violence, weak rule of law – from the economic and environmental pressures that lead hundreds of thousands of Central Americans to leave their homes and make the often-treacherous journey northwards. The table below, based on a 2019 survey of those intending to migrate, clearly demonstrates the primacy of economic drivers of migration with victimization by violence reported as the second most common reason. While two-thirds of respondents have a relative living abroad, only 3 percent across the three countries of Northern Central America indicated that family reunification was their primary motivation for migration (Creative Associates International 2019, 8).

This is the first of two reports on addressing root causes of Central American migration; the next report will focus on economic and environmental drivers of migration. We recognize that economic and political drivers are closely related and that it is somewhat artificial to separate them. But we also believe that until the political drivers are tackled, it will be difficult to address the economic causes. Simply providing more economic assistance will not stop migration. In fact, as we will consider in the next report, economic development often leads initially to more migration (deHaas 2017) – which only falls when a certain per capita income is reached. Costa Rica also provides an interesting counterpoint; while the country has problems, it also is known for its strong rule of law (as well as its lack of a standing military) and Costa Ricans are not organizing caravans or migrating northwards in large numbers.

There is no bypassing the thorny issues of political drivers of migration. Unfortunately, there are also no quick fixes. Corruption and organized crime have both been a constant presence in Northern Central America for the past two decades. As Norma Torres, US House of Representatives, said at a 2019 Wilson Center event, “Washington is the type of place that expects quick, flash results. Attention spans are very short, but the kind of change that is needed in Central America is the kind of change that takes decades, if not generations, to see through” (Wilson Center 2019).

Short-term measures – such as some of those being pursued by the Biden administration – seem to prioritize limiting migration over supporting efforts to address root causes, such as anti-corruption measures (Kitroeff 2021). This is politically expedient but is sending the wrong message to Central American governments – that if they meet US demands to curb migration they will

¹ This paper was informed by background papers prepared by Jaime Ordóñez on rule of law ([*La pobreza como causa esencial de la expulsión humana y la migración \(Centroamérica 2021-2022\)*](#)), available

in Spanish only), and Pamela Ruiz on criminal violence ([*Criminal Governance in Northern Central America*](#)).

be left alone to deal with internal political concerns – including in ways that lead to more migration.

As this report emphasizes, the role of civil society is crucial. Civil society organizations in Central America and Mexico are strong and professional; they have made impressive contributions in diagnosing the region’s problems – often at considerable risk to themselves. But in order to bring about lasting change in public institutions, the state needs to do its part. We believe that the private sector has an important role to play. While some business interests are linked to corruption, others are investing time and energy in supporting measures to strengthen rule of law, transparency and accountability.

If the root causes of Central American migration are to be addressed, steps must be taken now that will likely only pay off years from now. While the issues are difficult to tackle, we believe that a strong comprehensive regional framework – such as that outlined in our report on [regional cooperation co-responsibility](#) will provide the political space to deal with some of these issues. In this report, we consider issues around rule of law and accountability, corruption, and criminal violence – issues which are related to each other and which, as we will see in the next report, also deeply affect poverty, inequality, and disaster risk. These issues cannot be addressed without confronting fundamental problems of governance in which corruption has become entrenched.

“Poor governance is what underlies violence, impunity, insecurity and lack of economic investment. And all of the region’s governments either abet or embody corruption” (Call 2021).

Rule of Law

The American Bar Association’s Rule of Law Initiative defines the fundamental principles of the rule of law as follows (Rudnicka and Ferris, 2018, 9-10):

Just laws. The laws are clear, publicized, stable, and based on the universal principles of equality and non-discrimination. They protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to an effective legal remedy. They are applied evenly and consistently, and they lay out the mechanisms for solving common justice problems.

Good governance. The process by which the laws are enacted and enforced is accessible, fair, transparent, and efficient. Government institutions are equipped with checks and balances. Public institutions adhere to the principles of open government.

Accountability. Government as well as private actors are accountable under the law.

Access to justice. People are able to use justice institutions to obtain fair solutions to their common justice problems. The six key elements of access to justice include legal framework, legal knowledge, legal advice and representation, access to a justice institution, fair procedure, and enforceable solution.

As Elizabeth Andersen and Sebastián Albuja explain, any effective response to forced migration must comprise efforts to “eliminate the extreme conditions that drive people to uproot themselves en masse.” This includes “assuring that checks on government power are in place; that civil society can organize and voice its views without facing repression; that minorities are not discriminated against or excluded from political [or economic] participation; that corruption does not destroy institutions; that the streets are safe; and that investment finds conditions that lead to economic growth” (2015). All of these are necessary; implementing the changes necessary to strengthen the rule of law requires political will on the part of political leaders who came to power in the existing system and may lack motivation to introduce fundamental reforms which would change that system.

One of the consequences of weak rule of law in Northern Central America is the lack of public

confidence in governmental institutions. Latinobarómetro (latinobarometro.org) reports a significant deterioration in institutional confidence from 2014 through 2019 for Latin America as a whole, noting that the rates of confidence in existing institutions are as follows: 63 percent expressed confidence in the church or churches; 44 percent in the armed forces; 35 percent in the police; 28 percent in electoral institutions 24 percent in judicial authorities, 22 percent in government, 21 percent in Congress; and 13 percent in political parties. Confidence in the judicial system was weakest in El Salvador (14 percent), Nicaragua (15 percent) and Peru (16 percent). Confidence in political parties in 2018 in El Salvador was just 5 percent with even lower percentages in Honduras and Guatemala.

The lack of confidence in public institutions has wide-ranging implications. How do you stop criminal violence if people are reluctant to report crimes because they don't trust the police and judicial systems don't hold criminals accountable? Why should businesses invest in job-creating enterprises if they can't depend on the courts to uphold contracts and experience extortion in their day-to-day activities? Why should individuals decide to remain in their countries if they perceive that their political systems are not responsive to their needs and interests? The fact that churches are held in greater confidence than public institutions provides a ray of hope and a possible direction for the future as discussed later in this report. However, civil society organizations – no matter how courageous and resourceful – cannot, and should not, substitute for state action.

Strengthening the rule of law is central to addressing corruption, dealing with criminal violence, and fostering economic growth. But to take the actions necessary to change the system, political will is needed – political will from the leaders who have been successful under the present system.

Given weaknesses in rule of law and widespread corruption, there is a fundamental difficulty in

working with governments in Northern Central America who benefit from the present system. In fact, it is difficult to imagine the present governments taking actions to establish needed rule of law systems and to adopt strong anti-corruption initiatives. And yet a partnership with Central American governments means working with those predatory elites (Chappell 2021). The challenge is to work with entrenched governments, knowing full well that they are rife with corruption.

So, where to begin to strengthen rule of law in Northern Central America? As the Biden strategy for addressing root causes outlines, strengthening rule of law means strengthening the independence of the justice sector, promoting transparency, improving efficacy of legislative branches, and empowering public and private sector actors. It also means prioritizing an anti-corruption agenda (discussed further below), enhancing respect for human rights and a free press (US NSC 2021).

There are many initiatives in the region which might serve as initial steps in addressing the deep-rooted institutional problems in the region. For example, La Fundación para el Desarrollo de Guatemala (FUNDESA) has developed a flowchart (FUNDESA, nd) which maps every criminal case from initial charge through penitentiary and calculates the efficiency of the process at each level. This enables bottlenecks in the system to be identified – which is a first step toward coming up with a more efficient and effective system. Developing similar models in other Central American countries could offer a step forward. Another initiative, digitalizing the court system and moving away from a slow paper-based system – offers hope of speeding up the process and making the judicial system more efficient. FUNDESA argues that digitalizing the courts is the single most impactful initiative to address corruption in the country by providing traceability of where the problems are and efficiency in processing.

Other possibilities include developing 'cultures of legality' or a culture of 'denuncia' – in contrast to prevailing 'cultures of impunity' – that promote the

rule of law. This can begin with encouraging citizens to report crimes and to press charges. Crimestoppers – Guatemala (<https://tupista.gt/>) provides a way for people to denounce rights violations anonymously – either via the website or a call center, including domestic violence, trafficking, and extortion. However, in Honduras, the ‘Say it here Honduras’ initiative was a mobile tool that provided citizens with a mechanism for reporting corruption; this lasted almost five years but eventually disappeared due to lack of funding and a reduction in citizens’ corruption complaints (Bozmoski et al 2021, 7).

Reform is urgently needed not only in procurement processes, but also in electoral reform and the role of political parties.

Even if wholesale reform of the political and judicial systems isn’t possible in the short-term, there are specific laws that could be changed or strengthened that would provide real relief to citizens and could build confidence in political systems. For example, laws could be changed to increase penalties for perpetrators of domestic violence and to hold them accountable for their crimes.

Recommendations

- Support civil society efforts to analyze shortcomings in the judicial system by systematically identifying bottlenecks and supporting measures to overcome these bottlenecks.
- Support civil society efforts to digitalize judicial processes as a way of increasing efficiency and addressing huge backlogs of cases that diminish confidence in the system.
- Take measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, including through implementation of open and transparent processes for selecting judges

- Support measures to hold perpetrators of domestic violence accountable under the law.

Corruption

Corruption and lack of rule of law go hand in hand. The Atlantic Council reports that “Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have grappled with widespread corruption that has fuelled mistrust in political and wealthy elites, eroded democratic norms, exacerbated poverty, widened social inequality, and contributed to the conditions that force migrants to leave their homes” (Bozmoski 2021, 1). According to Transparency International, of the 188 countries surveyed in 2020 for their annual Corruption Perceptions Index, El Salvador ranks 104, Guatemala 148 and Honduras 157 (Bozmoski et al 2021, 1). Corruption is widespread: more than 20 percent of Guatemalans and Hondurans admitted to paying bribes to access social services (Angelo 2020). Moreover, corruption imposes huge costs on society – in lack of confidence in institutions, in impunity for crimes, as well as direct economic costs. In 2019, the economic costs of corruption were estimated at \$13 billion – or around 5 percent of the region’s GDP – a figure that has likely increased as a result of COVID-19-induced relaxation of existing safeguards and processes (O’Neill 2021).

There have been many recommendations over the years on how to reduce corruption, including the 2014 Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle. In 2007, the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) was created in Guatemala which led to 400 convictions and prompted the sitting president Otto Pérez Molina in 2015 to resign (CFR 2017). But in 2019, then-President Jimmy Morales, under investigation himself for corruption, allowed the CICIG to expire. A similar Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCH) was established in Honduras as a result of a 2015 embezzlement scandal. This mission had less to show for its efforts and its mandate was not

renewed. In June 2021 President Bukele of El Salvador terminated his country's agreement with the Organization of American States for the International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES), after two years of his efforts to impede its progress – in spite of then-presidential campaign commitments to make anti-corruption a centerpiece of his government (WOLA 2021). Presently there are no international mechanisms in the region which are charged with investigating corruption.

Although these initiatives had varying degrees of success in combating corruption, the decision to terminate them – rather than to strengthen or reform them – is a clear sign of the lack of political will to tackle corruption. As O'Neill (2021) concludes, "Central America's economic elites aren't keen to clean things up." While some private sector actors have taken important steps to address corruption, others have benefited from the present system; in fact, it is important to consider who benefits from corruption.

How do we address this widespread endemic corruption? We suggest a three-track policy: supporting civil society efforts to address corruption, taking measures to sanction corrupt individuals, and developing a strong regional platform to address corruption. This is very much in line with the US government's current approach. The US government's strategy to counter corruption is based on three lines of effort: support civil society and media organizations; prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute corruption; and sanction corrupt actors (US NSC 2021, 11-12). The so-called Engels list (Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actions Report) published in July 2021 lists 55 individuals whom the State Department determined were engaged in corrupt or undemocratic actions, including 2 former presidents as well as current and former members of Congress. US visas for all 55 of these individuals were immediately revoked (Covington 2021). Vice-President Harris has also announced a new anti-corruption task force – a collaborative effort with the Departments of Justice, Treasury and State to

investigate corruption and to train officers in the region to carry out investigations (Cuffe 2021). It is also time for international financial institutions to suspend or reduce financial support to governments which are corrupt. Another possibility is to use judicial processes to seize frozen assets of individuals found to have been corrupt and to use those assets to support individuals and communities affected by these corrupt actions. One of the problems with an approach based on sanctions is that they risk making those governments even more hostile to efforts to reform judicial systems and confront corruption.

A regional approach to corruption could be based on regional civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations, to call out corruption when it occurs, to provide support to those seeking to reform the system, and perhaps eventually to hold corrupt officials accountable through the judicial actions of a regional anti-corruption court.

One idea that has attracted international attention is the proposal to establish an international anti-corruption court, or IACC, which would serve as an international enforcement venue for violations of statutes required by the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) (Wolf 2014). El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are all signatories of the UNCAC and as such they have laws required by the UNCAC prohibiting bribery, embezzlement and other forms of corruption. The IACC could therefore be used as a tool to enforce these laws when governments in these countries fail to do so. Given their history, it is unlikely that political leaders in the region would support such a court, yet Escobar Mejia (2021) argues that major financial centers could press governments to establish such a mechanism.

Establishment of such a court would be a long-term undertaking. One idea is to establish a regional anti-corruption court in Central America; this could begin tackling corruption in the region by holding corrupt individuals accountable, while contributing to a global movement to establish an international court. One concrete way of moving forward would

be to support civil society efforts to develop accountability mechanisms. Call (2021), for example, noted that a regional anti-corruption commission or a regional NGO commission could help investigate malfeasance in support of the region's attorney general (2021). In this regard, the launch in June 2021 by ten Central American civil society organizations of a newly-formed Centro Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en el Norte de Centroamérica (CCINOC) is encouraging. With the support of the Seattle Foundation, this initiative – which is independent of governments – is intended to work against corruption and impunity in the region through observation, research, information-sharing, and education (<https://ccinoc.org/>). The challenge, of course, is how to move from reports and recommendations to actual measures that will sanction corrupt officials and hold them accountable. Although it is too early to tell whether CCINOC will be effective in meeting its objectives, this is exactly the sort of initiative which should be encouraged.

Recommendations

- Support and urge donors to support civil society initiatives working against corruption in their governments and provide protection to those human rights defenders calling out their governments for corruption.
- Encourage civil society actors to carry out social audits of corruption in their countries and urge international actors, such as Transparency International, to continue or intensify their efforts in Central America.
- Support regional bodies, such as the newly constituted CCINOC which are tackling corruption, and seek ways to give them real 'teeth' to carry out change and take steps now to establish a regional anti-corruption court.
- Urge governments to impose sanctions on corrupt individuals, including governments throughout the region, and to consider the

confiscation and re-purposing of their frozen assets to address citizens in need.

- Urge international financial institutions to consider reducing or suspending financial transfers when governments dismantle functioning anti-corruption mechanisms.
- Urge governments to implement public procurement policies which are transparent, efficient and secure, and that support the use of sanctions when these policies are corrupt.
- Consider the use of new technological tools such as blockchain, which is designed to prevent data from being modified or manipulated – to facilitate digital governance and transparency.
- Encourage the media to investigate and report on corruption as a way of mobilizing public opinion against individuals engaged in corrupt practices.

Criminal violence

Completing the trifecta of institutional-political drivers of migration is criminal violence. As reported in our first report on *Humanitarian Protection in the Region: A State of Emergency*, criminal violence in Central America has been a driver of migration, although in all three countries, potential migrants cite economic reasons as their primary motivation. Violence rates in Northern Central America have exceeded the average global homicide rate of 6.1 per 100,000 people (UNODC, 2019). Honduras and El Salvador have previously held the title for murder capitals. By 2020, all countries reported decreased homicide rates, with the assistance to some extent of COVID restrictions: El Salvador reported a homicide rate of 19.7, 37.6 for Honduras, and 15.3 per 100,000 individuals for Guatemala (Asmann & Jones, 2021). Criminal violence has become endemic in the region – four years ago, an International Crisis Group report was entitled “El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence” (ICG 2017).

The well-known gangs of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street) are present throughout the United States, Northern Central America, Spain, and Italy (Franco, 2008; Valdez, 2009; Seelke, 2016; Valencia, 2016; Finklea, 2018; Dudley & Avalos, 2018). The presence of these gangs in Northern Central America is often attributed to criminal deportations from the United States – deportations which increased after the 1996 passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) that expanded crimes for which noncitizens could be removed from the United States (Hagan, Eschback, & Rodriguez, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2009; Kerwin, 2018). However, a recent study by Florida International University (Cruz, Rosen, Amaya, & Vorobyeva, 2017) found that 97 percent of 1,196 former and current incarcerated gang members in El Salvador joined the gang in El Salvador and 90.8 percent had never been to the United States. These findings place into question the extent to which current deportations play a role in gang membership in Northern Central America as well as the “transnational” nature of these gangs.

Since the early 2000s, Central American government officials have attributed violence in their countries to MS-13 and Barrio 18. For example, former Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015), who was removed from office and is currently in jail for corruption, blamed “more than 40 percent” of homicides to battles amongst these gangs (Insight Crime, 2016). Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez (2014-present), whose name has been mentioned in conjunction with drug trafficking, stated “as much as 80 percent” of homicides are due to organized crime (Insight Crime, 2016). And former Salvadoran Minister of Justice and Security General David Munguía Payés, also accused of money-laundering and corruption, stated that 90 percent of homicides were due to gang members (Diario1, 2015). These statements give the impression gangs are the primary actors that contribute to violence in these countries.

In addition to gang violence, Central America has become a primary drug trafficking corridor, contributing to violence, corruption, and co-opted institutions. The U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs estimated that Central America was used to traffic 90 percent of cocaine destined for the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2017). While drug-trafficking is often known to contribute to drug-related homicides, substance abuse is also on the rise (International Narcotics Control Board, 2015, Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, 2020). The Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission Report (2020) acknowledges that current strategies fail to combat drug trafficking in Latin America, as well as drug abuse in the United States. In the last decade, Central Americans have witnessed Guatemalan presidential candidate Mario Estrada sentenced for conspiracy to traffic cocaine; Guatemala’s former president Pérez Molina and former vice-president Roxanna Baldetti sentenced for corruption, illicit association and customs fraud; Tony Hernandez (brother of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez) sentenced for distributing cocaine; and President Juan Orlando Hernandez identified an alleged co-conspirator in drug-trafficking and money laundering together with his brother (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2021; Ernst & Adams, 2019). The accusations and sentencing of such high-profile individuals involved in drug trafficking brings to light corruption at the highest echelons of government and the unintended and counter-productive consequences of the war on drugs.

However, the story is more complicated than gangs or narcotics cartels. The Attorney General’s office for the defense of Human Rights in El Salvador found that approximately 35 percent of all homicides were gang related in 2016 (Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, 2017). In Honduras, official data for 2015 attributes 5 percent of homicides to gangs while 46.8 percent of homicides were listed with no motive (IUDPAS, 2015). Insight Crime (2016) found approximately 28 percent of

homicides could be attributed to organized crime-related activities in trafficking corridors. Evidently, while gang- and drug-related violence account for a large portion of homicides in the region, the motives for many homicides in these countries remain unaccounted for and deserve further study.

With respect to extortion, the Guatemalan DIPANDA (Division Nacional contra el Desarrollo de Pandillas – National Division Against Gang Development) found that 90 percent of extortions are committed by opportunist groups while 10 percent are committed by structured groups such as gangs (Edelman, 2020). The biggest challenge for extortion is identifying the multiple actors and the underreporting of the crime.

To make security issues more complex, the issue of criminal violence is directly tied to both rule of law and corruption as citizens in Northern Central America have little confidence in security forces. In fact, in many parts of these three countries, the state is largely absent. Rather, gang leaders or caciques take responsibility for establishing order. In 2016, only 55.8 percent of Salvadorans had trust in the National Civilian Police (Cruz, Aguilar, & Yorobyeva, 2017). In 2018, 45.7 percent of Guatemalans had trust in their National Civilian Police (ENPEVI, 2018). Hondurans had the lowest level of trust in their National Police with 33.7 percent in 2018 (UNAH, 2019). These low levels of trust may be attributed to officers committing acts outside of legal norms, such as extrajudicial executions, transporting drugs, or requesting extortion payments (SSPAS, 2017; Arce, 2015; Labrador, 2018). Illicit behaviors by law enforcement place into question the legitimacy of these institutions. Nonetheless, Central American governments have focused most of their security strategies to address gang activity on strengthening security forces.

Central American administrations in each country have responded to alarming violence levels by implementing Mano Dura (Iron Fist) policies – often with the support of international donors. These policies are primarily focused on repressive

measures that include arresting “suspected” gang members and permitting military forces to conduct joint patrols with police forces (Andino, 2005; Reyna, 2017; Wolf, 2017; Espinoza, 2018). Rather than decreasing gang activity, these policies have had the counterproductive consequence of contributing to the evolution of gangs. With emphasis on incarcerating individuals, gangs become more organized within the confines of prison, where gang identity is strengthened, crimes are coordinated, and membership solidified (Cruz, 2010; Valencia, 2014; Seelke, 2014; Reyna, 2017; Wolf, 2017; Dudley, 2020). Prisons have become overcrowded; in Guatemala for example, prisons are running at 372 percent capacity (25,335 people incarcerated while capacity is only 6,812).

Outside of prisons, gangs changed their appearance (dress and prohibited tattoos), and in the case of Honduras, reduced graffiti to avoid police attention (Franco, 2008; Cruz, 2010; Seelke, 2014; Dudley & Arevalos, 2019; Ruiz, 2019). Moreover, decisions by the courts underscored the weakness of these policies; 84 percent of individuals arrested were released due to lack of motive for arrest in El Salvador and 56 percent of adults were released in Honduras (FESPAD, 2005; Reyna, 2017; Andino, 2005). Lastly, the ineffectiveness of these repressive initiatives has resulted in increasing activities by vigilante groups (Reyna, 2017; Andino, 2016; Resendiz Rivera, 2018).

The Salvadoran and Honduran governments have opted to apply terrorist definitions or sanctions to these gangs. Today, presidents in Northern Central America continue to develop their security strategies with a primary focus on reducing gang activity. For example, Salvadoran President Bukele’s Plan de Control Territorial (Territorial Control Plan) focuses on recovering territorial control from gangs (Rivera, 2020). Since taking office, Guatemalan President Giammattei proposed to reclassify gangs as terrorist organizations in his country (Mendoza, 2020), which already occurred in El Salvador. However, increasing repressive measures is not a new or innovative strategy in Central America; these policies have been shown to

be counterproductive and more concerning, a regression to militarization of domestic security forces. Learning from historically counterproductive policies may shed light to targeted solutions.

criminal governance, and migration of Central Americans to the United States.

Recommendations

Given the interrelated nature of rule of law, corruption and criminal violence – and the ways in which they have become entrenched in the political and economic systems of these countries – it is difficult to come up with recommendations which will have a significant impact in the short term. The issues are long-standing and deeply rooted in the political culture of the region. Piecemeal, short-term reform efforts are unlikely to change the situation enough to prevent people from migrating. The background paper on criminal violence prepared for this report (Ruiz 2021) rightly noted the decades of efforts to reform security forces in the region by strengthening training and professionalization, and suggested instead starting from scratch.

“The professionalization of special and vetted units is of great benefit to the U.S., its partners, builds moral among security personnel, and strengthens bilateral and regional cooperation. Should the administration be committed to an innovative police reform, it would require acknowledging the best investment would be to create new professional police forces in Central America. Rather than undergo an additional reform to systems that are perceived as systemically corrupt and continue with “cleansing” police forces, a more cost-effective, long-term investment would be the creation of new police forces with thorough vetting, training, and development. The consistent auditing of police leadership should be a requirement to ensure the highest echelons of police forces are not tainted, nor will they taint lower ranking officers.”

Strengthening the criminal justice system and focusing on prevention and rehabilitation programs can assist in minimizing violence,

- Urge governments in Northern Central America, with the support of other regional actors, to implement bold policies to professionalize and root out corruption in the security forces. We further urge the new Regional Migration Council – proposed in the [Task Force’s Regional Cooperation and Co-responsibility](#) report – to set up mechanisms to monitor and publicize progress made in this direction.
- Encourage civil society organizations, perhaps through an independent observatory, to collect and publish reliable data on crimes and to consider using mobile telephone apps to report crimes, including crimes of femicide.
- Urge governments in Northern Central America to prioritize reforms in the penitentiary system. Given the fact that a majority of crimes are being conducted by opportunistic groups or imitators (Edelman, 2020, Chumil 2021), it is imperative to categorize individuals based on risk to ensure lower-level offenders are not mixed with higher level offenders, to separate out those in need of mental health and or drug services, and to target programs that could provide rehabilitation and eventual reintegration into society.
- Take measures to increase public trust in security and justice institutions. For example, Crime Stoppers provides a middleman which guarantees the anonymity of citizens reporting crimes.
- Encourage governments to develop programs to implement exchange of illegal weapons for cash or other incentives.
- Accelerate programs in Northern Central America to keep children from joining gangs, which are responsible for some of the criminal violence that causes people to migrate from their home countries. A partnership between NGOs that serves at-risk youth and the private sector can provide a mutually beneficial relationship.² Since governments have identified neighborhoods with gang presence and/or high levels of violence, recruitment for prevention programs should be focused in these areas. The private sector can serve as a partner in providing employment and educational opportunities.

² The case of League Central America in El Salvador provides a model worth replicating.

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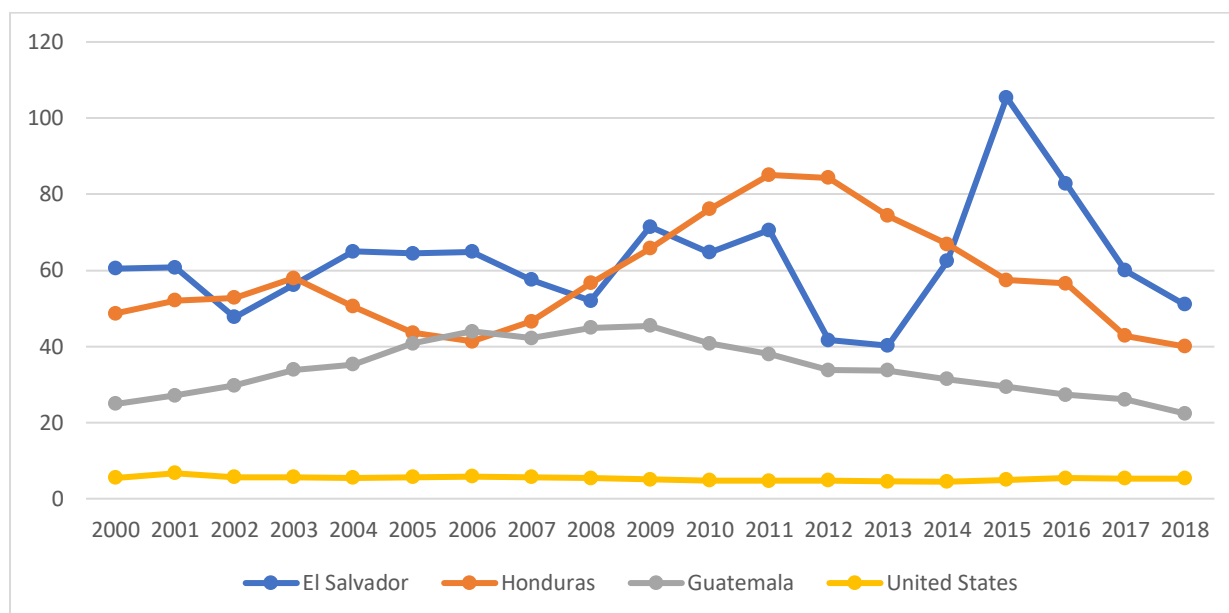
Annex I: Tables and Figures

Table 1: Percentage of those who intend to migrate who cite economic concerns or victimization as the primary reason for migration. 2019.

Country	Economic concerns	Victimization
El Salvador	50%	38%
Guatemala	71%	14%
Honduras	67%	18%

Source: Creative Associates International 2019.

Figure 1. Northern Central America and U.S. Homicide Rates per 100,000 People



Source: World Bank Data, 2021

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