

# Recent Trends in Central American Migration



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## Manuel Orozco

Inter-American Dialogue

[morozco@thedialogue.org](mailto:morozco@thedialogue.org)

[www.thedialogue.org](http://www.thedialogue.org)

## Introduction

Central American immigration has come under renewed scrutiny this month, with President Trump warning of “caravans of people” and “massive inflows” along the US-Mexico border and threatening to send the United States National Guard to secure the border.

Beyond the political rhetoric, the reality is a bit more complicated. On the one hand, the population of Central American migrants in the United States has nearly doubled from 2000 to present, but the trend is a bit different from 2009 onwards. Though migration has continued, it has done so at a declining rate. In fact, overall growth in the migrant population in the United States has been offset by large numbers of deportations.

This memo analyzes recent trends in Central American migration, starting with a brief historical context and moving on to current developments. It considers geographical divisions, reasons for migrating, and growth in the overall migrant population. It also addresses why the numbers of apprehensions are different from the numbers of people migrating. Finally, it considers implications of these current trends for Central American countries.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Central American migration is shaped by a combination of dynamics, mostly associated with poorly performing economies within the context of globalization as well as the historical legacies of repression and civil war.

In fact, the region exhibits four different migration periods:

- Pre-1970: predominantly intra-regional mobility;
- 1970-1990: conflict-related migration, escaping from civil war, repression, and military rule;
- 1990-2000: migration related to economic transition and global labor demand (push-pull trends);
- 2000-present: mix of economic and security related flows, intensifying after 2009.

As the table below shows, Central American migrants practically doubled from 2.6 million people to 4.2 million people within a span of fifteen years. Table 2 also shows that a large volume of migration is intra-regional, predominantly among Nicaraguans going to Costa Rica for work.

Table 1: Central American Migration

Region	2000	2010	2015
Mexico and Central America	11,941,317	16,797,728	16,415,990
Central America	2,612,081	4,053,637	4,173,997

Source: UNDESA

## GEOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF MIGRATION

Recently, policymakers have distinguished two regions within Central America, the so-called Northern Triangle and the Southern region, which includes Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. The Northern Triangle is considered a region exceedingly affected by the ravages of violence associated with dense waves of transnational organized crime, particularly narco-trafficking. The second region is mostly defined by intra-regional migration networks with Costa Rica and Panama as labor importing countries for Nicaraguans working in domestic labor, security, transportation, and construction activities (Panama in particular for construction).

Table 2: Geographic Destination of Central American migration (2013)

Country of Origin	Destination Countries and Regions						
	United States		Costa Rica		Central America		World
	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)
Costa Rica	90,455	63%	-	-	23,161	17.8%	143,465
El Salvador	1,392,663	89%	-	-	61,177	4.0%	1,526,093
Guatemala	975,504	87%	-	-	79,790	7.6%	1,049,865
Honduras	597,647	83%	-	-	54,778	8.3%	659,606
Nicaragua	275,909	42%	303,523	46.3%	340,185	51.9%	658,203
Panamá	114,181	76%	-	-	17,235	11.5%	149,220
Central America	3,446,359	80%			576,326	14%	4,350,597

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2017). Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 revision (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2017).

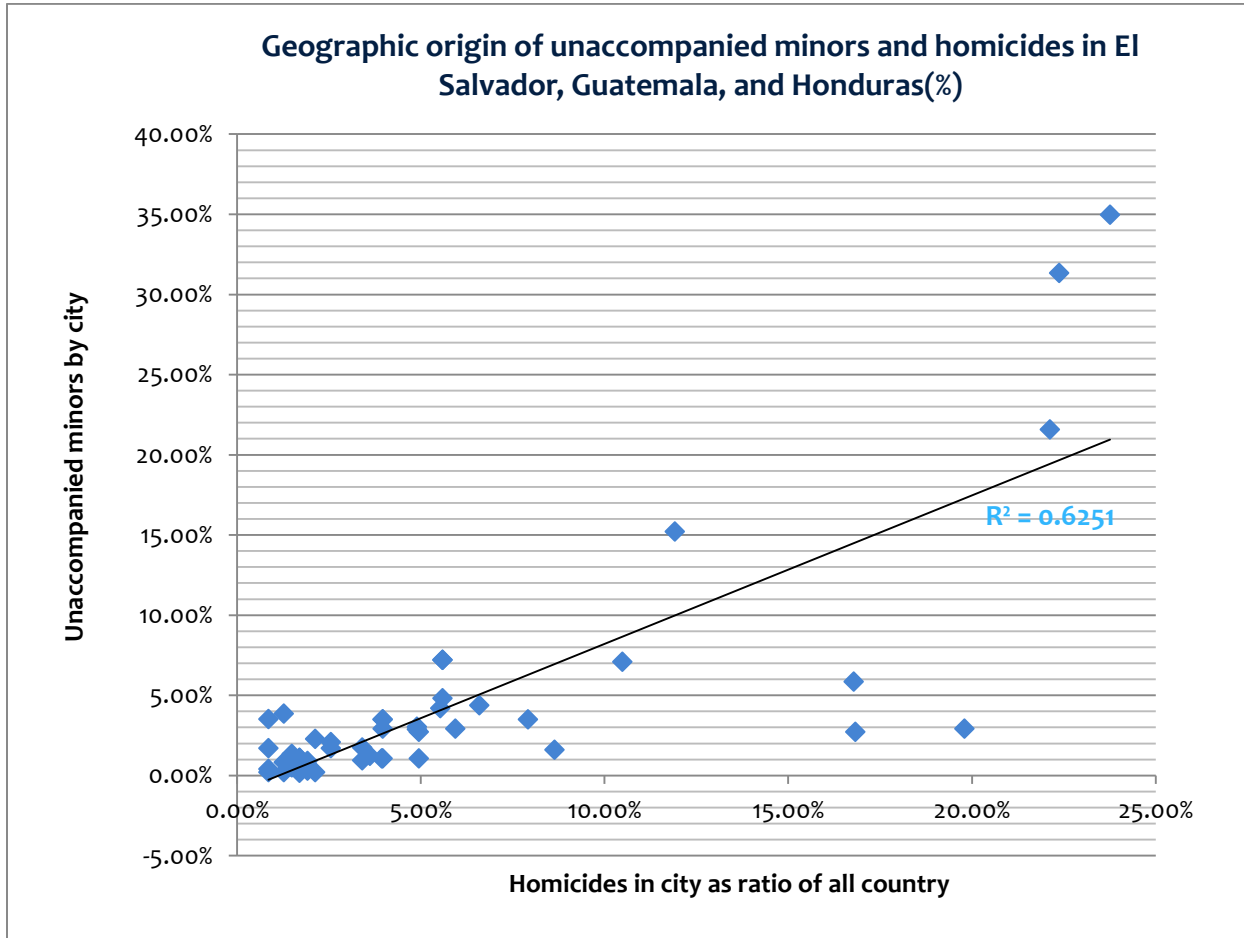
## SOME DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

The migration trend in the Northern Triangle has been spurred by waves of severe violence and insecurity associated with an environment of organized crime networks. In turn, a larger number of people have sought to leave their home countries, including many applying for political asylum to escape persecution from narco-trafficking networks, gangs, or extortion rings.

Our research shows that migration is triggered by different factors, including insecurity. Looking at the municipal data level, we found that,

- In Honduras, a 1% increase in homicides drives migration by 120%; increases in the size of economic informality drive migration by 12%.
- In Guatemala, a 1% increase in homicides drives migration by 100%; increases in economic informality drive migration by 4% and a decline in human development index increases migration by 5%.
- In El Salvador, homicides drive migration by 188% and economic informality by 27%.

A similar pattern was found between the migration of minors and violence in the three countries.



Source: Inter-American Dialogue.

These trends have continued in 2016 and 2017. Surveys of migrants in 2016 and 2017 show that 20-30% of Central American respondents cited insecurity as a reason for having left their country.

## CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION, 2009-PRESENT

Central American migration, particularly from the Northern Triangle countries, underwent changes in the post-2009 period, particularly related to increased insecurity. The slow economic recovery, the effect of the military coup in Honduras, as well as the expansion of youth gang violence and narcotrafficking networks had a broader effect on emigration.

However, this increased out migration has not directly translated in a dramatic increase of immigration to the United States. Rather we find that during 2009-2017, migration growth to the United States has seeing mixed patterns.

The table below shows that for El Salvador and Honduras, the growth in the number of migrants for this period was 1% at most, with Guatemala showing a larger increase. Two main factors are that on one hand enforcement may have reflected an effect in more apprehensions and difficulties entering the US, especially with Mexican authorities detaining prospective migrants. The other factor is the steady pattern of deportations.

Table 3: Migrants from the Northern Triangle in the United States

	2009	2017	Growth
El Salvador	1,051,267	1,139,014	1.0%
Guatemala	825,948	1,117,967	3.9%
Honduras	604,935	635,778	0.6%
Northern Triangle	2,482,150	2,892,760	1.9%

Source: Estimates based on IAD's methodology to measure migration, accompanied by DHS and DOS visa statistics, and World Bank indicators.

The table below compares people entering the US, the majority (89%) by crossing the US border, with the exception of the Salvadorans. In addition, many unaccompanied minors have sought to come to the US in numbers that are comparatively as large as or larger than the annual growth in the enrollment rate in secondary school within their home countries.

Table 4: Estimated Annual Immigration from the Northern Triangle (% unauthorized)

Year	El Salvador*	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
2009	61,000	43,485	50,205	154,690
2016	42,455	48,954	60,513	151,922
2017	25,465	60,139	48,478	134,082

Source: Author's estimates. \*In 2009 23% of migrants were authorized legal entry, and 61% in 2017.

The magnitude of this migration is measured by considering the number of people who are apprehended along the Mexico and U.S. border as well as by those who eventually enter. As part of the border-crossing effort, some migrants attempt to cross twice, and others three or more times before being apprehended. The number of actual migrants attempting to enter is thus smaller than the number of border crossing attempts. Total crossing attempts may be more than the numbers of those who actually entered. The problem is, however, that there are still large numbers of people who attempt to leave their

countries but remain in transit trying to enter the US.<sup>1</sup> This means that the total migration outflows from these countries is higher than the one visible at the U.S.-Mexican border.

Table 5: Apprehensions of Migrants from the Northern Triangle

Apprehensions	Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
At US border	2010	29,911	39,050	32,501	101,462
	2016	44,626	41,980	30,694	117,300
	2017	33,023	35,683	26,090	94,796
At Mexican border	2016	35,390	83,745	58,814	177,949
	2017	12,400	36,707	32,029	81,136

Source: DHS, Mexican migration numbers.

While migration has continued, it is doing so at a declining rate. This decline is particularly noticeable because the pattern of deportations has remained steady. Eventually, because most migration to the US is irregular, without legal authorization to work, the continued numbers of deportations effectively reduce the number of people in the country. In turn, the replenishment ratio of migrants from the Northern Triangle declines because the number of entries is not too large. In fact the net number between new migrant entries and deportations, in 2017 is 67,000.

Table 6: Deportations of Migrants from the Northern Triangle

Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
2010	17,947	23,430	19,501	60,878
2016	20,538	33,940	21,994	76,472
2017	20,000	28,849	18,695	67,544

Source: DHS.

Table 7: Differences Between Annual Migration and Deportations

Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
2010	43,053	20,055	30,704	93,812
2016	21,917	15,014	38,519	75,450
2017	5,465	31,290	29,783	66,538

Table 8: Percent of Migrants who Arrived the Same Year Relative to All Migrants

Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
2009	6.0%	4.0%	5.0%	4%
2016	3.0%	3.0%	6.0%	3.5%
2017	2.0%	3.9%	6.0%	3.5%

Source: Estimates based on IAD's methodology to measure migration, accompanied by DHS and DOS visa statistics, and World Bank indicators.

<sup>1</sup> Estimate of people leaving the region. Crossing Mexico:  $(10\% \cdot 177,949/3) + (40\% \cdot 177,949/x2) + (45\% \cdot 177,949/1) + (5\% \cdot 177,949/4) = 120,000$ ; Apprehended in the US:  $(60\% \cdot 117,300/1) + (35\% \cdot 117,300/2) + (5\% \cdot 117,300/3) = 92,863$ . Total possible people who attempt to enter the US, 230,000, of which 130,000 make it.

Table 9: Percent of Migrants Deported Relative to All Migrants

Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
2009	3%	5%	6%	5%
2016	2%	3%	3%	2.5%
2017	2%	3%	3%	2.5%

Source: Author's estimates

## IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGES IN MIGRATION

These numbers suggest at least four important facts that may point to a deterioration of the economies and societies in Northern Triangle countries:

- First, while migration has continued, shaped by a demand for foreign labor and insecurity in the region, there seems to be a slowing rather than increasing migration pattern relative to the total number of migrants.
- Second, there are economic implications for the Northern Triangle countries because family remittances currently are the driving force of economic growth. Under the current model of economic growth, economic opportunities will remain limited. Slowing migration not only affects the receiving of remittances but also long-term transnational engagement, including family ties.
- Third, given the continued apprehensions and deportations, the problem of job generation and reintegration is not negligible. For example, deportations alone amount to half of the annual labor force growth in El Salvador. However, the skill set of those returned, many of whom have been at least 10 years out of their home country, is suited to the US labor market rather than the home country. More problematic is that current reintegration programs are mostly focused on light workforce development support or on entrepreneurship in countries with highly informal economies.
- Fourth, the demand for foreign labor in the United States is not negligible. There are many activities in the US economy that are requiring low-skilled foreign workers. Construction, domestic work, and caring (for children and the elderly), are important drivers of migration. With declining migration, it is difficult to find short-term practical solutions and mitigating strategies for US labor shortages.

Table 10: Labor Force Increase (2017)

Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
Outmigration (est.)	20,000	110,000	70,000	200,000
Deportations	20,000	28,849	18,695	67,544
Labor force increase	44,358	199,456	109,487	353,301

Source: Author's estimates