

# Patterns of Central American Migration

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## THE HISTORIC PATTERN

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: economic transition and global labor demand related migration (push-pull trends);
- 2000-present: mix of economic and security related flows of people, intensifying in 2009.

The table below shows how Central American migrants practically doubled from 2.6 million to 4.2 million 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

## CURRENT MIGRATION

Recently, policy makers have distinguished two regions within Central America, the so-called Northern Triangle and the Southern region (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

Country of Origin	Destination Countries and Regions						
	United States		Costa Rica		Central America		World
	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)
Costa Rica	90,920	64.4%	-	-	23,161	17.8%	133,364
El Salvador	1,371,767	89.8%	-	-	61,177	4.0%	1,526,093
Guatemala	929,961	88.6%	-	-	79,790	7.6%	1,049,865
Honduras	550,694	83.5%	-	-	54,778	8.3%	659,606
Nicaragua	274,293	41.9%	303,523	46.3%	340,185	51.9%	655,117
Panamá	112,222	74.8%	-	-	17,235	11.5%	149,952
Central America	3,329,857	80%			576,326	14%	4,173,997

Source: UNDESA, 2016

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.

Table 3 below compares migration trends in 2009 and 2016. As of 2016, annual migration increased to over 160,000 people entering the US, the majority by crossing the US border. 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 enrollment rate in secondary school within their home countries.

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 dynamic, some migrants attempt to enter twice and others three or more times, reducing the number of actual emigrants to a smaller number when compared to the border crossing attempts. Total crossing attempts may be about 90% 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 this countries is higher than the one visible at the U.S.-Mexican border.

**Table 3:** Migration Indicators, 2009 and 2016

Indicators	Year	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Northern Triangle
Percent of migrants who arrived the same year as the survey was conducted	2009	6%	4%	5%	4%
	2016	3%	3%	5%	3.5%
Annual migration	2009	61,000	43,485	50,205	154,690
	2016	39,037	62,750	59,555	161,342
Immigrant visas issued	2009	10,695	4,419	3,531	18,645
	2016	11,367	4,722	5,084	21,173
Non-immigrant visa overstays (5% estimate of tourist visa holders that extend their stay beyond the stipulated period)	2009	1,310	2,649	1,523	5,482
	2016	2,996	2,800	2,451	8,247
Cross border entry (without a visa) Annual migration (immigrant visa + non-immigrant visa overstays)	2009	48,995	36,417	45,151	130,563
	2016	24,674	55,228	52,020	131,922
Deportations	2010	17,947	23,430	19,501	60,878
	2016	20,538	35,465	21,994	76,472
Apprehensions at US border	2010	29,911	39,050	32,501	101,462
	2016	51,200	66,982	42,433	160,615
Apprehensions at Mexico border	2016	35,390	83,745	58,814	177,949
Unaccompanied minors	2009	1,221	1,115	968	3,304
	2016	17,512	18,913	10,468	46,893
Cross border migration of children and adults	2016	42,186	74,141	62,488	178,815
Children as share	2016	42%	26%	17%	26%
Annual high school matriculation (Circa 2014)		13,000	8,000	32,000	53,000
UAC as share of high school enrollment		135%	236%	33%	88%

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

## DEVELOPMENTS IN 2017: HAS MIGRATION DECLINED

While the aforementioned patterns prevail, there are news reports that unauthorized cross border migration has declined since the number of people apprehended has declined. However, this picture is not entirely clear.

<sup>1</sup> Detained in Mexico:  $(10\% * 177,949/3) + (40\% * 177,949/x2) + (45\% * 177,949/1) + (5\% * 177,949/4) = 120,000$ ;

Apprehended in the US:  $(60\% * 160,615/1) + (35\% * 160,615/x2) + (5\% * 160,615/3) = 127,458$ . Total possible people who attempt to enter the US, 250,000, of which 130,000 make it.

Indeed, there has been a substantive decline in apprehensions but there has also been an increase of more than 15% of migration among and family units.

**Table 4:** Apprehensions at the U.S. Border

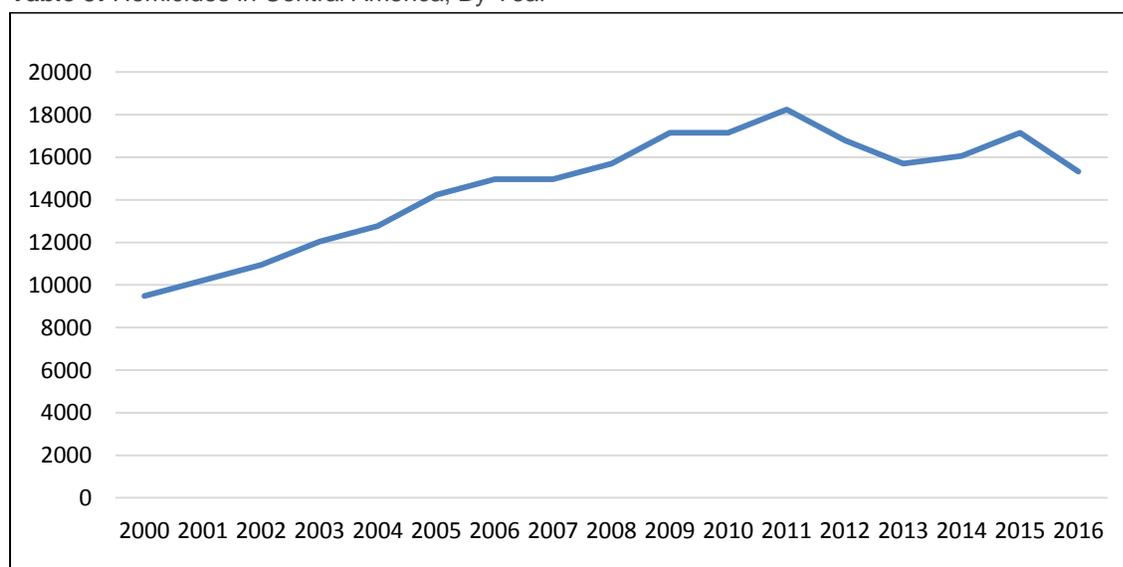
Year	FY2016	FY2017 (Oct-June)	Expected Change by End of 2017
Total Apprehensions (Jan-June)	267,746	140,034	-30%
<b>UAC Apprehensions</b>			
El Salvador	17,512	8,228	-37%
Guatemala	18,913	11,176	-20%
Honduras	10,468	6,576	-15%
<b>Family Units</b>			
El Salvador	27,114	21,950	9%
Guatemala	23,067	18,957	11%
Honduras	20,226	18,677	25%

Source: <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>

In regard to Guatemala, migration may have remained at the same levels. Data reveals that 14% of people in the Western Highlands of Guatemala had a relative migrate in 2017 and send money that same year. Moreover, the 9% growth in the remittance principal (amount sent per transaction, average) alone would not explain the aggregate value increase of 17% in remittances reported by the Central Bank. For El Salvador, the migration push continues, as more than 25% wanted to leave their country according to a 2014 survey. In 2016, the Universidad Centroamericana reported 40% wanting to leave.<sup>2</sup>

Declining homicides and violence in these countries may also be playing a role, as news outlets have reported that homicide rates in 2017 dropped at least 20% in the Northern Triangle and are expected to drop that much by the end of the year.

**Table 5:** Homicides in Central America, By Year



Source: Aggregated data per country from police offices of each country

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/Bolet%3ADn-Evaluaci%3B3n-A%3B1o-2016-10-01-2017.pdf>