BENEATH THE VIOLENCE

HOW INSECURITY SHAPES DAILY LIFE AND EMIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

A Report of the Latin American Public Opinion Project and the Inter-American Dialogue

Ben Raderstorf, Carole J. Wilson, Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, and Michael J. Camilleri

Insecurity, crime, and state weakness are parts of everyday life in much of Central America. Most homicides and other crimes go unreported or unsolved and law enforcement, judicial, and correctional systems are overloaded, corrupt, and ineffective. Despite decades of effort on remedies, the underlying security situation remains largely the same, if not worse, in some countries. Facing dangerous and daunting contexts, individuals modify their behaviors in ways that have personal, economic, societal, and even transnational consequences. A focus on these dynamics can reveal opportunities for strategic programming to curtail the damaging effects of crime and violence to the region.

The problem is particularly severe in the three "Northern Triangle" countries–El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras–which regularly rank among the most violent countries in Latin America and the world. (Note: This report uses "Northern Triangle" to refer to these three countries and "Central America" for those three plus Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.) In 2016, El Salvador recorded 81.2 homicides per 100,000 people, the highest rate in the Americas (with the possible exception of Venezuela, where official statistics are typically incomplete or unavailable). Honduras and Guatemala reported rates of 59 and 27.3

per 100,000, respectively—lower than El Salvador but still high enough to rank as third and fifth most violent in the Latin America and Caribbean region.[1] The reality of high homicide rates registers among the population: in the Northern Triangle, more than half the population has "some" or "a lot of fear" of being a victim of homicide, with El Salvador the most affected (see Figure 1).[2]

The main drivers of violence—beyond a long history of civil war, political instability, and weak judicial institutions—are

> By asking individuals not just about crime victimization and perceptions of crime, but also about their behavior patterns in the face of crime, the study delves deeper into how and why insecurity affects the social, political, and economic fabric in Central America.

Foreword

We are pleased to present "The Toll of Crime on Daily Life and Intention to Emigrate in Central America," a joint report by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University and the Peter D. Bell Rule of Law Program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

This report, by Ben Raderstorf, Carole Wilson, Liz Zechmeister, and Michael Camilleri, addresses critical questions about how insecurity impacts everyday life in Central America and how violence shapes behaviors from economic activity to migration. Based on approximately 9,300 in-person interviews conducted across nationally representative samples in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama as a part of the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer, these findings paint a detailed portrait of the ongoing toll that crime takes on countries in Central America. They also point the way towards some potential solutions.

This report represents the culmination of a year-long collaboration between LAPOP and the Inter-American Dialogue that attempts to connect the dots between opinion polling on security and actionable, concrete policy recommendations. At the end of the report, the authors provide a list of policy guidelines for decision makers in Central America, the United States, and elsewhere.

LAPOP is a center for excellence in international survey research. Its core project is the AmericasBarometer, a regular study of how citizens experience and evaluate democratic governance in 34 countries. LAPOP's mission is four-fold: produce high quality public opinion data; develop cutting-edge methods in international survey research; build local capacity in the field of survey research and analysis; and, disseminate timely results with rigor and clarity.

Established in 2015 with support from the Ford Foundation and named in honor of a founding Dialogue co-chair, the Peter D. Bell Rule of Law Program of the Inter-American Dialogue strives to elevate policy discussions around democratic institutions, government accountability, human rights, and citizen engagement in Latin America.

MICHAEL SHIFTER
President
Inter-American Dialogue

MITCHELL A. SELIGSON
Founder and Senior Advisor, LAPOP
Centennial Professor of Political Science,
Vanderbilt University

The 2016/17 AmericasBarometer shows that fear of crime leads large percentages of the population to alter their daily activities— avoiding public transit or making purchases, keeping children at home, changing jobs or place of study, moving neighborhoods, and even considering emigration.

FIGURE 1: LEVEL OF FEAR OF BEING A VICTIM OF HOMICIDE
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

Guatemala: 27.9%, 27.5%, 22.7%, 22.0%

El Salvador: 35.7%, 20.9%, 23.4%, 20.0%

Honduras: 32.6%, 20.1%, 21.9%, 25.4%

- ■ A Lot of Fear
- ■ Some Fear
- ■ Little Fear
- □ No Fear at All
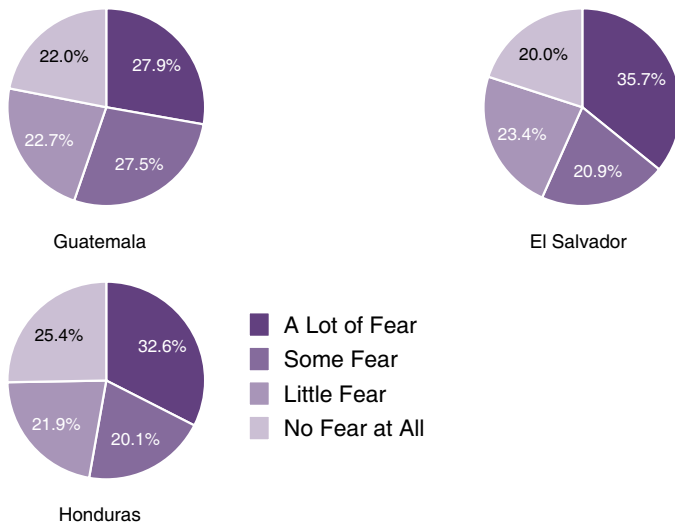
gang activity and drug trafficking.[3] There are an estimated 54,000 gang members across the three countries,[4] divided among groups that compete, often violently, for territory and resources. These gangs, known as *maras*, often seek to extract value directly from the communities. As a result, criminal extortion is rampant. A 2015 estimate found that Salvadorans alone pay an estimated $400 million in extortion and protection fees to gangs and other criminal groups.[5] Extortion, in turn, leads to country-wide networks of fear and intimidation, tightly constraining economic activity in many areas and sectors. According to an estimate by the Inter-American Development Bank, crime-related costs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are

equal to 3%, 6.2%, and 6.5% of GDP, respectively.[6] In recent years, violence in the region has received significant international attention as a major factor in a wave of migration to the US[7] (see the 2014 AmericasBarometer Insights brief on "Violence and Migration in Central America"[8]). In 2014, when the crisis peaked, US Border Patrol agents apprehended nearly a half million people at the US-Mexico border, in large part families and unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle.[9] While migration rates have since fallen somewhat—dropping sharply in 2015 but bouncing back in 2016—much of that decline has come from increased enforcement efforts on the part of the Mexican government.[10] There are also anecdotal reports that the Trump Administration's policies and rhetoric have discouraged migration, at least temporarily and especially for unaccompanied minors.[11] In any case, evidence suggests that the underlying desire to emigrate remains strong. The 2016/17 AmericasBarometer finds that intentions to move abroad have risen significantly in every country in Central America since 2014, especially in Honduras.[12]

At the same time, governments in the Northern Triangle have been mostly unable to respond effectively to problems of crime and security. Prison systems are massively overcrowded, with one estimate placing El Salvador's current prison population at a staggering 348.2% of capacity.[13] Meanwhile, criminal justice systems are widely seen as corrupt—and often with good reason: 11.6% of adults in the Northern Triangle report being asked to pay a bribe to a police officer in a twelve-month period.[14]

This project asked questions in all six countries about "Out of fear of crime, in the last 12 months…
Have you avoided leaving your home by yourself at night?"
Have you avoided public transportation?"
Have you prevented children from playing in the street?"
Have you felt the need to move to a different neighborhood?"

We also asked three questions in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador about "In the last 12 months…
Have you avoided buying things that you like because they may get stolen?"
Have you changed your job or place of study out of fear of crime?"
Have you considered migrating from your country due to insecurity?"

And one question in Guatemala only: "Out of fear of crime, in the last 12 months…
Have you kept your minor children from going to school for fear of their safety?"

Data collection for the Central American countries included in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer was conducted in late 2016 (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua) and early 2017 (Guatemala and Panama). The samples are designed to be nationally representative. In each country, approximately 1,550 adults were interviewed face-to-face.

Together, all these factors paint a concerning picture of the region. That is, the enormous burden of crime and insecurity on the Northern Triangle—and how it generally relates to migration, corruption, instability, and a lack of economic opportunities—is well-documented.

However, understanding the more specific impact of insecurity on individuals' lives – who is more likely to take precautions against crime and to what consequence – is often hindered by a lack of granularity and clear, consistent, and comparative data. National indicators, especially crime trends beyond homicides, are often inconsistent, of poor quality, and at times politicized. There is also often a gap in understanding between those statistics and the individual-level picture painted by the many high-quality field and ethnographic studies that have been conducted over the years.[15] It is at times difficult to elaborate clearly on how the security environment affects the daily functions of a society as a whole and how it drives economic activity, migration, and other trends.

By asking ordinary citizens to report on their own circumstances, public opinion studies provide a window into micro-level dynamics. However, a comprehensive assessment requires sizeable modules on crime and violence, in order to drill into the topic. For example, the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer finds that nearly equal proportions of the public in Uruguay and Honduras cite an issue related to security as the most important problem facing their country.[16] Yet across these diametrically opposed countries – Uruguay among the safest in the region and Honduras among the most violent in the world – individuals' specific experiences and concerns vary. Via the inclusion of more detailed questions, surveys provide a means to reveal exactly how problems of crime and insecurity manifest in a particular context, and with what consequences for individual behaviors and societal outcomes.

This report, which presents findings gathered as a part of LAPOP's 2016/17 AmericasBarometer surveys, begins to fill in some of these gaps.[17] Analyses of the survey data, which were collected in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, more concretely measure and diagnose the human and societal impact of insecurity. By asking individuals not just about crime victimization and perceptions of crime, but also about their behavior patterns in the face of crime, the study delves deeper into how and why insecurity affects the social, political, and economic fabric in Central America. In presenting key findings from the project, we aim to shed

FIGURE 2: CRIME AVOIDANCE BEHAVIORS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

Prevented Children from Playing in the Street

Guatemala	69.2%
El Salvador	65.9%
Honduras	67.6%
Nicaragua	56.7%
Costa Rica	60.8%
Panama	63.6%

Has Avoided Leaving House Alone at Night for Fear of Crime

Guatemala	56.6%
El Salvador	59.6%
Honduras	59.8%
Nicaragua	36.9%
Costa Rica	46.8%
Panama	48.6%

Has Avoided Using Public Transportation for Fear of Crime

Guatemala	47.4%
El Salvador	42.2%
Honduras	50.2%
Nicaragua	31.1%
Costa Rica	25.5%
Panama	32.4%

Has Felt Need to Move Neighborhoods for Fear of Crime

Guatemala	19.7%
El Salvador	21.1%
Honduras	19.5%
Nicaragua	15.0%
Costa Rica	15.4%
Panama	19.4%

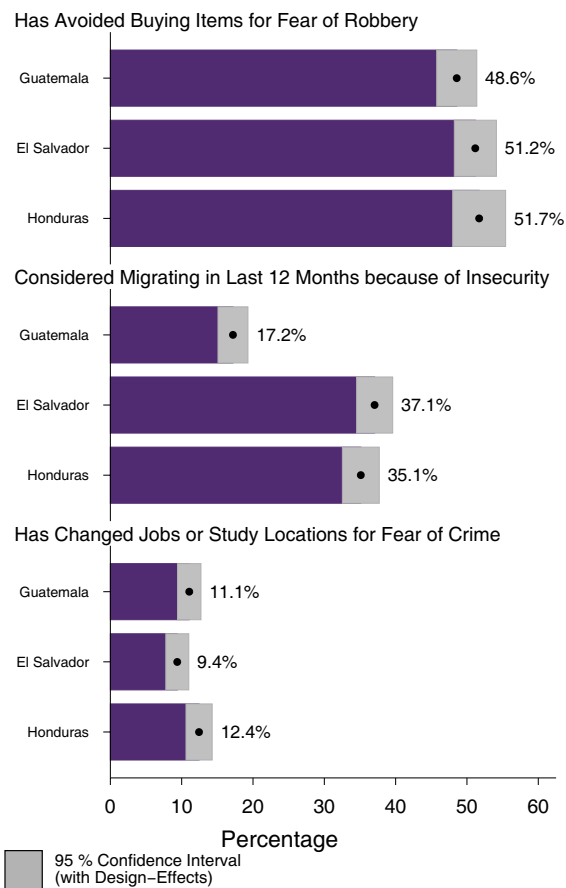Percentage

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

more light on the many complex and pressing security concerns in the region—and inform discussions about how to address them.

1. How Insecurity Shapes Behavior in Central America

Measured by changes in behavior, the toll of insecurity on daily life in Central America is widespread and significant. The 2016/17 AmericasBarometer shows that fear of crime leads large percentages of the population to alter their daily activities—avoiding public transit or making purchases, keeping children at home, changing jobs or place of study, moving neighborhoods, and even considering emigration.

FIGURE 3: CRIME AVOIDANCE, ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, AND MIGRATION IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

Has Avoided Buying Items for Fear of Robbery

Guatemala	48.6%
El Salvador	51.2%
Honduras	51.7%

Considered Migrating in Last 12 Months because of Insecurity

Guatemala	17.2%
El Salvador	37.1%
Honduras	35.1%

Has Changed Jobs or Study Locations for Fear of Crime

Guatemala	11.1%
El Salvador	9.4%
Honduras	12.4%

Percentage

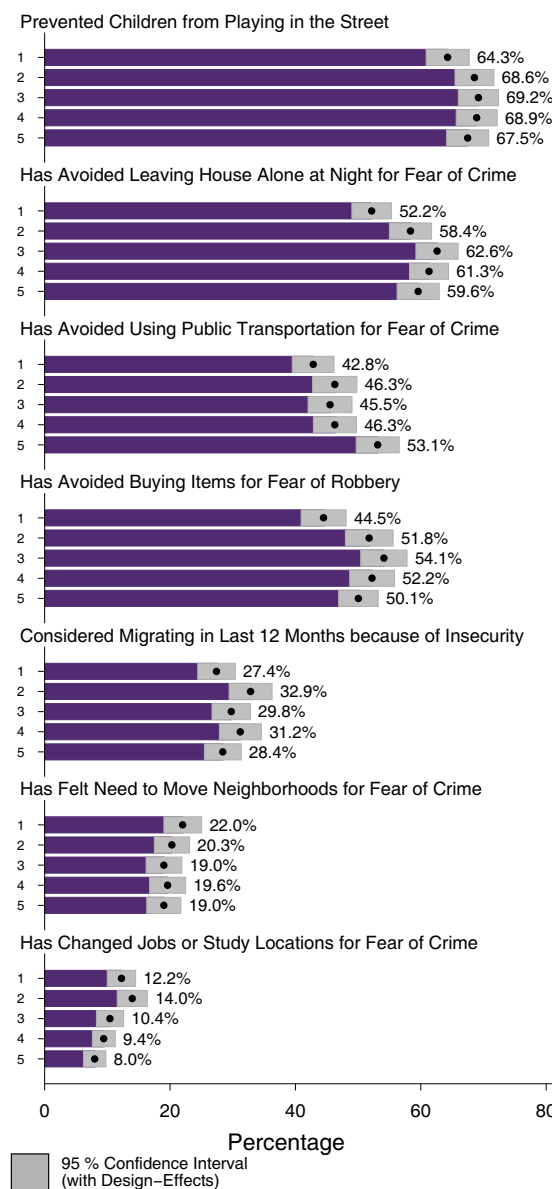95 % Confidence Interval
(with Design–Effects)

As seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the distribution of impact varies significantly across behavior type and country in Central America. Unsurprisingly, crime avoidance behaviors are most common in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This is consistent with other statistics on crime and security in the region, which generally find a sharp divide between the Northern Triangle and its neighbors immediately to the south. Yet, surprisingly high proportions of the population in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama report having changed their behavior, particularly when it comes to preventing their children from playing on the street or feeling the need to move neighborhoods. This suggests that fears about family safety are more rigid—and less connected to the underlying crime rates—than fears about individual safety. That approximately two-thirds of Central Americans (63.9%) report having prevented their children from playing in the street may reflect a widespread state of panic, or it may simply reflect a general tendency toward caution in the care of others, even in the face of comparatively smaller risk.[18]

Digging deeper into the Northern Triangle specifically—measuring purchasing habits, changing jobs or place of study, migration, and school attendance—we find that the behavioral impact of crime is particularly strong when it comes to economic activity. In Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, just over half of the adult population (50.5%) reports having avoided buying "things they like" in the past year because they may be stolen.[19] These data affirm the assumption that underlies assessments based on aggregate economic data: crime and insecurity deter individuals from spending, to the detriment of the country's

FIGURE 4: CRIME AVOIDANCE BY QUINTILE OF WEALTH IN CENTRAL AMERICA
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

Prevented Children from Playing in the Street

1	64.3%
2	68.6%
3	69.2%
4	68.9%
5	67.5%

Has Avoided Leaving House Alone at Night for Fear of Crime

1	52.2%
2	58.4%
3	62.6%
4	61.3%
5	59.6%

Has Avoided Using Public Transportation for Fear of Crime

1	42.8%
2	46.3%
3	45.5%
4	46.3%
5	53.1%

Has Avoided Buying Items for Fear of Robbery

1	44.5%
2	51.8%
3	54.1%
4	52.2%
5	50.1%

Considered Migrating in Last 12 Months because of Insecurity

1	27.4%
2	32.9%
3	29.8%
4	31.2%
5	28.4%

Has Felt Need to Move Neighborhoods for Fear of Crime

1	22.0%
2	20.3%
3	19.0%
4	19.6%
5	19.0%

Has Changed Jobs or Study Locations for Fear of Crime

1	12.2%
2	14.0%
3	10.4%
4	9.4%
5	8.0%

Percentage

95 % Confidence Interval
(with Design–Effects)

financial situation. Additionally, 11% of those residing in the Northern Triangle have changed their job or place of study in the past year because of fear of crime.[20] This type of outcome likely takes its own toll on the economy, and also may be socially disruptive and destabilizing.

These crime avoidance behaviors are somewhat more common in urban areas than in rural ones. For example, 23.3% of urban respondents in the Northern Triangle report feeling the need to move neighborhoods due to crime, while only 16.2% of rural respondents say the same. There is only a small variation in responses by gender, with female respondents slightly more likely to prevent children from playing in the streets, avoid leaving the house alone, and feel the need to move neighborhoods, and male respondents slightly more likely to avoid public transit. Variation in crime avoidance also exists across age groups, with middle cohorts slightly more likely to engage in crime avoidance—especially when it comes to pressure to move neighborhoods: 25.7% of respondents between 36 and 45 years old report feeling a need to move, whereas only 11.8% of those 66 years and older feel the same.

Interestingly, in most cases there is little variance in crime avoidance behavior across wealth quintiles (see Figure 4). Among the exceptions are that those in the poorest quintile are significantly less likely to avoid leaving the house alone at night and the wealthiest are significantly more likely to avoid public transit. We note that, while there is not a statistical difference between the least wealthy groups in their likelihood of avoiding public transportation, the fact that 44.6% of the lowest two quintiles do so is still a significant and concerning finding.[21] Many of these individuals are unlikely to have alternative forms of transit (for example, 80 percent of adults in Honduras report not owning a car[22]) and therefore exclusion from public transport is a significant blow to mobility and economic opportunities.

Finally, in Guatemala specifically, approximately one in three respondents (31.7%) report having kept children at home out of fear of crime (see Figure 5).[23] This is in keeping with recent studies and reporting about a growing number of children routinely missing school or college because of fear of violence and criminal gangs. As Francisco Benavides, a regional education adviser for Latin America and the Caribbean at UNICEF described, "In some areas of Latin America, we are talking about a second lost generation."[24]

FIGURE 5: GUATEMALANS WHO REPORT KEEPING CHILDREN HOME FROM SCHOOL BECAUSE OF CRIME
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

- No
- Yes
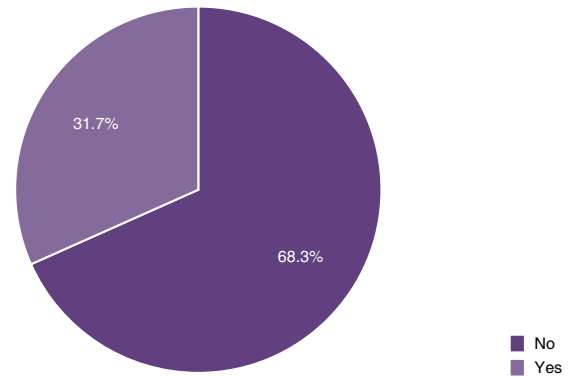
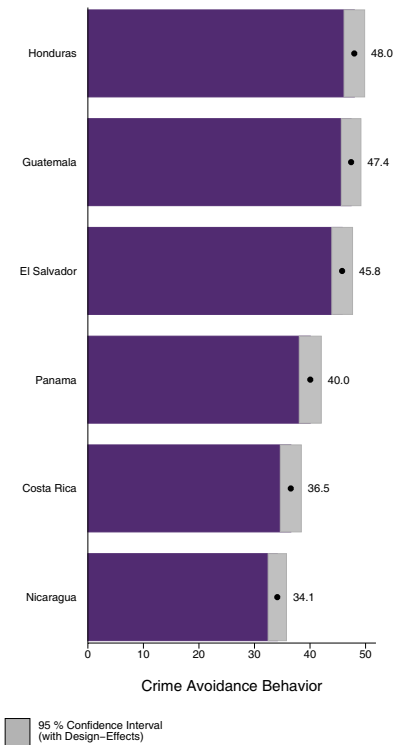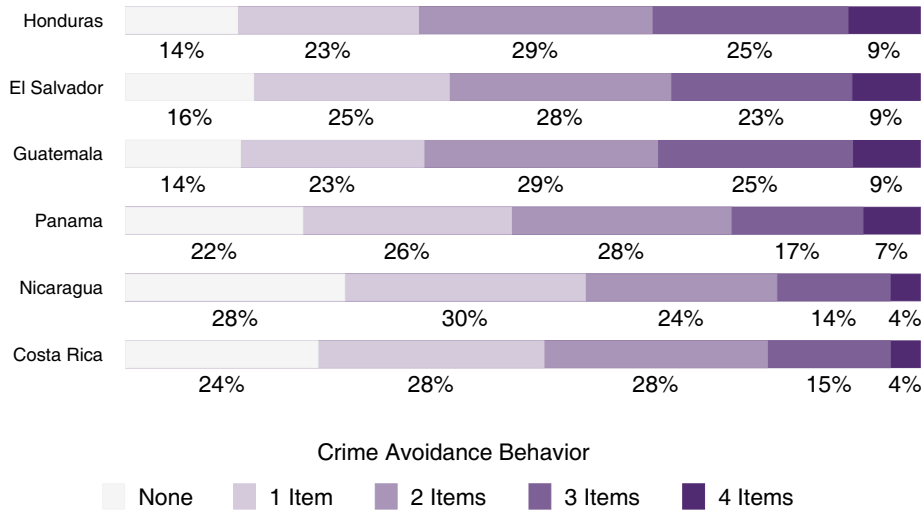# 2. Creating and Validating a Crime Avoidance Behavior Index

With these findings in mind, we create a crime avoidance behavior index—a single score that reflects how much single individuals or specific populations change their daily routines to seek security. This index, which is constructed using the questions that were asked in all Central American countries (VIC71, VIC72, VIC43, and VIC74; see earlier text box for wording), can be used to measure the aggregate impact of insecurity between countries (see Figure 6) as well as compare crime avoidance behavior with other data gathered as a part of the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer.

In short, the crime avoidance behavior index is a way of measuring how much each individual goes out of his or her way because of insecurity. It is essentially a numerical shorthand for how "crime averse" any one person or group is. With each individual assigned a score between 0 and 100, we can compare the aggregate impact of crime avoidance across countries, as well as compare subgroups based on various other traits and responses.

As expected, high index scores are associated with increased perceptions of insecurity, crime victimization, and gang presence. Those who have been a victim of any type of crime in the last 12 months—including robbery, burglary, assault, blackmail, fraud, and extortion—score 39.1% higher on the index than those who have not (60.1 versus 43.2). In other words, crime avoidance is higher

FIGURE 6: THE CRIME AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR INDEX ACROSS COUNTRIES

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

Crime Avoidance Behavior

None | 1 Item | 2 Items | 3 Items | 4 Items

Crime Avoidance Behavior

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design–Effects)

among those who are genuinely at risk for crime. Those who report feeling "Very Unsafe" in their neighborhood score almost twice as high on the crime avoidance index as those who report feeling "Very Safe" (60.9 vs 33.7). Respondents in neighborhoods without gang-related graffiti—as evaluated by the interviewer—engage in measurably less crime avoidance behavior. Experiences with police corruption and longer perceived police response time also correlate with more crime avoidance behavior (see Section 4).

In summary, the crime avoidance behavior index is a useful and valid measure of the burden of crime in a population. It correlates in the expected ways with indicators of crime, gang presence, and weak rule of law and it is consistent with observations made in macro-level studies and by policymakers. Therefore, we can use the crime avoidance behavior index to test how the daily impacts of security are related to—and potentially the drivers of—various other trends, above all the intention to emigrate.

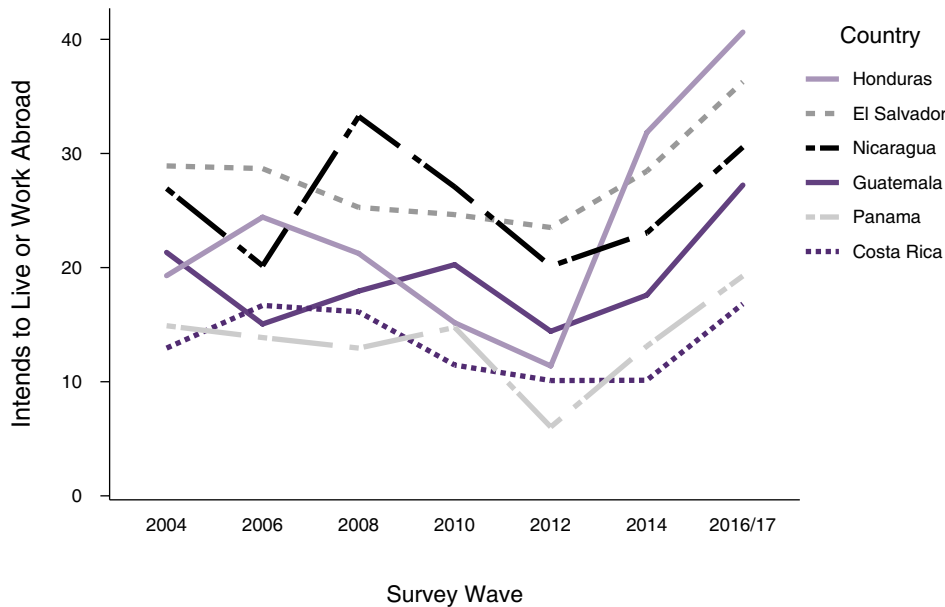# 3. Crime Avoidance and Intentions to Migrate

Among the most important consequences of crime avoidance, from a policy perspective, is migration. In

fact, crime avoidance behavior is one of the strongest predictors of intention to migrate. This individual-level dynamic helps explain why, in the past five years, intentions to "live or work in another country in the next three years" have spiked in all countries in Central America, especially in Honduras (see Figure 7).

Crime avoidance behavior is one of the strongest predictors of intention to migrate and helps explain why intentions to do so have spiked in all countries in Central America.

FIGURE 7: A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN INTENTIONS TO MIGRATE
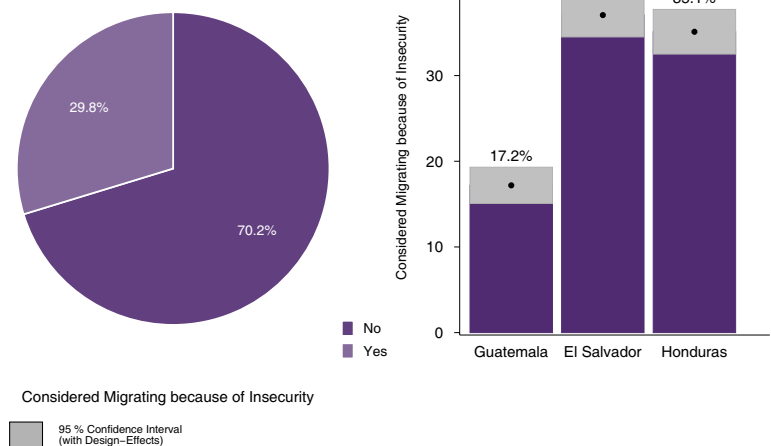Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

In the Northern Triangle specifically, intentions to migrate—as expected—are robustly linked to factors related to insecurity. In fact, analyses of the survey data reveal that security concerns play a central role in individual motivation to migrate. 29.8% of adults in the Northern Triangle have considered migrating in the last 12 months specifically due to insecurity, as seen in Figure 8.[25] The pressure to migrate due to insecurity is especially high in El Salvador and Honduras when compared to Guatemala. This rate is comparable to the 34.7% of adults in the Northern Triangle that intend to live or work in another country in the future regardless of motivation, which suggests that many potential migrants are driven by security, not just a search for economic opportunities or other factors such as family unification.

This is reinforced by comparing crime avoidance behavior index scores in the Northern Triangle to intentions to migrate for any reason. To perform this analysis, we predict individuals' intention to migrate out of the country with measures of their individual characteristics, security evaluations and behaviors, corruption experiences, trust assessments, and economic situation. Interestingly, crime avoidance behavior is as strongly associated or more strongly associated with migration than almost all other factors measured, including gender,

age, wealth, perception of neighborhood insecurity, interpersonal trust, trust in local and national governments, experience of bribery, crime victimization, fear of being murdered, gang activity, and change in household income. Only unemployment and receiving remittances—which means the respondent likely has relatives abroad—have larger regression coefficients than the crime avoidance index. These results are presented in Figure 9, where the dots and associated numbers indicate the estimated effect of a maximum unit change in the independent variable (y-axis) on individuals' intentions (0-100 likelihood) to migrate out of the country. The lines on either side of the dots represent the 95% confidence interval for the coefficient. Solid dots are statistically different from zero, whereas hollow dots are not.

These findings provide strong empirical evidence for the chorus of arguments that recent migration from the Northern Triangle has been driven by "push" factors in addition to "pull" factors. The most-discussed example of

FIGURE 8: PRESSURE TO MIGRATE REGIONALLY AND BY COUNTRY
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

FIGURE 9: PREDICTORS OF INTENTIONS TO MIGRATE
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17


95% Confidence Interval with Design–Effects
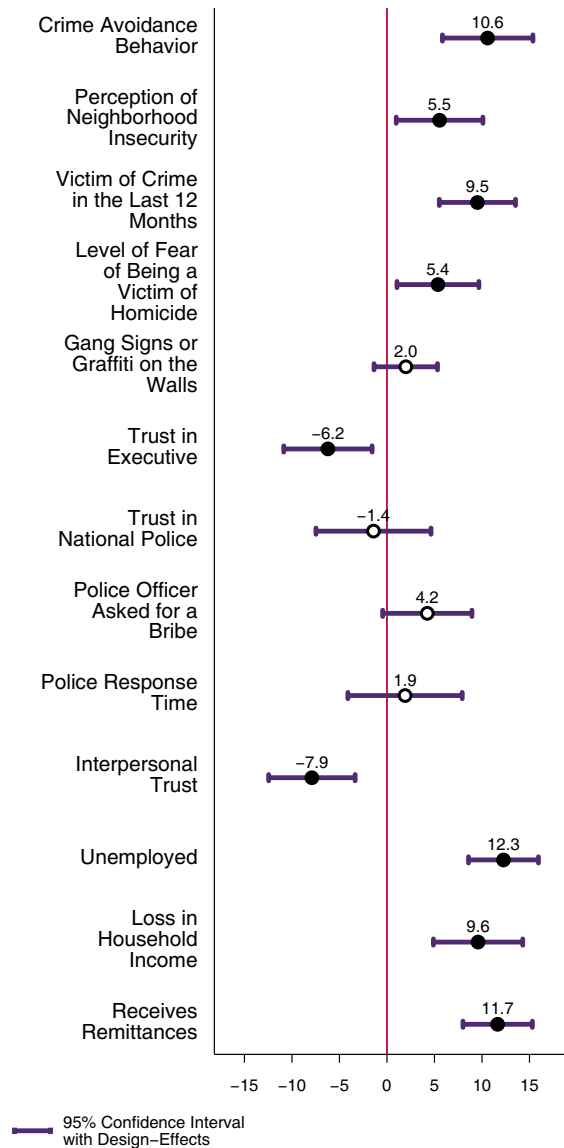
this argument is the 2014 report "Children on the Run" by the UNHCR, which interviewed 404 unaccompanied child migrants and found "violence, insecurity and abuse" to be the primary reasons they had risked the journey.[26] A 2014 Inter-American Dialogue survey of migrants from Central America also found that "for Salvadorans and Hondurans, violence in their country of origin was by far the leading push factor, while for Guatemalans it was both violence and the lack of opportunities" with family reunification "secondary to the more immediate and pressing issues of violence and poverty."[27] The results in Figure 9 are consistent with this pattern, showing that the toll of

insecurity on individuals' daily lives – via their experiences and their crime coping behaviors –is a key driver of individual intentions to migrate, alongside factors that indicate economic insecurity.

This suggests that US immigration control efforts that focus exclusively on domestic policies and border security are unlikely to be successful in deterring migration in the long run. Even if changes in immigration policies or rhetoric in the US result in a drop in border crossings—as many have argued occurred in the initial months of the Trump Administration[28]—the decline is likely to be temporary. As of August 2017, there was already evidence that the number of undocumented migrants apprehended at the US-Mexico border was rising quickly back towards pre-Trump levels, with a 22.5% month over month increase from July.[29] This is especially true for families crossing the border, as opposed to unaccompanied minors; apprehensions of family units
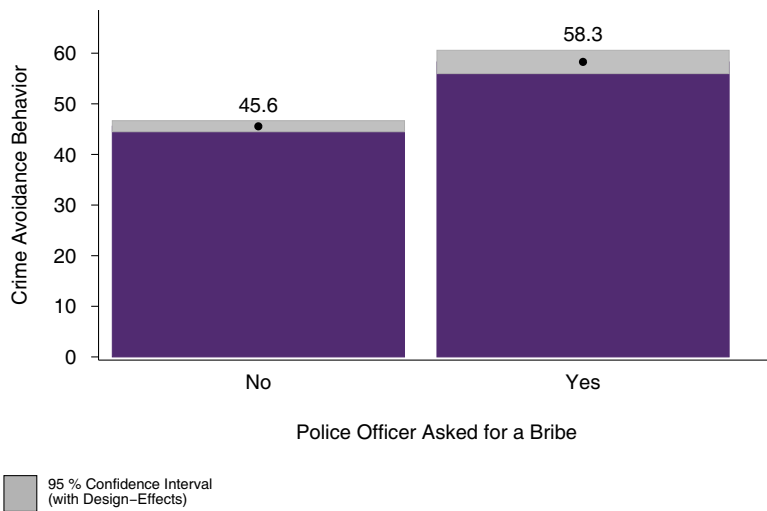
FIGURE 10: CRIME AVOIDANCE AND TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design–Effects)
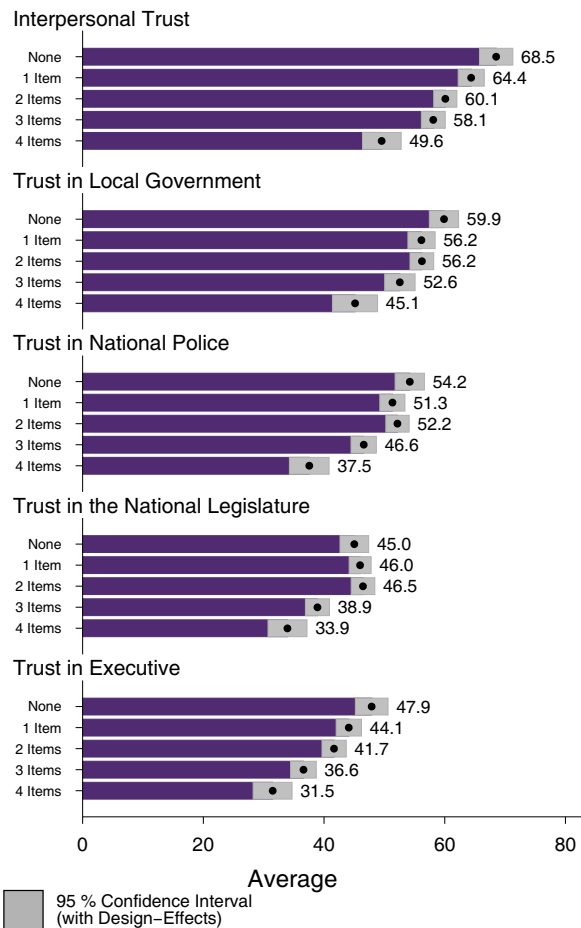
FIGURE 11: POLICE CORRUPTION AND CRIME AVOIDANCE
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

rose 30% relative to a similar 2016 period. This should not be surprising, as these results show that the pressure to migrate because of insecurity is high even for adults.

These findings suggest that in order to reduce the number of undocumented migrants risking the journey from the Northern Triangle in the long term, the most effective strategy is one that attempts to improve conditions in the three countries, particularly in terms of security, violence, and crime. We also suggest that tracking crime avoidance behavior can be a useful tool to identify the populations most at risk and likely to migrate.

4. Countering the Toll on Governments and Societies

Crime avoidance behavior also provides an important lens into how security situations negatively affect democracy and the state—and how governments can counter the tide.

Crime avoidance is associated with diminished trust in the executive, the legislature, the national police, and local government (see Figure 10, where crime avoidance appears on the y-axis as a count of how of the crime avoidance items in the index that received a positive response). There is also clear evidence that crime avoidance behavior is associated with lower levels of interpersonal trust, as measured by whether the respondent thinks "people from around here" are trustworthy.[30]

According to the AmericasBarometer, those who have experienced police corruption in the past year in the

Northern Triangle engage in significantly more crime avoidance behavior than those who have not, as shown in Figure 11. There are several possible explanations for this relationship. On one hand, those who are more at risk of being targeted by violent crime may also be targeted more often by police corruption. This would suggest that police corruption is of most concern in the communities that are most plagued by violence. On the other hand, it may also be that those who have had a police officer ask for a bribe are less likely to trust law enforcement and attempt to take control of their own security. In any case, the link between corruption and crime avoidance behavior supports the growing consensus that fighting corruption is critical to solving the Northern Triangle's pressing challenges, including violence and migration.[31]
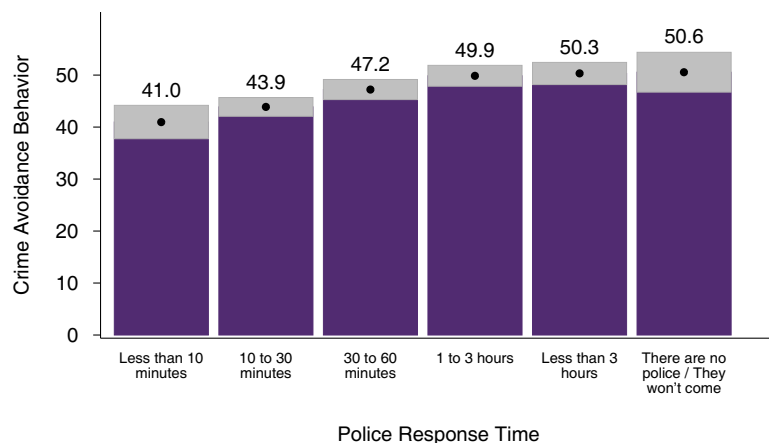
There is also evidence, detailed in Figure 12, that longer perceived police response time is associated with more crime avoidance behavior. This makes sense for obvious reasons: if individuals anticipate that the police take hours to arrive (or won't come at all), they can be expected to take measures to protect their own safety. The relationship, however, is less strong than one might expect, and is less dramatic than having experienced police bribery. This suggests that the integrity of law enforcement is more important than the proximity of the police. Therefore, police reform—including controls against corruption and the implementation of high quality community-based policing approaches—may be more effective than simply bolstering the size and presence of police forces.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, there is strong evidence that crime avoidance behavior (along with being

> There is strong evidence that crime avoidance behavior (along with being a victim of a crime) correlates with increased engagement and activity in the community.

FIGURE 12: POLICE RESPONSE TIME AND CRIME AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design–Effects)

is how drug traffickers maintain order in poor neighborhoods, as documented by Enrique Desmond Arias and Corinne Davis Rodrigues in Rio de Janeiro.[36] They argue that "traffickers create a 'myth of personal security' in which individual residents believe they can guarantee their own safety through their actions and political connections to traffickers."[37] In that sense, individuals most vulnerable to crime may feel the need to participate in community organizations and institutions for the sake of self-protection through personal relationships, yet the extent to which those organizations operate outside the confines of the rule of law, or within it, varies.

In either case, this suggests a critical new piece in this puzzle in the Northern Triangle: even though the people most affected by security issues are less trustful of their neighbors and more likely to want to move out of their community, they may also be more willing to work to try to improve it. This finding may help point the way forward when it comes to lessening the burden of crime and violence—and by extension, stemming the pressure to migrate. These vulnerable populations may be turning to local groups as a last resort. This may also make them a potential focal point for policy interventions, either by the state or by development organizations. The findings from the AmericasBarometer study suggest that the Central Americans who are most affected by crime and violence are not passive actors. They are turning to their community institutions, either to get help or to try to improve the community themselves. Those looking to assist them should follow.

a victim of a crime) correlates with increased engagement and activity in the community. Higher crime avoidance behavior scores are associated with attendance at meetings of religious organizations, meetings of a parents' association at a school, and meetings of a community improvement committee or association (see Figure 13).[32] Likewise, intentions to migrate are also associated with greater attendance in these community organizations. In other words, instead of self-isolating, those individuals most alert to crime are more engaged with their community even if they hope to escape. This finding fits with previous research on the "associativity of distrust" in Latin America—a positive correlation between fear and the tendency to participate in local organizations.[33] As Kevin Casas-Zamora argues, this engagement can be "based more on reasons of convenience—to fight crime—than on solidarity."[34] This is part of a broader pattern of engagement: research has also shown that crime victimization leads to increased participation in politics around the world.[35]
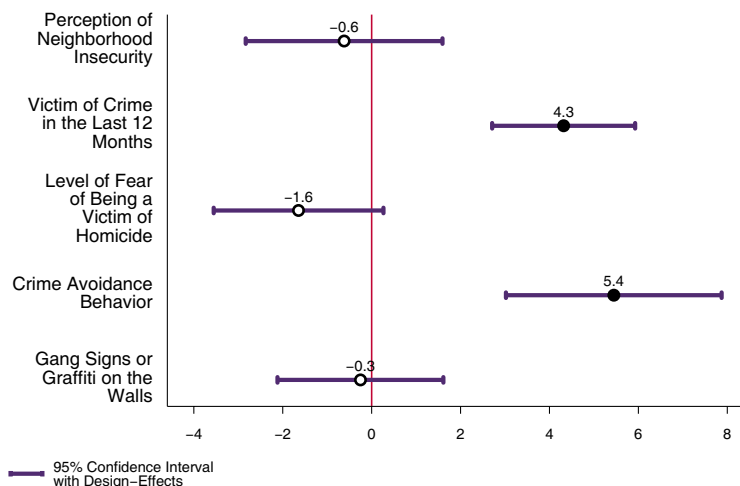
At the same time, increased participation may be the product of informal community organizations, dispute settling mechanisms, and local norms that emerge in poor communities outside the reach of the state. It is important for future studies to delve into variations in the types of local participation and efforts that are emerging in response to crime, since some may be more conducive to democratic deepening than others. A good example

FIGURE 13: COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION BY VARIOUS FACTORS
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17

95% Confidence Interval with Design–Effects

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Focus on "push factors" instead of "pull factors" behind migration.*** These findings provide clear evidence for the argument that migration from the Northern Triangle is driven to a large degree by concern about crime and fear of violence. Policymakers in the United States looking to stem migration pressure should continue to focus on improving security and economic conditions in the Northern Triangle countries, rather than focusing exclusively on domestic immigration and border security policies.

- ***Think of security as an economic investment.*** The high incidence of crime avoidance behavior—particularly in employment and purchasing decisions—suggests a clear link between insecurity and missed economic opportunities. Measures aimed at improving citizen security situations should be framed as long-term economic investments.

- ***Invest in communities.*** Evidence suggests that community organizations and local institutions can be an important resource for those most vulnerable to crime and violence. Investing in communities at the micro level may be a critical juncture, both when it comes to lessening the burden of insecurity and as a potential way to stem pressure to migrate.

- ***Protect access to transportation and education.*** The sheer number of Central Americans that avoid public transit or keep their children out of school because of fear of crime translates to a significant loss of opportunity with significant long-term impacts on economic productivity and other outcomes. Improving secure access to both these services is critical when it comes to lessening the burden of crime and violence.

- ***Fight petty corruption and improve police to bolster community security.*** While the exact mechanisms still need to be studied, the link between petty corruption by police and crime avoidance behavior is clear. Improving the quality and efficacy of local police will help ease the impacts of crime. Fighting corruption more broadly may also help improve overall trust in institutions and improve the quality of public services, which can also help lessen the burden of insecurity.

- ***Stay focused on Honduras.*** Within Central America, the highest burden of crime avoidance falls on individuals in this country. Despite the recent progress in reducing homicide rates, Honduras remains the most affected in terms of crime avoidance behavior and it has the highest (and most sharply increasing) rates of intention to migrate.

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