

The Hidden Driver: Climate Change and Migration in Central America's Northern Triangle

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The Hidden Driver
*Climate Change and Migration in
Central America's Northern Triangle*

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American Security Project

Perspective

—

Laura Sigelmann

September 2019

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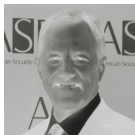
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In this Report:

While individuals have migrated from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador for decades, it is only recently that large numbers of families and unaccompanied minors have migrated to the United States. Migrants from these countries, known as the Northern Triangle, are fleeing local instability and violence, poverty, and drought, among other reasons. As climate change deepens poverty and food insecurity in the Northern Triangle, it is likely that the United States will continue to see a rise in the number of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. This requires a thoughtful and comprehensive overhaul of the U.S. asylum system, significant investment in border infrastructure, and targeted development aid.

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IN BRIEF

- The number of Central Americans crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without appropriate documents has reached a 16-year high.
- Most migrants are families and unaccompanied minors from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador – a region known as the ‘Northern Triangle.’
- Migrants are fleeing many factors, including violence, poverty, and food insecurity.
- Many migrants are from rural areas that are highly susceptible to the effects of climate change.
- Climate change will increase temperatures and reduce precipitation, decreasing crop yields by 30-87% by 2100.
- To address migration, policymakers must understand push factors and adjust the asylum system to meet the needs of the new demographics of migrants.

About the Author

Laura Sigelmann is a third-year dual-degree graduate student at the University of Texas-Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs and Jackson School of the Geosciences. In May 2020, she will graduate with a Master of Global Policy Studies and Master of Energy and Earth Resources. In her studies, Laura has specialized in climate security, with a focus on climate change, migration, and conflict in fragile states.

Introduction

In May 2019, more than 130,000 migrants were apprehended along the U.S.-Mexico border,¹ reaching an 11-year high.² Eighty percent of those migrants were families and unaccompanied minors fleeing Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.³ These three countries make up a region in Central America known as the ‘Northern Triangle’ (Figure 1) – an area with high rates of gang violence, poverty, and food insecurity.⁴ While the area has been politically unstable for decades,⁵ it is only recently that more families and unaccompanied minors than single men have migrated to the United States.

Understanding the trends and motivating factors for migration is critical for managing migrant flows. Several push factors contribute to the decision to migrate, including local instability and violence, poverty, and drought. Oftentimes, migrants move within their country first, only crossing international borders after the situation in their home country deteriorates.⁶ In the Northern Triangle specifically, difficult socioeconomic and security conditions are the primary drivers of migration, while drought, family reunification, and poor governance exacerbate those conditions.⁷



The effects of climate change are worsening the underlying conditions in the Northern Triangle, intensifying food insecurity and undermining families' livelihoods. Repeated droughts since 2014 have destroyed crops and resulted in levels of food insecurity previously unseen in the region; this has contributed to changing migration patterns to the U.S.⁸ Up to 10.6 million people in Latin America could become internal ‘climate migrants’ by 2050,⁹ stressing the resources of countries that are already insecure and impoverished.

As climate change deepens poverty and food insecurity in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, it is likely that the United States will continue to see a rise in the number of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. This requires thoughtful and comprehensive overhaul of the U.S. asylum system, significant investment in humane border infrastructure, and targeted development aid to the Northern Triangle.

Central American Migration Trends

Prior to 2014, most migrants seeking asylum in the United States were single adult men from Mexico looking to find work.¹⁰ While Mexican men still constitute the largest foreign-born group in the U.S., the number of Mexican immigrants has declined and, in 2016, the number of Central American asylum-seekers surpassed Mexican asylum-seekers.^{11,12}

Based on data from the Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (CAMPI) at the University of Texas, the type and country of origin for migrants has largely changed.¹³ CAMPI compiled data from U.S. and Mexican immigration authorities to create a model for Central American migrants by type and country. The model uses data on apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as statistical assumptions about recidivism and the number of migrants never detected. The model also breaks down inadmissibles by country – inadmissibles are migrants that go directly to ports of entry to seek asylum and are only found in the U.S. context. The data has a few limitations, since Customs and Border Protection (CBP) first published data on unaccompanied minors and families in 2008 and 2012, respectively. Data for U.S. fiscal year 2019 contains information from October to June.

The data elucidates several key trends. Since 2011, and particularly since 2017, migration to the United States from the Northern Triangle has increased rapidly (Figure 2). This is primarily driven by large increases in numbers of migrants from Guatemala and Honduras. From October 2017 to June 2019, the number of migrants entering the U.S. from Guatemala and Honduras increased by 190% and 270%, respectively.

The general increase in numbers of migrants hides a more important trend: the increase in numbers of families and unaccompanied minors. In 2012, families and unaccompanied minors accounted for less than 10% of total migration numbers (Figure 3). Since then, the number of families from the Northern Triangle seeking asylum in the U.S. each year has increased nearly 25,000%, from 1,488 in U.S. fiscal year 2012 to 373,110 in 2019. The number of unaccompanied minors has increased over 440%, from 10,146 in U.S. fiscal year 2012 to 55,109 in 2019. The number of single adults entering the U.S. saw a peak in 2013 and has plateaued around 130,000 per year since.

Northern Triangle Migration to U.S. by Country

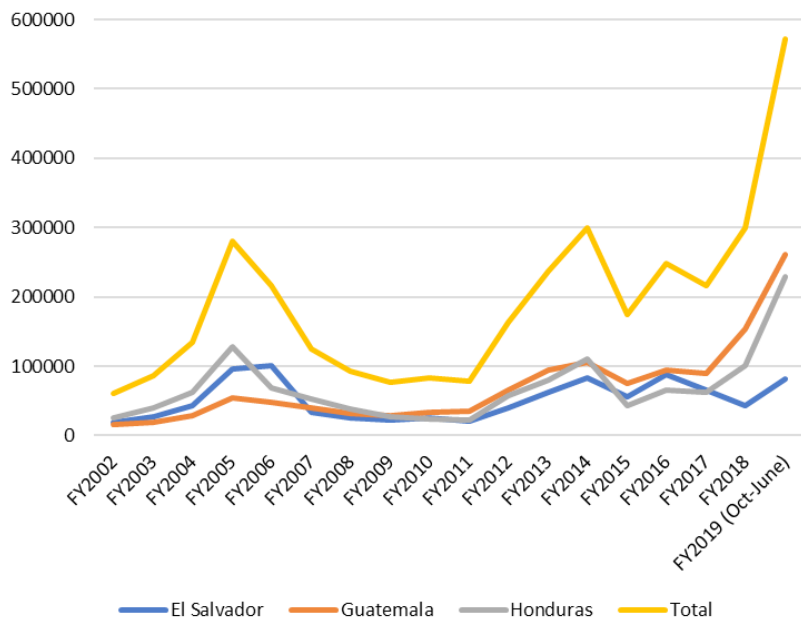


Figure 2 - Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).

Northern Triangle Migration to U.S. by Type

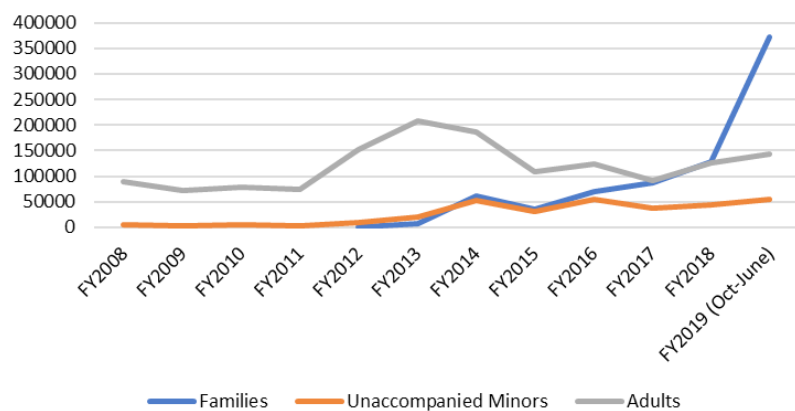
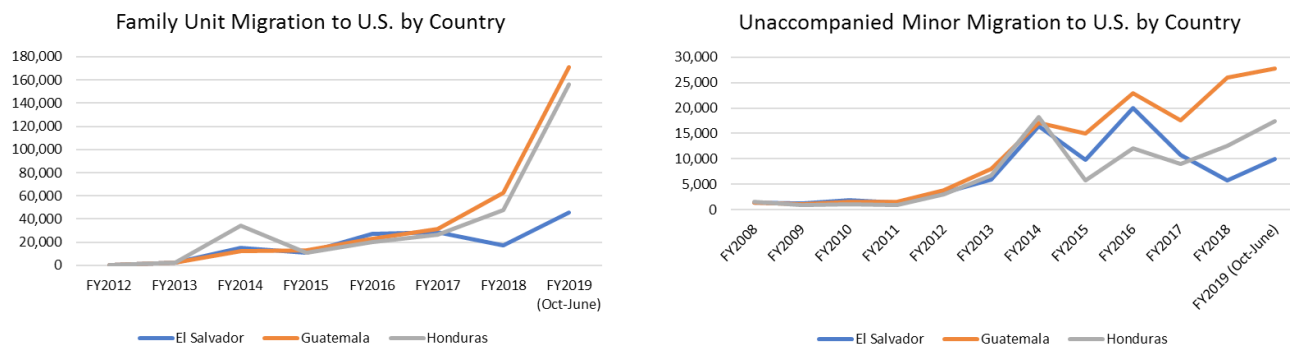


Figure 3 - Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).

Of those families and unaccompanied minors migrating to the U.S., the majority are from Guatemala and Honduras (Figure 4). This trend is particularly clear with family units. In 2015, 32% of family units were from El Salvador, 37% were from Guatemala, and 31% were from Honduras. By 2019, those numbers were 12%, 46%, and 41%, respectively.



Figures 4.1 and 4.2. Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative.

The large increase in family migration is more clearly shown when accounting for the population of origin countries. Figure 5 shows outmigration per 100,000 people, including migrants who did not make the full journey to the U.S. According to the CAMPI model, an average of only 8% of migrants never attempted to enter the U.S., and the trends of migrant types were similar to those ultimately reaching the United States. In 2002, 351 people per 100,000 migrated out of El Salvador. By June 2019, that number had increased to

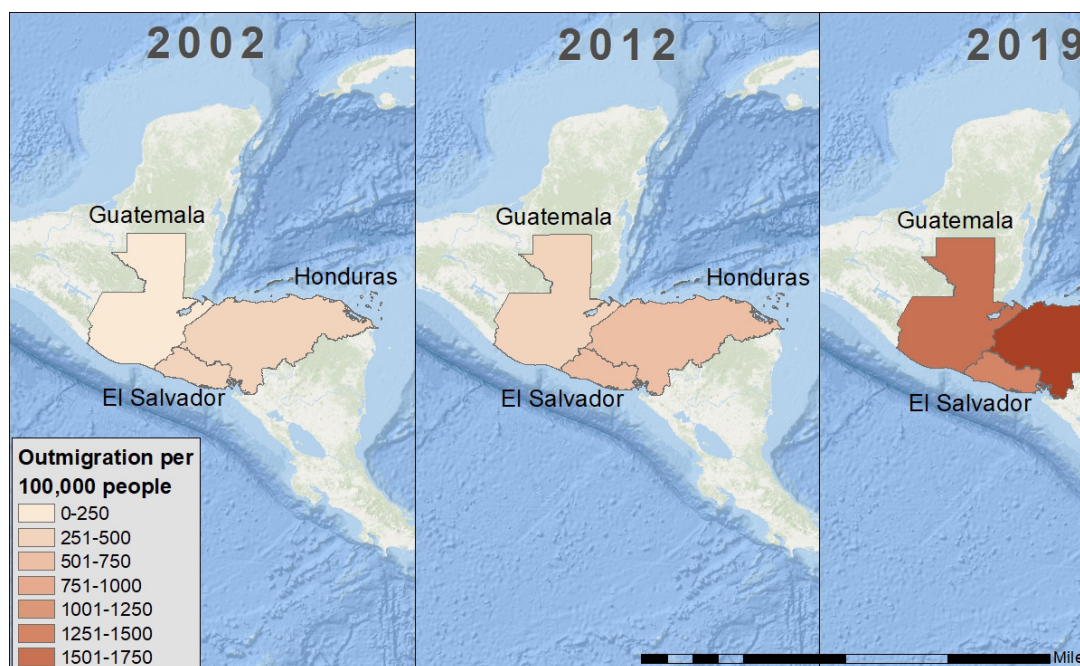


Figure 5. Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).

1,272 per 100,000, a 260% increase. In Guatemala, the rate of outmigration increased from 168 in 2002 to 1,510 per 100,000 in 2019, a nearly 800% increase. Honduras had an outmigration rate of 407 per 100,000 people in 2002 and 2,415 per 100,000 in 2019, a nearly 500% increase.

Push Factors for Migration

The decision to migrate, leaving one's home country and loved ones, is deeply personal and complex. Many rural migrants first move within their country to large urban areas,¹⁴ only fleeing internationally after socioeconomic or environmental conditions worsen. Urban migrants and those escaping violence frequently migrate directly to the United States. Central American migration is often characterized as mixed – some individuals migrate for economic opportunity, some flee violence, and others escape for a combination of reasons. In 2018, the International Organization for Migration conducted a survey of a Salvadoran “caravan”: nearly 52% cited economic opportunity as their reason to migrate, 18% cited violence and physical insecurity, 2% cited family reunification, and 28% cited a combination of factors.¹⁵ A 2014–2016 World Food Program survey of migrants from the Northern Triangle's dry corridor found that the most frequently cited reason for migration was “no food.”¹⁶ These results demonstrate the complexity of motivations and intertwined nature of factors.

A 2018 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean found that most migrants from the Northern Triangle during the years 2002–2012 came from rural areas.¹⁷ During that time, there was an increase of nearly 59% in irregular migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Irregular migration is the “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination.”¹⁸ Irregularity does not refer to the migrants themselves, but rather to their migratory status, which can change over time. Nearly two-thirds of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador left rural areas and more than half of remittances sent to Guatemala went to rural households.¹⁹ Remittances are private international monetary transfers that migrants make, often sent to family members who remained in their home countries. Only 11% of Honduran returnees went to cities, the remainder returned to rural areas.²⁰ According to the report, most migrants were fleeing food insecurity, climate shocks, lack of economic opportunity, and the erosion of the social fabric of their communities.²¹

The migrants entering the U.S. in 2019 are often vulnerable families and unaccompanied minors fleeing deep poverty and food insecurity in rural regions of the Northern Triangle. Climate change will likely worsen poverty, deepen food insecurity in vulnerable regions, and contribute to deteriorating security conditions, which will accelerate migration and further stress U.S. resources.

Socioeconomic Conditions and Economic Opportunity

All three countries in the Northern Triangle have high poverty rates and lack economic opportunity. Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have poverty rates of 59.3%, 61.9%, and 29.2%, respectively.²² Due to historic colonial rule, land ownership has been concentrated in the hands of a few elites, leaving a legacy of deep inequality.²³ While neoliberalism led to greater macroeconomic stability, those gains have not resulted in improved living conditions for the majority of Northern Triangle residents.²⁴ In rural areas in particular, poverty rates and socioeconomic conditions are worse; 76% of residents in the Western Highlands of Guatemala live below the national poverty line and 27% live in extreme poverty.²⁵ The rural poor are the most sensitive to economic, political, and climate shocks.

All three countries also have large youth populations that are expected to grow. Approximately 54% of Salvadorans, 66% of Guatemalans, and 65% of Hondurans are under the age of 29.²⁶ For people aged 15–29, there is net migration into large cities – defined as 500,000 people and above.²⁷ While this may present an opportunity for economic growth due to the influx of working populations, the lack of employment options²⁸ in the region may leave large populations under- or unemployed. This may lead people to seek informal employment or migrate for economic opportunity.

Additionally, the presence of large unemployed youth populations in cities may create a security risk, further undermining the stability of each country. It is easier for gangs to target and recruit youth without employment options.

Agriculture and Food Insecurity

Rural residents are particularly vulnerable to environmental change in Northern Triangle countries. Guatemala and El Salvador are among the top 15 countries world-wide most exposed to natural disasters, especially earthquakes and droughts.²⁹ Agriculture is the main source of economic activity for approximately one third of all Northern Triangle residents, most of whom grow maize, beans, rice, and coffee.³⁰ Repeated or sudden drought, particularly in the dry corridor (Figure 6), has led to chronic malnutrition in children under 5. In Guatemala, the rate reached 59.6% in rural areas.³¹ Malnutrition drives migration, particularly for families seeking a better life for their children.

Climate change directly impacts agriculture through drought and rainfall variability. Changes in the onset, duration, or intensity of rainfall can destroy crops. Because agriculture is one of the main sources of work for rural farmers, particularly subsistence farmers, drought and the El Niño phenomenon can decimate rural livelihoods.

When harvests are destroyed, rural populations must find alternative livelihoods or apply coping mechanisms.

A recent World Food Programme (WFP) study found that dry corridor residents often apply a variety of coping mechanisms to reduce food insecurity before migrating internationally.³² These can include reducing food consumption, adjusting finances, selling assets or land, and then finally migrating.³³

Levels of food insecurity rose to 32% in the dry corridor of the Northern Triangle following drought in 2014.³⁴ A WFP survey of dry corridor households with a recently emigrated family member found a 47% rate of food insecurity.³⁵ Seventy-two percent of interviewed households had applied at least one emergency coping mechanism to manage food insecurity in their household. The study concluded that for this region in particular, emigration is the ultimate coping strategy to manage food insecurity. One year later, the 2015 El Niño drought phenomenon destroyed 60% of maize and 80% of bean crops, resulting in more than 3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, 1.5 million people affected by food insecurity, and a \$17 million funding gap in Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) aid.³⁶

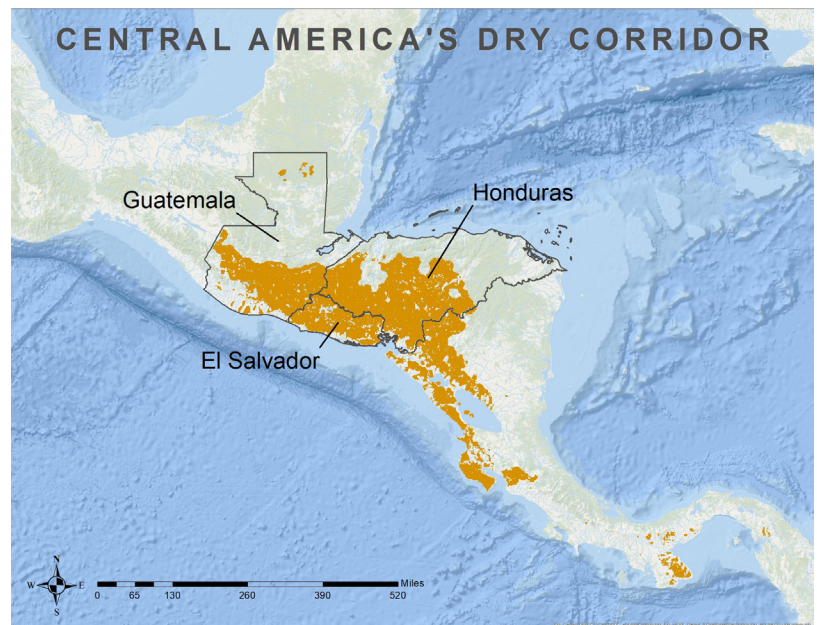


Figure 6. Data from Climate Risk Index (Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical -World Bank and United Nations Environmental Programme, 1999).

In 2018, a delayed start to the rainy season in the dry corridor of the Northern Triangle ruined up to 70% of the first harvest, while excessive rainfall ruined up to 50% of the second harvest.³⁷ The 2019 El Niño phenomenon destroyed more than half the crops of subsistence farmers in the Northern Triangle's vulnerable dry corridor, leaving an estimated 1.4 million people in need of urgent food assistance.³⁸ These two years correspond to the greatest increase in the rate of Central American migrants traveling to the U.S.

Climate change can also expand the reach of diseases affecting crops. A 2012-2014 outbreak of coffee rust disease hit smallholder farmers particularly hard.³⁹ The disease has a limited temperature range, but increases in nighttime temperatures throughout the Northern Triangle allow the disease to thrive at higher altitudes.⁴⁰

Governance, Security Conditions, and Violence

The Americas have the highest average intentional homicide rate in the world; In 2017, El Salvador had 61.8 homicides per 100,000 people, Honduras had 41.7, and Guatemala had 26.1, compared to the global average of 6.1 (Figure 7).⁴¹ El Salvador is by far the most violent of the three Northern Triangle countries, consistently leading the globe in highest homicide rates. Extortion, violence against women, and kidnapping are also common in the region. The primary driver of crime in Central America is gang activity and drug trafficking.⁴² Most residents change their daily routines out of fear of violence and crime, including: not leaving the house at night, not using public transport, and moving neighborhoods.⁴³ Over one-third of all residents in Honduras and El Salvador considered migrating due to insecurity, and 17% of Guatemalans considered doing the same.⁴⁴

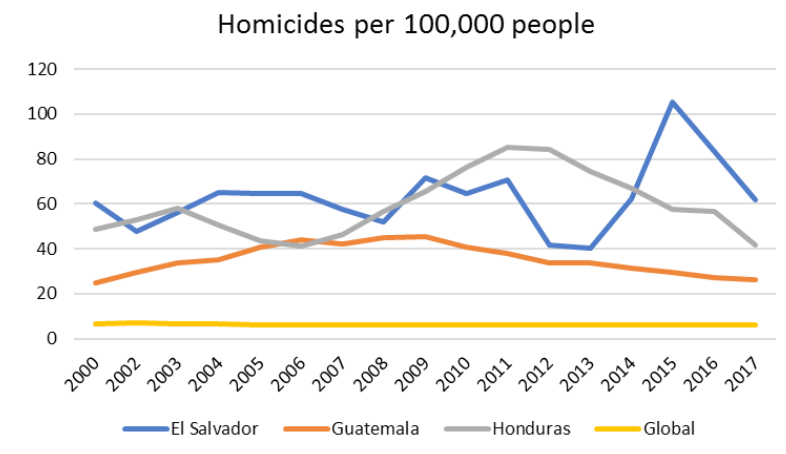


Figure 7. Northern Triangle homicides. Data from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

backslide into deeper corruption.⁴⁵ Weak national institutions have allowed the elites to capture state resources and prevent the implementation of social programs, legal reforms, and climate change adaptation.⁴⁶ The pervasive culture of impunity and democratic backsliding has led to hopelessness in communities⁴⁷ that are already dealing with high crime rates, poverty, and climate change.

Transnational criminal organizations use drug trafficking routes through Central America, often battling one another for control over territory.⁴⁸ Homicide rates rose in the 2000s as the region became the primary transit route for South American narcotics bound for the U.S.⁴⁹ The United States is the primary consumer of South American narcotics, but those affected are in the Northern Triangle.⁵⁰ Gangs also engage in neighborhood turf wars to control illicit markets like drug distribution and extortion. Poor economic prospects, high poverty, and large urban youth populations leave many young people vulnerable to recruitment by such organizations.⁵¹

As climate change continues to decimate rural livelihoods, more youth may migrate to cities seeking work. If employment is unavailable, youth may turn to the informal sector and gang-related activities. Without robust formal economies, violence and high crime rates are likely to continue throughout the Northern Triangle. Pervasive insecurity is already a driver of mass migration: 40% of Northern Triangle asylum-seekers mentioned direct attacks on themselves or their families as a reason for migration.⁵² As more families are forced to leave rural areas for urban work opportunities, only to find pervasive violence and insecurity, the push factors for migration will grow.

Climate Change in the Northern Triangle

Climate change directly and indirectly influences the three main drivers of migration: socioeconomic conditions, food security, and violence. While climate change may often get wrapped up in explanations such as poverty, economic development, or low wages,⁵³ it is an important underlying influencer – and one that will worsen over time. Given that migrants are already fleeing dangerous conditions, understanding how climate change will affect these conditions is critical for understanding future migrant flows.

Climate change will have two primary effects in the Northern Triangle: decreased rainfall and increased temperature. Annual rainfall has already decreased about 1 mm per day per 50 years from 1950 to 2008.⁵⁴ Global climate models predict decreases between 10% to 50% by 2100.⁵⁵ Evaporation will likely increase⁵⁶ in conjunction with precipitation decreases, further stressing water resources. Rainfall has become increasingly erratic since 1950 and the onset of the rainy season has started later, a trend which is likely to continue. Decreases in precipitation will reduce water runoff, leading to an increased risk of water supply shortages. Such shortages will affect cities' water supply and agricultural production. Deforestation and land degradation have also reduced the resilience of ecosystems, increasing the probability of landslides and biodiversity loss.⁵⁷ These effects will combine to place incredible stress on critical water resources.



Maize in a traditional agriculture field in Guatemala's Western Highlands. USAID photo.

Climate change will also lead to increased warming in the region, a reality which has already been detected – about 0.7°C to 1°C per 40 years since the 1970s.⁵⁸ Central America will experience some of the strongest warming for hot extremes, resulting in increased dryness and reduction in soil moisture.⁵⁹ Temperatures are likely to increase by 1.6°C to 4°C by 2100.⁶⁰ In addition to placing stress on agriculture, increased heat is likely to have significant human health effects such as increased heat-related diseases and vector-borne diseases.

These two trends directly impact agricultural productivity and food security. Central America is currently food insecure, and decreases in rainfall and increases in temperature will likely decrease agricultural productivity in the short- and long- term, further threatening food security, especially for the rural poor.⁶¹ Warming has already reduced Central American wheat, maize, and barley production from 1981 to the present, although the impacts were offset by technological advancements during the same period.⁶² It is not safe to assume the same technological advancements will be made in the future. Food insecurity is a large driver of migration, and climate change will place enormous environmental stress on communities, particularly the rural poor, likely causing more people to migrate north in the future.

Maize, beans, and rice are the primary subsistence crops of the Northern Triangle – nearly 90% of production of those crops is destined for internal consumption.⁶³ All three primary subsistence crops are predicted to have drastic decreases in yield by 2100 (Table 1). Changes in rainfall variability are especially concerning, since untimely droughts or heavy rainfall can easily wipe out entire harvests.

Table 1: Changes in Crop Yield by Year

Crop	Time Period	% Change in Yield
Maize ⁶⁴	2030; 2050; 2070; 2100	0; 0; -10; -30
Beans ⁶¹	2030; 2050; 2070; 2100	-4; -19; -29; -87
Rice ⁶¹	2030; 2050; 2070; 2100	+3; -3; -14; -63
Wheat ⁶⁵	2020-2040	-1 to -9

Data from IPCC Assessment Report 5

Coffee is a significant export crop and source of employment. It is also highly susceptible to climate variations, particularly hot temperatures. Increased temperature will likely reduce coffee production and allow the spread of crop diseases such as coffee rust disease. Coffee rust disease is particularly concerning, and warming nighttime temperatures have enabled it to spread at higher altitudes than before. The 2012-2013 coffee rust disease in Central America affected nearly 600,000 hectares and reduced employment in the coffee sector by 30-40%.⁶⁶ This trend is likely to continue as Central America will warm under most climate scenarios.

Climate effects will also impact socioeconomic and security conditions. Water stress is likely to further entrench socioeconomic disparities, since wealthier elites will continue to have access to water resources while the poor will be unable to meet their basic needs. Vulnerable groups are especially exposed to climate effects, including indigenous peoples and women and children living in poverty.⁶⁷ Decreasing agricultural yields will reduce employment, causing the rural poor to seek other options like migrating to cities or directly to the United States to find work. Those migrating to cities will likely encounter deteriorating security conditions and lack of employment opportunities, leading them to migrate further or join the informal sector. Gangs and organized criminal groups may exploit the vulnerability of rural populations migrating into cities and recruit them into their organizations. In countries where one-third of the population are employed in agriculture, nearly 10.9 million people could lose their livelihoods due to climate change.

U.S. Policy

Over the past five years, the U.S. government has enacted a number of policy responses to address the surge in migration by families and unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border. The most recent policies have aimed to reduce the “pull factors” towards the United States, while earlier policies addressed the “push factors.” Since 2014, the U.S. and Northern Triangle governments have run public awareness campaigns to inform citizens about the dangers of irregular migration, but these campaigns have been unsuccessful⁶⁸ – knowing the dangers of migration and likelihood of deportation does not influence migrants facing existential threats in their home countries.

The U.S. government has traditionally provided foreign assistance to combat smuggling operations and development aid to build economic and government resiliency. Under former U.S. President Barack Obama, the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) provided more than \$1 billion in security assistance to help law enforcement, counternarcotics, and justice reform throughout the Northern Triangle.⁶⁹ Since U.S. FY2014, the Department of State has also allocated more than \$100 million to help Mexico control migration.⁷⁰ In response to the increase in unaccompanied minors in 2014, former President Obama developed a holistic interagency approach to Central America under the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, emphasizing prosperity and regional integration, strengthening governance, and improving security.⁷¹ This was designed to complement a similar approach by Northern Triangle governments and the Inter-American Development Bank.⁷²

The current Trump administration has largely left the strategy in place, albeit with some recent cuts. Since U.S. FY2016, Congress has appropriated nearly \$2.6 billion to promote economic prosperity, improve security, and strengthen governance in the Northern Triangle.⁷³ While there are numerous U.S.-sponsored assistance programs, some have been particularly successful when carefully and thoughtfully targeted. One example, a USAID-financed program called Climate, Nature, and Communities of Guatemala, was launched in 2014 and then cancelled by the Trump administration in 2017. During its implementation period, it showed promising results in helping rural Guatemalans respond to climate change through crop diversification, water conservation, and reforestation.⁷⁴

In 2014, the Obama administration expanded the detention of families awaiting asylum proceedings, building new facilities to house rising numbers of Central American migrants.⁷⁵ Near the end of his term, former President Obama ordered the deportation of recently arrived migrants whose asylum claims had been denied, hoping to deter potential migrants.⁷⁶

In response to the surge in migration, the Trump administration has enacted a policy of “zero-tolerance,” which charges all migrants with the federal crime of irregular entry. Additional actions include:

- Restricting the grounds for asylum claims⁷⁷
- Deploying U.S. troops to the U.S.-Mexico border⁷⁸
- Diverting billions of dollars appropriated for military preparedness towards a border wall⁷⁹
- Separating children from their families⁸⁰
- Revoking Temporary Protected Status for more than 250,000 Northern Triangle immigrants⁸¹
- Threatening tariffs against Mexico if it failed to curb migration⁸²
- Cutting millions of dollars of aid to Northern Triangle countries⁸³
- Standardizing metering at Ports of Entry⁸⁴
- Enacting Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or “remain in Mexico” policies, forcing migrants to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings⁸⁵
- Enacting “safe third country” agreements to force migrants to first apply for asylum in designated countries⁸⁶

- Attempting to modify U.S. asylum rules such that migrants could not apply in the U.S. if they had not first applied for asylum in a country through which they traveled and been rejected⁸⁷
- Attempting to block asylum for migrants crossing between ports of entry⁸⁸

Not only are many of these hardline measures unpalatable for U.S. residents,^{89,90,91} they have not had their intended effect: reducing the number of migrants attempting to enter the United States. Migration, especially by families and unaccompanied minors, continues to grow. Despite a slight decline in asylum claims between May and June 2019, the number of migrants entering the U.S. in FY2019 far exceeds the previous 16 years.⁹² The reason for the inefficacy of these policies is largely due to the type and motivations of migrants. Families and unaccompanied minors fleeing violence, poverty, and starvation are unlikely to be deterred by hardline measures, especially when conditions in their home countries are far worse.

Policy Recommendations

Migrants fleeing violence, poverty, deteriorating security conditions, and starvation in the Northern Triangle have not been deterred by the hardline policies enacted by the Trump administration.^{93,94} This trend is unlikely to change as climate change worsens the underlying conditions in the Northern Triangle. The U.S. asylum system and infrastructure need immediate and robust system-wide changes.

The hardline measures to date have been both ineffective and costly. A 2,000-mile border wall, a cornerstone in the Trump administration's immigration policy pledges, would cost an estimated \$21.6-\$31.2 billion to build, in addition to the cost of maintaining the wall over time.⁹⁵ The U.S-Mexico border is a diverse region of rivers, remote deserts, rugged terrain, marshlands, and hill country – much of which is private land and would require imminent domain.

Rather than reduce migration, “zero-tolerance” measures force migrants to seek smugglers to cross the border, wait in unsafe border towns, or both. The flow of migrants has not decreased in response to the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policies.

Revamp and Revitalize Official Border Crossings

There is a clear need to invest in official border crossings and personnel. Restricting official border crossings only encourages irregular migration and forces migrants to rely on smuggling operations, putting money in the hands of organized crime organizations.



A group of 11 migrants, guided by 2 smugglers cross the Rio Grande. US Customs and Border Patrol photo.

The waves of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum since 2014 have been presenting themselves at official border crossings or to border patrol agents.⁹⁶ The number of migrant apprehensions per Border Patrol Agent per year reached 23 in 2018, a 93% decrease from the 322 of 1992.⁹⁷



The pedestrian crossing at the Calexico Port of Entry in Southern California. US Customs and Border Protection photo.

There are currently 328 official ports of entry and 48 border crossings overseen by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO). The zero-tolerance policy early in the Trump administration sought to arrest and criminally prosecute every migrant that crossed the border “improperly,”⁹⁸ forcing asylum seekers to cross at official ports of entry. Yet migrant flows were deliberately restricted at ports of entry, preventing asylum-seekers from reaching U.S. soil. This practice is known as “metering” – CBP officers stationed at U.S. ports of entry accept limited numbers of asylum seekers a day.⁹⁹ By creating a structure where migrants are restricted at official ports of entry and spend months in perilous conditions awaiting processing, metering

practices push asylum-seekers towards smugglers and dangerous crossings.¹⁰⁰ In conjunction with the “remain in Mexico” policy, many migrants who have a right to request asylum in the United States are forced to spend significant amounts of time in unsafe and overcrowded Mexican border towns.^{101,102}

CBP OFO currently has a staffing shortage of nearly 4,000 Port of Entry Officers and \$5 billion of unmet infrastructure needs, creating long wait times at official ports of entry and vulnerability in border security systems.¹⁰³ About 81% of hard drugs intercepted along the U.S.-Mexico border between U.S. FY2012 and FY2016 were seized at official ports of entry¹⁰⁴ – investing in infrastructure and staffing at official ports of entry and border crossings would curtail drug trafficking and speed the flow of commerce, while managing intensified migrant flows.

Adapt the Asylum System

The U.S. asylum system is backlogged, convoluted, and lacking critical infrastructure. As of September 28, 2018, the Justice Department’s Executive Office for Immigration Review had 395 immigration judges and a backlog of nearly 2,000 cases per judge.¹⁰⁵ Even asylum cases that resulted in a removal order took more than 500 days to process due to the severe understaffing and backlog of cases. More judges are needed to reduce caseloads and wait times.

The U.S. should abandon “safe third country” requirements and the “remain in Mexico” policy (Migrant Protection Protocol) – both of which aim to prevent migrants from entering the U.S. at all. United States law states that anyone has the right to apply for asylum on U.S. soil even if they entered the country irregularly and not through an official port of entry – a policy which the Trump administration is attempting to undermine.

The U.S. should eliminate metering policies. Restricting the number of migrants able to request asylum at official Ports of Entry only encourages them to cross the border in dangerous, remote areas, often paying smugglers. This money strengthens the same organized criminal groups that traffic drugs into the U.S.¹⁰⁶ Restricting legal pathways to asylum also puts CBP at risk because they must find and escort migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border, including in dangerous regions.¹⁰⁷

Fund Humane Detention Infrastructure

The U.S. must adjust its asylum process for the types of migrants most frequently arriving today, including proper infrastructure for families and unaccompanied minors awaiting approval to seek asylum. The immigration infrastructure was built for single transient males and is not equipped to handle families and unaccompanied minors – as evident by a spate of deaths of children in custody.¹⁰⁸ Facilities lack basic necessities such as soap and are dangerously overcrowded. Facilities built decades ago are struggling to manage the medical and psychological needs of families and children fleeing violence and poverty.¹⁰⁹

The conditions in immigration facilities have sparked international outrage,¹¹⁰ and for good reason. Border detention facilities are overcrowded and unsanitary,¹¹¹ oftentimes keeping basic necessities from migrants. Migrants have said they were unable to shower or brush their teeth and were often packed into cells intended for far fewer people.¹¹² For children separated from their families, conditions are even worse. Several migrant children have died in U.S. custody,¹¹³ while others exhibit signs of malnutrition, dehydration, and psychological trauma.¹¹⁴ Investments in CBP should ensure that immigration infrastructure is appropriate, humane, and sanitary for the new types of migrants seeking refuge in the United States.

Increase Sustainable Development Aid

At a Senate hearing in March 2019,¹¹⁵ Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan stated that the U.S. government should use aid to support Central American governments' efforts to improve economic opportunities, address poverty and hunger, and improve governance. U.S. aid must also be climate-resilient and consider future climate adaptation needs in the Northern Triangle. Addressing the drivers of migration is truly the best sustainable long-term solution. Reducing development aid – a policy already enacted by the Trump administration¹¹⁶ – will exacerbate the underlying drivers of migration.



A participant in a Nespresso agro-forestry programme in Guatemala. Photo courtesy Nestlé / Flickr.

Migrants are fleeing physical, economic, and food insecurity in the Northern Triangle, and those issues are not homogenous across regions. Using aid to target microeconomic growth and small businesses, sustainable development in vulnerable rural areas, and urban security initiatives would be far more successful than large-scale uniform projects because they address the complex and varied underlying reasons why migrants flee. U.S. development aid must find ways to anchor potential migrants to their communities of origin in immediate and impactful ways.

Economic development programs should focus on building human capital and formalized assets in migrant-sending regions. Formalizing savings systems for remittances in the Northern Triangle could bring \$250 million into the financial system annually, creating jobs and economic stability.¹¹⁷ Additionally, development aid should work to reduce informality and implement jobs creation projects targeting small and medium enterprises.¹¹⁸ All initiatives should focus on incorporating youth and women into the workforces, especially with growing youth populations.

Development aid should also target climate-resilient agricultural production in order to reduce the push factors for impoverished rural residents. Such development projects must be rooted in the communities of origin and create sustainable livelihoods, rather than implementing catch-all solutions that are disconnected from their communities.¹¹⁹ One such example is a USAID Climate, Nature, and Communities of Guatemala project, which advanced sustainable forestry management, agroecology, and ecotourism to build climate-resilient livelihoods.¹²⁰

Conclusion

The face of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border is constantly changing: once a single Mexican male seeking temporary employment, now families and unaccompanied minors fleeing violence, poverty, and starvation in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. While the decision to migrate is complex, the lack of economic opportunity, persistent security concerns, and food insecurity are the largest drivers of Northern Triangle migration. Each of these push factors, particularly food insecurity, are likely to worsen in the face of climate change. Increased temperatures and decreased precipitation will further decimate rural livelihoods, leading people to migrate directly to the United States or seek work in insecure and impoverished cities. The situation at the U.S.-Mexico border will only worsen, unless the United States takes concrete action to address the push factors in Central America and the failures of the U.S. asylum system.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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