How to Address Child Migration from Central America

by Eric Olson

SUMMARY

The arrival at the U.S. border in 2013–14 of tens of thousands of unaccompanied migrant children from Central America is unprecedented. Factors driving them include both longstanding challenges—chronic violence, economic despair, official corruption, and the pull of family reunification—and the myth recently disseminated by greedy traffickers of lenient U.S. immigration policy. The United States, while taking steps to deter further migration, should also focus intensively on the long term factors.

More than 57,525 unaccompanied children have been detained by the U.S. Border Patrol since October 2013, and tens of thousands more are expected by the end of 2014. A large majority are from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Although myriad factors have contributed to this influx, the principal drivers are chronic extreme violence, significant poverty, and limited opportunities for vulnerable age groups in Central America, as well as reunification with family already in the United States.

References and links to documentation are available in this Brief's online version, available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/how-to-address-child-migration-central-america. Thanks to Veronica Colon Rosales and Carla Mavaddat for research assistance for this Wilson Brief.
In the past two years, these longstanding factors have been augmented by the notion, promoted by smugglers and traffickers exploiting families’ fears about children’s safety, that U.S. immigration policy had changed and that children would be granted “permission” to enter the United States. Family members in Central America came to believe that despite many dangers, the long odds against their children’s ability to flee north easily were preferable to the impossible odds of their remaining in communities surrounded by violence and exploitation by gangs and criminal networks.

**Factors that push**

According to World Bank estimates, 66 percent of Hondurans live on less than a $1.25 a day, as do 53 percent of Guatemalans and 35 percent of Salvadorans.\(^4\) Worse, nearly two million Central Americans between the ages of 15 and 25 do not work or go to school, with the highest proportions in the region being in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Chronic undernourishment, also contribute.

Furthermore, these three countries form the most murderous region in the world: Honduras ranks first among these countries, with 90.4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador is fourth with 41.2, and Guatemala is fifth with 39.9\(^5\) (by comparison, Colombia’s rate is 30.8 per 100,000, Mexico’s is 21.5, and the United States’ is 4.7). Homicides are concentrated among young men,\(^6\) with a homicide rate among Honduran males ages 20 to 24 of 318.3 per 100,000 in 2013.\(^7\) Further violence in the region includes extortion, kidnapping, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Weak police and justice ministries and pervasive corruption contribute, and mistrust in police forces\(^8\) leads to many crimes, and corrupt acts, going unreported, reinforcing a culture of impunity.

**Traffickers cash in**

Many parents are desperate to keep their children from becoming victims of gang violence or being forced into gang activity. Coyotes—smugglers and traffickers—have sensed an opportunity to expand business beyond Mexico, where migration has been declining in recent years. They promoted the notion that U.S. immigration enforcement was changing and that children were being given special treatment to reunite with family. About 75 to 80 percent of so-called unaccompanied minors actually travel with coyotes,\(^9\) and some pay criminal organizations such as the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) or groups associated with Los Zetas to lead them through Mexico, at a cost of $3,000 to $10,000 per person, depending on the migrant’s age, gender, and origin.\(^10\)

Passage through Mexico is a very risky leg of a treacherous journey. Migrants have been sold into forced labor, prostitution, or drug trafficking, or have suffered extortion aimed...
at family in the United States. Some migrants have been killed by traffickers who found them uncooperative or who became alarmed by law enforcement.\textsuperscript{11} In one 2010 incident, 72 migrants, mostly from Central America, were killed outside San Fernando, Mexico.\textsuperscript{12} According to the United Nations, human smuggling in the Americas is an estimated $6 billion per year business.\textsuperscript{13} For its part, Mexico has strengthened immigration enforcement in the south and increased deportations of Central Americans. Mexico detained 86,298 foreign individuals in 2013 and deported 93 percent (80,079) of them, according to official statistics.\textsuperscript{14} Of those deported, nearly 96 percent (77,232) were from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

### The Surge from Central America

Unaccompanied children\textsuperscript{*} caught crossing the US-Mexico border, '000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Honduras</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>From El Salvador</td>
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Source: US Customs and Border Protection

### Options for the United States

It is essential to dissuade children from taking the perilous journey through Central America and Mexico to reach the United States. A recent decline in border detentions suggests that seasonal factors and U.S. efforts to provide accurate information in Central America about U.S. immigration laws are having some effect for now.

But beyond the particular dynamics at the border, the United States has an opportunity to work together with Central American nations and Mexico to ensure policy coordination and maximize resources to address the underlying drivers of the migration, and weaken trafficking and smuggling networks. At a Wilson Center forum in July 2014, the foreign ministers of
Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador pledged to work collaboratively with the United States to address these problems.

The United States should consider the following:

- Collaborating with Mexico and Central America to find regional solutions to the violence and economic despair driving the migration.
- Increasing assistance to Central America for programs reducing community-level violence, such as targeted law enforcement, expanded prevention for at-risk youth, and gang intervention.
- Rebuilding law enforcement institutions in Central America to combat corruption, increase transparency, and ensure accountability for corrupt and abusive officials to restore public trust and end impunity.
- Initiating and expanding workforce development and technical training programs for young people in at-risk communities, in cooperation with governments and the private sector.

Eric Olson

Eric L. Olson is associate director of the Latin American Program
Eric.Olson@wilsoncenter.org

Eric focuses on security challenges including organized crime, drug trafficking, and youth gangs, and state responses. He was associate director of the Wilson Center’s Mexico Institute and has worked for the Organization of American States, Amnesty International USA, and the Washington Office on Latin America.