



Crime, Violence Driving Migration from Central America: Reports (/news-analysis/crime-and-violence-drive-migration-from-central-america-reports)

Written by Mike LaSusa Wednesday, 02 March 2016

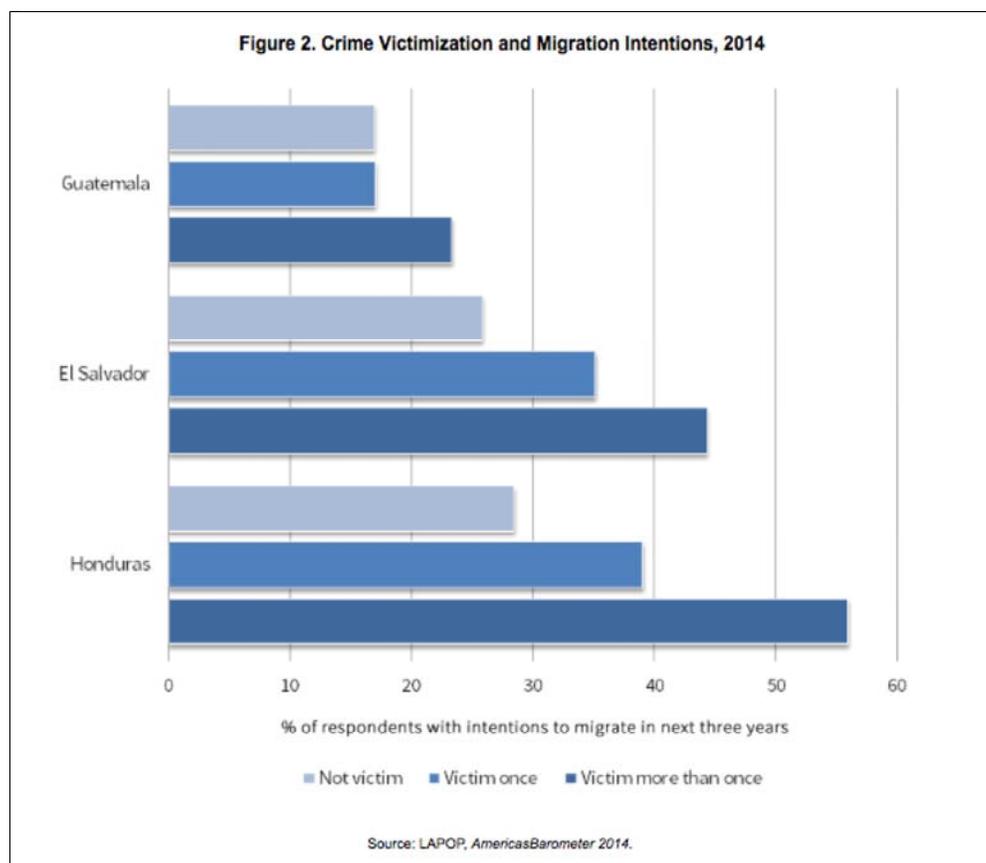


Central American migrants riding the "Train of Death"

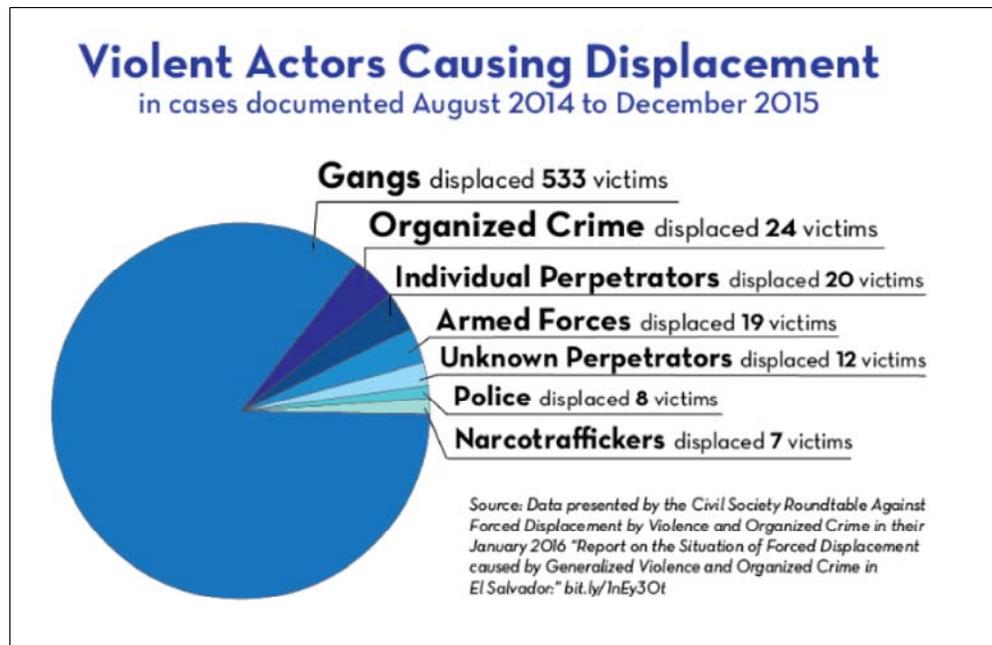
Several new reports highlight crime and violence as key factors driving large numbers of Central American citizens to migrate to the United States, suggesting current US efforts aimed at deterring migration may be misplaced.

A recent report (<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/understanding-central-american-refugee-crisis-why-they-are-fleeing>) by the American Immigration Council described crime

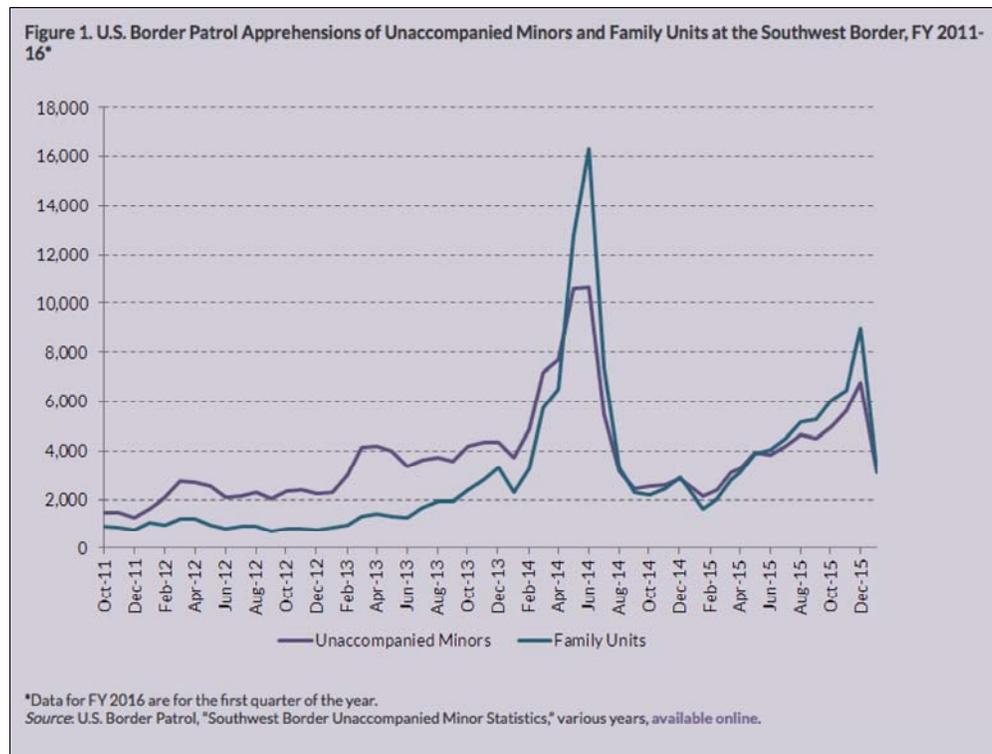
victimization as a "critical predictor" of citizens' intentions to migrate. The data analyzed by the organization showed that for citizens in Central America's "Northern Triangle" countries of El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news>), Guatemala (<http://www.insightcrime.org/guatemala-organized-crime-news>) and Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/honduras-organized-crime-news>), repeated victimization was associated with a substantially increased intention to migrate. (See the American Immigration Council's graphic below.)



Recent research conducted in El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news>) by the Center for International Policy (CIP) and the Latin America Working Group (LAWG) found (<http://lawg.org/action-center/lawg-blog/69-general/1588-no-life-here-internal-displacement-in-el-salvador>) that "criminal organizations are by far the main violent actors causing internal displacement" in the country, which often serves as a precursor to emigration abroad. According to the organization, "security concerns are a common thread among most if not all migrants" from El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news>). (See the CIP/LAWG graphic below.)



Yet another report (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/increased-central-american-migration-united-states-may-prove-enduring-phenomenon>) from the Migration Policy Institute also pointed to continuing crime and violence in the Northern Triangle as a major "push factor" contributing to citizens' decisions to emigrate. Given the persistence of criminal violence in the region, along with other factors like poverty and limited economic opportunities, the organization assessed that the high rates of migration by Central American children and families to the United States "have increasingly shown the characteristics of an enduring phenomenon." (See the Migration Policy Institute graphic below.)



Previous research has similarly indicated that criminal victimization plays a key role in driving migration from Central America. For instance, a 2014 study ([/news-analysis/unaccompanied-child-migrants-and-the-central-america-exodus](#)) of survey data conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) found that Central Americans who were victims of crime or corruption expressed an increased desire to emigrate compared to non-victims.

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Crime and violence are rarely the only factors in Central American citizens' decisions to leave their home countries. To be sure, the Northern Triangle nations are among the most dangerous in the world, with extremely high murder rates ([/news-analysis/insight-crime-homicide-round-up-2015-latin-america-caribbean](#)) and rampant extortion ([/news-briefs/northern-triangle-world-extortion-hotspot](#)) fueled by the presence of powerful criminal groups. But at the same time, many citizens are also motivated to migrate by relatively high levels of poverty and inequality (<http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/region/LAC>), as well as informal employment (<https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2015/04/01/promoting-workers-rights-informal-economy-central-america>) and joblessness

(<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS/countries?display=default>). In addition, a large number of Central Americans have relatives already living in the United States with whom they want to reunite.

Nevertheless, the consistent finding that crime and violence contribute significantly to migration from Central America has important implications for US policies in the region.

In recent years, the United States has placed a heavy emphasis on what Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson described (<https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/07/10/statement-secretary-homeland-security-jeh-johnson-senate-committee-appropriations>) as "an aggressive deterrence strategy focused on the removal and repatriation of recent border crossers." The "deterrence" strategy also includes a public affairs component (<http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/2015-08-07-000000/cbp-launches-“know-facts”-awareness-campaign>) aimed at raising awareness about the dangers of migrating from Central America, as well as the low likelihood of migrants receiving permission to stay permanently in the United States.

However, the American Immigration Council found that Central Americans are well aware of the dangers associated with migration, and they tend to have a generally realistic view about their chances of being deported even if they do reach the United States. Yet they often choose to migrate anyway, which suggests that they feel the risk of staying in their home country outweighs the risks of attempting the journey.

"Violence and crime as a push factor is going to outweigh anything the US can do in terms of deterrence," says Jon Hiskey, the lead author of the American Immigration Council report. "This notion that deterrence is the answer is just missing the point."

"A deterrence strategy that's based on sending a message back to prospective immigrants that it's too dangerous, or that the chances of success are too remote and so [they] shouldn't come is not going to work on a certain groups of individuals within these countries -- that is, those that are confronting crime and violence on a daily basis," Hiskey told InSight Crime.

SEE ALSO: Coverage of Displacement (</component/tags/tag/146-displacement>)

Faye Hipsman, who co-authored the Migration Policy Institute report, told InSight Crime that a strategy of deterrence may work to discourage some migrants from attempting to reach the United States, especially those migrating primarily for economic reasons or to reunite with family members.

"But for folks that are experiencing persecution and violence," Hipsman said, "any amount of border enforcement, or US immigration enforcement or deterrence probably won't stop them."

In fact, increasing deportations (</news-briefs/mexico-southern-border-plan-fuels-violence>) of undocumented migrants could actually prove counterproductive. An influx of young people with few viable options for legitimate employment could fuel the growth of criminal groups responsible for so much of the crime and violence in Central America.

"When people get deported, and they left because they had no opportunity, they come back and are probably feeling very hopeless. And they think the only way they can get by is to join a gang," Hipsman told InSight Crime.

Hipsman says this is why it is important for countries to develop effective reintegration programs for deportees.

"Programs that offer services to deportees, especially youth, that give them job training, or link them with someone who can hire them, or make their transition into their own society smoother and easier would be a promising step," Hipsman said.

While some Northern Triangle governments have attempted to implement reintegration programs for returned migrants, they often lack the funds (<http://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/no-hay-fondos-para-recibir-a-deportados>) to do so effectively. And with deportations from the US on the rise, this problem could intensify.

A recent report (pdf (http://hsgac.senate.gov/download/stronger-neighbors_-stronger-borders-addressing-the-root-causes-of-the-migration-surge-from-central-america)) from US Senator Tom Carper made clear that the root causes of migration from Central America are complex, and addressing them will require a coordinated effort between the United States and its neighbors.

But in light of mounting evidence that "deterrence" policies are ineffective, and perhaps even counterproductive, the United States should reevaluate whether its resources might be better spent elsewhere.