

News Analysis

Unaccompanied Child Migrants and the Central America Exodus

Details

Written by Charles Parkinson

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The United States is seeing a flood of migrants -- many of them unaccompanied children -- from Central America, despite economic conditions leading to lower migration in the region as a whole. Could insecurity and organized crime be behind this Northern Triangle exodus?

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Central American migrants entering the United States **increased by 50 percent**, growing from just over two million to more than three million. This growth came against the backdrop of a drastic fall in the total number of unauthorized immigrants entering the United States between 2005 and 2010, according to the Department of Homeland Security ([pdf](#)), with **the post-2008 global economic recession touted as a key driver** of this downward trend.

While the increase in Central American migrants ran counter to economically motivated migration patterns in the wider region, it broadly coincided with deteriorating security and the growing

presence of organized crime in Central America. This was particularly true in the three countries where the majority of migrants came from -- the so-called "Northern Triangle" of [El Salvador](#), [Honduras](#) and [Guatemala](#).

A recent study, "Violence and Migration in Central America" ([pdf](#)) by the [Latin American Public Opinion Project](#) (LAPOP) attempted to establish whether the migration was connected to security issues, using surveys taken throughout the isthmus to analyze the population's perceptions and experience of migration, insecurity and corruption.

The findings are somewhat inconclusive, and the report highlights how the existence of pre-established migration networks makes it extremely difficult to determine whether crime has acted as a sole push factor. However, some significant patterns did emerge.

The investigation found that, while violence has increased to some degree in most of the countries over the past decade -- including an explosion of violence in [Honduras](#) (click on LAPOP homicides graph to expand) -- it is only in [El Salvador](#) that people reported feeling more fearful of crime. However, the study also used a "binary logistic regression model" (click on LAPOP chart to expand) to establish that being a victim of crime or corruption is far more likely to inspire migration than simply feeling it is a major problem.

Tens of thousands of the Central Americans that decide to migrate are unaccompanied minors, and those that work with them say there is anecdotal evidence that in their cases insecurity is the main motivation.

It is predicted that up to 60,000 unaccompanied child migrants will enter the United States in 2014, according to US Department of

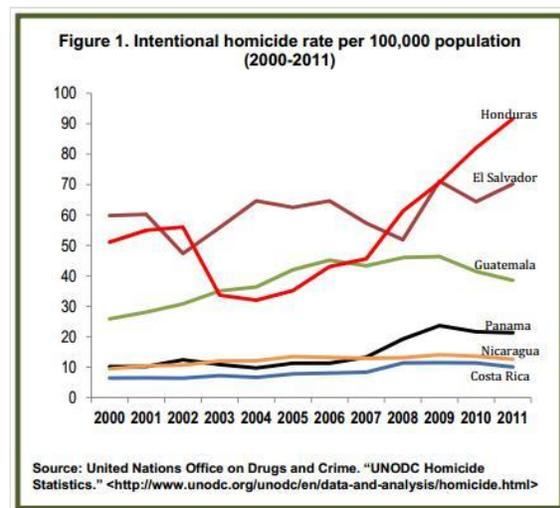
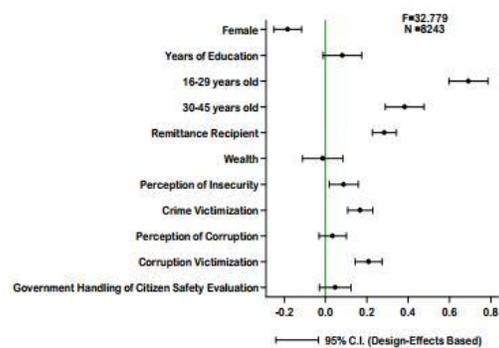


Figure 4. Factors explaining migration intentions in Central America, 2012



Homeland Security sources quoted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in a report ([pdf](#)) released in late 2013. The figure represents more than double the 24,000 registered in 2013 and follows a pattern of rapid growth, with 13,000 arriving in 2012 after an average of 6,800 registered each year between 2004 and 2011.

Most of the children cross the country's southern border, with the overwhelming majority from [Mexico](#), [El Salvador](#), [Guatemala](#) or [Honduras](#). The increase in unaccompanied child migrants from the three Northern Triangle countries has been so steep that [in 2012 they had come close to the number originating from Mexico](#), even though the Northern Triangle's combined population is around a quarter of [Mexico's](#)

120 million residents.

For David Walding, Executive Director of the Bernardo Kohler Center -- an NGO in Texas that works with undocumented migrants -- while the predicted numbers for 2014 appear exaggerated, the pressing nature of the problem and its causes are not.

"Most of them are fleeing some type of gang violence, that's the predominant issue," Walding told InSight Crime.

"That's certainly what we see with the 15 or 16 year old kids, pressure from the gangs, either pressure to join a gang or some sort of [extortion](#)," he said.

This, according to Walding, is a development of recent years.

"In the past we saw more of the poverty driven migration, so kids would come here [to the United States], mostly boys, looking to earn money," he said.

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Another commonly touted reason for child migrants leaving Central America is because they have family in the United States, but according to Virginia Raymond, an immigration lawyer based in Austin, Texas, this too is now rarely the case.

"Their primary reason was not to reunite with family, it's to escape violence" Raymond told InSight Crime.

According to Raymond, while domestic abuse can drive children into the hands of gangs and organized crime, it is not always a factor.

"One girl's [home life] was fine, but she was kidnapped by narcotics traffickers," Raymond said. "When she was pregnant, he [one of the men who kidnapped and raped her] came after her and wanted to reclaim his child." The girl subsequently escaped from [Honduras](#) to the United States.

For such children, kidnap, [extortion](#), rape or murder are accepted risks of the journey in part because they have grown up surrounded by such things. While the United States is expecting large numbers to reach its borders, many children only get as far as [Mexico](#), before being deported or forced into labor or sex trafficking.

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While, as the LAPOP report shows, it is difficult to accurately assess what personal motivations lie behind mass migration patterns, it is clear that there is a degree of correlation between the rise in Central American migrants headed to the United States and the security situation in their home countries.

As noted in the USCCB report, the steep increase in unaccompanied children since 2011 coincides with the aggressive entrance of the [Zetas](#) into [Guatemala](#). It also followed the 2009 coup in [Honduras](#), which saw the country become the most violent peacetime nation in the world as organized crime took advantage of the political turmoil.

SEE ALSO: [The Zetas in Guatemala](#)

However, as demonstrated by the testimonies of child migrants, it is often street gangs rather than drug cartels that have the most direct impact on the lives of the wider population. The gangs known as "maras" have a strong presence in all three Northern Triangle countries, especially in [El Salvador](#), where in recent years gangs have been responsible for [almost half of all murders in the country](#).

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In gang-controlled areas, the maras threaten, beat and even kill not only rivals but also anyone perceived to be challenging their authority. [Extortion](#) and child recruitment is rampant. All can drive people from their homes.

In contrast, [the Zetas influence in Central America is now waning](#), while their rivals the [Sinaloa Cartel](#) prefer a lower profile and less violence in their Central American operations. In [El Salvador](#), local organized crime and drug traffickers prefer a legitimate facade to brutal violence.

Regardless, both gangs and organized crime have undoubtedly contributed to an atmosphere of deteriorating security, and their victims are certainly among the thousands of migrants seeking a new life in the United States, even if it is impossible to assess exactly what proportion is fleeing insecurity. Until the Northern Triangle countries can begin to tackle this criminal threat -- something they are currently a long way from doing -- the exodus will likely continue.



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