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Violence and Migration in Central America

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Executive Summary. Over the past decade, much of Central America has been devastated by alarming increases in crime and violence. For most of this timeframe, migration from many of these same countries to the United States increased as well, at least until the 2008 financial crisis deflated migration numbers. In the following *Insights* report, we examine the possible relationship between high levels of violence and Central Americans' migration intentions. Though conventional views of the motivations behind migration tend to highlight economic and familial factors as the principal causes of migration, we find that crime victimization and perceptions of insecurity among Central Americans also play a significant role in determining the extent to which an individual considers migration as a viable strategy. Nonetheless, in the face of consistently high levels of crime and violence, perceptions of insecurity among Central Americans over the past ten years have been declining, suggesting perhaps a populace that has become accustomed to a high crime context and thus one less inclined to let crime influence future migration patterns.

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Homicide rates, and crime more generally, have been on a tragically steady rise across much of Central America over the past several years. With the increasing presence of drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and the proliferation of street gangs, citizen security in countries like Honduras and El Salvador has evaporated.

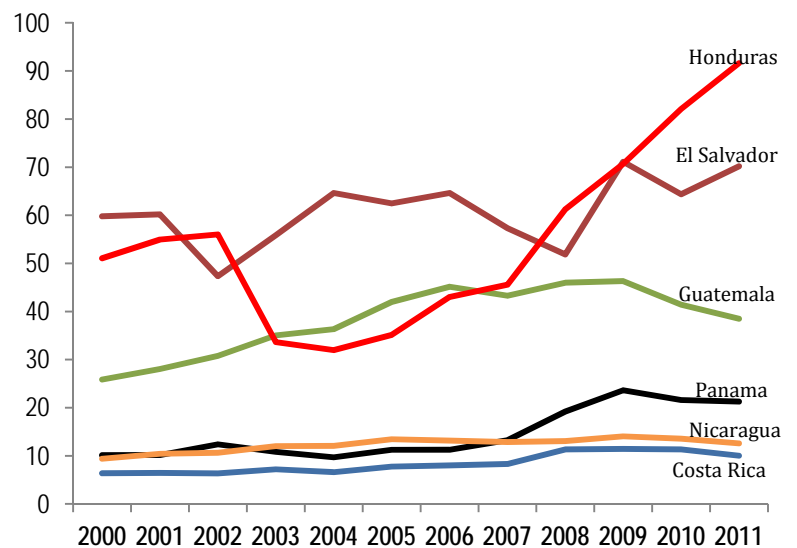
In this *Insights* report we examine one potential consequence of these increased levels of crime and violence – migration.¹ Through analysis of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey data², we examine whether fear of crime and crime victimization seems to be driving some Central Americans to seek a better life in another country. Given the role of criminal organizations in fueling much of the violence, and the pervasive corruption that tends to accompany these criminal organizations, we also examine the linkages between perceptions of corruption, as well as personal experiences with corrupt officials, and intentions to migrate.

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

² Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.

Figure 1. Intentional homicide rate per 100,000 population (2000-2011)



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "UNODC Homicide Statistics." <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html>>

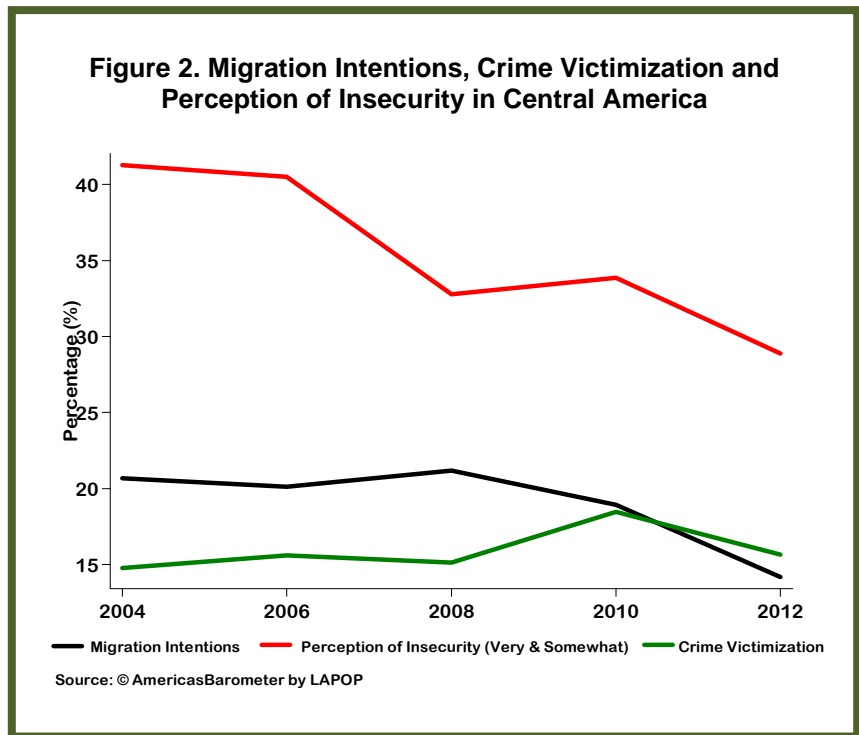
Crime, Violence and Migration in Central America

As evident in Figure 1, violent crime in Central America, and Honduras and El Salvador in particular, has reached unprecedented levels. At the same time, the past ten years has also witnessed an equally significant rise in migration rates for many of these same countries. In fact, the number of Central American migrants to the U.S. between 2000 and 2010 increased over 50 percent, faster than any other migrant-sending region in Latin America (Stoney and Batalova 2013). This overall increase occurred despite a drop in migration rates following the 2008 global financial crisis, which greatly diminished the level of demand for migrant labor in the U.S. market.

Many observers have posited a connection between Central America's rising crime rates and the significant outflow of migrants from the region. A recent report in *The Guardian* claims that "[e]xtreme violence in Central America is sending a surge of refugees fleeing north to Mexico" and likens this "exodus" to that of citizens fleeing a civil war (Tuckman 2013). More rigorous work on this question also finds a significant effect for violence and political instability on migration in cases such as Nicaragua during the Contra war (Lundquist and Massey 2005) and Guatemala during the height of its civil war (Morrison and May 1994). Indeed, currently the leading migrant-sending countries in the region, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, are also those confronting the highest levels of crime and violence. All of these countries, however, also have pre-established migration networks, making unclear the precise connection between crime, violence, and the migration decision.

Through analysis of AmericasBarometer survey data from 2004 through 2012, we attempt to clarify the relationship between crime and migration after taking into account the more conventional predictors of migration such as age, gender, income, and one's level of connectedness to a migration network.³

³ In addition to the extensive work on the causes of migration by such scholars as Massey, et al. (2005), Arnold,



Of particular interest for understanding the impact of crime on Central American migration rates is the degree to which being a victim of crime versus simply feeling unsafe in one's neighborhood leads to migration. For while the number of those directly affected by crime in Central America is staggering, there are even greater numbers of Central Americans who feel unsafe in their neighborhoods even though they may not have been personally victimized by crime. Therefore, identifying the relative impact each factor has on migration becomes essential for a complete assessment of crime's impact on regional migration patterns.

et al. (2011) explore this question in a previous issue of *Insights*.

In order to explore these linkages, we analyze responses to the following AmericasBarometer item that has been asked in each survey since 2004:

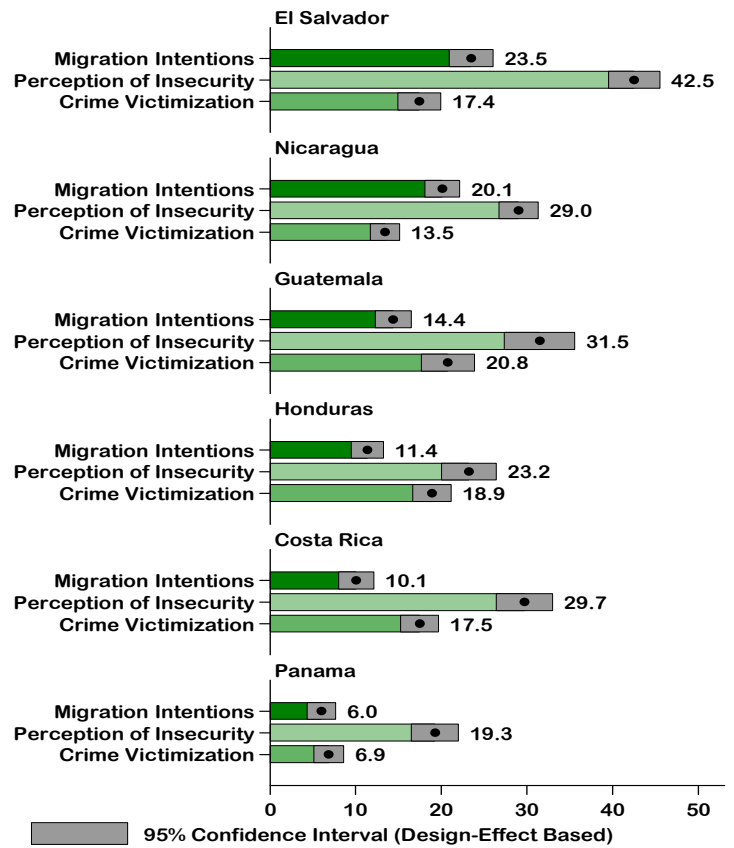
Q14: Do you have any intention of going to live or work in another country in the next three years?

As Figure 2 illustrates, the percentage of Central Americans who reported such intentions was quite steady from 2004 through 2008, hovering around 22%. Migration intentions have declined steadily since 2008, however, falling to just under 15 percent in 2012. Such a drop is consistent with reports of widespread declines in migration rates across Mexico and Central America following the onset of the 2008-09 global financial crisis that greatly diminished the level of demand for migrant labor in the U.S. market.

Interestingly enough, Figure 2 also reveals an even sharper decline in feelings of insecurity among Central Americans in recent years, with a drop of close to 15 percentage points between 2004 and 2012 despite the rising levels of actual crime and violence during this time. Crime victimization, meanwhile, though dipping slightly between 2010 and 2012, remained several points higher than it was in 2004, mapping more closely to the homicide data revealed in Figure 1.

Delving deeper into these cross-time patterns we find that El Salvador is the

Figure 3. Migration Intentions, Perception of Insecurity and Crime Victimization in Central America, 2012



only country where fear of crime remained steady from 2004-2012, with roughly 42% of respondents stating that they felt insecure in their neighborhoods. In all the other countries, fear of crime declined over this time period, even in Honduras, the country that witnessed the sharpest increase in homicides.⁴ These contrasting trends of actual and perceived levels of insecurity suggest that Central Americans may have become increasingly desensitized to

⁴ In 2004, 36.6% of Honduran respondents reported feeling insecure in their neighborhoods, yet in 2012 this percentage had dropped to 23%.

high levels of crime, or made behavioral adjustments in their daily lives to avoid victimization, and thus are now less likely to feel unsafe in their neighborhoods.

The question these contrasting trends of violence and perceived insecurity raises for this report is the extent to which either, or both, help explain current and future migration patterns across Central America. As we see in Figure 3, in some countries there does appear to be a connection between levels of perceived insecurity and migration intentions. Respondents in El Salvador, for example, were most likely to report feeling unsafe in their neighborhood in 2012 and also the most likely to report having intentions to migrate. El Salvador, though, is a country with an extensive migration history so it is unclear whether this high level of insecurity is in fact causally related to the equally high level of migration intentions.

Conversely, notwithstanding the country's unprecedented levels of violence, individuals in Honduras were among the least likely of Central American respondents to report feeling unsafe in their neighborhood and also ranked very low in reported migration intentions.⁵ At this aggregate level, though, personal victimization is also strongly correlated with intentions to migrate, suggesting again that both of

these crime-related factors may be at work in pushing at least some percentage of Central Americans to consider leaving their native country. To further explore these patterns, though, we must turn to a multivariate analysis of the individual-level determinants of migration intentions among Central Americans.

Modeling Crime's Impact on Migration

In order to effectively identify the unique effects of crime victimization and perceptions of insecurity on Central Americans' migration intentions, we first must incorporate a series of control variables that should theoretically also be associated with one's migration intentions. An abundance of research on the determinants of actual migration has identified two groups of factors that most help distinguish those who migrate from those who do not (e.g., Massey, et al. 2005).

The first, and perhaps most intuitive, are socioeconomic and demographic identifiers of migrants. These include such factors as age, gender, income, and education levels, along with an individual's views of her personal and the national economic situation. We therefore include variables in the following model designed to capture these factors.⁶

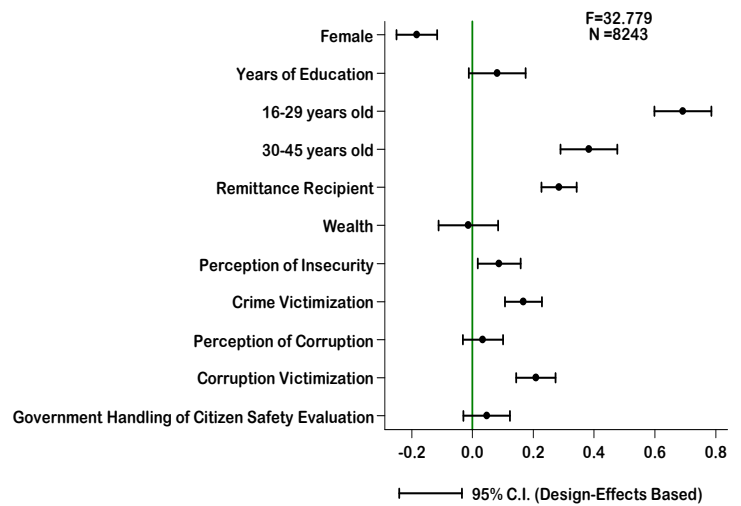
⁵ The Pearson's correlation between fear of crime and intentions to migrate is .103 (p<.001).

⁶ The model also includes country dummy variables. See appendix for the full results from the model.

A second group of predictors of migration concerns an individual's ties with an active migration network. Typically referred to as the "friends and family effect" (Massey, et al. 2005), those individuals who have migrant friends or relatives already living abroad, and particularly those who receive remittances from those friends or relatives, will be far more likely to migrate themselves because such ties reduce the costs of migration. This reduction in cost not only includes the financial help remittances may provide a potential migrant, but also the informational advantages she may get from knowing individuals that have already established themselves in the destination country. In order to model this "friends and family effect" then, we include an item that indicates whether or not a respondent receives remittances as a proxy for a high level of involvement in a migration network. Our expectations for these controls are in line with research that identifies those most likely to migrate as young males with relatively high levels of education and income, as well as those who have existing connections to a migration network.

Of central concern for this report, however, is the impact that high levels of crime have on an individual's migration decision. Here we include a series of variables designed to capture a range of possible effects crime may have on migration. First, we use an item that asked respondents whether they had been victimized by any type

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



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2012

of crime in the previous twelve months. The expectation here is clear – all else equal, a respondent who has been victimized will be more likely to consider leaving her country. Similarly, an individual who feels very unsafe when going about her daily life should also be more likely to consider migrating. In order to test this proposition, we include an item that asked respondents to assess how safe they feel in their neighborhood on a 1-4 scale. Finally, we included an item that asked respondents to evaluate their government's anti-crime efforts, expecting that those who do not have much confidence in their government's ability to address the country's crime problem will be more likely to consider migration as well.

Another facet of Central America's crime wave in recent years has been the

consequent increase in corruption, particularly in those countries where drug trafficking organizations have established a presence. Thus citizens may consider high levels of corruption to be at least in part a by-product of the high levels of crime, suggesting that we examine the impact of corruption on the migration decision as well.

To do this, we include an item similar to the “crime victimization” measure that asks respondents whether they had been asked for a bribe in the previous twelve months by a public official. Such concrete evidence of corruption should lead individuals to give greater consideration to migration as a viable life plan in the future. We also include respondents’ perceptions of corruption in government, again expecting higher levels of perceived corruption to make someone more likely to consider leaving the country altogether.

The results of our binary logistic regression model of migration intentions appear in Figure 4. Immediately evident is the significant impact that being a victim of crime and corruption has on the probability an individual will plan to migrate in the near future. The effects for both of these victimization items on migration

intentions significantly outweigh the impact the “perceptions” items have. Though higher feelings of insecurity do have a marginally significant effect on the migration decision, this impact is decidedly less than either of the “victimization” items. What these findings suggest, then, is that victims of the current crime wave, as well as those victimized by the pervasive corruption that has accompanied the crime wave, are increasingly likely to consider migration as a viable means of escape from their current situation.

Both crime and corruption victimization are significant predictors of migration intentions suggesting the crime wave in Central America will continue to contribute to

In comparing these individual-level results to the aggregate patterns displayed in Figure 3, we see that countries like El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala seem to support the central finding that crime and insecurity lead individuals to consider emigration. Conversely, when we look at countries like Honduras, with high levels of crime victimization but relatively low levels migration intentions; or Costa Rica where close to a third of respondents reported feelings of insecurity but only 10 percent had plans to migrate, other factors seem to be at play that are diluting the crime-migration relationship.

The individual-level results also find support in the behavior of the control variables included in the model. The powerful effect that receiving

remittances has on the probability of planning to migrate, along with the age and gender profile of the likely migrant, all suggest that our dependent variable, migration intentions, serves as an adequate proxy for migration itself, despite not measuring actual behavior.

Conclusion

In this brief report we have explored the possibility that Central America's recent crime wave has contributed to a growing number of emigrants from the region. More specifically, we investigate whether being victimized by crime or corruption, having strong feelings of insecurity, or both increase the probability an individual will seek to leave her country of origin.

We find that both actual victimization as well as fear of crime are significantly linked to intentions to migrate, although firsthand experience with crime is far more important. Likewise, personal experience with corruption significantly increases the probability that an individual will contemplate leaving his country, but overall perceptions of corruption levels in the country yielded no impact. These findings indicate that in addition to its other tragic consequences, the crime wave currently affecting much of Central America seems also to be contributing to a larger pool of people looking to exit the country.

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Appendix

Table 1. Migration Intentions

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>(t)</i>
Evaluations of Government Handling of Citizen Security	0.047	(1.21)
Corruption Victimization	0.209*	(6.36)
Perception of Corruption	0.034	(1.01)
Crime Victimization	0.167*	(5.36)
Perception of Insecurity	0.088*	(2.43)
Wealth	-0.014	(-0.29)
Remittance Recipient	0.285*	(9.73)
30-45 years old	0.383*	(8.04)
16-29 years old	0.692*	(14.54)
Years of Education	0.082	(1.72)
Female	-0.183*	(-5.40)
Perceptions of national economic situation	-0.144*	(-3.45)
Perceptions of personal economic situation	-0.109*	(-2.73)
Big city	-0.053	(-1.12)
Medium city	-0.049	(-0.95)
Small city	-0.049	(-1.15)
Rural Area	-0.113*	(-1.99)
Guatemala	0.070	(1.30)
El Salvador	0.240*	(4.00)
Honduras	-0.041	(-0.68)
Nicaragua	0.250*	(4.22)
Panama	-0.193*	(-2.69)
Constant	-2.092*	(-44.39)
F	32.78	
<i>Number of Obs.</i>	8243	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at * $p < 0.05$ two-tailed.

Country of Reference: Costa Rica