

How Fear of Crime in Central America Impacts Daily Life, Contributes to Migration

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A new [report](#) by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and the Inter-American Dialogue titled "Beneath the Violence" at [an October 3 event](#) in Washington, DC, shows the extent to which insecurity negatively affects the daily lives of Central American citizens, and provides further evidence that crime and corruption are important factors driving emigration from the region.

The findings suggest current policies aimed at addressing these issues may lack an adequate emphasis on preventive, rather than reactive measures for deterring crime and migration.



Tegucigalpa. The neighborhood (Villa Cristiana) is controlled by the Mara 13.

Based on surveys carried out in Central America, the authors created a "crime avoidance behavior index" that ranked countries according to the degree to which respondents said fears of crime had affected their daily lives.

The index showed that citizens in Honduras felt most impacted by insecurity throughout the region, followed by closely Guatemala and El Salvador, the other two countries that make up Central America's "Northern

Triangle.” Notably, a majority of those surveyed in the Northern Triangle subregion admitted to having “some or a lot of fear of being murdered.”

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the study found that at the individual level, “crime avoidance is higher among those who are genuinely at risk for crime.” People who had already been victims of a crime were much more likely to report fearing another such incident. Other factors, such as the presence of gangs in one’s neighborhood and first-hand experiences with police corruption or incompetence, were also associated with greater crime avoidance behavior.

Although there were surprisingly small variations in the average responses across different socioeconomic classes, the report notes that lower-income individuals carry a higher burden when it comes to insecurity. For example, nearly half of the poorest respondents surveyed said they avoid taking public transportation for fear of becoming the victim of a crime, potentially impacting their ability to seek out educational or work opportunities.



In addition, the study found a strong correlation between greater crime avoidance and increased emigration. Roughly one-third of adults in the Northern Triangle had considered leaving their country due to insecurity during the year prior to the survey. The only factors found to have a greater impact on the decision to emigrate were unemployment and having relatives abroad.

As InSight Crime previously pointed out, it is common that a number of these so-called “push” factors will combine to spur a person’s decision to migrate. Echoing what several experts told InSight Crime, the LAPOP and Inter-American Dialogue report argues that “this suggests that US immigration control efforts that focus exclusively

on domestic policies and border security are unlikely to be successful in deterring immigration in the long run.”

The new report provides valuable information about how insecurity is perceived by citizens in Central America, as well as how it impacts various aspects of their lives.

For instance, one of the report’s authors, Michael Camilleri, pointed out during the presentation of the study that Honduras and Uruguay have roughly the same percentage of population saying that insecurity is their country’s main issue. However, as InSight Crime previously reported, other studies have shown that Honduras experiences far greater economic impacts from crime than Uruguay does.

The economic impacts of crime are important to take into account because, as mentioned above, crime victimization and lack of economic opportunity often combine to drive emigration from Central America. And the LAPOP and Inter-American Dialogue authors say their findings contain important lessons for policymakers seeking to tackle insecurity and migration in the region.

Report author Carole Wilson stated that “insecurity motivates migration,” suggesting US efforts to increase border security and crack down on undocumented migrants will only have a limited effect.

Undocumented immigration to the United States has [appeared to decline](#) in response to intensified enforcement operations under the administration of President Donald Trump. But Camilleri argued that “any drop that we’re seeing ... in migration is likely to be temporary. The underlying push factors are ultimately what will matter to long-term migration trends.”

This assessment was echoed by former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central America and the

Caribbean Juan Gonzalez.

“On the long term, it’s not going to work, because people that are fleeing violence and that are looking for opportunities are either going to go to Mexico, which is something that we’ve been seeing, or they’re going to make the journey to the United States,” he said.

According to Gonzalez, investing in socioeconomic development in particularly crime-prone regions like the Northern Triangle countries would be a more efficient allocation of resources than increasing spending on US domestic security measures.

Improving law enforcement and judicial institutions could also help curb crime and corruption, thus reducing the incentive for citizens to migrate, the authors said.