Migration and Proxies in Central America


Abstract:

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 trend 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.

These findings are consistent both with the previous literature and with anecdotal evidence (and, really, common sense). However, there is an interesting measurement question.

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.

The *AmericasBarometer* data is survey data, so does not measure migration, only a question about intent to migrate. Why, I wonder, not include migration data? The simple answer may just be that this type of short research note isn’t intended to do so; rather, it is intended to highlight ways to use *AmericasBarometer* data. Nonetheless, I need a bit more convincing about how intent to migrate is a good proxy for migrating.