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Northward Migration from the Northern Triangle

A Compendium of Research on Historical and Root Causes



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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Historical Factors	4
Mexico Apprehensions and Protection Issues	6
Entrenched Root Causes	9
Triggers of Migration Surges	11
U.S.-Northern Triangle Alliance for Prosperity	12
Addressing Root Causes	13
Regional Impact of Covid-19	14
Impact Focus by Northern Triangle Country	20
Summary	26
References	27

Introduction

Illegal migration from Central America's Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) is at record levels, as a result of U.S. demand for cheap labor and restrictive immigration policies, decades of Central American armed conflict and increasing rates of violent crime, entrenched poverty and inequality, and perceptions of family reunification and economic opportunities in the U.S. Particularly, concentrated waves of migration have occurred as a result of deteriorating and fluctuating economic and social conditions and events. These "triggers" have led to sudden internal displacement and outward migration through the Central America sub-region, predominantly through Mexico. Migration surges have brought thousands of migrants to the U.S. southern border, overwhelming U.S. law enforcement and immigration authorities.

Historical and Root Causes: Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are among the poorest nations in Latin America with 30, 26, and 17 percent of their people, respectively, living on less than two dollars a day (extreme poverty), according to the World Bank. Economic failure is endemic, and all three countries are in the bottom half of economies based on competitiveness, weighed down by extremely high levels of crime and violence, impunity, and dysfunctional systems.

Outward migration has created pockets of rural labor shortages and thousands of broken families where women and even children are forced to head households. Migration has driven the creation and growth of the largest criminal gangs, such as MS-13 and M-18, while simultaneously enabling large remittance flows to the region that has served as a major social safety net. Crime, violence, and an overall lack of citizen security threaten social and economic collapse – El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have the first, second and fourth highest homicide rates in the world, and San Pedro Sula and San Salvador are the two most violent cities in the world based on murder rates.

Impact and Humanitarian Needs: In the North of Central America (NCA), the pandemic is intensifying the challenges and increasing vulnerabilities to COVID-19, highlighting the inequities that accentuate the differentiated impact on populations.

Health Impact: The health systems in the three countries, being weak and fragmented, do not guarantee the universal access necessary to face the health crisis of COVID-19. They tend to be geographically centralized, with specialized medical and services concentrated in a few urban centers. The facilities are insufficient for the expected level of demand during the pandemic and are highly dependent on imports of equipment and supplies. In 2018, the date of the latest available data, the NCA countries were among the nine countries with the lowest number of hospital beds per 1,000 people in the world.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Hand washing is a life-saving practice that has been socialized as the first preventive measure against coronavirus. To guarantee adequate levels of health and hygiene, the water supply and sewage sanitation should be ensured. However, in the NCA there is a deficiency in safe water and sanitation services, including in urban areas where there is often overcrowding.

Impact on Food Security and Nutrition: Food insecurity is a critical area since, according to data collected up to February 2020, some 600,000 people were food insecure in El Salvador, mostly in rural areas. This figure reached 3.2 million in Guatemala, while 962,000 people were acutely and severely food insecure in Honduras (the equivalent of 18 percent of the population). In Guatemala and Honduras, food delivery has been the central element in supporting the population. The pandemic is worsening the situation as can be seen in the protests that point to the lack of food as a main factor of concern among the population.

Impact on Protection: Despite COVID-19 related lockdowns in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, displaced people and community leaders report that criminal groups are using lockdowns to strengthen their control over communities, intensifying extortion, drug trafficking, and gender violence, and using forced disappearances, assassinations, and death threats against those who do not comply.

Displacement: The impact of the pandemic in the NCA countries runs the risk of hampering efforts to improve livelihoods and work opportunities for internally displaced persons, and to develop the capacity of state authorities to address their needs, including the creation and implementation of laws and public policies that seek to promote the rights of internally displaced persons in these countries.

Groups in Vulnerable Situations: The pandemic has a discriminatory impact on various population groups and their response capacity. Vulnerable population includes women, children, and adolescents, indigenous and Afro-descendant, elderly persons, and those with chronic diseases, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ + persons, and persons deprived of liberty.

Historical Factors

The second U.S.-Mexico Bracero guest worker program was started in 1942 and provided four million Mexicans with the opportunity for legal temporary agricultural labor work in U.S. border states.¹ Ironically, the program also led to a parallel wave of illegal migrants who were willing to work for lower wages than Bracero workers who had guaranteed wages and benefits. In response, and with the Government of Mexico's urging, the U.S. launched Operation Wetback in 1954, which led to the deportation of 3.8 million undocumented workers.² The Bracero program ended in 1964 after concerns that the program was distorting agricultural labor markets, though dependence on cheap imported labor led to a new influx of undocumented Mexican workers. In 1976, the U.S. adopted strict quotas on U.S. immigrants that disfavored Mexican and Central American migrants in particular. In the absence of a coordinated set of immigration policies, illegal immigration grew in the 1970s and 80s as demand for cheap Mexican labor spread outside the agriculture sector and to the northern states. The 1990s boom in the U.S. services and construction sectors brought even higher rates of illegal immigration from Mexico and Central America.³

Central America Migration: Key Takeaways

- The U.S. bears considerable responsibility for illegal migration from Mexico and Central America due to its dependence on cheap labor, failure to sustain and improve guest worker programs and incoherent immigration policies.
- Of the 239,000 Central American migrants apprehended in the U.S. in 2014, 52,000 were unaccompanied alien children – 77% were from Central America and half were under the age of 12.
- Mexico apprehensions of Central America migrants rose by 60 percent from 2014-15. Mexico deported 77 percent of apprehended migrants in 2015, while the U.S. deported only three percent in 2014.
- According to a Honduras study, migrants are respected in their home communities for their initiative and commitment to their families. Their remittances represent a “political escape valve.”
- El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are the first, second and fifth most violent countries in the world. The homicide rate is surpassing the casualty rate during the El Salvador and Guatemala conflicts. For those that migrate, Mexico has been deemed a “death trap” for Central American migrants.
- Despite over \$25 billion in U.S. foreign assistance in 55 years, the Northern Triangle countries suffer from chronic underdevelopment. Ironically, remittances by illegal migrants is the strongest segment of GDP in all three countries, while official investment has failed to yield adequate socioeconomic development.

1 The first Bracero program, 1917-21, ended with Mexican government dissatisfaction due to poor labor conditions and discrimination against Bracero workers in the U.S.

2 Braceros: History, Compensation. Rural Migration News, UC Davis; April 2006.

3 Immigration in the United States: New Economic, Social, Political Landscapes with Legislative Reform on the Horizon. F. Hipsman, D. Meissner. Migration Policy Institute, April 2013.

Family ties contributed immeasurably to migration. In 1970, eight percent of immigrants were from Mexico, but by 2011 that figure grew to 30 percent. By 2010, the immigrant population from Mexico and Central America totaled 20.4 million. The news that relatives and community members heard from migrants to the U.S. was positive – they obtained formal or informal employment depending on their status, and despite the fact that less than half had completed secondary education, 91.7 percent of their children went on to earn a high school diploma.⁴ The fact that migrants were able to send substantial remittances to Mexico (\$24 billion in 2015) and Central America (a combined \$9 billion to Guatemala and El Salvador in 2015) reinforced the idea that the U.S. was, for them, the bountiful Promised Land. And for Central American unaccompanied alien children (UACs), family reunification continues to be a motive for migration.⁵ A third pull factor for potential migrants was the apparently positive perceptions of opportunity versus risks – their understanding of lax U.S. immigration and border enforcement, the belief that the hazards of overland travel to the U.S. were manageable, and awareness of the increasing formalization of overland travel facilitation services by “coyotes” that would lead groups of migrants to the border and beyond.⁶ In the weeks leading up to June 2014, 52,000 UACs – 50 percent of them under the age of 12 – crossed our southern border. UACs were part of an overall annual surge of 239,000 from the Northern Triangle that for the first time surpassed migrants from much more populous Mexico.⁷ Coyotes promulgated the false claims that U.S. immigration policy would shortly be changing, and migrants arriving before July 2014 would have increased likelihood of being allowed to stay. Coyotes also promised “safe passage” to the U.S., notably through Mexico, where the greatest dangers awaited migrants in the form of criminal gangs who kidnapped and trafficked Central Americans, or who extorted, raped, maimed or killed those who slept on roadsides or in train yards on their way north. Coyotes offered up to three passages for one price if the migrant was detained and returned to Central America. For all, however, the conventional understanding was that to cross the border into the U.S. was a virtual guarantee of a right to stay. This proved to be the case – in 2014, only three percent of those detained in the U.S. were deported, while for UACs virtually none were sent back due to protection concerns.



Young migrants near the U.S.-Mexico border in south Texas
(Todd Heisler/New York Times)

4 The Integration of Immigrants into American Society. MC Waters, MG Pineau. National Academies Press, 2015.

5 Family Reunification and Other Explanations for the Border Surge of Unaccompanied Children. A. Nowrastah. Cato Institute, June 2014.

6 Smuggling as Social Negotiation: Pathways of Central American Migrants in Mexico. YG Gonzalez. Open Democracy, April 2016.

7 Increased Central American Migration to the United States May Prove an Enduring Phenomenon. M. Chishti, F. Hipman. Migration Policy Institute, February 2016.

Mexico Apprehensions and Protection Issues

If 2014 is remembered by the immense wave of migrants from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America, of which one out of five were unaccompanied children, then 2015 is associated with a crackdown on the part of Mexican authorities. Partially as a result of U.S. pressure and financial support for the Frontera Sur southern border and overland enforcement program, Mexico apprehensions of Central Americans grew 60 percent from 2014 to 2015.⁸ When added to migrants apprehended in the U.S., the actual movement in 2015 was likely only slightly smaller for Honduras and El Salvador than in the previous year, while Guatemala migration remained the same. Mexico apprehended 166,503 Central American migrants in 2015 compared with 102,156 during 2014. Notably, Mexico has also been diligent about deportations, returning 77 percent of detainees in 2014, mostly on chartered buses to Central America (compared to just three percent from the U.S., as mentioned above).

For Central American migrants, Mexico has been called a “death trap” by Amnesty International.⁹ In 2010, 72 mostly Central American migrants were kidnapped and massacred by a drug cartel. In June 2015, more than 200 migrants were violently attacked in two incidents in the states of Veracruz and Sonora. Prosecutors in four southern states reported robberies against migrants went up by 81 percent in 2016, while in Oaxaca, robberies and assaults nearly doubled.

Mexico has taken actions to reduce violence and protect migrants, notably UACs. Beginning in 2010, Guatemalans and Belizeans became eligible for free visitor’s visas, enabling them to legally cross into Mexico to work or trade for a few days at a time – though the move was criticized for not including Hondurans and Salvadorans.¹⁰ By law, Mexico offers protection (asylum) to those who face risks to their lives or safety if returned to their countries of origin.¹¹

The Migrant as Local Hero

In the U.S., undocumented migrants are regarded suspiciously. Yet at home, they are often seen as role models for initiative in helping their families and the sacrifices they make to send back regular remittances. In their communities of origin, a new social order has emerged, based on knowledge of how to migrate successfully and how to send home remittances. Migration itself has been deemed a “political escape valve,” given that remittances provide the social safety net that governments have failed to provide. Former Mexico President Vicente Fox calls migrants “heroes.” As economist John Kenneth Galbraith stated, “Migration is the oldest action against poverty. It selects those who most want help. It is good for the country to which they go; it helps to break the equilibrium of poverty in the country from which they come.”

8 Ibid.

9 Mexico, a Death-Trap for Migrants. M. Penman. Amnesty International, June 2015.

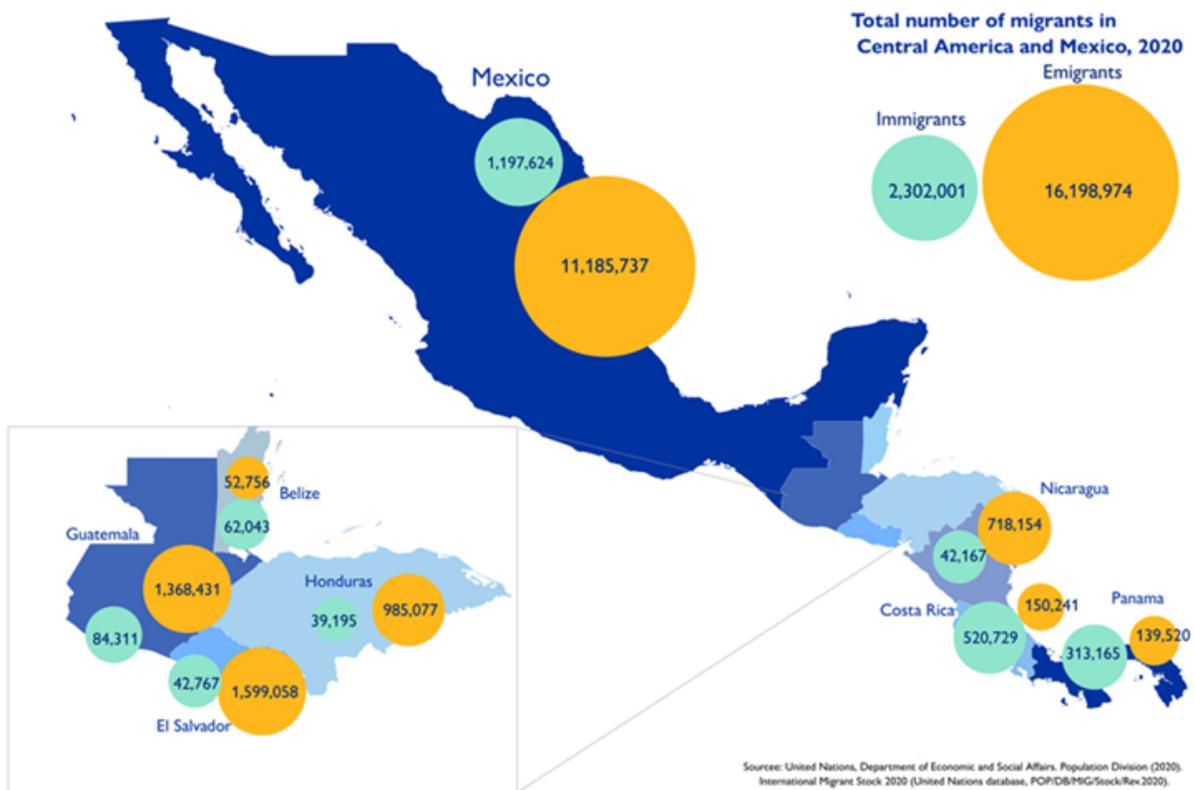
10 Understanding Mexico’s Changing Immigration Laws. LV Gonzalez-Murphy. Wilson Institute, 2011.

11 Closed Doors: Mexico’s Failure to Protect Central American Refugee and Migrant Children. Human Rights Watch, February 2016.

But less than one percent of children (in 2015, 60 percent were traveling alone or without a family member) who are apprehended by Mexican immigration authorities are recognized as refugees. Mexican law provides that UACs should be transferred to the custody of Mexico's child protection system and should be detained only in exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, detention of migrant children is the rule.

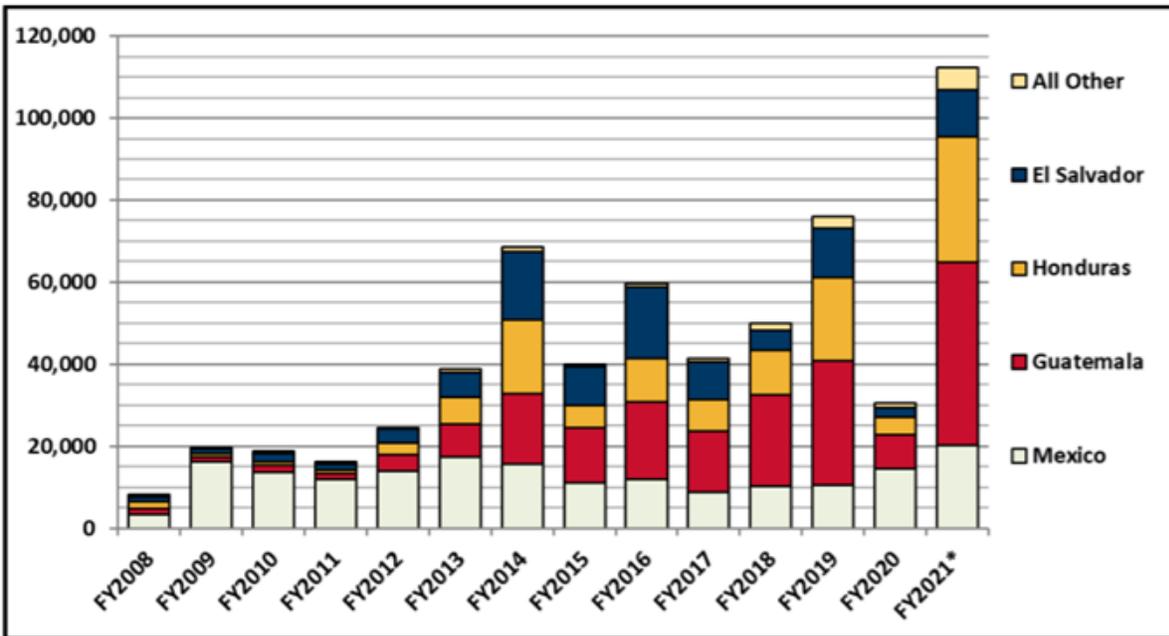
Despite Mexico's tough stance on migrants and the risks they face from gangs and cartels, migration was again on the rise in 2016 (see table) as Central Americans ran from increasing violence in the sub-region. In the first nine months of U.S. Fiscal Year 2016 alone, the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended 33,613 UACs from the Northern Triangle countries. Alarming, asylum requests in neighboring countries have also skyrocketed, up tenfold in Costa Rica from 2014, and up 176 percent in Belize from 2013.¹²

Total population of immigrants and emigrants in Central America and Mexico, 2020



12 Action Urgently Needed as Central America Asylum Claims Soar. A. Edwards. UNHCR, April 2016.

UAC Apprehensions at the Southwest Border by Country of Origin FY 2008-FY2021



Sources: FY2008-FY2013: United States Border Patrol “Juvenile and Adult Apprehension-Fiscal Year 2013”.
 FY2014-FY2018: Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehension by Sector
 FY2018. FY2019-FY2021: U.S. Border Patrol, “Southwest Border Encounters”.

Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children Encounters¹ by Country

Numbers below reflect Fiscal Years 2014 - 2020.

Unaccompanied Alien Children Encounters by Country							
Country	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20
El Salvador	16,404	9,389	17,512	9,143	4,949	12,021	2,189
Guatemala	17,057	13,589	18,913	14,827	22,327	30,329	8,390
Honduras	18,244	5,409	10,468	7,784	10,913	20,398	4,454
Mexico	15,634	11,012	11,926	8,877	10,136	10,487	14,359

¹Beginning in March FY20, USBP Encounters statistics include both Title 8 Apprehensions and Title 42 Expulsions. To learn more, visit: [Title-8-and-Title-42-Statistics](#)

Entrenched Root Causes

The underlying conditions that have historically driven outward migration from the sub-region are being addressed in some measure through sustainable development programs financed by the international community. But despite tens of billions of dollars in international donor assistance over the past 60 years, the region's economies are in tatters, and these poorly governed countries teeter on the edge of failed state status. Central America continues to be the most under-developed sub-region in the hemisphere, and suffers from weak governance and corruption, poor education and health standards, loss of its natural resource base, and extreme poverty.

Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are among the poorest nations in Latin America with 30, 26, and 17 percent of their people living on less than two dollars a day (extreme poverty) respectively, according to the World Bank. Economic failure is endemic, and all three countries are in the bottom half of economies based on competitiveness, weighed down by abysmal crime and violence, impunity and dysfunctional judiciaries. Ironically, the largest portion of GDP, and where growth has been steady, is in remittance flows, much of it sent by illegal immigrants – the very group that the governments of the U.S. and Mexico invest millions to apprehend and deport. As such, these undocumented migrants who are so lowly regarded in the U.S., are role models in their communities in Central America for their initiative and for the risks on behalf of their families.¹³ Migration has become a “political escape valve,” and former Mexico President Vicente Fox calls migrants “heroes.”

Criminal gangs extort everyone. Extortion fees account for an estimated 1.7 percent of El Salvador's GDP, one percent of Honduras's, while the extortion economy accounts for \$60 million a year in Guatemala. This is lost tax revenue to these countries' treasuries, and also represents money that should have been disbursed for the benefit of local economies, business owners and consumers, but instead goes into the pockets of gangs.

The “Post-Conflict” Misnomer

These three Northern Triangle countries are caught up in a war – there were more than 144,000 homicides between 2004-2013, and tens of thousands more went missing and are presumed dead, out of a total population of 18 million. This far exceeds the 77,000 U.S. military combat deaths in conflicts since World War II. The homicide rate likely surpasses the casualty rate during the longer “periods of conflict” in Guatemala (200,000 from 1960-96) and El Salvador (75,000 from 1980-92) - dispelling any notion that the region has benefitted from two decades of peace.

While gangs continue to generate revenue from illegal trafficking, extortion allows them to exert authority through violence, or the threat of it, at the local level. In El Salvador, the MS-13 gang has an estimated weekly income of \$600,000. This revenue enables gangs to enforce territorial

¹³ Honduras: The Perils of Remittance Dependence and Clandestine Migration. D. Reichman. Migration Policy Institute, April 2013.

control in neighborhoods, with a devastating impact on personal and family safety, and community cohesion. The cash pays for gang members' livelihoods and covers expenses such as incarcerated members' legal fees. Compounding the problems created by criminality is a historic pattern of household and communal violence. Governments lack the political will and resources to tackle criminality, and impunity is the norm (97 percent of murders in San Pedro Sula go unsolved).

Push Factors

Pull Factors

Crime and Violence

- Street gangs
- Other organized crime
- Dysfunctional judiciaries
- Impunity

Lack of Economic Opportunity

- Poverty/inequality
- Un/underemployment
- Few educational opportunities
- Climate change/ natural resource loss

Social Marginalization

- Broken families
- Ethnicity and discrimination
- Social class

- Family reunification
- Perception of:
 - U.S. immigration policy
 - Economic and educational opportunity in the U.S.
 - Migration travel risks

Triggers of Migration Surges

The historical migration push factors are entrenched, though varying somewhat in depth and magnitude year to year. But other factors, often unanticipated, are the proverbial straws that break the camel's back, and can lead to spontaneous migration decisions. These can be internal and local, such as the thrips (an insect) attack that devastated the cardamom crop in Guatemala in 2014, robbing laborers from their source of wage income.¹⁴ It can also be natural disasters. Both El Salvador and Guatemala rank among the most disaster vulnerable countries in the world, and flooding events or earthquakes lead to immediate displacement of families who often are already economically marginalized.¹⁵ At a higher level, political instability, such as what followed the coup and constitutional crisis in Honduras in 2009, can lead to businesses closing their doors and a massive loss of jobs. As well, as shown by the gang truce in 2012 in El Salvador, which led to a 35 percent decline in homicides, the ability of criminal groups to “dial up or down” levels of violence is real.¹⁶ When homicides again ramped up in 2013 to shocking levels, migration rates including at-risk youth, skyrocketed.

The triggers for migration can also include external conditions, such as day-to-day changes in perception of risks of migration travel, immigration policies or opportunities. The source for this information can be family or community members or the coyotes themselves. Information, as well as the migration travel packages they created, led many to conclude that coyotes were to blame for the surge in migration in 2014, and led to USG efforts to promote better understanding of the risks of travel and the fact that illegal immigrants are subject to deportation.¹⁷ Cell phones provide instant access to information, including by coyotes, given cell phone coverage is ubiquitous (in El Salvador, universal 1:1 cell phone coverage was first exceeded in 2008).¹⁸ U.S. economic conditions also control migration. Remittances in Central America¹ are the most important international flow to the region, with about 9 percent of GDP on average in the last twenty years and reaching in 2020 USD 33,723.5 million. Remittances in the region surpass Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by 2.6 times, and official development assistance by 15.2 times. Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic have the highest ratio of remittances to GDP – 24.1, 24, 14.7, 14.6 and 10.4, respectively – concentrating about 96 percent of total remittance flows to the region. It is not a surprise that U.S. recessions curtail employment opportunities in the U.S. for migrants. Remittances fell 10 percent between 2008 and 2009 due to the Great Recession, a sharp decline in economic activity during the late 2000s. It is considered the most significant downturn since the Great Depression. The term Great Recession applies to both the U.S. recession, officially lasting from December 2007 to June 2009, and the ensuing global recession in 2009.

14 Cardamom Crop Severely Affected; CentralAmericaData.com; December 2012.

15 Report Identifies Top 10 Countries At Risk From Natural Disasters. The Climate Reality Project. October 2011.

16 Best Practices in Reducing Violent Homicide Rates: Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico. J. Bumpus et al. Princeton University, 2013.

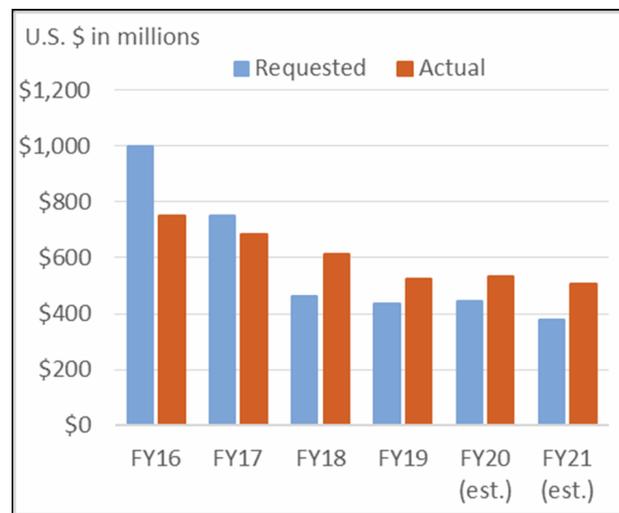
17 Coyotes, US Immigration Misinformation Still Major Factor For Central America Migration, GAO Says. A. Kimery. Homeland Security Today, August 2015.

18 El Salvador: Central America's Leader in Cell Phone Use, Raul Gutierrez. Inter Press Service, August 2016.

U.S.-Northern Triangle Alliance for Prosperity

The U.S.-Northern Triangle Alliance for Prosperity is a proxy for the priorities of the international community to address the migration issue, both through improved enforcement and attention to root causes. From FY2016 to FY2021, Congress appropriated more than \$3.6 billion to implement the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Congress has divided appropriations relatively evenly between bilateral assistance programs focused on good governance, economic growth, and social welfare and Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) programs intended to prevent violence, reform justice-sector institutions, and combat gangs and organized crime. U.S. agencies have allocated the majority of funds to the Northern Triangle countries. Annual appropriations measures have required the State Department to withhold a portion of that aid, however, until the Northern Triangle governments take steps to improve border security, combat corruption, protect human rights, and address other congressional concerns.

Funding for the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America:
FY2016-FY2021



Sources: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, FY2018-FY2021; FY2020 estimate data provided to CRS, June 15, 2020; and P.L. 116-260

Congress appropriated \$505.9 million of foreign assistance for Central America in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260). That amount is \$129 million more than the Trump Administration requested but \$27 million less than Congress allocated to the region in FY2020. Similarly, to prior years, the FY2021 act requires the State Department to withhold 50 percent of CARSI and military aid for the Northern Triangle governments until it certifies those governments are addressing certain congressional concerns.

Addressing Root Causes

The development community has for decades focused on the conditions for sustainable, equitable growth in the Northern Triangle countries. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) alone has invested more than \$25 billion in development assistance through bilateral and Central America regional assistance in the three countries over the past 55 years.¹⁹ As the USG puts in place new programs through a further \$1.6 billion in FY 14-16 resources, questions will be asked as to how these resources will yield a more sustained and positive outcome, and create the conditions that will reduce the number of their citizens that only see opportunity in migration to the U.S. or other countries.

All three countries rank poorly in competitiveness.²⁰ Investor confidence is particularly low, and foreign direct investment (FDI) has severely lagged. Income inequality is among the highest rates globally, and education standards are particularly low. Poverty and extreme poverty are widespread and have actually worsened early in this decade as the U.S. recession put a damper on migrant employment and remittances. Deteriorating political and security conditions have tainted the investment climate and undermined the opportunities presented in the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement, supported vigorously for over a decade by USAID and the Department of Commerce. In this new phase, USAID will be redoubling its support for competitiveness, improved conditions and credit for small and medium-size business, a more resilient rural agricultural sector, formal and informal education and training, and new opportunities for trade. There will also be new attention to energy and reducing the impact of climate change, which has led to natural resource and habitat loss and has reduced agricultural productivity.

While citizen security is a need for all inhabitants of the Northern Triangle countries, much of USAID's work is focused on vulnerable youth who are likely candidates for illegal migration. One of USAID's first activities in the Northern Triangle was Alianza Joven. The implementer reports that 450 gang members were rehabilitated in Guatemala through mentoring and job training. However, some of those who were supposedly rehabilitated were apparently later killed by the gangs or returned to gang membership. As well, rehabilitation proved expensive. As a result of this experience, USAID decided in 2008 to focus its Central America efforts on "prevention" rather than rehabilitation, believing that for the amount spent on each rehabilitation effort, many youth could instead be reached before they decided to join gangs. That decision was reinforced by the USG categorization of MS-13 and M-18 as Transnational Criminal Organizations, which raises questions about using U.S. foreign assistance to assist ex-gang members.

¹⁹ www.foreignassistance.gov/aid-trends

²⁰ A Medium- and Long-Term Plan to Address the Central American Refugee Situation. D. Restrepo, S. Mathema. Migration Policy Institute, May 2016.

That informal policy has continued, and USAID today focuses on “at-risk” youth through the creation of opportunities in formal and informal education, vocational training, computer skills, life skills, reproductive health, rural productive skills, job placement, internships, protection and sheltering.

Corruption and impunity are major challenges. The judicial systems are weak, overwhelmed and subject to political interference. As well, there are serious human rights challenges related to victimization, internal displacement and migration. With higher funding levels, USAID can now take on a more systemic approach to the broad issues that confront the Northern Triangle, including through partnerships that leverage investment from public and private partners, and that build local capacity to take on development roles.

Regional Impact of COVID-19

Impact and Humanitarian Needs

In the North of Central America, the pandemic is intensifying the challenges and increasing vulnerabilities to COVID-19, highlighting the inequities that accentuate the differentiated impact on populations.

I. Health impact

Although the pandemic exerts pressure on health systems throughout the world, its impact is even greater in countries characterized by socio-economic inequities, low public investment, lack of adequate health infrastructure and large gaps in access to basic systems, including health systems. Despite being categorized as middle-income countries, large swaths of the population remain invisible and out of reach of potential social measures. The health systems in the three Northern Triangle countries, being weak and fragmented, do not guarantee the universal access necessary to face the health crisis of COVID-19. They tend to be geographically centralized, with specialized medical and health services concentrated in a few urban centers. The facilities are insufficient for the expected level of demand in times of pandemic and are highly dependent on imports of equipment and supplies.



Persons affected by Hurricane Eta take refuge in a shelter in Honduras in 2020
(UN Population Fund)

In 2018, the date of the latest available data, the NCA countries were among the nine countries with the lowest number of hospital beds per 1,000 people in the world, with Guatemala ranking last. In addition, they were already under pressure due to the dengue epidemic that worsened in 2019.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Hand washing is a life-saving practice that has been socialized as the first preventive measure against coronavirus. To guarantee levels of health and hygiene, the water supply and sewage sanitation should be assured (Sustainable Development Goal 6). However, in the NCA there is a deficiency in safe water and sanitation services, even in urban areas where there is overcrowding in the poorest areas. However, in the NCA there is a deficiency in safe water and sanitation services, even in urban areas where there is overcrowding in the poorest areas. In Guatemala, it is estimated that some 307 precarious settlements, with about 917,000 people, would be in greater need of these services. In El Salvador, it is estimated that 25 percent of the population is supplied with water through rural systems while 11.1 percent of households lack access to piped water service and are supplied with water through wells and other unimproved sources.

II. Impact on food security and nutrition

Food insecurity is a critical area since, according to data collected up to February 2020, some 600,000 people were food insecure in El Salvador, mostly in rural areas. This figure reached 3.2 million in Guatemala, while 962,000 people were acutely and severely food insecure in Honduras (the equivalent of 18 percent of the population). In Guatemala and Honduras, food delivery has been the central element in supporting the population. The pandemic is worsening the situation as can be seen in the protests that point to the lack of food as a main factor of concern among the population.

III. Impact on protection

The pandemic threatens to exacerbate the protection and forced displacement crisis in the NCA countries. Despite general border closures that mitigate the spread of the pandemic, violence continues to spread throughout entire communities in the NCA. The growing situation of chronic violence and insecurity, along with pandemic related restrictions, are putting the lives and well-being of tens of thousands of people in the region at risk, while exacerbating existing difficulties.

Despite COVID-related lockdowns in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, displaced people and community leaders report that criminal groups are using lockdown to strengthen their control over communities, intensifying extortion, drug trafficking, and gender violence, and using forced disappearances, assassinations, and death threats against those who do not comply.

Likewise, there is an impact on the restriction of the right to freedom of expression through the limitation of public information, a right that is strongly linked to attention to the pandemic. The work of defending human rights, or the right to public participation, has also been restricted by the limitation of circulation but also by attacks by some of the governments against critical or dissident speech.

Displacement: The impact of the pandemic in northern Central America runs the risk of hampering efforts to improve livelihoods and work opportunities for internally displaced persons, and to develop the capacity of state authorities to address their needs, including the creation and implementation of laws and public policies that seek to promote the rights of internally displaced persons in these countries.

The data available and used for planning indicate that internal displacement in the three countries can be significant. In El Salvador, the number of internal displacements caused by violence is 71,500; in Honduras, the figure is 247,000; and in Guatemala, where there is no official data on internal displacement, the estimated figure is 242,000.

Despite the confinement measures, displacements caused by violence continue, particularly from El Salvador and Honduras. In Guatemala and Mexico, although at lower levels due to the closure of the border, people continue to request asylum. Although the average number of weekly asylum applications registered in Mexico in the month of April has fallen by 90 percent due to the border restrictions implemented in Central America, there are still hundreds of people who are submitting their applications to receive refugee status in this country.



Photo Source: The Wilson Center

IV. Socioeconomic impact

Although El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are classified as middle-income countries, most of the population works in the informal sector without any social protection and has not benefited from the limited economic growth that has characterized the region in recent years. On the contrary, real per capita income decreased for the most vulnerable sectors.

The specter of the economic recession is becoming increasingly visible as the impact of both internal and external movement restrictions imposed by the authorities to curb the pandemic grows. In all three countries, unemployment has risen, generating large income losses and affecting the already limited livelihoods of many people. While food prices have risen in various places, COVID-19 movement restrictions also make it difficult to access food in both urban and rural areas.

V. Impact on education

As COVID-19 has spread in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, the Ministries of Education have begun to close schools at all levels. To date, the countries of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) are part of the 23 countries and 12 independent states in the region that have closed their schools. As a consequence, it is estimated that more than 8 million children in these countries have had their right to education affected as a result of the pandemic. Many educational institutions do not have the necessary digital technology infrastructure, and there are also gaps in access to computers and the Internet at home.

With the closure of schools, the inability to enjoy the right to education is added to the interruption of face-to-face educational services, as well as the lack of access to other important basic services: school meals, recreation programs, extracurricular activities, pedagogical and psychosocial support, and also school health and water, sanitation and hygiene services. This situation, which has extended beyond what was initially anticipated, increases the risk of permanent school dropout, especially for the most vulnerable children such as migrants, refugees, children with disabilities, and children from indigenous communities who are at risk of exclusion.

VI. Groups in vulnerable situations

The pandemic has a discriminatory impact on various population groups and their response capacity. The impossibility of working from home, overcrowded conditions, and lack of access to water and sanitation increase the risk of infection for the population living in poverty and vulnerability. All the vulnerabilities of the population groups identified in the March 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview have been exacerbated due to the pandemic.

Women: Women are often on the front lines, in charge of caring for children, the elderly, as well as the sick, exposing themselves even more to the risk of contracting the virus. The pressure on health systems significantly affects women since, according to a survey by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, they represent the vast majority of the total number of people employed in this sector.

Women also work mainly in the service sector, which was particularly affected by the crisis. On the other hand, a drastic increase in gender-based violence (GBV), even at the hands of her partner, has manifested itself in all three countries, which already had the highest rates of GBV in the world. In a context of confinement, school closings and the need for care in the event of the possible presence of one or more infected persons at home, the burden of unpaid domestic work assumed by women, adolescents, and girls, as well as cases of violence towards them, has increased significantly. Indigenous and rural pregnant women, who often live in poverty and with limited or no access to health services, have accumulated several critical vulnerabilities in the face of the pandemic.

Although the crisis affects the entire workforce, the situation of informal workers of both sexes, and especially that of women and young people, indigenous people, Afro-descendants and migrants, results from the confluence of the axes of inequality and constitutes a strong core of vulnerability. Paid domestic workers (11.4 percent of employed women), many of them migrants, indigenous or Afro-descendants, find themselves in a particularly complex situation. Few have access to social security, and they are more unprotected in scenarios of sustained unemployment. Physical distancing measures prevent them from developing their activities and generating income that allows them to stay out of poverty.

Children and adolescents: Due to the lack of food, acute malnutrition should increase, particularly in children under five years of age. In addition, the disappearance of educational opportunities and exposure to all kinds of violence accentuate the vulnerability of children and adolescents, severely damaging their immediate future. In the poorest households, remote education is often impossible, so if the suspension period is extended, the risk of dropping out of school will increase, particularly for those affected by the drastic fall in family income. It also increases the risk of mental health issues of children and adolescents as a result of confinement and family stress.



Photo Source: The Atlantic Council

The risk of child labor and/or the risk of abandonment is also likely to increase due to the contraction of family income.

Populations on the move: For displaced people, the challenge of protecting themselves from the virus is greater because they have less access to supplies, sanitary facilities, or simply decent housing.

In addition, they are at greater risk of having their rights trampled on and they find it more difficult to access immigration protection and regularization services, including the possibility of accessing international protection.

Rural populations, often mostly indigenous as in Guatemala, have the highest poverty and extreme poverty rates. In rural and remote areas, access to health services, which are often insufficient, is also difficult.

Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples: In the north of Central America, as in other regions of the world, most of these populations belong to the poorest and/or most invisible groups. The situation of indigenous peoples in most respects is much worse than that of non-indigenous people with similar characteristics, such as the same level of education, age, rural or urban place of residence, type of work and types of household. Having little access to means of sanitation, overcrowding, among other factors, increase morbidity and poor health conditions make them a population at high risk of mortality from epidemics. Additionally, risk communication represents a challenge in multicultural and multiethnic regions where multiple languages are spoken. In Honduras, for example, the outbreak is concentrated along the northern coast of the country, where a large part of the Garífuna population lives. In this community, which has roots among both indigenous groups and African descendants, many households are headed by women or grandmothers, and one or both parents work abroad to send money home. As in other Afro-Honduran and indigenous communities, some neighborhoods and homes lack electricity, internet access, and piped water. Food insecurity is common, and many are unable to access health services due to distance or affordability.

Older people and those with chronic diseases are more vulnerable to the coronavirus. People with disabilities, dependent on the care of others or with difficulties in getting around or getting help, are particularly vulnerable to the spread of the virus and suffering neglect. In Guatemala, 10 percent of the population has at least one difficulty performing daily activities.

LGBTQI+ people consistently face obstacles in accessing health care and related support services, especially in places where their identities are criminalized or persecuted, and where essential treatment is often denied or mistreated. This can cause people to avoid going to critical health services for fear of arrest or violence. In addition to the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis that further restrict access to livelihoods and housing, quarantine measures leave LGBTQ+ people, particularly youth, at risk in hostile homes or abusive relationships.

Persons deprived of liberty: There are particular risks related to COVID-19 in confined populations for whom physical distancing is not possible, in particular due to the lower level of health of the prison population.

Impact Focus by Northern Triangle Country

El Salvador

As a result of the complex emergency affecting El Salvador, the most marginalized Salvadorans live in poverty and lack adequate food. Many have been forced from their homes by criminal gangs, and often consider migration to the U.S. as the only viable option. In response, OAA is applying for assistance, and will coordinate the proposed program with Salvadoran partners to provide stability to these communities through food distribution and direct feeding programs.



According to the World Food Programme (WFP), vulnerability to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and severe weather conditions – also exacerbated by El Niño which causes alternating floods and droughts – affects the sustainability of El Salvador’s food systems. The country is heavily dependent on import for main staples like rice, beans, and corn. All the wheat and rice consumed nationally is imported. Farmers only account for 14 percent of the economically active population, and the vast majority of them are subsistence smallholders’ farmers producing mainly staple food – maize and beans – and living on less than US\$ 200 a month.

In support of the Government of El Salvador (GOES) and the U.S.-Central America Alliance for Prosperity, USAID supports cross-cutting economic development and democracy/governance objectives in El Salvador. USAID has been a leader in addressing issues related to at-risk youth, though the problem is larger than USAID, other donor and GOES resources. The homicide rate, a key indicator of gang violence in El Salvador, was the highest in the world in 2016. As a result, USAID is focusing on at-risk youth prevention programs including training and job creation. But its resources cannot address the problems in all communities. While USAID/El Salvador does not have a significant agricultural program, it did respond to food insecurity in the western departments in 2014-15 through a joint program with the World Food Program (WFP). Unfortunately, due to funding constraints that successful program could not be continued, and food security and other push factors for migration continue to plague western El Salvador and other parts of the country. USAID/El Salvador also supports activities aimed at generating employment and economic opportunities, including in departments supported by this proposal, but at levels that will not completely resolve these issues.

OAA has reviewed USAID/El Salvador's strategic program plans, and learned about the current situation, needs, strategy and programs taking place in the country. OAA designs and implements programs that will avoid duplication and seeks to create synergies with on-going efforts by other implementing partners on the ground.

Impact on health systems

El Salvador is a country with a health system that faces challenges, and this situation is further aggravated by a pandemic such as COVID-19. Only 2.5 percent of GDP is invested in health, while the WHO recommends six percent. The pandemic also affects the nutritional status and health of families, especially groups in vulnerable situations such as children under five years of age and pregnant women. The nutritional profile of the country indicated that prior to the crisis there was a double burden of malnutrition, that is, the tangible coexistence of conditions of malnutrition, hidden hunger, overweight and obesity.

Impact on food security and livelihoods

The fall in household income is an immediate, almost general impact, of the containment measures implemented. This impact affects more poor households, the majority of which sustain themselves through activities that provide the income they need to live the day. At the national level, 26.3 percent of households are in a condition of income poverty. As of 2019, this figure reached 30 percent in rural areas and 24.1 percent in urban areas, for a total of 491,396 households nationwide, according to the census and statistics office of the Salvadoran government.

In 2018, among the most important deprivations that Salvadoran households presented were the absence of social security (68 percent), the underemployed and job instability (62 percent), the lack of access to sanitation, (43 percent) and the overcrowding (41 percent) These conditions further highlight the vulnerability of important segments of the population.

According to estimates by the Inter-American Development Bank for 2020, the consolidated middle class would decline from 22 percent to 17 percent of the population, the vulnerable middle class from 47 percent to 43 percent, and poverty would increase from 28 percent to 39 percent, which would imply about 600,000 thousand people nationwide at risk of falling into poverty. The most impacted and vulnerable livelihoods are small producers and day laborers of coffee, basic grains, aquaculturists and fishermen. The food insecure population represents 126,000 households, which depend on the consumption of corn and beans and, therefore, are much more vulnerable to the negative impact and market fluctuations caused by the economic restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

Guatemala

Guatemala is a multicultural middle-income country where 40 percent of the population of 16.58 million are indigenous Mayan. Guatemala ranked 128th among 188 countries (Human Development Report, 2016).²¹ Guatemala is very vulnerable to natural disasters. Since 2010, Guatemala continues to be severely affected by erratic rains as a result of the El Niño phenomenon. Over the last four years, the country has faced a humanitarian crisis brought on by the country's worst drought in decades coupled with structural causes of the country's main problems affect the entire population. Vulnerable groups such as indigenous, women, persons with disabilities, children, elderly persons and urban and rural areas need humanitarian assistance. According to the 'Encuesta de Salud Materno-Infantil' (ENSMI 2014-2015), there are high rates of anemia (24.2 percent in pregnant women and 14.5 percent in non-pregnant women). There are over 200,000 children currently suffering from chronic malnutrition and could face irreversible damage to their mental, physical and cognitive development.²²



Between 2015 and 2016 Guatemala experienced one of the worst droughts recorded in the last 25 years, the consequences of which persist among the population of the most arid area of the east of the country, the dry corridor. Food shortages worsened in 2017, chronic and acute malnutrition affected the entire population, and especially children, who are seriously affected in their growth. In the dry season, Guatemalan homes in the east of the country are mainly affected and it is a phenomenon that is experienced every year. Food shortages have been anticipated because the supply of labor in the harvests has been reduced and the poorest households directly depend on it to buy food.

23

Malnutrition creates adverse effects on health of all affected individuals. It also slows the physical growth of infants and children, and impedes their cognitive, social-emotional, motor, and intellectual development, intellectual performance. Malnutrition also curbs the earning potential of workers of all ages. The impacts of malnutrition are compounded as adults are unable to care adequately for their children, and children suffer permanent developmental damage that later will leave them less able to participate in the economy and to provide for their own families. In these conditions, and given conditions of poverty and criminality, many will choose to leave their homes as part of internal and outward migration.

21 World Food Programme in Guatemala, Standard Project Report 2017. https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000070011/download/?_ga=2.158631676.73858951.1525286993-618265752.1523028827

22 United Nations Development Programme, November 2017.

22 Desnutricion cronica en Guatemala afecta a 66% de los mas pobres, Prensa Libre (Guatemala), November 7, 2018.

Honduras

In recent years, prolonged droughts, heavy rain, and flooding in Honduras—including from Hurrricanes Eta and Iota—have negatively affected thousands of small-scale subsistence farmers and resulted in the loss of livelihoods in rural communities. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated mitigation measures



further constrained household income sources and increased food prices during 2020 and into 2021, with up to 2.5 million people facing or projected to face crisis levels of acute food insecurity in the coming months, according to FEWS NET.

In accordance with information provided by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, over 20 percent of the population in Honduras suffers from hunger and there is a high percentage of malnutrition and undernutrition among children under 15 years old. This appears to be due mainly to a decline in per capita food availability because of the drop in domestic production and import capacity. Additionally, food insecurity and hunger are phenomena which are closely associated with extreme poverty, but with specific characteristics. Deficient feeding is something that affects not only those living in conditions of extreme poverty but also broader population strata and groups living in certain areas or regions where there is permanent food insecurity.

According to the World Food Programme (WFP) the income distribution is highly unequal and vast disparities exist between urban and rural areas, regions and social groups. Poverty – affecting 60 percent of the population – is at the root of chronic food insecurity in Honduras. The most vulnerable include indigenous populations in rural areas (where more than half of the extremely poor are concentrated), women, girls, children under five and people with disabilities and living with HIV/AIDS. The country’s vulnerability to extreme climatic events exacerbates food insecurity. In the southern and western regions – corresponding to Honduras’ Dry Corridor – four years of continuous drought have eroded people’s ability to secure sufficient nutritious food all year round. In 2015, irregular rainfalls resulted in the loss of more than half the crops. To cope, people have resorted to migration or the sale of productive assets.

Almost three quarters – 72 percent – of families depending on agriculture either own small parcels of land or work as laborers for large land owners. Limited access to land, technology and agricultural assets hampers the potential development of the agricultural sector.

Poorly diversified diets and a lack of nutritional awareness result in overlapping nutritional problems including stunting, mineral and vitamin deficiencies and overweight/obesity.

Impact on health systems

The health system is limited and unprepared to respond effectively to the coronavirus emergency. To this, logistical limitations are added so that health personnel can carry out activities in health establishments, and there is an availability of tests that allow an effective follow-up of those infected. It is also necessary to expand risk communication since many of the population still do not see the magnitude of the problem, and to reinforce training for the personnel of the Security Secretariat and Permanent Contingency Commission (COPECO), including assistance personnel. In addition, there is a shortage of appropriate tools and personal protective equipment (such as biosafety equipment) for the protection of health personnel and further training in their use is necessary.

The health system has around 8,000 beds and 37 Intensive Care Units with an occupation of more than 70 percent in both the public and private hospital network, which represents a great challenge to attend to any emergency. The death rate from COVID-19 in the country continues to rise daily.

In addition, medical equipment is required for the specialized rooms that attend to cases in the different hospitals and authorized medical centers, especially mechanical ventilators for critical cases. Epidemiological monitoring at the regional level requires the establishment of Rapid Response Teams to provide more effective epidemiological surveillance and case monitoring.

Impact on food safety

According to vulnerability monitoring carried out by the WFP to identify the impact of COVID on households, all economic, income-generating activities have been affected due to the restrictions implemented to control the spread of the virus, especially the areas of commerce, services, informal employment with daily pay, tourism and artisanal fishing in fishing areas, having an impact of a reduction of a 51 percent in the employment of the population.

The lack of availability and access to food has led to 40 percent of respondents, on average, facing severe economic vulnerability. They spend more than 75 percent of their income on the exclusive purchase of food, reducing their investment in other areas of basic need such as health, education, housing, water, and hygiene. Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed do not have food reserves, leading more than 79 percent of those surveyed to rely entirely on market purchases as the only source of obtaining food resources. Five out of 10 households surveyed have access to food products through savings or credit to satisfy basic needs, forcing them to rely on negative coping strategies.

The impact that the COVID-19 emergency will eventually have at the national level on food systems will depend on the availability of food, the period of impact and the containment strategies, and restriction to the food supply that each country imposes when trying to mitigate and lessen its impact.

Summary

Illegal migration from Central America Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) is at record levels, as a result of U.S. demand for cheap labor and restrictive immigration policies, decades of Central American armed conflict and increasing rates of violent crime, entrenched poverty and inequality, and perceptions of family reunification and economic opportunities in the U.S. Particularly concentrated waves of migration have occurred as a result of deteriorating and fluctuating economic and social conditions and events. These “triggers” have led to sudden internal displacement and outward migration through the Central America sub-region, predominately through Mexico to the U.S. Migration surges have brought thousands of migrants to the U.S. southern border, overwhelming U.S. law enforcement and immigration authorities. After an immense wave of Central American migration in 2014 – 20 percent of whom were unaccompanied children – Mexico increased its southern border and internal enforcement in 2015, increasing apprehensions and deportations. U.S. political will to respond has been moderated by the important role that undocumented workers play in the U.S. Northern Triangle governments, supported over the years by billions of dollars in U.S. and other international official assistance, have failed to grow their economies, improve social well-being and provide citizen security required to stem undocumented migration. As well, illegal migration is often considered the only viable option for survival, and migrants are respected within their communities for taking risks to support their families. In light of increasing attention by the international community to the root causes of this complex crisis and the resulting humanitarian impacts, Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA) has undertaken this analysis of existing research and data.

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