

Perfect Storm: The Pull and Push Factors Driving the Central American Migration Crisis

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	3
Guatemala	5
Poverty, Hunger, and Corruption Spur Migration...5	
“Coyotismo”—Coyotes Openly Advertising Their Services	5
Migration Is the Economic Model	6
Disenchanted Elections	7
Safe Third Country?	7
El Salvador	8
Gangs and Extortion Cause Many to Flee.....8	
Gangs and Extortion	8
Internal Displacement	8
“Your Gang Must Be the Ultimate Survivor”.....9	
“A Mafia of the Poor”.....9	
Extortion: “Everyone Pays It”.....10	
“Heavy Hand” Policies.....10	
A Fresh Face, A Fresh Approach?.....11	
Honduras	11
Political Problems, “Loss of Hope in Honduras” Prompt Outflow.....	11
Dissatisfaction Driving Migration.....	12
Narco-Politics	12
Increased Focus on Immigration	13
A Controversial Re-Election—And Loss of Hope	13
Unmet Expectations	14
Conclusion	15
References	16

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Executive Summary

Alonso Benítez vanished one day in April 2019 with his 17-year-old son, leaving an elder, 18-year-old son to oversee his coffee farm. He paid a coyote 170,000 lempiras (\$7,300) to take him and his son to the U.S. border, according to the elder son, Jordi Benítez. After spending four days in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, the pair were released and went to Houston—where Benítez found work in a gravel pit.

Jordi Benítez recalled his father's motives—mainly, he wanted to get ahead and make improvements to the farm. He also felt frustrated by the low price of coffee and wanted to get out of debt. A plague known as coffee rust—*roya*—crimped production. Then there was the 17-year-old son, who “also saw the opportunity to emigrate,” Jordi said. At the time, it was widely believed in Central America that minors were not being held for long in U.S. custody and adults taking a minor with them were allowed entry.

The case of Alonso Benítez sums up many of the underlying push factors in rural Central America: agricultural difficulties, low prices for commodities, and climatic events such as droughts. The “American Dream” also occupies a special spot in the collective consciousness, along with the opportunity to earn dollars. Income earned in the United States and sent home in the form of remittances props up households and floats economies. Many like Benítez profess no interest in staying for long in the United States—just long enough to earn money to build a home of their own. Coyotes also peddle the idea that children cannot be held in custody for long, giving migrants with children more hope that they will be able to stay in the U.S.

This study includes interviews with politicians, public officials, NGO leaders, academics, priests and religious community officials, and migrants and their families. It also involved on-the-ground reporting in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. It aims to inform the debate on immigration by providing an account of what is occurring in Central America and explains how migration can be motivated by factors beyond poverty and violence, such as natural disasters, corruption, and political crises. A proper understanding of these factors will assist Central American, Mexican, and U.S. policymakers in stemming the illegal flow of immigrants into the United States.

Introduction

Alonso Benítez was considered a model farmer, growing organic coffee in Honduras' western highlands. In recent years, he had switched to organic methods, planted timber-producing trees to diversify his income, and worked with a cooperative to earn a premium on the world price. Benítez also had a large extended family in the area, who pitched in with harvests and lowered his labor costs.

Key Points

- Despite increased immigration law enforcement both in Mexico and along the U.S. border, the push factors that drive Central Americans to leave their countries continue to mount.
- Rampant poverty, crime, and political instability in the region, combined with structural weaknesses in the U.S. asylum system, created a perfect storm.
- The United States is viewed as a safe haven, where workers can earn more in a day than many Central Americans make in a month.



But Benítez vanished one day in April 2019 with his 17-year-old son, leaving an elder, 18-year-old son to oversee the farm. He paid a coyote 170,000 lempiras (\$7,300) to take him and his son to the U.S. border, according to the elder son, Jordi Benítez. After spending four days in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, the pair were released and went to Houston—where Benítez found work in a gravel pit.

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Outward migration has marked much of Central America for decades—especially the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, three of the poorest and most violent nations in the hemisphere. The motives for migrating vary, depending on the region and are almost always multifactorial with strong push factors at play—poverty, violence, political problems, and dissatisfaction with life at home. The United States, which is seen as safe and where workers earn more in a day than many Central Americans make in a month, still appeals to potential migrants, in spite of an anti-migrant discourse and admonishments to stay put.

The case of Alonso Benítez sums up many of the underlying push factors in rural Central America: agricultural difficulties, low prices for commodities, and climatic events such as droughts. The “American Dream” also occupies a special spot in the collective consciousness, along with the opportunity to earn dollars. Income earned in the United States and sent home in the form of remittances props up households and floats economies. Many like Benítez profess no interest in staying for long in the United States—just long enough to earn money to build a home of their own. Coyotes also peddle the idea that children cannot be held in custody for long, giving migrants with children more hope that they will be able to stay in the U.S.

It’s all an attractive message in a region where poverty is rife. The cost of living is also high, while salaries remain stubbornly low. In interviews with travelers in the caravans of 2018, many Hondurans’ first responses to questions on why they were migrating included “the price of the basic basket of goods” and “the price of electricity.”

Violence is seldom spoken of at first, but it often emerges as a factor in their desire to flee. Gangs control entire communities in urban areas, practicing extortion on most anyone operating a business and forcing those unable to make payments to flee. Internal relocation is impossible for many trying to escape extortion payments. An NGO director in El Salvador says gangs—both the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street gang—send out “*la alerta roja*” (the red alert) to colleagues if a person owing money has left their territory.

At the heart of the poverty and gang violence are political problems and corruption. For instance, Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernández, brother of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, was convicted in October by a New York court on drug trafficking charges. Prosecutors allege he [funneled \\$1.5 million](#) into the 2013 National Party campaign of his brother.

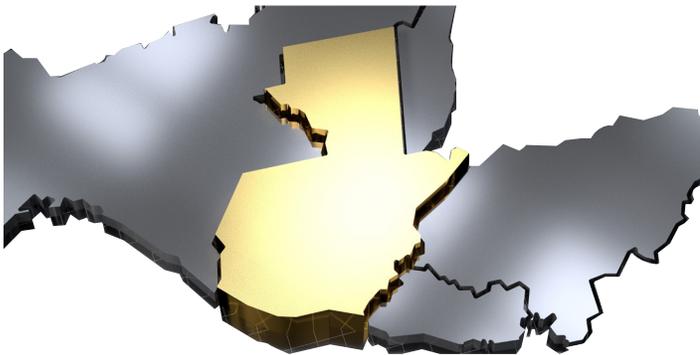
Sources in Honduras and Guatemala describe drug cartel funding of political campaigns as common practice. It’s not the only form of illicit money flowing into the campaigns. Hernández said that about \$148,000 from the companies that have been tied to the \$200 million embezzled from the country’s social security system ended up in his 2013 campaign ([Palencia 2015](#)).

Hernández won a disputed 2017 re-election; caravans headed to the U.S. Mexican border subsequently formed. Observers see a connection, calling the election a trigger event, in which people “lost hope” in Honduras.

“If you look at homicide levels, it’s going down, but migration is spiking,” said Kurt Ver Beek, of the Honduran anti-graft group Association for a More Just Society ([Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa](#)). “Hondurans just feel way less hopeful, way more hopeless about their future,” which fuels the attitude, “So why not leave?”

Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei was inaugurated January 14, promising a pro-growth agenda to slow migration and lift living standards ([The Economist](#)). But he inherits a country which has long neglected its rural and indigenous hinterlands—places experiencing increased outflows of migrants in recent years. Observers see little changing Giammattei’s leadership.

El Salvador in 2019 elected Nayib Bukele, 38, who ran as an outsider on an agenda of unseating an unpopular political elite ([Bukele](#)), curbing corruption and slowing migration by improving public safety. He’s proved popular—his approval rating hovers near 90 percent ([Margolis](#))—but it’s too soon to tell if his early efforts at fixing security are sustainable.



Guatemala

Poverty, Hunger, and Corruption Spur Migration

School administrator Sandra Temaj has seen parents pull their children from her classrooms in a community of corn, bean, and coffee farmers in Guatemala’s western highlands. At the beginning of 2019, she had 184 pupils in primary and secondary studies. But by September 2019, only 156 pupils were enrolled; 20 had headed to the United States.

Temaj, who has worked 20 years in the Huehuetenango Department, sees people taking their children with them to the United States. In some cases, family reunification is occurring as parents already in the United States pay coyotes to bring their kids to them. But she sees a simpler reason for migrants taking minors: “The child is the hook for reaching the United States,” she said.

Migration is nothing new in western Guatemala, where economic opportunities are scant and remittances sent from the United States prop up households. But the migration of past years—and especially since the end of the 1960-1996 civil war, which sent Mayans fleeing as soldiers razed their villages—featured mostly men, who headed off solo to the United States with the goal of making enough money to build a home of their own back in Guatemala. Many fulfilled their dream as gaudy mansions dot the verdant landscape—built with “gringo architecture” to include columns, porches, and gabled roofs.

Nowadays, entire families attempt to migrate in increasingly bigger numbers. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported apprehending 264,168 Guatemalans in its 2019 fiscal year, which ended September 30, making Guatemala the top source of migrants arriving at the *southwestern* border ([CBP 2019a](#)). In May 2019, Department of Homeland Security officials estimated that 3 percent of Huehuetenango’s entire population had tried to migrate to the United States over the previous seven months ([Miroff and Sieff 2019](#)).

Insecurity afflicts greater Guatemala City and regions of the country rife with narcotics trafficking. But a Creative Associates International survey found 71 percent of Guatemalans cited “economic concerns” as their main motive for migrating ([Creative Associates International](#)). The homicide rate in Guatemala hovers at around 22 per 100,000 residents, according to government statistics—having been decreased over the past decade ([Dalby and Carranza](#)). “Food insecurity, not violence, seems to be a key push factor informing the decision to travel from Guatemala,” then-CBP Commissioner Kevin McAleenan, told the *Washington Post* in September 2018 ([Miroff and Sieff 2018](#)).

“Coyotismo”—Coyotes Openly Advertising Their Services

The idea that taking a child to the United States has taken hold in rural Guatemala and other parts of Central America is a testament to the marketing prowess of coyotes. Observers in Guatemala say the idea of migrating with minors has spread via social media and messaging services such as WhatsApp. But coyotes—as smugglers are called—promoted the idea, too. “There’s a lot of ‘coyotismo,’”

“The child is the hook for reaching the United States.”

—Sandra Temaj, school administrator
in Guatemala

said Huehuetenango's bishop, Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini, an outspoken defender of migrants. The coyotes "know the [U.S.] law," he said in an interview, and promote it so "people say, 'Let's go.'"

Offering services as a coyote is illegal in Guatemala. But coyotes run ads in Spanish and Mayan languages regardless, offering trips to "various states in the American Union." Some ads offer financing, with payments to be made after arriving in the United States. "Don't suffer any longer!" said one advertisement. "Spend only one day walking in the desert," it continued. "A special trip" offered to take migrants to Houston in just 10 days, transiting Mexico by car and crossing the U.S.-Mexico border at Piedras Negras, opposite Eagle Pass, Texas.

Press reports describe coyotes offering discounts for adults taking children since they are instructed to surrender to the Border Patrol upon arrival and have no need to be transported to destinations in the interior of the United States ([Partlow and Miroff](#)). People interviewed in Central America confirmed these accounts and said the coyotes usually offer three attempts at entering the United States.

Prices have only increased as the U.S. border became increasingly fortified, according to interviews with potential migrants in Central America and a former coyote in Huehuetenango. The former coyote said the success rate for migrants is plummeting. "If there are 10 migrants, only two get through," he said. "It used to be seven or eight would get through, but never less than six." Sources in Huehuetenango say coyotes have increasingly entered politics, winning seats in Congress and mayoral races.

Parents are not the only ones migrating with children. Three migrant shelter operators in Mexico said in interviews that adults routinely arrived with children whose names didn't match theirs on official identifications.

Ramazzini and others interviewed say deportees returning to places like Huehuetenango often confront deep debts owed to coyotes as their land is used as collateral or they borrow from relatives. They face bleak prospects for making repayment. "The core reason [for migration] continues being poverty and the need to work. There are no jobs. The jobs that exist are badly paid," Ramazzini said. "Additionally, as people started to go to the United States, they resolved their economic problems. The proof of that is the increase in remittances each year."

Migration Is the Economic Model

Remittances sent to Guatemala represented 11 percent of GDP and 46 percent of household income in 2017, according to the International Monetary Fund ([Ruiz](#)). Six in ten Guatemalans lived below the poverty line in 2014 ([World](#)



[Bank](#)). Roughly 70 percent of the population works in the informal economy, in which no taxes are paid and no benefits are given. It is estimated 70 percent of the children in the western highlands suffer malnutrition ([USAID](#)). The World Food Programme, meanwhile, put the stunting rate at 46.5 percent nationally, the highest of any country ([World Food Programme](#)). "Migration is part of the [economic] model," Seynabou Sakho, the World Bank's director for Central America, told Bloomberg ([Bartenstein and McDonald](#)).

Total remittances have surged in recent years. The remittances sent to Central America support households and sustain economies through consumption—especially as exports in countries such as Guatemala decline. Some observers see downsides, however. "In any community you're going to find idle people, who don't work and don't study because they have family there [the United States] and they send them dollars," said Carlos René Osorio, a school administrator in Palencia, a municipality 15 miles east of Guatemala City. "There's no life vision: only that they send me money and I have enough to spend."

Osorio also has had pupils pulled from his schools and taken to the United States. He blames multiple factors for the outflow of migrants—including parents believing their children are "passports," who will allow them entrance at the U.S. border. Low technology farming that is subject to

unpredictable weather patterns is a factor, too. He introduced a reporter to two students, ages 14 and 16, whose father headed for the United States in 2018 after suffering repeated crop failures due to drought. The father paid a coyote and “only plans to stay for a short time,” they said. He now works as a gardener in New York state and sends remittances. The eldest boy said his father had heard President Trump’s rhetoric on the migration but wasn’t dissuaded. “He had no choice. He had to risk it,” the boy said.

The national director of Faith and Joy schools, Father Miquel Cortés, offered a simple explanation for the exodus from rural areas: corruption. He says that primary school enrollment in Guatemala has fallen over the past decade from 96 percent coverage to just 87 percent coverage at the primary level. The coverage slips to just 45 percent at the junior high level, he said, while most of the education budget is spent on teacher salaries. An analysis by the National Economic Research Center (CIEN) estimates 85 percent of Guatemala’s total budget is spent on salaries—with much of the payroll packed with cronies.

A conditional cash transfer program was implemented under former first lady Sandra Torres between 2007 and 2011 with the aim of combatting extreme poverty and malnutrition ([Hootsen](#)). The program kept kids in school, Cortés said, and kept people from migrating. But it served political purposes, too, such as building a patronage base—evidenced by Torres’ strong showing in rural areas in the August 2019 runoff election.

Disenchanted Elections

The August elections proved a disenchanting affair for many Guatemalans. Critics complained the runoff election featured candidates who promised to perpetuate the status quo. The election process excluded popular and reform-minded candidates. The outcome also confirmed the elites’ ability to beat back one of the continent’s most effective anti-corruption initiatives: the United Nations-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

The political system, critics and analysts contend, is rife with corruption, and candidates often carry the perception of being backed by shadowy parts of the military—a legacy of the civil war—or narcotics traffickers ([Lakhani 2019](#)). “Some of them represent business interests. Some of them represent criminal interests. We can see from CICIG’s reports [that] a large part of the funding for political parties comes from organized crime, including drug trafficking,” said Alexander Aizenstadt, a Guatemalan lawyer licensed in both Guatemala and New York state. “It’s a weak democracy because there’s a divorce between the interests of the political class, using the government as a way of perpetuating

their own self-interest, their own ways of accruing property and money, and the real interests of Guatemalans, who simply want a better life.”

Former prison system director Alejandro Giammattei defeated Sandra Torres handily in a runoff. Torres was subsequently arrested on finance campaign violations—a common accusation in Guatemalan politics ([Menchu 2019a](#)). Guatemala’s electoral court controversially disqualified two candidates with strong support: Zury Ríos, daughter of former general and dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (who was convicted of genocide against indigenous peoples), and Thelma Aldana, a former attorney general running on an anti-corruption agenda. Aldana, whom Guatemalan prosecutors accuse of embezzlement, revealed in February she had received asylum in the United States ([Associated Press 2020](#)). She says the charges against her are politically motivated. Multiple analysts posit one or both would have made it to the runoff and that Torres had “co-opted” the courts.

In January 2020, Giammattei assumed office and replaced outgoing President Jimmy Morales, a former television personality, who left with a 76 percent disapproval rating, according to the newspaper *La Prensa* ([Online News Editor](#)). Morales rode into office as an outsider in 2015 after street protests forced out President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti ([Tuckman and Lakhani](#)). Both were charged in a corruption scandal known as *La Línea*—The Line. The fraud involved the country’s customs agency and “lowered taxes on importers in exchange for financial kickbacks.” According to InSight Crime, the fraud network earned roughly \$328,000 per week ([Lohmuller](#)). Leveraging his lack of a political past, Morales had run on the slogan, “Not a thief, not corrupt” ([Agren 2015](#)).

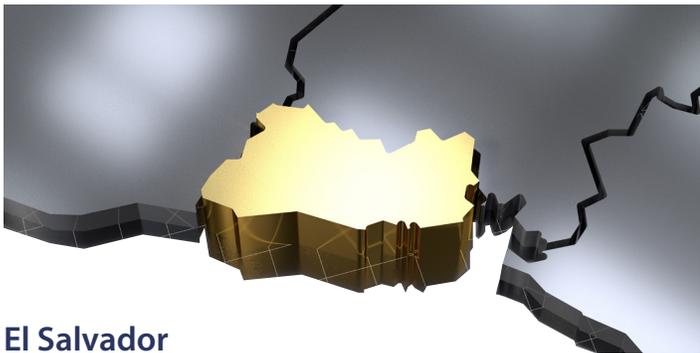
Safe Third Country?

With U.S. priorities turning to immigration, the Trump administration signed an asylum cooperation agreement with Guatemala in July 2019. The agreement requires migrants traveling through Guatemala, and wishing to seek asylum in the United States to do so in Guatemala ([Agren 2019a](#)). The agreement has encountered legal difficulties, however. Guatemala’s constitutional court ruled it was invalid as international treaties must be approved by the country’s Congress—something still pending ([Menchu 2019b](#)). Some in Guatemala, including the private sector, have lauded the deal, saying it avoided closure of the U.S. market and the [statements made by President Trump](#) over Twitter that the United States might impose tariffs on Guatemalan imports, impose visa restrictions, and tax remittances. The Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) entered into force on November 15, 2019. Some 939 asylum seekers had been sent to Guatemala through the ACA as of March 16, when the program was suspended due to coronavirus

concerns. Only 20 of the asylum seekers arriving—all from Honduras or El Salvador—opted to apply for asylum in Guatemala ([Girón](#)).

Guatemala received only 262 asylum claims in 2018, according to Univision ([Adams](#)). Staff at the migrant shelter run by Scalabrinian missionaries in Guatemala City say few claims find success due to asylum seekers abandoning the process, which takes approximately nine months on average. Asylum seekers, said Marcos Castro, a lawyer at the shelter, receive no government assistance and often find it difficult to obtain a proper identity document, making it nearly impossible to work in the formal economy. Asylum seekers, he added, traditionally had come from countries with political or armed conflict such as Venezuela and Colombia.

But asylum seekers are now citing an additional reason for requesting refuge in Guatemala: perceptions that Mexico has toughened migrant enforcement and doubts that their asylum claims in the United States will be successful. “News spreads so they know now the situation is difficult,” Castro said, “not only in Mexico, but for people arriving at the U.S. border.”



El Salvador

Gangs and Extortion Cause Many to Flee

As the head of an association of moto-taxi owners, Marcos (a pseudonym used to protect his identity) balked at paying extortion to the 18th Street gang. He was asked to hand over \$600 per month for the approximately 20 association members and their more than 40 vehicles—motorcycles rigged into tricycles for three passengers sitting behind the driver. The gang promptly burned a moto-taxi for non-payment and left a chilling message: “If you don’t pay the monthly fee, a driver will be the next to burn.” Marcos promptly paid. He also complained to a police anti-extortion unit, which dismantled the ring extorting his association in 2015. A weakened gang leader kept up the harassment, however, forcing Marcos to move to another barrio in the capital city of San Salvador.

In the new barrio, Marcos ran into the same problem. But this time it was the rival Mara Salvatrucha, which in 2016

demanding he hand over the names and numbers of association members. Marcos refused. Shortly thereafter, the gang murdered a young driver in front of his home and left a message: “You’ll be next.” Marcos borrowed \$5,000 and offered it to the gang in lieu of handing over his colleagues’ contact information. The Mara Salvatrucha leaders accepted the payment. But the extortion continued, and a leader told Marcos: “Don’t ever change your phone number or we’ll kill you.”

Gangs and Extortion

Gangs in El Salvador have made extortion their calling card. The gangs themselves—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street gang (also known as Barrio 18 or B-18)—have grown powerful to the point they control neighborhoods, cow security forces, and prompt many Salvadorans to flee the country. Non-payment, victims like Marcos say, isn’t an option, and the gangs “can’t be negotiated with.”

Migration due to violence and poverty has long marked El Salvador. It’s the smallest of the Northern Triangle countries and about the size of Massachusetts with a population of 6.6 million. Currently, an estimated 2.3 million people of Salvadoran origin live in the United States ([Noe-Bustamante et al.](#)). Tens of thousands were forced to flee the civil war of the 1970s and 80s, which ended in 1992, leaving 75,000 dead and displacing one million people. But the violence and poverty in the subsequent years prompted more Salvadorans to head north, especially as the country suffered some of the highest rates of homicide in the hemisphere.

The murder rate reached a staggering 104 per 100,000 residents in 2015 ([Lakhani 2016](#)) but declined to 51 per 100,000 residents by 2018 ([Dalby and Carranza](#)) and dropped even lower in 2019, according to the government ([AP News](#)). A Creative Associates International survey found “victimization – personal exposure to homicide, robbery, extortion and violence against women – is the primary driver of migration for 38 percent of Salvadorans.” That compares to 18 percent of Hondurans and 14 percent of Guatemalans ([Creative Associates International](#)).

Internal Displacement

Violence and gang disputes also drive internal displacement. A 2018 survey designed by the non-governmental group Cristosal and carried out by the Central American University (UCA) found 235,700 Salvadorans were displaced in 2018, roughly 5.2 percent of the population ([Diario1](#)). In the survey, UCA asked respondents, “Have you had to change residence due to violence?” Of those responding “yes,” the majority had moved twice due to violence and some up to five times, according to Celia Medrano, Cristosal’s director of regional programming.



Displacement causes difficulties for families due to gang control of neighborhoods, which is so tight that kids hired as “lookouts” alert superiors to who’s coming and going. There are “invisible lines,” between neighborhoods, which are enforced. And when a family moves from one gang-controlled neighborhood to another, “the gang starts investigating,” Medrano said. If someone moves to escape extortion payments, the gangs will send out “red alerts” via messaging applications such as WhatsApp, prompting many to start thinking about migration. Migration, Medrano said, usually follows attempts at relocating internally and “depends on the family network abroad.”

Cristosal estimates 122,000 children had to switch schools in 2018 as young people arriving from other neighborhoods are seen suspiciously ([Gonzalez](#)). Some teens are “confined” to the house due to gang difficulties, with families saying their children have migrated, Medrano says.

The forced recruitment of young men into gangs also occurs in El Salvador and Honduras, according to analysts and migrants interviewed while transiting Mexico. A researcher described the gang’s reasoning for forced recruitment in both El Salvador and Honduras to *Global Sisters’ Report*: “Gangs prefer that one person from each of the [neighborhood] households is in some way associated with them... that lessens the likelihood they will be reported. The gang believes that it is benevolently providing protection for its family, so of course you would pay them a small amount in return [extortion] for that” ([Agren 2018](#)).

Young women, meanwhile, are sometimes forced to be gangsters’ girlfriends. A woman named Isabel, interviewed in Mexico in April 2018, said she fled El Salvador with her two grandsons due to gangsters extorting her bakery. But her problems with gangs went back a decade when a gang leader insisted her daughter become his girlfriend. The daughter refused and was later gang-raped—a crime that

produced a grandson, whom Isabel was raising and migrating with.

“Your Gang Must Be the Ultimate Survivor”

Both the MS-13 and B-18 trace their origins to the streets of Los Angeles, where Salvadoran migrants formed gangs for self-protection purposes. The groups arrived in El Salvador in the 1990s after the U.S. government deported gang members arrested for crimes ([Verza](#)). They quickly co-opted existing gangs and “gave them an identity,” said Wilfredo Gómez, a Baptist pastor and former B-18 gang member.

That identity was so strong, the gangs developed the ethos “For my barrio I kill, for my barrio I die” and “Your gang must be the ultimate survivor,” Gómez said. The gangs also found fertile ground for recruiting in El Salvador—a violent country with simmering social resentments—by offering disaffected young men a sense of acceptance and feeling of authority. “Where else will you find acceptance and easy money?” Gómez said. “This nation has an illness: violence. For a *salvadoreño*, speaking of violence is normal, on all levels,” he said from his church in San Salvador. Churches have become one of the only exits from gang life ([Green](#)).

Much of the gangs’ easy money comes from extortion, although “it was originally a voluntary co-operation,” said Gómez, who joined B-18 in Los Angeles as a teenager. “They went about extorting drug dealers in Los Angeles,” he recalled. “Here, they went after vulnerable people.”

“A Mafia of the Poor”

Analysts describe the gangs as loosely related to their affiliates in other countries but largely autonomous. “The gang is a small, part-time role player in international criminal schemes,” according to an analysis by InSight Crime and the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) at American University ([InSight Crime and CLALS](#)). Still, El Salvador has declared MS-13 and B-18 to be terrorist groups ([Delcid](#)), while the U.S. Department of the Treasury considers MS-13 a transnational criminal organization and has imposed sanctions on its leaders ([USDT 2012](#)).

Even with these designations, some analysts express skepticism about the gang’s supposed wealth and power. Salvadoran news organization El Faro and the *New York Times* published a 2016 report, *Killers on a Shoestring*, which showed MS-13 leadership living like paupers. It said of MS-13’s supposed leader that “he leased a squat concrete house with a corrugated roof in a neighborhood where rents rarely reach \$400. He owned an old Honda Civic and a Nissan van” ([Martínez et al.](#)).

Another imprisoned leader, Borrromeo Henríquez Solórzano, “El Diablito de Hollywood,” claimed to have no assets, despite being the subject of U.S. sanctions. His wife, Jenny

Judith Corado, is also the subject of U.S. sanctions ([USDT 2015](#)). Yet reporters found her peddling used clothes and lingerie from a dilapidated market stall.

Referred to as “a mafia of the poor,” the *El Faro/The Times* report estimated MS-13’s annual income at \$31.2 million. “If divided equitably among the estimated 40,000 members of MS-13, each gang member would earn \$15 a week and about \$65 a month. That is half the minimum wage of an agricultural day laborer” ([Martínez et al.](#)).

Extortion: “Everyone Pays It”

But extortion costs the Salvadoran economy big—\$4 billion annually, according to a 2016 central bank study. It extends from barrios to big business to rural regions, with sugar cane growers paying to protect their crops, which gangs threaten to burn for non-payment. An estimated 70 percent of businesses pay extortion, according to the *El Faro/The Times* report. Transport companies are perhaps the biggest targets. Gangs killed 692 drivers between 2011 and 2016 for nonpayment ([Martínez et al.](#)), and owners are required to provide thugs with free rides. Political candidates must ask for permission to hold rallies in gang-controlled areas, the *Wall Street Journal* reported ([Whelan](#)).

Marcos, the moto-taxi entrepreneur, said he had to transport thugs as they went about collecting extortion and threatening business owners. He estimates having paid \$45,000 in extortion over the last decade and recalls the threats being so severe that his family skipped giving gifts at Christmas one year in order to make the payments. During an interview, Marcos lifted his high-top sneakers to show the soles separating from the upper—such was the hardship that he couldn’t afford new footwear.

Similar situations of extortion exist in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras. In Guatemala, a school director in the rough Guatemala City suburb of Villa Nueva said he regularly receives requests for students’ permanent records from parents who are forced to move hastily because they can’t make extortion payments. The director described the origins of extortion there as starting with beverage companies paying gangs to protect their drivers and deliveries. “But the gangs started extorting stores because the beverage companies wouldn’t pay more,” he said. Like many in Central America, he expressed some cynicism with the situation and politicians’ willingness to intervene. “Gangs mean business” for security firms, he said.

Extortion is so widespread that everyone pays it, said Sister Lidia Mara Silva de Souza, a Scalabrinian nun in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and director of the country’s Returned Migrant Attention Center, in a 2018 interview with *Global Sisters Report* ([Agren 2018](#)). “In the payments we make to

private security companies”—including the gated community where the sisters live—“extortion is included, and they have to pay the gangs, so we all pay.”

Silva has tried to help deportees open small businesses upon arriving back in Honduras. “But as (the deportees) generate an income, the gangsters come,” she said, adding that eventually, as the extortion increases, “they have to close the business” ([Agren 2018](#)).

Government officials in Honduras, and across Central America, urge migrants to stay put and not risk the road through Mexico to the U.S. border. Honduras officials even admonished potential migrants to start small businesses with the money they would pay coyotes. But Silva says potential migrants know that opening a business simply invites “extortion.”

Central American gangs deal mostly in extortion, along with loan sharking—often small loans to barrio dwellers—and small-time drug dealing, with the sellers carrying small amounts to avoid trouble if caught, said Jennifer Fernández, a researcher with the *Jóvenes Hondureños Adelante* NGO, which is working with gangs.

“Heavy Hand” Policies

Governments have imposed policies promising “*mano dura*” (“heavy hand”) against gangs in all three countries. The policies are popular with exasperated populations but have proven ineffective and even counterproductive, according to several observers.

“They became strong, starting with the repression against them,” Fernández said of the gangs. “These young people right now are in a complete ‘war’ in the sense that they’re always working and everything that they do is to be ready for any confrontation with the police or other groups.” The gangs have become more sophisticated in recent years, Fernández said. MS-13 members have stopped tattooing themselves and turned more to white-collar crime and attempts at infiltrating the police, she said ([Gallon](#)).

Amid the soaring homicide rates earlier this decade, the El Salvador government negotiated a truce with gang leaders in 2012, something a few politicians from the time still won’t admit to ([International Crisis Group](#)). Gang leaders were promised better prison conditions, in exchange for promising to reduce violence and stop recruiting kids in schools. The homicide rate plummeted rapidly, showing the imprisoned gang-leaders’ influence over their underlings. But it was unpopular with the population, and the homicide rate skyrocketed again one year later as the truce unraveled.

Additionally, “it seems possible that the truce may have increased gang cohesion,” according to a World Health

Analysts say the sudden revocation of temporary protected status and repatriation of so many Salvadorans would “collapse” the country’s economy, which relies heavily on remittances.

Organization analysis ([Katz et al.](#)). And in the process, “it has been suggested that the government officials who negotiate gang truce[s] might inadvertently be acknowledging gangs as legitimate social entities.”

El Salvador’s homicide rate has been dropping since 2015. It has fallen even further since President Nayib Bukele was inaugurated on June 1. Bukele’s administration attributes the decline to its sending soldiers and police to stamp out extortion and better protect public places. His government boasted in August that the homicide rate had been halved to just 4.4 murders per day ([Associated Press 2019](#)). It fell even further as part of an initiative Bukele calls “Territorial Control Plan.” El Salvador has reduced its homicide rate from 8.8 murders per day, when Bukele took office, to 3.8 per day in 2020 ([Univision](#)). In interviews, observers in the country question if the president’s plan represents a radical shift in security policy and suggest it resembles previous “heavy hand” approaches.

A Fresh Face, A Fresh Approach?

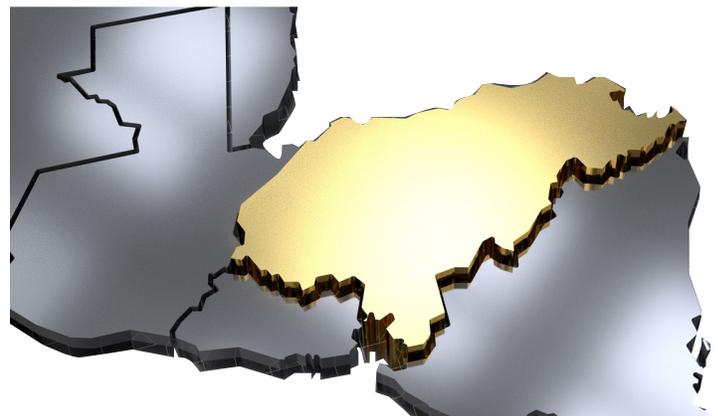
Bukele, a former mayor of San Salvador, won the 2019 election in a landslide as Salvadorans tired of the two parties ruling since the peace accords—the conservative ARENA and left-wing FLMN. At age 38, of Palestinian origin and adept at social media—he took a selfie during his speech at the UN General Assembly in September—he won power as an anti-establishment candidate, who promised to provide migrants reason to stay and combat the gangs controlling parts of the country. “It is our fault,” he said in August ([Semple](#)) after a father and his daughter from El Salvador drowned trying to cross in the Rio Grande. “We can say President Trump’s policies are wrong. We can say Mexico’s policies are wrong. But what about our blame?”

The president has pursued close relations with the Trump administration. He sent 800 police to beef up border protection and impede migration ([Garcia](#)), even though the flow through El Salvador is significantly less than in Honduras and Guatemala, according to press reports. He consented

in September to an agreement with the United States to allow asylum seekers from third countries to be sent back to El Salvador ([Hackman and Montes 2019a](#)). Bukele enjoys a 91 percent approval rating, according to a UCA poll. Unlike Guatemala, analysts say Bukele enjoys the benefit of the doubt with the population on the U.S. migration agreement, and the Salvadoran public generally approves of its presidents supporting “pro-U.S. policies” due to the economic importance of Salvadorans living abroad for the country’s economy ([Forbes](#)).

The Trump administration reciprocated and agreed to extend the work permits for Salvadorans with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for one year. “A sudden inflow of 250,000 individuals to El Salvador could spark another mass migration to the U.S. and reinvigorate the crisis at the southern border,” according to a statement from the Department of Homeland Security ([DHS](#)).

Remittances reached \$5.47 billion in 2018, amounting to roughly 20 percent of the country’s GDP ([Bnamericas](#)). Analysts say the sudden revocation of TPS and repatriation of so many Salvadorans would “collapse” the country’s economy, which relies heavily on remittances. “In some years,” the Washington-based Migration Policy Center said in a 2018 report on El Salvador, “remittances constitute two or three times the country’s public social spending” ([Menjivar and Cervantes](#)).



Honduras

Political Problems, “Loss of Hope in Honduras” Prompt Outflow

From a fancy strip mall in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, the owner of a pizzeria spoke with pride that he paid his employees substantially more than the minimum wage of 9,000 lempiras per month (roughly \$365) ([Secretaria de Trabajo y Seguridad Social](#)). Yet the owner, who regularly employs 10 workers at a time, has seen five employees quit suddenly over the past four years, all headed for the United States or Spain as migrants.

Jorge Canales, a welder, fled the city of San Pedro Sula with his wife and two children—joining a migrant caravan in late 2018—after gangsters demanded “war tax” payments, a euphemism for extortion. Two of his relatives left their jobs prior to Canales and tried to set up their own business but were killed for trying to avoid the war tax. Figuring he was next, Canales hit the road.

Javier Ávila decided to migrate in June 2019 after drought wiped out his melon crop in southern Honduras for the second consecutive season. He had borrowed about \$80 to rent a small plot for his crop, which was lost after the seasonal rains didn’t arrive, he said from a migrant shelter in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. He couldn’t cobble together the funds to plant again.

Honduras has sent migrants to the United States for decades. Various calamities, both man-made and natural, have triggered exoduses. Some observers say the first wave of migration came from the decline of the big banana plantations—in what was the original “banana republic”—which ceased operations in the 1980s. Then came Hurricane Mitch, which stormed through Central America in 1998 and did so much damage that economists say the country still hadn’t recovered a decade later. Political problems, including the 2009 coup, led even more Hondurans to migrate.

The motives nowadays for migrating from Honduras—and, to lesser degrees, Guatemala and El Salvador—are often multifactorial and include violence, poverty, and problems in the agricultural economy such as drought and low prices for crops (especially coffee).

Dissatisfaction Driving Migration

In the case of Honduras, interviews with migrants and potential migrants reveal “dissatisfaction” with life circumstances and an inability for many to make ends meet as motives for migrating. “Many of the people leaving in the (migrant) caravan had jobs,” said Ismael Zepeda, the economist with the Tegucigalpa think tank FOSDEH. A 2019 survey from Creative Associates International found 32 percent of Hondurans intended to migrate ([Creative Associates International](#)).

Further complicating the migration picture are political problems, which date back to the coup of June 28, 2009. Soldiers entered the presidential palace that morning, grabbed President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya, who had become close with

then-Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, and ushered him out of the country, while he was still in his pajamas ([BBC News](#)). But a string of corruption scandals involving politicians and presidents from the ruling conservative National Party have only further fueled the motivation to migrate, according to analysts.

Narco-Politics

The most recent scandal for Honduras’ political class came in a New York court, which on October 18, 2019, convicted Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernández, brother of President Juan Orlando Hernández, on charges of cocaine-importation conspiracy, along with firearms offenses and false-statement offenses ([DOJ 2019b](#)).

Tony Hernández, a former National Party congressman, “participated in the importation of almost 200,000 kilograms of cocaine into the United States,” according to prosecutors. Hernández, one of whose co-conspirators was convicted Sinaloa Cartel boss Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, “funnelled millions of dollars of drug proceeds to National Party campaigns to impact Honduran presidential elections in 2009, 2013, and 2017,” prosecutors said.

President Hernández was not charged, though he was named an unindicted co-conspirator. He denies any wrongdoing and insists drug cartels are seeking revenge for his government’s crackdown on narcotics trafficking ([Adams and Ernst](#)).

The Hernández conviction revealed the depth of political and electoral infiltration by drug cartels, which use Honduras as a transit country to move cocaine from the Andean



region to North America. Tony Hernández isn't the only relative of a president to be convicted of drug crimes. Fabio Lobo, son of former National Party President Porfirio Lobo, was sentenced to 24 years in prison in 2016 on charges of conspiring to import cocaine. "Lobo used his father's position and his own connections to bring drug traffickers together with corrupt police and government officials," prosecutors said after his conviction ([DOJ 2017](#)).

The level of drug cartel infiltration in Honduras' politics surprised few. "I don't think there's a single important candidate not financed by narcotics trafficking. Not one!" Father Ismael Moreno, a Jesuit priest known as "Padre Melo" and a fierce critic of the country's political class, said in an interview in the city of Progreso. "They're not content with just looting state institutions so they're using the State to get involved with narcotics trafficking."

The U.S. government has showed steadfast support for Juan Orlando Hernández, despite the drug cartel accusations. As the court case unfolded, former acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan described Hernández as "a strong partner" ([Agren 2019b](#)). Shortly after Tony Hernández's conviction, the U.S. Embassy in Honduras tweeted that State Department and Department of Homeland Security officials [met with their Honduran counterparts](#) to "follow up on agreements" signed in September.

"I can't think of another case where we have had such open dealings with a head of state suspected of involvement in drug trafficking," Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute, told the *Wall Street Journal*. "This tells you this [U.S.] administration is really anxious to reach a deal on immigration with Honduras no matter what other concerns there are with that government, including drug trafficking" ([de Cordoba](#)).

Increased Focus on Immigration

The U.S. and Honduran governments agreed in September to an asylum cooperation agreement similar to deals struck earlier with El Salvador and Guatemala ([Hackman and Montes 2019b](#)). The agreements allow the United States to send asylum seekers from third countries—such as Haiti, Cuba, and African nations—to countries to the south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The agreements pledge to increase capacity in the Central American countries receiving migrants. But critics contend none of the countries in Central America have sufficient capacity to process asylum claims and cannot provide for their own citizens or keep them safe.

The U.S. posture on Juan Orlando Hernández reflects the complexities involved when dealing with countries like Honduras. In interviews, analysts posit the United States

The U.S. and Honduran governments agreed to an asylum cooperation agreement similar to deals struck with El Salvador and Guatemala.

has largely shown an interest in combatting narcotics trafficking at the expense of combatting corruption. The focus has turned to immigration, too, especially in the wake of the 2014 crisis of unaccompanied minors arriving at the U.S. border.

Analysts also connect increased migration over the past two years with the country's political problems—the corruption cases rocking the Hernández administration and the conviction of Tony Hernández—with the latter, "giving people a little bit of hope that U.S. justice will do what won't be done in Honduras," said Zepeda, the economist with the Tegucigalpa think tank FOSDEH.

The conviction of Tony Hernández triggered street protests. Graffiti reading "anti-JOH"—as Juan Orlando Hernández is known in Honduras—marks the Honduran urban landscape. Physicians and teachers joined the protests, which flared over the summer of 2019, but are now quickly dispersed by security services. "It's hard to maintain a movement," Zepeda said. "The opposition is fractured."

A Controversial Re-Election—And Loss of Hope

Hernández's 2017 re-election proved even more controversial as the Honduras Constitution limits presidents to a single, four-year term. The Supreme Court in 2015 invalidated the ban on more than one term, saying it infringed on Hondurans' human rights. Ironically, proponents of ending the ban on re-election had used an attempt by Zelaya to seek a second term in 2009 to oust him from office ([Associated Press in Tegucigalpa](#)).

The November 2017 election was rife with irregularities, especially in the vote count, which was mysteriously stalled with 57 percent of the ballots counted and Hernández trailing challenger Salvador Nasralla of the Libre party by five points. When the count resumed, Hernández's vote total climbed and ultimately passed Nasralla's to finish at 42.95 percent to 41.42 percent ([Kinosian](#)).

The 2017 election outcome sent Hondurans into the streets in protests, which were eventually suppressed. Some analysts see a connection between the controversial election

and a surge in outward migration—including the formation of caravans, the first of which left the city of San Pedro Sula some 10 months later.

“My primary [migration] push factor would be the elections and I think what would be a general loss of hope in Hondurans,” said Kurt Ver Beek, founder of the Honduran anti-graft group Association for a More Just Society. “The election was a trigger event.”

Corruption has corroded Honduras for decades. But recent scandals have been especially egregious. In a scandal known as “Pandora,” politicians embezzled money from a fund known as the “District Development Fund”—which was meant for financing local projects—into non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with ties to politicians, according to Univision ([Ernst](#)). The expectation of being caught was so slim that some of the politicians were paid with checks by the NGOs. Those politicians then deposited the checks into their personal bank accounts.

In response to the protests over corruption in the IHSS, the Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) was created in 2016 as an agreement between Honduras and the Organization of American States ([MACCIH](#)). The MACCIH mandate was to last for four years and involved strengthening the country’s anti-corruption institutions and proposing judicial reforms.

The MACCIH, working in conjunction with Honduran investigators and prosecutors, scored its first conviction in August 2019, when former first lady Rosa Elena Bonilla de Lobo—wife of former President Porfirio Lobo—was found guilty of fraud and embezzlement totaling \$650,000 ([Asmann 2019](#)). MACCIH also announced action to seize properties from politicians allegedly involved in the Pandora scandal, including offices belonging to the National and Liberal Parties ([OAS](#)).

MACCIH’s mandate expired in January 2020 and was not renewed ([Palencia 2020](#)). Shortly after its departure, the country’s supreme court tossed out Bonilla de Lobo’s conviction and ordered a new trial ([Asmann 2020](#)). Analysts offer mixed opinions on its performance—with some saying the top tier politicians haven’t been touched and others positing the political class has had reason to worry. “They have everyone nervous,” Ver Beek said. “Is indicting [the] second tier and putting fear into the first tier enough? Probably not. Will they change the culture of corruption in the country? That’s a much higher bar.”

Supporters of Hernández point to actions taken against drug cartels such as Honduras changing its laws earlier this decade to extradite accused narcotics traffickers ([Stone](#)).



Top cartel kingpins have been arrested and sent to the United States. Hernández “inherited the most violent country in the world,” said Fernando Anduray, National Party executive secretary. But the homicide rate, which topped 80 per 100,000 people in 2012, had been halved by 2018. Hernández has also carried out police reforms, along with a purge, which has terminated the employment of nearly 6,000 officers ([Rainsford](#)).

Unmet Expectations

In interviews over the past year, Honduran migrants transiting Mexico to reach the United States often raised the issue of politics as a factor prompting them to abandon the country. Most Hondurans, without being prompted, also mentioned low wages, the high cost of living, and especially the price of electricity.

A labor reform earlier this decade allows employers to hire by the hour—a move Zepeda said has “doubled” underemployment over the past five years. An increase in the value added tax from 12 percent to 15 percent in 2014 was meant to fund anti-poverty programs, but in practice, “the poor fund the poor,” Zepeda said. At the same time Honduras has forsaken billions of dollars in tax revenues to grant tax exemptions to a number of businesses, including fast food franchises under the argument such restaurants attracted tourism. The finance ministry estimated the tax exemptions in 2018 amounted to 6 percent of GDP ([ConfidencialHN](#)).

Hernández has increased social spending for Hondurans in extreme poverty through a program known as “Vida Mejor” (Better Life), which the president’s office says has improved health and education outcomes, according to an analysis by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank ([Presidencia de la República de Honduras](#)).

But migrants are still abandoning the country. Some 109,185 migrants were returned to Honduras in 2019—more than the 75,279 the previous year and 48,022 in 2017, according to CONMIGHO, the Honduran agency handling migrant matters ([CONMIGHO](#)).

In the large cities, violence is pushing people to leave, according to migration observers. In the rural areas, drought has hit some regions for four of the past five years, while prices for coffee have crashed ([Hodari](#)). Veteran coffee producer Silvio Padilla, 69, normally hires 50 seasonal workers to pick his crop. But due to drought and a plague called coffee rust, he said he would hire just 35 workers in 2019—people from poor parts of western Honduras. Young people, he said, “have abandoned coffee,” and think more about migrating. “Us veterans are used to working more, accepting our lot in life. But young people now have another vision of things, want to see other things and go look for them.”

An NGO that Padilla works with regularly sends agronomists to his 7.5-acre farm in the hills of central Honduras and helped turn his farm organic—allowing him to fetch a better price—but also diversify into crops such as avocados. Some of the agronomists are themselves migrating—despite earning 15,000 lempiras (\$600) in rural Honduras—according to supervisors who attribute the departures to the lure of the United States. One of the agronomists in western Intibuca department says he tired of life in Honduras and inquired of a coyote about taking his wife and children, ages 11 and 4, to the United States “to take advantage of this law” which he said would allow minors to enter the country without difficulties. He was quoted a price of \$5,000 for each adult with a child to take the trip as the minor would allow him to cross the border with fewer complications. “But,” he said, “I decided not to risk it.”

Conclusion

Migration has marked much of Central America for decades, driven by the desire to escape poverty and/or violence and the hope of achieving the “American Dream.” Potential migrants profess that they are not easily dissuaded from plying the risky path through Mexico, which is rife with risks like rape, kidnap, and robbery. But the increasing difficulty of the trip is reflected in the rising fees charged by coyotes and the declining number of detentions at the U.S. southwestern border, which dipped to 36,514 in February 2020, down from a high of slightly more than 144,000 in May ([CBP 2019c](#)).

Despite the difficulties of transiting Mexico—where enforcement has been toughened—and crossing an

increasingly secure U.S. border, the push factors prompting migrants to make the trip and abandon Central America continue.

The principle push factors vary in each of the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. But common push factors for migrants include corruption and violence; poverty, including the inability for those with jobs to make ends meet; drought, which is causing crop failure; the falling prices for crops like coffee, a major regional export; and political problems, especially in Honduras, which provoke a sense that improvement at home is not possible and that the future lies abroad.

Extortion continues to force Central Americans to abandon their homes and often the region. Gangs in El Salvador and Honduras continue exercising control over communities and forcing business owners to pay what is euphemistically called the “war tax.” Nonpayment brings death threats, and escaping payments can prove impossible.

Gangs—both the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street gang—can issue alerts via applications like WhatsApp to track down those not paying. Internal displacement due to violence is also common—5.1 percent of the Salvadoran population in 2017, according to one report ([Tueller and Olson](#))—but difficult as gangs view people arriving from neighborhoods controlled by rivals with suspicion.

Politicians often promise tough policies to stop gangs. But critics say such policies only prompt the gangs to retrench and fight for self-preservation. A pastor and former gang member said of the gang ideology, “For my barrio I kill, for my barrio I die.”

Migration, in many ways, underpins Central American economies and provides an escape valve for these countries. Remittances sent from the United States prop up households, provide stability to national economies, and spur consumption. Migration has provided some ambitious Central Americans with an escape from poverty. But it has also enabled elites, who see no need to slow migration, as it is a status quo which works for them—and they are content to keep it intact.

As a Guatemalan think tank analyst said ruefully after President Trump demanded Guatemala sign an asylum cooperation agreement: “We continue doing everything except taking responsibility. ... We’re not the victims and we need to assume our responsibilities because the United States is no longer going to cover the cost of Guatemala’s shortcomings.” ★

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