

GLOBAL

Today's Migrant Flow Is Different

Poverty has driven many previous waves of migrants from their homes. What's new now is the rise of the gangs.

SOFÍA MARTÍNEZ JUN 26, 2018



Police patrol a low-income neighborhood in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in 2015. (FERNANDO ANTONIO / AP)

The killing of a loved one. An attempt at gang recruitment. A rape. Harassment by a police officer. A death threat over an outstanding extortion payment. Amid the justified uproar at the Trump administration's policies on America's southern border, often lost are the reasons many Central Americans leave their homes, and are prepared to brave the perils of the journey north, in the first place. Families arriving at the border from countries like Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala leave behind a

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myriad of stories, many of them connected to their homelands' plague of armed violence.

Historically, Central Americans have tended to migrate for economic reasons. Since the end of the internal armed conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua—which together displaced almost 2 million people in the 1970s and 1980s—thousands of Central Americans travelled to the U.S. to escape economic misery in their war-torn states. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. saw record numbers of apprehensions of migrants along its border with Mexico.

Today's migrant flow is very different. Yes, there are still male heads of household seeking to pursue the “American Dream” in the U.S. so as to send home a couple of hundred dollars each month to their families. But the crux of the recent crisis at the border is that there are fewer male migrants in their 20s or 30s making the crossing, and many more families, newborns, children, and pregnant women escaping life-or-death situations as much as poverty.

Previous U.S. policies contributed to the extreme insecurity in their home countries. In 1996, U.S. authorities approved the “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act,” which led to the deportations of tens of thousands of convicted criminals to Central America in the early 2000s. This in turn led to the expansion of gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (*Barrio 18*)—originally born in the U.S.—across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The region's civil wars left behind tens of thousands of young people from broken families. That reality, combined with extreme inequality, policies of mass incarceration of suspicious

youth, and weak judicial and security institutions created the new monster that is today's gang problem. Over the past 15 years, they have taken over both rural and urban areas across North Central America, setting up roadblocks in poor neighborhoods and imposing their own law. While poverty remains the principal cause of Central American families traveling north, desperation to escape gang violence also motivates many.

In countries like El Salvador and Honduras, parents living in what are popularly known as “red zones”—usually communities plagued by gangs—have to spend hard-earned money on private transport or after-school programs to avoid their kids coming into contact with criminal groups. “It’s really complicated for us [the parents] ... because we need to work more hours to pay for the security of our children and also spend enough time at home to talk with them and make sure they are not hanging out with the wrong people,” a Honduran social worker and mother of two told me recently. I am withholding her name, and those of others quoted in this story, for security reasons.

For some families, it is too late to keep their kids away. In El Salvador, where there are around 65,000 thousand active gang members with a social support base of half a million people, boys from 12 years up are prime targets for recruitment. Girls can also be targeted at an early age, either to be sexually abused or to become gang members. The eventual fate of a girl—whether she is left alone, harassed into joining the gang, or forced into becoming a sex slave—depends entirely on the local leaders, or *palabrer*os, who run the local cells or *clicas* (cliques) of the two largest gangs, MS-13 and *Barrio 18*.

The recruitment process is gradual and lasts from a couple of months to a few years. It can start with a present from the local

gang, such as expensive sportswear or an invitation to come to a party in a *casa loca* (literally ‘mad house’), with sex workers included. If you spend enough time with internally displaced people in Central America, more than one will tell you that their old homes became one of these *casas locas* because the gang wanted it “for strategic purposes” in their turf wars with other groups. If a family refuses to leave, all its members are threatened.

Despite decades-long prevention efforts by local authorities and foreign-backed law enforcement, gangs remain defiant and undefeated. The phenomenon has grown so rapidly since the 2000s that it has penetrated deep into the social fabric of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, meaning police operations alone aren’t enough to defeat the gangs. Top state officials in the region are aware of the magnitude of what they face, and behind closed doors agree that they are “fighting a war they cannot win.”

Nevertheless, the governments from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras continue to rely almost solely on security crackdowns to tackle gangs. This has indirectly created yet another reason for the local population to flee. As an NGO worker in El Salvador told me recently: “The situation is so bad that sometimes people are more scared of the police than the gangs.”

While law enforcement is an inevitable part of the fight against violent crime, the impact in communities where gangs are present can be hugely counter-productive. Especially in El Salvador and Honduras, residents get caught in daily armed confrontations caused by gangs’ turf wars, as well as operations by security forces in their communities to combat them. This is

on top of the usual harassment that the gangs inflict on local families, like trying to recruit their children or extracting weekly extortion payments. “In my previous neighborhood I couldn’t trust anybody, it is like not knowing who the enemy is,” a man displaced from his community in central Honduras by gang violence told me when I met him in Tegucigalpa. In El Salvador, it is very common that teenagers living in “red zones” are harassed by security forces, who consider them usual suspects of gang membership.

This situation has left thousands of Central American families stuck between a rock and a hard place. They know how dangerous the trip to the U.S. is, but are forced to leave to save their lives. “If I stay here, I will die,” a Honduran woman told me in tears during a group interview with victims of forced displacement in Tegucigalpa. Her fear was retaliation from gangs after her son and mother had been killed in the same week.

When I have asked displaced people over the past few months if U.S. migration policies deter them from fleeing, they usually reply that the prospect of being caught by U.S. migration officials makes them anxious, but that “there is no scarier place” than their home countries. This is why, no matter how hard and sometimes inhumane this administration’s anti-immigration policies might be, many Central American parents and their children will be determined to make the trip north anyway.

Many don’t leave much behind, not even their houses. This is why, as a friend from Guatemala who once considered making the trip recently told me, they are still willing to go through the perilous journey: “We know you can get killed, and how dangerous it is especially for women [to try entering the U.S.

without papers] ... but when it's a life or death situation, I bet you would do the same.”

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