

# Forced Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America

## Drivers and Experiences

Sonja Wolf



The Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) is a center for research and higher education specialized in the social sciences. The Drug Policy Program (PPD) is one of the first academic spaces in Mexico dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of drug policy, health, violence, and human rights.



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Forced Migration from Central America Project



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## Introduction

The countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America –El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras– have long struggled with social exclusion and authoritarian governments. Periodic protests were violently crushed, and the inability to achieve change by peaceful means resulted in political violence and civil wars. The Peace Accords signed in the early and mid-1990s and the transitions to electoral democracy allowed for some limited reforms, but the structural transformations that Central American societies needed remained elusive.

The three countries have acquired a more urban and modern face. Citizens enjoy greater protection of human rights than in the past and can freely choose their rulers in ordinary elections, except for Honduras, which saw a democratic collapse with the 2009 coup d'état and fraudulent presidential elections in 2017. There, post-electoral violence, together with the increasing concentration of the executive power over legislative and judicial institutions, has eroded citizen confidence in public and political institutions. The progress that has occurred should not detract from the deep flaws that continue to characterize the nations of the Northern Triangle.

State structures are weak and underfunded due to limited tax collection and widespread corruption.<sup>1</sup> With an underdeveloped civil service, appointments and hiring decisions often based on personal and partisan connections regardless of merit, leave public institutions with little ability to build public policy. Corruption damages democratic institutions and prevents governments from allocating the maximum of available resources for the enjoyment of human rights, particularly economic and social rights.<sup>2</sup>

Economic power continues to be concentrated in a few hands. Deep-seated poverty, exclusion, and racism also persist and affect especially indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples as well as rural populations.<sup>3</sup> Rural poverty reaches 49 percent in El Salvador, 77 percent in Guatemala, and 82 percent in Honduras.<sup>4</sup> Overall poverty rates have decreased somewhat over the years, but more as a result of remittances than consistent social and economic policies. These transfers are an important contribution both to family economies and to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and in 2016 they constituted 10.4 percent of GDP in Guatemala, 17.1 percent in El Salvador, and 20.2 percent in Honduras.<sup>5</sup>

Central America's precarious labor markets, with low unemployment rates and high underemployment rates, offer low wages and little or no social security. Existing socio-economic vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the effects of climate change.<sup>6</sup> The spread of the infectious disease COVID-19 is an additional aggravating factor. According to the Economic Commission for

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Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the imminent global recession will cause a decrease in GDP in the region and a significant increase in unemployment and poverty levels.<sup>7</sup>



*A voting center during El Salvador's presidential elections in 2014. ©Sonja Wolf*

Public services in the Northern Triangle are just as precarious. Health systems are characterized by low coverage, poor quality of health services, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to essential medicines and treatments.<sup>8</sup> There is reasonable concern that the coronavirus pandemic will lead to a collapse of weakened, fragmented, and underfunded health systems. Access to affordable, quality education is equally limited. Education systems have poor infrastructure and inconsistent school coverage. In Honduras, for example, many schools do not have electricity or running water and depend heavily on the support of the teachers and families themselves. Factors such as a lack of financial resources, teenage pregnancies, violence, and gangs also lead to dropping out of school.<sup>9</sup>

Central America is a drug transit zone that presents significant levels of crime and violence, which includes robberies, assaults, rapes, homicides, and extortion. LGBTQ people, or those perceived as such, face violence by state and non-state actors that is motivated by widespread discrimination and intolerance to various sexual orientations and gender identities.<sup>10</sup> The crimes that perhaps stand out the most are homicides and extortion, both largely associated with street gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18.



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In fact, extortion has become endemic and constitutes one of the main sources of illicit income for these groups.<sup>11</sup>

The areas most affected by insecurity and violence are marginal urban neighborhoods with a lack of economic opportunities, state presence and access to public services. These circumstances, in turn, set the stage for the development of street gangs and criminal groups.<sup>12</sup> Children and adolescents join these groups in search of status, support, and belonging that they could not otherwise obtain, or are pressured to join. Once integrated into these structures, they carry out surveillance, drug sales, extortion, and other activities. Girls and women may be forced to form intimate relationships or perform support tasks. Gangs rule through fear and expect residents of the territories under their control to abide by their rules and collaborate when requested.

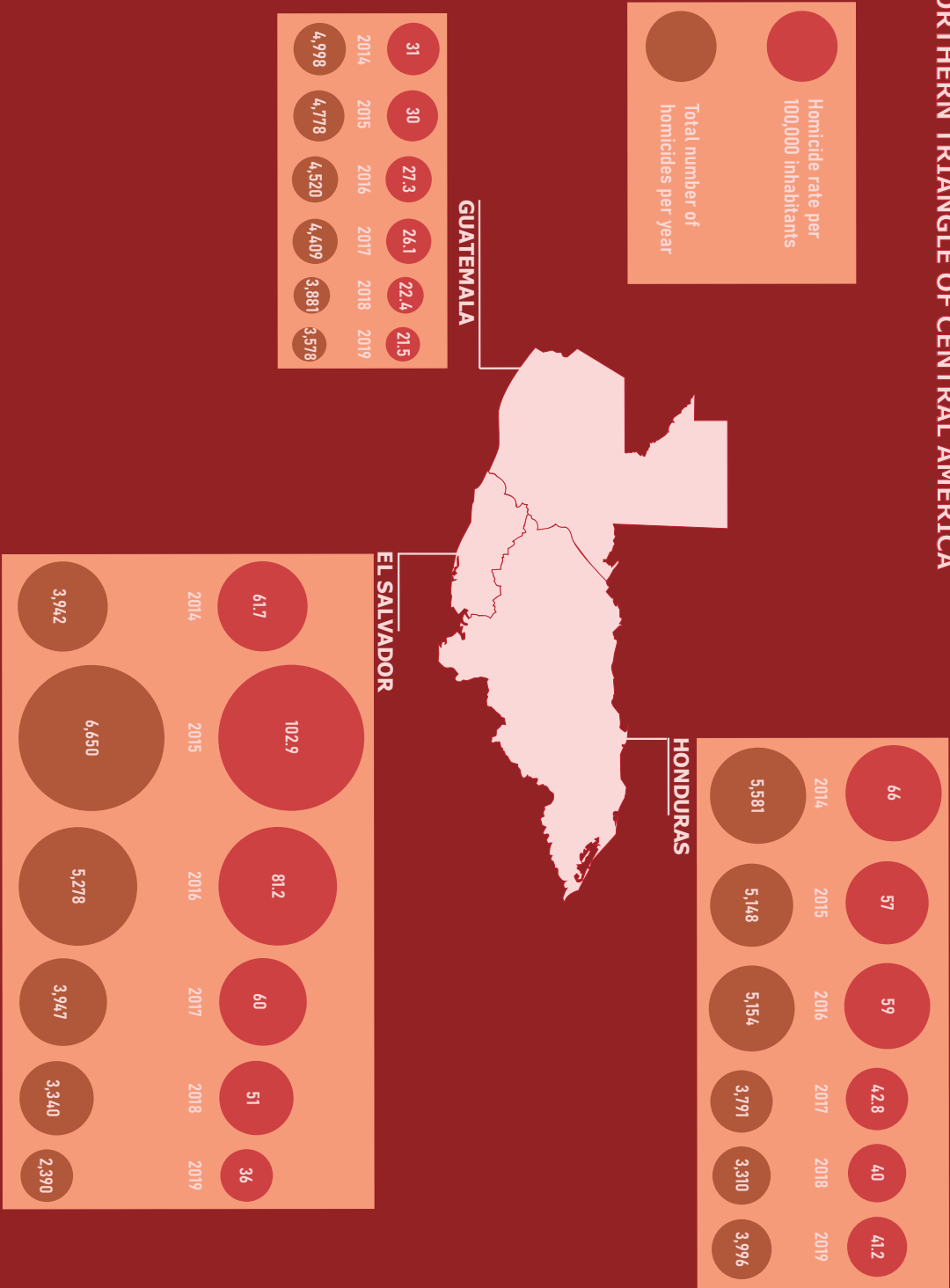
Regardless of who the perpetrators are, most crimes are committed with impunity, resulting in underreporting of crimes.<sup>13</sup> In Honduras, the impunity rate is over 90 percent.<sup>14</sup> High crime and violence rates are worrying not only because of the human and economic cost, but also because they threaten democratic governance. Citizen confidence in the government, the police, and the justice system is declining due to chronic insecurity and widespread corruption.<sup>15</sup> Security agents themselves have been implicated in arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, forced displacement, homicides, and extrajudicial executions.<sup>16</sup>

Governments across the political spectrum have responded to crime, violence, and gangs through highly punitive policies that seek short-term results, but fail to sustainably address the structural roots of insecurity. Furthermore, these strategies often lead to human rights violations and further undermine citizen confidence in state institutions and the rule of law.<sup>17</sup> Prevention and social reintegration programs, which are essential to keep people out of gangs, tend to be implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and have limited scope and funding.<sup>18</sup> US agencies have been supporting governments' fight against gangs, but they have mistakenly seen these groups as transnational criminal organizations.<sup>19</sup>

Security strategies have involved measures such as the classification of new crimes, reduction of age to establish criminal responsibility in adolescents, more severe prison sentences, and excessive use of pre-trial detention that diverts scarce resources to overcrowded prison systems.<sup>20</sup> Most alarming, perhaps, has been the progressive militarization of the police in terms of equipment, training, and operations, making the illegal and excessive use of force more likely. Furthermore, the Armed Forces have gained increasing prominence in the provision of public security. Honduras has even militarized the prison system and has promoted military participation in civic and educational training.<sup>21</sup> Iron-fist policies, while symbolically powerful and often popular with voters, have worsened violence in the Northern Triangle and fueled arbitrary acts and human rights abuses by security agents of the state.<sup>22</sup>

# HOMICIDE RATE PER 100,000 INHABITANTS AND CORRESPONDING NUMBERS OF HOMICIDES (2014-2019)

## NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA



Source: InSight Crime's 2014-2019 Homicide Round-Up and UNAH - Observatory of Violence

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*“Forced migration is due to the persistence of deep-seated forms of violence in the countries of origin. The state does not have a presence in migration-producing communities. This governance gap...is filled by non-state actors, particularly street gangs and criminal groups, who establish control over these territories and their populations.”*

### **Forced Migration: Definition of a Problem**

Migration is frequently divided into dichotomies of voluntary migration (often motivated by economic or labor reasons) and forced or involuntary migration, including the movement of internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing persecution.<sup>23</sup> The binary labeling of migration decisions as voluntary or forced is not useful, because most of them show elements of choice and constraint. Furthermore, forced migration occurs when people face serious threats to life or livelihoods, and there is no reasonable alternative to leaving their country.<sup>24</sup> Neatly opposed categories not only fail to capture the complexity of individual migration experiences, but also have very different political implications. Labeling people as voluntary migrants is politically convenient for states seeking to evade their protection obligations, even if in practice this may mean returning them to danger.<sup>25</sup> According to this conceptualization, Central Americans who lack a minimum of subsistence or security are considered to be forced migrants. Labeling them as forced migrants shifts attention from the illegality of irregular border crossings (emphasized by states) to the drivers of human mobility.

Many of the migrants interviewed for this research explicitly stated that they had no intention of emigrating, but felt that they had no choice but to leave their country due to overwhelming difficulties of making a living or threats of physical violence. Some first relocated internally, but found it impossible to improve their financial situation or stay safe in small countries where gang networks and criminal groups can easily locate and harm victims. Julio, a farmer and former soldier from Honduras, summarizes the options that migrants have given the circumstances they face. “No human being is worthy of the treatment that we receive in our countries. Every day things are getting worse in Central America. No one leaves because they want to, but necessity forces us to hit the road. Sometimes there is no food in the house, no work. So in order not to die there, we better get out. Sometimes people do not understand that. These are tough things that only those who have lived through them understand” (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras).



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## Forced Migration: Factors, Data, and Responses from Central America

There are few systematic investigations of forced migration from Central America, largely carried out by NGOs that collect testimonies and seek to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to victims. Existing studies and reports identify a wide range of drivers of forced migration, including both internal and cross-border displacement. More structural factors include poverty, corruption as well as a lack of trust both in institutions and in their capacity or commitment to combat impunity.<sup>26</sup>

Specific triggers can be as diverse as gender-based and intra-family violence, violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, violence by state actors as well as displacement caused by the establishment of extractive industries or the effects of climate change.<sup>27</sup> In addition, there are drivers related to insecurity generated by the territorial control of gangs and criminal groups, threats, the illegal occupation of houses, extortion as well as gang harassment and forced recruitment.<sup>28</sup>

The occurrence of forced migration from Central America is indisputable and has gained greater visibility in part due to the impact of civil society, including strategic litigation. However, despite the seriousness of the problem, to date there is no coordinated or systematic data collection that allows an adequate evaluation of the nature and magnitude of the phenomenon or the effectiveness of the measures taken to tackle and prevent forced migration. The Northern Triangle governments have been reluctant to acknowledge the existence of forced migration induced by violence.

Guatemala still does not recognize that the phenomenon is occurring. El Salvador has recently done so, and in January 2020 adopted a law to help and protect internally displaced persons. But its successful implementation depends on the state's ability to reduce the territorial control of gangs and to build the technical and material capacity of public institutions.<sup>29</sup> Although Honduras was the first of the three countries to make forced displacement a crime and establish an inter-agency commission to create solutions for those affected, its policies have been hampered by financial, political, and technical obstacles.<sup>30</sup>

The recognition that the territorial control of the states is limited and that they do not have a monopoly on the use of force, has a political cost. But governments' silences and inactions only help make forced migration an inevitable reality for many citizens. Given these institutional inertias, and the difficulties, if not impossibilities, of relocating internally, Central Americans tend to leave for Mexico or the United States. But the obstacles on this journey increasingly make European countries, such as Spain, a sought-after refuge for asylum seekers.<sup>31</sup>

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## Forced Migration: Data and Responses from Mexico and the United States



*The militarization of migration routes in Mexico.*

*©Rubén Figueroa*

Since much of forced migration is irregular, it is difficult to determine the number of displaced people. However, the data on refugees, asylum seekers, and deportees offer some clues. Statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that the number of refugee recognitions for people from the Northern Triangle worldwide increased from 11,985 in 2009 to 90,998 in 2019, representing a 659 percent increase during that period. The total number of refugee recognitions for Salvadorans experienced the most notable peak, from 5,051 in 2009 to 41,850 in 2019, representing an increase of 729 percent during the same period. However, these figures contrast with worldwide asylum claims filed by people from the Northern Triangle, which grew from 19,864 in 2009 to 378,314 in 2019, representing an increase of 1,805 percent. Given the particularly striking increase in asylum applications from Guatemala and Honduras, it is a matter of concern that the number of pending asylum applications far exceeds that of recognized refugees. This disparity suggests that Central American migrants tend to be considered economic migrants and are denied the international protection they require.

A look at the deportation figures for people from the Northern Triangle is also instructive. Mexico, for example, has seen an increase in the number of asylum applications in recent years. In 2019 alone, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) received asylum applications from 3,525

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Guatemalans, 8,711 Salvadorans, and 29,146 Hondurans.<sup>32</sup> But, as the statistics of the National Institute of Migration (INM) of Mexico indicate, deportations of people from the Northern Triangle have also increased over the years, particularly from 2014 onwards. Similarly, arrests and deportations from the United States, particularly by the Border Patrol, have seen a notable increase. The deportation figures alone do not provide information on the reasons for departure or the protection needs of individuals. However, the conditions in the countries of origin and the growth of asylum applications suggest that more people may need international protection, but they are detained and expelled, especially from the two countries on the traditional migration route from Central America.

Central American migrants generally go to the United States, where many of them have family networks and where the labor market is economically more attractive than in the south. Clandestine routes through Mexico to avoid detection by the migration authorities have become even more dangerous since the start of the “war on drugs” in late 2006. Migrants no longer had to deal only with being overcharged for transportation and other services or having to pay bribes to state agents. As criminal groups began to make inroads into the migration industry, Central Americans also became more vulnerable to assaults, sexual violence, human trafficking, kidnapping for extortion or forced labor, killings, and disappearances, often in complicity with police or migration officers.<sup>33</sup>

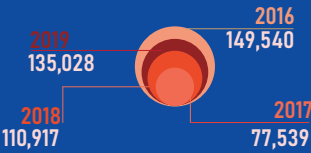
Attempts by the United States to prevent the entry of unauthorized migrants and to detain and deport those who cross the border irregularly intensified in the wake of a perceived humanitarian crisis between May and June 2014. At that time there was an increase in the number of unaccompanied minors and families who reached the border between the United States and Mexico.<sup>34</sup> President Donald Trump, who campaigned on an anti-immigrant platform and branded irregular migrants as gang members, tightened border control policies even though they do not deter people fleeing their countries.

After a series of migrant caravans traveled to the United States-Mexico border between October 2018 and February 2019, the Trump administration took steps to make it harder for people to apply for asylum in the United States and to pressure Mexico to harden its own migration enforcement. United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials have been found to refuse entry to asylum seekers at ports of entry along the border, despite the fact that such rejections contravene international refugee law.<sup>35</sup>

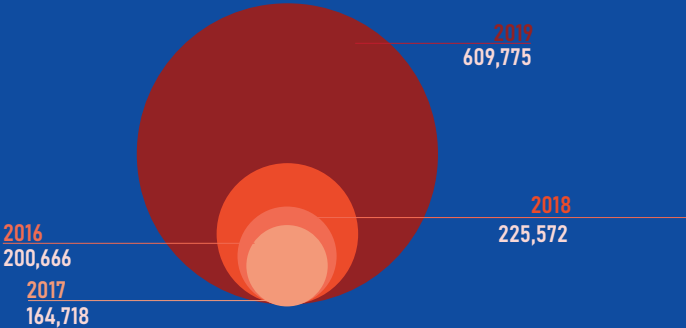
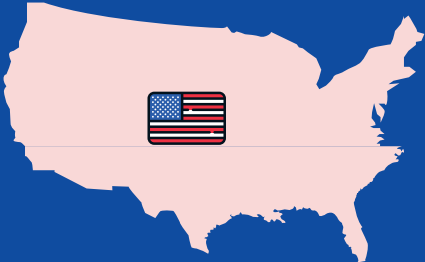
Two key policy initiatives are the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), colloquially known as the “Remain in Mexico” program, and safe third-country agreements with the Northern Triangle that compel people to first seek international protection in a country they transit en route to the United States. According to the MPP, asylum seekers must wait in insecure and ill-prepared



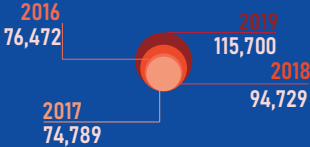
# INDIVIDUALS FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA DEPORTED FROM THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO (2016-2019)



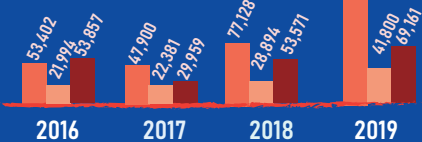
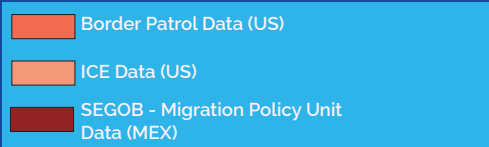
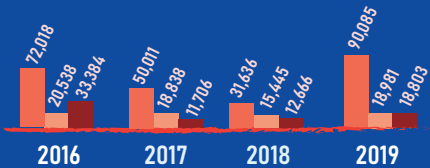
DEPORTATIONS (2016-2019) BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MIGRATION (MEX)



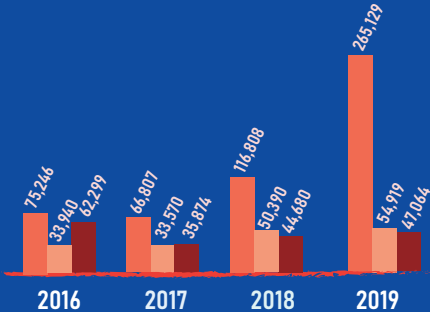
BORDER APPREHENSIONS (FISCAL YEARS\* 2016-2019), BORDER PATROL \*\* (US)



INTERIOR APPREHENSIONS (FISCAL YEARS 2016-2019), ICE\*\*\* (US)



GUATEMALA



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Mexican border cities for the duration of their court proceedings, which can take months or even years.<sup>36</sup> The desired effect of these actions is to create virtually insurmountable barriers to seeking international protection in the United States and leaving refugees vulnerable to arrest and deportation by Mexican migration authorities.

Over the years Mexico has played a vital role in deterring undocumented migration to the United States. Successive governments have endeavored to highlight the country's respect for the human rights of migrants, but in practice Mexico's immigration policy routinely privileges the detention and deportation of irregular migrants. Pressure and funding from the United States have helped shore up the enforcement capacity of Mexico's immigration law.<sup>37</sup> But Mexico also has incentives to act as a buffer state for its northern neighbor in the hope of commercial benefits and favorable treatment for Mexican immigrants in the United States.

The administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador initially committed to follow a migration policy based on respect for human rights and development in southeastern Mexico and Central America. Members of the migrant caravans received humanitarian visas that allowed them to work temporarily in the country. But when in June 2019, the Trump administration threatened to impose tariffs on Mexican products, both governments agreed to implement various immigration control measures, including the deployment of the recently created National Guard at Mexico's southern border. The deployment of this security force, whose members are mostly active soldiers or military police, prompted immigration raids and arrests of irregular migrants.<sup>38</sup> This crackdown overwhelmed already overcrowded and unsanitary migrant detention centers, and heightened concern over inadequate assessments of asylum seekers.<sup>39</sup>

The sharp increase in the number of asylum applications has brought the COMAR to the brink of collapse. The agency is understaffed and under-resourced and has relied heavily on the UNCHR's support to process applications.<sup>40</sup> Given the time it takes to adjudicate asylum claims, Mexico's border regions have seen an increasing presence of migrants along with an increase in xenophobic sentiment among host communities. Research found that migrants in these areas feel especially discriminated against because of their physical appearance or foreign accent, especially when they are looking for work or a place to rent.<sup>41</sup>

Although COMAR has increased its refugee recognition rate, concerns remain that Mexico may be failing in its responsibility to offer protection to the growing number of Central Americans who require it. Officials at the INM, who are also empowered to detain and deport irregular migrants, often do not adequately inform people of their right to apply for asylum or actively discourage them from applying.<sup>42</sup> In addition, migrants have limited access to legal assistance

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that would help them file asylum claims or may feel deterred from seeking refugee recognition by the prospect of being detained in prison-like conditions.<sup>43</sup> In the absence of legal status, migrants are at risk of being returned to countries where they face continuous threats to life or well-being.

The COVID-19 emergency has further complicated the situation for Central American migrants. Detention practices in the United States and Mexico remain unchanged, leaving migrants unable to practice social distancing and vulnerable to infection. The United States is summarily returning asylum seekers to Mexico without implementing any sanitary filters and has delayed asylum hearings under the “Remain in Mexico” program, leaving migrants with no choice but to stay in crowded shelters or tent cities without adequate sanitary conditions.<sup>44</sup> The COMAR at least continues to receive asylum applications, but has suspended their resolution.<sup>45</sup> People left in this limbo may have difficulty accessing health care and other services at a time when there is a greater need for them. This contrasts with Portugal’s decision to grant all migrants with pending residency applications, including asylum seekers, legal residence until at least July 2020 to facilitate their access to public services during the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>46</sup>



*A migrant caravan crosses Mexico.*  
©Pedro Ultreras



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## The Research

Forced migration from Central America is a major public policy problem that requires effective and shared responses by the countries of origin, transit, and destination. As long as the drivers of this displacement are not seriously addressed, people will continue to leave their countries. However, migrants cannot wait for violence to diminish in their countries, which largely depends on the availability of material resources and political will, and both are usually scarce. Migrants require assistance and protection as long as they cannot stay in or return to their communities. In the absence of systematic and reliable data, it is difficult to get governments to recognize the forced nature of migration and to develop the necessary policies and programs.

Today, knowledge of forced migration from the Northern Triangle remains limited and rudimentary. It is essential to have more and better information on the factors and areas of expulsion. Through an exploration of the reasons for departure, we intend to convey that it is necessary to understand migration as forced, whether it is caused by threats to people's life or well-being. The transformation of the parameters of the discussion about this phenomenon is one more step for governments in the region to assume their respective responsibilities of assistance, protection, and public policy.

Furthermore, it is necessary to better discern the characteristics of the neighborhoods and communities that expel people, including the forms of state and non-state governance that occur in different places. Migration from the Northern Triangle cannot be understood without analyzing the evolution and expansion of gangs and criminal groups, as an unintended consequence of inappropriate security strategies or even with the acquiescence or collusion of the state. This analytical lens allows us to train our eyes on the need not only for more effective and humane asylum and migration policies in transit and destination countries, but also more effective and sustainable development and security policies in the Northern Triangle nations.

In response to these concerns, this investigation pursued three objectives. First, it sought to collect, through semi-structured interviews with migrants, detailed and contextualized information on the reasons and places of departure. Specifically, we wanted to understand how the violence generated by different actors or structures of oppression become factors of displacement. Second, it sought to know the reasons for research participation and its emotional impacts on the interviewees. Third, the research findings aim to sensitize decision makers and society in general about forced migration and influence public policies in Central America, Mexico, and the United States.

The research results suggest that forced migration is due to the persistence of deep-seated forms of violence in the countries of origin. In general, the state does not have a presence in migration-producing communities. This governance gap, manifested in scarcity, such as a lack of public services and

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infrastructure, is filled by non-state actors, particularly street gangs and criminal groups, which establish control over these territories and their populations.

Residents must abide by their rules and find ways to maintain agreements of coexistence with these groups if they wish to preserve their physical integrity. They may even turn to these actors to resolve problems or conflicts that formally constituted local or national authorities will not address because they lack the capacity or presence to do so. Without wanting to, people end up giving these non-state actors greater legitimacy and influence, which ends up violating their human rights even more.

However, violence also tends to accompany migrants in transit and in exile. Again, this violence can be physical in nature, such as when migrants are assaulted or kidnapped by criminal groups, sometimes in complicity with state agents. More often, this violence is structural in nature, and is related to the challenges of access to jobs, housing, and public services, especially in the absence of a solid support system for migrants and refugees, as is the case in Mexico.

This book is divided into seven substantive sections. The first explains the research methodology and presents data on the reasons for research participation and its impact on migrants. The second takes up the context of the Northern Triangle of Central America, emphasizing the situation in each of the three countries. The third offers demographic data of the interviewees. Sections four through seven make up the bulk of the study and discuss the drivers of forced migration, the experience of exile, the impacts of forced migration, and migrants' hopes for the future, respectively. The book concludes with some general reflections and a series of recommendations addressed to the countries of the Northern Triangle, Mexico, and the United States.

# DISPLACED PERSONS FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA (2015-2019)



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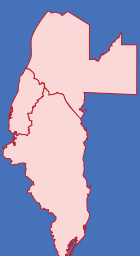
EL SALVADOR



HONDURAS



TOTAL NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA



## REFUGEES



## ASYLUM SEEKER



## INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS



## OTHER PERSONS OF INTEREST



Source: UNHCR Annual Global Trends Reports (2016-2020)

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# I. Methodology

For this research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with forced migrants from the three countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America. Access to the interviewees was facilitated by the migrant shelters in Tijuana, Saltillo, Guadalajara, and Aguascalientes, as well as by the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Aguascalientes, Tapachula, and Mexico City. In that last place, Programa Casa Refugiados also collaborated. 134 interviews were carried out with individuals and families from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. We sought to interview migrants in equal numbers from the three countries. However, in the research period (August to November 2019) the presence of Honduran migrants far exceeded that of other nationalities and thus created a larger sample of interviewees from that country.

The number of forced migrants in Mexico always fluctuates and is influenced by the situation in the country of origin, but it also depends on family circumstances and the availability of resources. While people who travel to Mexico as a destination or transit country are some of the poorest, they need to raise at least a small amount of money to move across borders. Similarly, there are an unknown number of migrants who remain invisible to researchers, because they can raise funds, either through relatives, mortgaging or selling property, to pay a smuggler. It is very possible that fewer Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrants are seen today, because the nationals of these two countries have relatively greater means, perhaps increased by remittances or relatives in the United States that help finance smuggling fees.

## Reasons for and Impact of Research Participation

Great emphasis was placed on creating an ethical research process, particularly through the search for iterative consent. This means that informed consent was not treated as a single event, but as a researcher-participant relationship that was sensitive to the needs, concerns, and values of the latter.<sup>47</sup> Iterative consent requires researchers to provide ongoing assurances that participation in research is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential, and provides collaborators with some degree of control over the research process.

The project included a meta-research component in which at the end of the interviews people were asked why they had decided to participate in the research and how that experience made them feel. Gatekeepers, such as institutional ethics committees, detention centers, and migrant shelters, can prevent migrants, considered a vulnerable population, from participating in research to avoid retraumatization. From this perspective, people should not go

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through the pain of retelling stories of violence, especially when there is no immediate benefit or that benefit is elusive, as is often the case in social science research.



*Norman, a Honduran migrant interviewed in the migrant shelter in Saltillo, Mexico. ©Sonja Wolf*

This may be a legitimate concern, but, particularly when argued by state actors, it could also lend itself to masking human rights violations. Whatever the intent, when gatekeepers deny access to potential collaborators, they also deny them the ability to exercise their right to participate in research and have a voice in matters that affect them. The literature on the research participation of vulnerable populations indicates that, although people may choose to collaborate in a study in anticipation of a direct benefit, such as monetary compensation, they are generally motivated by altruistic purposes.<sup>48</sup> Participation in research can also be seen as a social event that allows people to feel less alone.<sup>49</sup>

Related literature examining the effects of research participation on vulnerable people shows that people may find it difficult to discuss past experiences of suffering, but that the discomfort this may produce is no greater than the anguish experienced in everyday life.<sup>50</sup> In fact, any immediate distress is generally offset by the positive effects of research participation, such as the



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opportunity to speak to an empathetic listener, feel recognized, find a sense of purpose to help others, or contribute to social change.<sup>51</sup> This positive feedback allows the conclusion that the research participation of vulnerable groups should be promoted more widely. However, the views expressed may reflect a bias of social desirability, as participants may not feel comfortable telling researchers that they regretted their research participation or felt hurt by it.<sup>52</sup>

When asked about the reason for participating in this research, some people, especially those with pending asylum cases, expected specific benefits, such as help with their paperwork, a job or food. The researchers explained that they could not help with asylum cases, nor that they could necessarily solve other basic needs. But whenever possible, job opportunities were sought or, as a humanitarian gesture, food was donated. Most migrants expressed having participated in the study for altruistic reasons, such as helping other migrants, raising awareness of the situation of migrants, supporting research, and influencing public policy.

Andrés commented on the possibility of helping migrants in a situation similar to his. “I want this to help someone else, both my compatriots and my other Honduran and Guatemalan brothers. Mexicans should know what happens to a migrant. There should be no migration” (Andrés, 30 years old, El Salvador). Shirley was one of many people who hoped to educate Mexican society about why Central Americans leave their countries. “People who live here, although they see in the news that an infinity of things is happening in my country, they do not believe it. So it is nice when you can talk about your country. I think this is to raise awareness that our country is not doing badly for fun. Some people have asked me ‘Why are you coming to invade our country?’ But I am not a criminal. We all have the right to improve our lives. I am not going to stay in my country and starve. There are people who do not understand that part” (Shirley, 30 years old, Honduras). Mario thought it was important to support research on forced migration. “I have to do my part. I have a responsibility to tell the story, even if there is no direct benefit” (Mario, 22 years old, Honduras). Roque, who traveled with his partner from Honduras, was convinced of the opportunity to be a force for change in his country. “I think the best way to create understanding is to share information. As our experience becomes known, the state can change its way of acting. This may be the start for public policies. When we come here, we are part of this advocacy towards the state” (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).

Many interviewees acknowledged having told their stories with great sorrow, because they remembered the violence they had experienced or because they were unable to bring their families with them. At the same time, they declared feeling “good” or “happy” about their participation in the research. For many people, the experience was cathartic, because they could “let off steam” or “vent your anger or resentment.” Similarly, other migrants felt that the experience

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had been gratifying, because “it feels good to talk to someone”, because they could speak in confidence or because they could “talk about things that cannot be shared with everyone.”

*“I think the best way to create understanding is to share information. As our experience becomes known, the state can change its way of acting. This may be the start for public policy. When we come here, we are part of this advocacy towards the state.”*

*Roque, 51 years old, Honduras*

Some of the interviewees found a sense of purpose by helping explain the reality of migrants. “Listening to the experience of a migrant is not the same as having the experience. You remember everything you have lived through, the poverty. I feel sad about the past, but I also feel happy, because I can collaborate and change things” (Mario, 22 years old, Honduras). Leslie said, “I feel good, because I am talking about the reality. It is difficult to speak about the past, but if we do not speak about it, we silence everything. It is better to say what you feel. It hurts more to be silent than to speak about what you have lived through. It is easy for people to look at you, but do they put themselves in your place? No! It is easy to judge” (Leslie, 34 years old, Honduras).

Other participants derived meaning from their research participation, because “it helps us get along, talk about what happened to us and give us different ideas.” Roque, who hoped to change public policies in Honduras, expressed a sense of recognition. “Our history is important. Coming here makes us feel useful. We are human beings who get taken into account” (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).

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## II. The Context of the Northern Triangle

Prior to the 1980s the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America were agriculture-based economies where conservative landowning elites wielded power directly or in alliance with the military. Authoritarian regimes enjoyed the self-interested support of the United States and lacked incentives to create democratic institutions. An exclusionary economic model, centered on unskilled and low-wage labor in primary production, did not require an expansion of education and other social services. Even the post-World War II growth of manufacturing through import substitution did not see the development of a more liberal political system and improved living standards for the majority of the population.<sup>53</sup> Social discontent with rising inequality and deteriorating economic conditions contributed to the outbreak of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador.

The United States propped up existing regimes with massive economic and military assistance to thwart perceived Communist insurgencies. In Guatemala it supported the genocide of indigenous peoples, while in Honduras it sponsored military bases and counterinsurgency groups. These protracted armed conflicts had enormous social, economic, and human costs. Hundreds of thousands of Central Americans migrated, especially to the United States.<sup>54</sup> In Los Angeles, the new home of many of these refugees, their children joined existing street gangs, such as the Barrio 18, or formed their own street gang, the Mara Salvatrucha. Prolonged military stalemates, as well as the destruction of economies and infrastructure, gave way to modest economic and political reforms in Honduras and to negotiated Peace Accords in El Salvador and Guatemala. Deportations from the United States imported the gangs into the shattered Northern Triangle where they developed amid postwar reconstruction efforts, continued socioeconomic marginalization, and the absence of gang policies.

The first half of the 1990s saw not only a transition from political violence to peace, but also, for the first time, from authoritarianism to democracy. However, it is important to note that democratic systems were not created by choice, but as a pragmatic concession by the elites to end the wars. The new economic model, based on neoliberal prescriptions of privatizations, trade liberalization, reduced regulation, and fiscal reforms, discouraged public social spending. Today, the Northern Triangle has a more urban face, holds periodic elections, and has established formally democratic institutions, as well as civilian control of the Armed Forces. But wealth and political influence remain highly concentrated, and authoritarian legacies have hampered the consolidation of democracy. As a result, states have limited capacity to provide public services and establish the rule of law.<sup>55</sup>

The manufacturing and service industries, more than the agricultural sector, drive economic growth. Labor markets are highly informal and adequately paid jobs in short supply. Poverty has gradually decreased in all three countries, but remains high and disproportionately affects rural areas.<sup>56</sup> In Guatemala, the country with the worst sanitary conditions and the lowest educational attainment, indigenous peoples are particularly affected by the chronic underinvestment in human capital.<sup>57</sup> Increasingly, the Northern Triangle is affected by the environmental impact of deforestation, biodiversity losses, tropical storms, and climate change. In the early 2000s a dry corridor began to threaten water resources, crops, and food supplies, particularly in the western highlands of Guatemala where malnutrition was already acute. Furthermore, mining and hydroelectric projects have caused conflicts with local populations in Guatemala and Honduras.<sup>58</sup> In both countries, environmental and land activists have been murdered with impunity in recent years.<sup>59</sup>



*Mural depicting the indigenous environmental activist Berta Cáceres. The Honduran human rights defender was assassinated in March 2016 by individuals hired by Desarrollos Energéticos (Desa), a company that was building the Agua Zarca dam in the Lenca indigenous territory, Honduras. The mural is in San Salvador, El Salvador. ©Sonja Wolf*



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The Armed Forces' involvement in politics has been largely reduced, but it reappears periodically in Honduras and Guatemala.<sup>60</sup> States have tenuous control over local territories where their governance voids are filled by street gangs and criminal networks, particularly drug trafficking groups. The professionalization of the police forces has been delayed and has led successive governments to request military support for the provision of public security. But non-state criminal actors are so deeply embedded in the state apparatus throughout the Northern Triangle that their association with politicians and military officials has led to widespread corruption. Although citizens now benefit from greater human rights and freedoms than in the past, public institutions are small, underfunded, and unresponsive to the needs of most of the population. According to some observers, "the worst symptom of the region's unresolved challenges ... is people's lack of hope for a better future."<sup>61</sup> Still, these common trends should not hide differences between countries.

## Honduras

Like El Salvador, Honduras has seen steady growth in gangs and gang violence that it has countered through iron-fist policies and, since 2010, the increasing militarization of police forces. Crime and gang violence remain a serious problem, especially in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. But it is organized crime and corruption that have flourished, especially after the coup d'état that removed President Manuel Zelaya from power in June 2009. Zelaya, who took office in 2006, froze commodity prices and raised the minimum wage by 60 percent.<sup>62</sup> In March 2009 he called for a June 2009 national referendum on whether to convene a constituent assembly to rewrite the Honduran constitution. Opponents viewed the proposed poll as an attempt to extend the President's tenure and obstructed the referendum.

On June 28, 2009, the Armed Forces detained Zelaya at his home and expelled him to Costa Rica. The National Congress accepted a forged resignation letter and swore in an interim President. The Organization of American States (OAS) temporarily suspended Honduras, and foreign governments withheld millions of dollars in aid. But Zelaya was never reinstated for the remainder of his term, and no one has been charged in connection with the coup. After a period of serious human rights violations, Honduras returned to civilian rule.<sup>63</sup> But the coup caused a widespread collapse of law and order, as well as an increase in crime and poverty.

By 2013 an unsustainable budget deficit made it difficult to pay government workers.<sup>64</sup> Teachers went on strike because they had not been paid in months. That same year, Juan Orlando Hernández, President of the National Congress, was declared the winner of the contentious general elections. In 2015 it transpired that government officials had participated in a kickback scheme that



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had drained the Honduran Social Security Institute of more than US\$300 million and deprived thousands of citizens of medications. Some of the funds had financed President Hernández's 2013 election campaign. In August 2015, the Constitutional Court ruled that the constitutional ban on reelection was unconstitutional. For months, protesters marched to demand the President's resignation.

Civil society groups called for the creation of an anti-corruption agency modeled after the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). In response, the government agreed to establish the OAS-backed Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). But unlike the CICIG, the MACCIH lacked independent investigative or prosecutorial powers, and was underfunded and hampered by government machinations to ensure impunity.<sup>65</sup> Until its dissolution in January 2020, the MACCIH promoted a series of legal reforms and supported the Attorney General's office in high-profile cases. Corruption and organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, continue to permeate all levels of the Honduran state, including the police as well as the local and national government.<sup>66</sup>

*“Corruption and organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, continue to permeate all levels of the Honduran state, including the police as well as the local and national government.”*

In the 2017 presidential election, Hernández faced Salvador Nasralla of the Anti-Corruption Party. Initially trailing in second place, Hernández saw his fortunes turn around after a power cut. Nationwide protests erupted when the victory was handed to the President, who ordered the security forces to crack down on protesters.<sup>67</sup> The OAS called for fresh elections, but the Trump administration recognized Hernández as the winner. In November 2018, US authorities arrested Juan Antonio Hernández, the President's brother and a former congressman, on drug trafficking and weapons charges. Witnesses who testified during the trial leading up to his conviction in October 2019 implicated the President in receiving drug money for his election campaign. Nationwide protests erupted again that year, and were violently crushed, first over proposed privatizations and later over revelations that the President had been linked to his brother's drug conspiracy. Under Juan Orlando Hernández “Honduras had become a kleptocratic narco-state.”<sup>68</sup>

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## El Salvador

Corruption has been a constant during the administrations of both the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) that governed El Salvador during the first twenty years of the postwar period and of the former guerrilla Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) that held the presidency between 2009 and 2019. The issue has only recently gained greater visibility as a result of investigations by the Attorney General and a journalistic interest in transparency and impunity. However, the heightened awareness of the anticorruption fight has had mixed results. President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) was investigated for the diversion of disaster relief donations of US\$15 million to personal and party accounts, but died in 2016 while awaiting trial. His successor, President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) pleaded guilty to charges of money laundering and embezzlement of more than US\$300 million in exchange for a ten-year prison sentence. The President of the first FMLN government, Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), was accused of embezzlement and laundering more than US\$350 million.<sup>69</sup> In 2016 he fled to Nicaragua where he was granted asylum and, in 2019, he was granted citizenship, thus blocking his extradition. To this day, El Salvador does not have the necessary tools to advance in the fight against corruption. The country does not have autonomous and independent institutions, nor does it have an adequate capacity for investigation and transparency.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps the main problem that El Salvador is struggling with, and that feeds forced migration, is gang violence. Since 2003 successive governments have tried to repress gangs with iron-fist policies. Contrary to their stated objective of dismantling gangs and lowering the murder rate, these arrest-and-incarceration-focused policies fueled violence and strengthened the gangs by concentrating them in segregated prisons.<sup>71</sup> Extortion spiraled as the gangs sought to raise funds to support their imprisoned members and their families. Over time the gangs intensified their control over local territories, effectively restricting mobility between rival gang areas, and their influence in public institutions, particularly local governments and the security forces.<sup>72</sup>

The Funes administration promised to implement a comprehensive security strategy, but limited resources and an unexpected uptick in gang violence made this difficult. A government-sponsored gang truce between 2012 and 2013 managed to dramatically reduce the murder rate. However, the initiative collapsed after a year amid government infighting and a lack of socioeconomic opportunities for gang members.<sup>73</sup> In response to a subsequent escalation of violence and targeted gang attacks on police and soldiers, the administration of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014-2019) declared a war on the gangs and tolerated, if not encouraged, extrajudicial executions of suspected gang members. Investigations by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson (PDDH) concluded that the police had murdered 116 people between 2014 and

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2018 and altered the crime scenes. To date, no officer has been convicted of any of these killings.<sup>74</sup>

Despite being the target of state violence, the gangs have gained legitimacy as social and political actors. They act as de facto authorities in local communities and are the interlocutors of politicians and political parties during gang truces and elections. Both the FMLN and ARENA paid the gangs in the 2014 presidential elections to buy their votes and suppress voter turnout. The reduced homicide rate under President Nayib Bukele, who took office in June 2019, has led analysts to assume that his government has quietly negotiated a reduction in violence with the gangs.



*Mural depicting Monsignor Óscar Romero. He was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, a position from which he denounced social injustice and repression in El Salvador. He was killed by a sniper on March 24, 1980 while officiating a mass. The murder triggered the civil war in the Central American country. The United Nations Truth Commission named Roberto d'Aubuisson, a former military officer and founder of the ARENA party, as the intellectual author of the assassination of the priest, who was canonized by Pope Francis on October 14, 2018. The mural is in the historic center of San Salvador, El Salvador. ©Sonja Wolf*

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## Guatemala

Unlike El Salvador, Guatemala has seen its democracy curtailed by military power. Stable political parties have nearly disappeared and have been replaced by personalities who were propelled to fame and power by personal wealth, their role in the civil war or media influence.<sup>75</sup> Homicides are attributed not only to street gangs, but also to organized crime networks that morphed out of wartime illegal armed groups and operate under the protection of state agencies and political parties.<sup>76</sup> In 2006 the government and the United Nations agreed to establish the CICIG to help investigate and dismantle criminal networks, assist in prosecutions, and recommend policies.

In 2015, the CICIG discovered that political parties had financed their 2011 and 2015 elections with undeclared donations from sources such as state contractors, business elites, and organized criminal groups.<sup>77</sup> In 2015, the CICIG also revealed that dozens of government officials, including retired general and President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti, were implicated in a US\$200 million corruption scheme involving the customs authority.<sup>78</sup> The case, known as La Línea, sparked widespread protests and the subsequent resignations and arrests of dozens of public officials, including Pérez Molina and Baldetti. The first is still awaiting trial, the second has been sentenced to 15 years in prison for a separate embezzlement case.



*A graffiti alluding to the Mara Salvatrucha, located in a marginal community in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador, El Salvador.*

©Sonja Wolf

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The 2015 presidential elections were won by Jimmy Morales, a former television comedian and candidate for the National Convergence Front, a party created by former military officers. Although Morales promised to fight corruption, in August 2017 the CICIG revealed that the President and his party had received some US\$825 million in illicit campaign financing, and announced that it would seek to repeal his immunity from prosecution. A year later, when the CICIG petitioned to lift Morales's impunity for the third time, the President declared that he would not renew the CICIG's mandate beyond September 2019. During its 12 years, the CICIG's invaluable work included dozens of legal reform proposals, the identification of more than 60 criminal networks, and convictions in more than 300 corruption cases.<sup>79</sup> In January 2020 Alejandro Giammattei was sworn in as Guatemala's new President. The former director of the prison system offered to promote economic growth and be tough on crime, but he has not made the fight against corruption a priority of his government.



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### III. Demographic Data on the Migrants

The migrants we interviewed included women and men between the ages of 16 and 55 years. Five of them indicated having a different sexual orientation. In all three countries, people left rural communities (29% of interviewees) or urban areas (71% of interviewees). Educational data shows that many migrants had attended primary school (37%) or had received no education (10%). They suggested that education in their countries was not affordable for poor families. They struggled or were unable to cover expenses such as tuition, uniforms and shoes, books and school supplies as well as transportation costs in places with limited educational infrastructure, particularly when the families were larger and needed some or all of the children to contribute to the household income. However, several migrants had obtained a secondary school (23%) or high school (15%) degree, and some (14%) had studied or completed university degrees in areas such as Public Relations, Pedagogy, Electrical Engineering, Systems Engineering, Local Development, and Public Health.

People with limited formal education had diverse skills and many years of practical experience. Men in particular had worked in a wide range of jobs to make a living. The migrants had worked in fields as diverse as agriculture, commerce, the state, and the manufacturing and service industries.

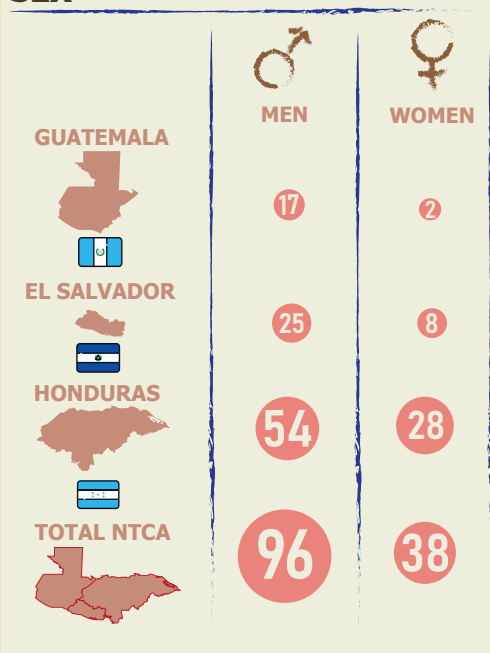
Interviewees with previous migration experiences (40%) had left for Mexico or the United States and returned voluntarily or by deportation, suggesting that migration is a survival strategy that deterrence policies will not effectively reduce. They made the most recent trip alone (46%) or accompanied (54%), often by a close family member, such as a brother, a cousin, or their spouse and children. Many had left their family in the countries of origin due to a lack of funds or the risks of irregular transit. Some people had relatives in Spain, and yet others in Mexico and especially the United States. These transnational connections point to the historical nature of migration from Central America.

At the time of the research interviews, some people (27%) were in a process with the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), or had obtained refugee status (8%) and were planning to stay in Mexico. Some ended their trip there, because they thought that the Trump administration's hostile attitude toward Latino immigrants and the inability to pay a smuggler made crossing into the United States dangerous, if not impossible. Others had never contemplated the idea of moving to that country. Some migrants had obtained refugee status in Mexico, but they intended, like those in transit (21%), to reach the United States. One person in this group decided to continue north because his asylum application had been denied.

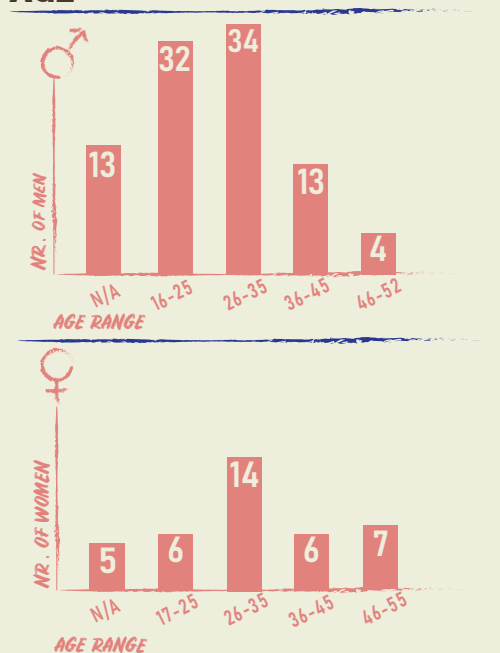
Although a fair number of migrants (37%) wanted to find a way to stay in Mexico at least for some time, others were unsure where to go (8%). Among the interviewees

# SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE INTERVIEWEES FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA

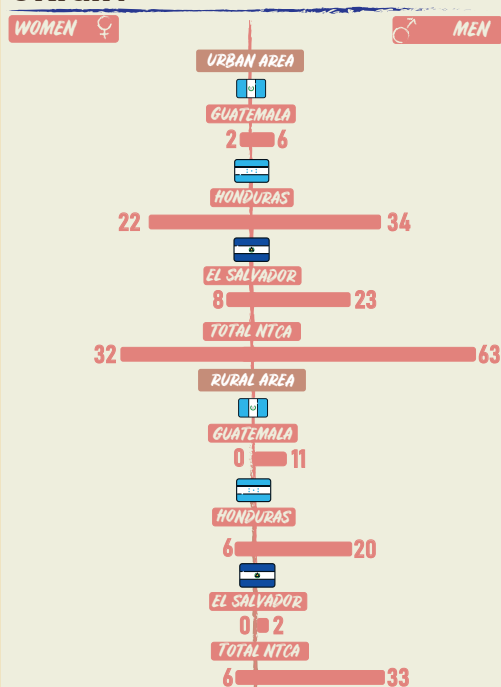
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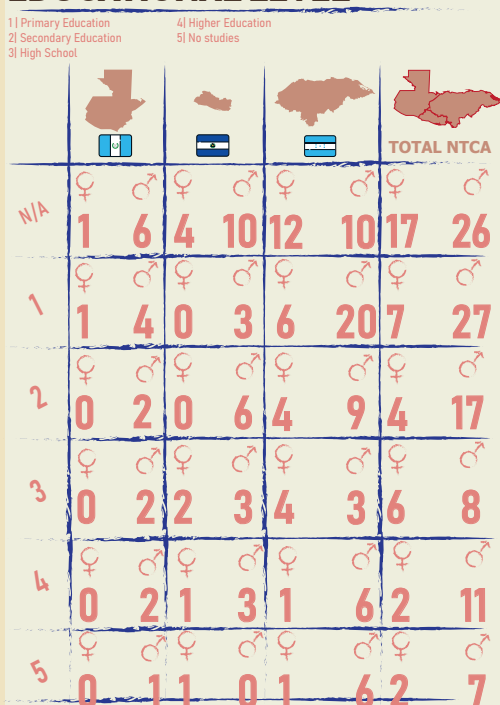
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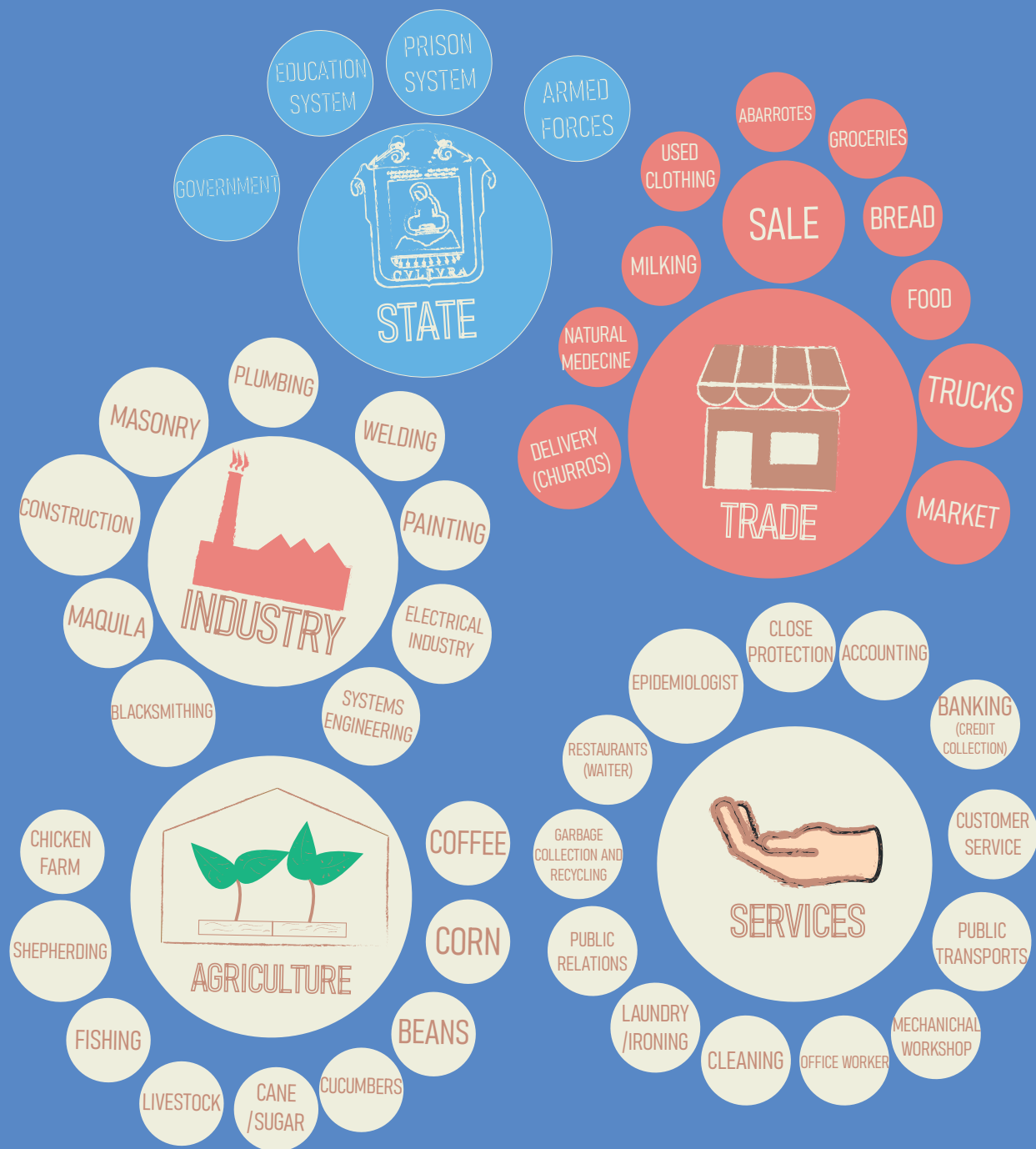
## ORIGIN



## EDUCATIONAL LEVEL



# LABOR ACTIVITIES OF THE INTERVIEWEES FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA



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there was a generalized perception that the country's economic situation was not very attractive or that corruption and insecurity made Mexico little different from their countries of origin. While the drug cartels operated in the former, street gangs were active in the Northern Triangle and were able to follow their victims across borders. Consequently, some of those who had fled the violence were eager to be as far away from Central America as possible. Gregorio expressed a widely shared sentiment when he stated that migrants were little more than prey. "Mexico means no to life. There are no rights or anything for us here. We are nothing to anyone" (Gregorio, 28 years old, El Salvador).

*"Mexico means no to life. There are no rights or anything for us here. We are nothing to anyone."*

*Gregorio, 28 years old, El Salvador*

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## IV. The Drivers of Forced Migration

According to several interviewees, the countries of the Northern Triangle are beautiful places with natural resources and hardworking people. But people were highly critical of the social, economic, and political problems plaguing their countries and how they contributed to forced migration. Although much of the reflections focused on current dynamics, several migrants pointed out that the present was not very different from the past. Although all three countries have transitioned to democracy, they have not addressed the structural roots of the political violence and civil wars that marked the 1980s. In this sense, today's violence, and the exodus it produces, reflects a profound exclusion that has permeated Central American societies for decades.

José emphasized that El Salvador had not fundamentally changed over the years. "In 1992 the Peace Accords were signed, but the war always continued. The gangs developed. They do not hesitate to kill someone. Apart from that, the introduction of a new currency was a blow to the country. Businessmen benefited from this measure, but the poor suffered" (José, 47 years old, El Salvador). Brayan affirmed that violence and abuse of authority were a common occurrence in Honduras. "For Hondurans, violence is our daily bread. We live with it every day" (Brayan, 30 years old, Honduras).

### The Economy and Employment

Migrants from all three countries, but particularly from Honduras, regretted that getting a job had become increasingly difficult, even more so for adults with limited educational backgrounds.

**Requirements.** People had generally acquired skills through informal on-the-job training, rather than formal training. Limited schooling opportunities, and the lack of certificates or diplomas that could document knowledge and skills, hampered access to jobs. Some Hondurans stated that in the past one could get a job only with a primary education, but this was now considered insufficient. However, university graduates were also struggling to find paid work. Employment requirements had also become more burdensome in other respects and now included admission tests, letters of recommendation, a criminal record, and the absence of tattoos. Since all documentation, such as a criminal record, had to be submitted in original with each application, the costs of a job application increased significantly, making them very expensive for poor people. Individuals aged 30 or older also had difficulties finding work. According to a woman from Honduras, the obstacles to getting a job were such that people in her neighborhood were collecting and recycling garbage for a living.



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**Favoritisms.** The perceived need for personal or party connections can also make it harder to access employment. Honduran migrants mentioned that it was practically impossible to get a job in a mayor's office, for example, unless one had worked for political candidates or parties during the electoral campaign. Activists who did so were rewarded with a job once the political figure had been elected to office.

**Availability of jobs.** In Honduras, job insecurity had increased in recent years, since many companies had chosen to give their workers only with short-term contracts of up to three months so as not to have to pay statutory benefits. On the role of drug trafficking groups in creating lawful job opportunities, Diego said the following: "JOH [Juan Orlando Hernández] extradited the big drug traffickers, the Valle Valle brothers, because he himself is a drug trafficker and wants to dominate the small traffickers. They owned businesses and gave people jobs, such as building livestock fence. Zelaya did not act against the drug traffickers so that the poor could subsist with the drug trade and its lawful work, such as milking cows. JOH eliminated the subsidies that Zelaya had given, but he does not invest in jobs. Instead, he invests more in the Armed Forces to defend himself in the next elections. Without drug traffickers, there is no prosperity. The countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America need bad people to create jobs" (Diego, 33 years old, Honduras).

**Working conditions.** Those who had worked in factories felt that despite the low wages they had earned, they had been comparatively better off than those who worked in the fields. In companies, workers had at least access to bathrooms and did not need to spend long hours toiling in the hot sun.

**Low wages.** The wages that many of the migrants had earned in their countries of origin were a pittance, but the situation was worse in the countryside than in the cities. "Most people in Honduras rarely find work. San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa are two cities where one can get employment in factories. But the rest is just fields: bananas, beans, corn, potatoes, and onions" (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). Some people had earned about 250 lempiras per day. Income at this level made it difficult to cover transportation to the workplace, rent and food, let alone pay for water and electricity bills. Given the political instability that Honduras has been experiencing periodically, teachers were perceived as one of the most vulnerable sectors to the effects of protests and insecurity. In some parts of the country, teachers had been without pay for months and just kept working so as not to abandon their students.

However, the most precarious sector was agriculture. Mario explained that the work was exhausting and very poorly paid. "I worked in agriculture. I earned 50 lempiras a day plus food. You work a lot, and the salary is small. You have nothing left to buy clothes and shoes. The money is enough just for the day. It is very difficult to get ahead" (Mario, 22 years old, Honduras). Farmers who worked as day laborers sometimes found work for one or two days a week,

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leaving them without income and the possibility of supporting their families for the rest of the week. Marlin, who had a wife and a baby, said, “Sometimes I worked a day or two a week. They paid me 100 lempiras a day, so I had to take out credits. Sometimes what I did was go someplace by myself and cry” (Marlin, 27 years old, Honduras).

The seasonal nature of agricultural work also meant that farmers were left without a source of income for several months of the year. With the little money they earned, they had to take out loans and pay them off later. Coffee growers managed to make less and less profit in the face of rising cultivation costs. “We plant and harvest coffee, but right now the coffee is worth nothing. They want it for free. But if you go to the store, things are very expensive. The farmer’s effort does not matter to anyone” (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). José, another coffee grower, stated that “the coffee sector is broken. The cost of supplies to grow coffee has increased. The price of coffee went down. Honduras is at rock bottom” (José, 30 years old, Honduras).

Low pay makes it difficult to support a family, especially when a household is large. Adult respondents, who had two to four children, came from families with up to nine or eleven siblings in some cases. The fact that their parents were unable to provide for them adequately led some of the interviewees to live with other relatives and start working at an early age.

The problem of low wages is compounded by the parallel rise in the cost of living. People from El Salvador attributed this trend to postwar economic policies, such as dollarization. Migrants from Honduras considered that things went downhill from the coup d’état against President Manuel Zelaya. The subsidies that were paid during his administration were eliminated in subsequent years, especially with the coming to power of President Juan Orlando Hernández.

Norma, a single mother with four children, explained how the lack of decent job sources forced her to make very difficult decisions. “I worked in the field, in tomato, onion, sweet pepper, and jalapeño pepper plantations. There is no stable work in Honduras, only in the harvest season when the farm owners might grow corn or beans. I knocked on doors, looking for washing and ironing work. I have suffered a lot. I even prostituted myself to feed my children. It is tough, but I did not know what to do anymore. I could only give my children some cooked rice because I had nothing left to give them. In the afternoons I was waiting for them to come home from school and had nothing to give them. I cried. A friend said to me, ‘Let us go to the border, let us do this.’ I had never sold sex before. Since I lived on the Nicaraguan border, I went over to the truck drivers” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).

Given the dearth of stable and decent employment, many migrants, especially those from urban areas, had created their own microbusinesses. However, gang

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extortion prevented their businesses from flourishing. Furthermore, when the requested fees could not be paid, the owners were threatened and had to close their businesses. Everyone who left their countries of origin for economic reasons was seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

### **The Effects of Climate Change**

The employment situation was one of the main concerns of migrants. The impact of climate change on water demand and availability, agriculture and food security, biodiversity and other sectors was not widely mentioned by migrants. Some of those who had worked on the coast or in the field mentioned this problem in relation to fishing productivity as well as the impact of rising temperatures on health and the possibility of carrying out certain kinds of work. Rafael, a fisherman from El Salvador, expressed that “before, there were loads of fish. The boat came back with four bags, that is what we call the nets. Your hands got soft from handling so much fish. But today that does not happen anymore. The boats come back with just two bags, at most” (Rafael, 39 years old, El Salvador).

Norma, an agricultural worker from Honduras, stated that “on one occasion I worked in the melon fields in Choluteca. There I would get up at 1 in the morning. At 2:00 in the morning the bus arrived, because we traveled for about two hours to be at work at 5:00. We worked hourly, cleaning the melon plants. Sometimes we would come back at 6:00 or 7:00 at night. I normally weigh about 120 pounds, but during that time I weighed like 80 pounds. I was skin and bones because Choluteca is very hot” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).

### **Public Services**

Migrants commented that public services in their countries, especially health and education services, were precarious. In rural areas, the road quality was described as poor, public transport as inadequate, and electricity and drainage as absent. According to the interviewees, health and education are not only deficient, but also unaffordable for low-income people. Health clinics and hospitals, where they were within reach, provided poor care and medications were unavailable or very expensive.

Public schools had insufficient funds and charged parents fees for the purchase of blackboards, erasers, brooms, and mops. In some places, parents were even in charge of fixing the roofs and windows of schools. For low-income families, the payment of fees and the purchase of uniforms, shoes, and school supplies meant that education was effectively out of reach.

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Norma, who lived in the border area of Honduras with Nicaragua, commented “I lived in a livestock and agricultural area. The schools there are very poor. Before, the schools did not ask the parents for much, but now they ask that the children go to school in uniforms and with shoes, that you pay tuition, everything. Now a public school is almost like a private school. If you are poor, you do not have enough money to send your children to school. There is a health center, but medicines are very scarce. The closest hospital is in the department’s capital, but the service is poor. Since I lived near Nicaragua, I went to the clinic on the other side of the border. With my youngest son, I had a high-risk pregnancy. Since the health care was so poor, when I had to give birth to him I was alone in my house. I could no longer bear the pain, but I braced myself and gave birth to him alone” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).

### **Discrimination and Violence Against the LGBTQ Population**

Five people expressed having a different sexual orientation. In their countries of origin, they had suffered discrimination from their own families, students, and teachers as well as society in general. “I never told my mom that I was gay. I was afraid that she would throw me out of the house. She would not have told me that I was no longer her son, but she once threw a knife at me. It is not that she is violent, but she has a very strong character. I got out because of the discrimination. I felt sad when I walked down the street and heard people say to me ‘Goodbye, bitch!’” (César, 17 years old, Honduras).

Denis, a young Honduran man who came to Mexico at the age of 15, spoke about the intolerance he encountered at school. “I am gay. My family was not very accepting of it. They hit me to cure me. The truth is that my youth was very painful. There was a lot of discrimination. Like it or not, when you are gay it shows. At school, teachers make fun of you, bully you. My grandmother saw that people made fun of me, because I was the only gay person in my family. The people in my town are very closed and to avoid criticism of our family, my grandmother sent me to another city when I was 11 years old. I started living by myself” (Denis, 21 years old, Honduras).

A lesbian woman from Honduras stated that, due to her sexual orientation, she had faced some difficulties in finding a job and had even been threatened by gangs. Similarly, a man from El Salvador claimed to have been the victim of assassination attempts for being from the LGBTQ community.

For José, a farmer from Honduras, the feeling of discrimination and rejection was so overwhelming that he tried to take his life twice. “In Honduras, gays are not well regarded. Everyone sees you as the weirdo. There is no need for you to say that you are such or such, because as much as you want to hide it, your gestures, your way of walking, your way of speaking, these are things that give you away. I got depressed, felt that I was not useful for anything or anyone.

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I even tried to poison myself twice. I preferred being dead to leading a life that I am not willing to lead. It is quite difficult. You cannot involve your family, because you are afraid that your family would react the same. You are afraid to go to a human rights organization, because people will ask you what you were doing there. So we do not even go to a psychologist. I have asked God to change me, I have tried to change, but I cannot. Being gay is not something that you choose. You are born that way. I can decide not to sleep with a man, even if my body wants it. But there are things you cannot change. I want to be accepted for who I am. The migrant shelter's rule is one of non-discrimination. You feel good, because at least you have the organization's support. I feel freer in Mexico" (José, 30 years old, Honduras).



*José, a Honduran migrant interviewed in the migrant shelter in Saltillo, Mexico. ©Sonja Wolf*

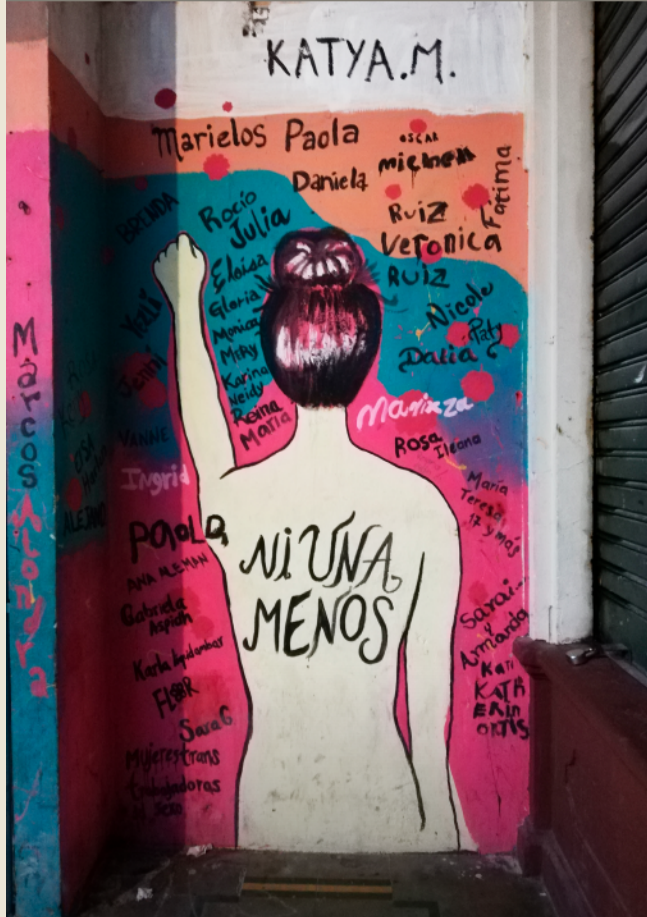
## **Domestic Violence**

Norma had to leave her native Honduras after several episodes of domestic violence at the hands of her partner, a gang member. "I suffered a lot of domestic violence. My partner was very aggressive, violent, he hit me. He was abusing me. When I did not want to sleep with him, he took me by force. He is a gang member. When I first met him, he was not like that. But in the gang, he got into alcohol and drugs and became more violent. Gang members are aggressive, they have no heart. I reported him, but sometimes they took him away one day and the next morning he would be back. Are they waiting for you to get killed? I do not know. On one occasion, he tried to kill me with scissors and I stabbed him with an ice pick, putting it halfway in his hand. I reported him, but they did not listen to me. Instead of taking him away, they locked me up for 24 hours. It is very



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common that they take the women and not the men away. When I decided to come to Mexico, he wanted to kill me, and he attacked me with a knife. He was very drunk, and I was able to defend myself a little. I still have scars. If I am alive, it is because God is great. So, when this happened, instead of going to the authorities, I decided it was better to leave Honduras” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).



*Mural created to raise awareness about femicide in El Salvador, by the artists' group of the Cultural Café Maktub. The mural is located in the historic center of San Salvador, El Salvador. ©Sonja Wolf*

## Child Sexual Abuse

A Guatemalan mother fled with her two daughters to Mexico after the younger one was abused by her father and the complaint was leaked to the media, resulting in agonizing levels of social harassment. “My youngest daughter, when she was about nine years old, started doing poorly in her studies; she no longer got the same results. My older daughter, when she grew up, did not want to see her dad anymore, but my ex liked to take our younger daughter with him. When

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she started secondary school, she fell apart. I started to investigate, and she told me that her dad touched her. So I reported him. I went to the PGN [Procurator General] and to the Attorney General to defend my daughter. But the Guatemalan authorities betrayed her. It was all published in the news: her name, her address, a photo of the school where she studied.

Very ugly social harassment began. I could not even walk to the corner without being asked what had happened to my daughter. It was harassment that punished me. And my daughter no longer wanted to go to school. At school, gang members told her, 'If your dad touches you, we will touch you too.' She fell to pieces and did not want to leave the house anymore. I went to the Attorney General. I protested. I wanted to withdraw the complaint, but it was not possible. I lived three years with that. 'No,' I said, 'this will not be solved'" (Ana, 51 years old, Guatemala).

## Gang Violence

Gang violence represents another major driver of forced migration. As the interviewees pointed out, the problem is occurring especially in the urban areas of Honduras (such as Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula) and El Salvador (such as the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador). It is aggravated by the formation of gang networks and, in the case of El Salvador, by the small size of the country. People who fled gang threats commented on how their lives were affected by these groups, particularly through activities such as forced recruitment, extortion, forced collaborations, and forced dating.

**Feeling of insecurity.** In gang-controlled neighborhoods, the mere presence of these groups creates a daily feeling of insecurity and even terror, as their readiness to resort to violence is widely known. A Honduran family, which was being extorted and feared for one its teenage daughters because she had caught the attention of some gang members, was unable to lead a normal life in the neighborhood. "You could no longer live in peace – from time to time bullets would hit the wall of my house. There was no need for confrontations; they were shooting just to pass the time. The worst thing is that you cannot go and report them because the police let gang members know that someone went to report them. We have noticed that people who reported gang members have been killed. They get taken out of their houses and killed. The police, perhaps because they fear for their lives themselves, collude with the gang members. Another thing is that there are gang members in the police. So, your life is always at risk. We lost two brothers to crime. But what you must do is shut up and say nothing. I saw many deaths near my house, and you could not say anything, just burst into tears, because they are innocent people. There came a time when the bullets hit our window and pierced inside. We could not take this anymore" (Marlon, 44 years old, Honduras). There were also armed assaults on buses or in neighborhoods, especially on payday. Some migrants mentioned the

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existence of periodic curfews when people were advised not to leave the home to avoid injury or death in armed clashes between rival gangs.

*"Gang members have their rules. If you do not do what they ask, they come and hurt you. Then what do you do? It is very difficult. They feel superior, they say they rule. When you have daughters, it is very difficult. You are always afraid that they will get hurt."*

*Juana, 49 years old, Honduras*

**Mobility restrictions.** People living in gang territories face mobility restrictions that make it difficult for them to go to rival gang areas to visit family or friends, attend school or do their work. Given the surveillance and identity checks carried out by gangs, anyone who enters these territories is at great risk. Gregorio, who worked as a bus driver in El Salvador, narrated that "at the beginning I had problems with gang members. They began to intimidate and interrogate me. Then they said they would let me work, but they wanted to know if I was going up let rival gang members board the bus. You notice who is involved in gangs because of their haircut or the way they dress. If a gang member boards my bus and then a rival gets on, it is no longer my problem. I just do my job, make my stops, and that is it. That is the service you provide" (Gregorio, 28 years old, El Salvador).

Marlon, who had come with his entire family to Mexico, spoke of the effects that these mobility restrictions have on social cohesion. "When my sister and her family came to visit us, the gang members were trying to figure out why they came and where they were going. You could no longer invite friends to the house, because gang members think that every stranger who comes to one's home is watching them. Hondurans have already become antisocial" (Marlon, 44 years old, Honduras). The fear in gang territories was so pervasive that all that was left to do was ask God not to let anything happen. Several migrants suggested that if you wanted to survive in the territory of a gang, you needed to obey its code of silence. If you saw something related to their criminal activities or witnessed a murder, you needed to "see, hear, and shut up."

**Gangs as a conflict resolution tool.** Zulay, a Honduran woman whose daughter was bullied by her neighbor's children for having Down syndrome, described how her neighbor used her friendship with gang members to intimidate her. "The problems started because my neighbor's children bullied my daughter. One day I complained, but the neighbor has a brother who is in a gang. They threatened to kill me and my children" (Zulay, 26 years old, Honduras).

**Free-riding.** Carlos, who worked as a credit and collection manager for a bank in his country, related how gang members' refusal to pay their debts resulted

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in threats and, ultimately, the termination of his employment contract. “It was prohibited to give credit to gang members. But in El Salvador it is very difficult to know who is or is not a gang member. There were gang members who, perhaps through an aunt, took out loans and then did not pay the debt. Sometimes I would go to houses to collect debt, because people were behind on their payments. One day I went to collect a woman’s debt, but she was not at home. Her son stepped outside, shirtless, with gang tattoos on his chest. When I asked him to tell his mother to come to the bank to bring her account up to date, he said no, that the money was his and that he did not have to pay anything. He pulled out a gun and told me to go or he would shoot me. I came across more situations like this. In fact, in some cases I had to seize people’s assets. People were a little resentful of me, because I had taken away their things. I started having problems with both gangs. When I could not clean up that loan portfolio, the bank fired me. But even after I stopped working at the bank, the gang members continued to follow me around. They had been given the green light to kill me” (Carlos, 31 years old, El Salvador).

**Forced recruitment.** Gangs continue to grow, because marginalized youth see in them a vehicle for respect and social status that is otherwise unattainable. In one case, parents who tried to prevent their son from voluntarily joining a gang were threatened by the group, because it resented their interference with their son’s decision. But gangs are also actively seeking to recruit new members. Initially they try to persuade young people to join the gang by inviting them to eat or giving them gifts. If these enticements do not have the intended effect, the threats begin. Schools and communities serve as recruiting grounds, especially socialization spaces such as soccer fields.

In schools, the presence of gang members or their children among students creates a climate of mistrust and fear in the classroom that limits social interactions. Some of the interviewees stated that they had limited communication with gang members to avoid getting into trouble. In schools, young people can be attacked or extorted by gang members. They may also be asked to sell drugs. Risks also accompany them on their way to and from school. Two brothers from Honduras, for example, reportedly attended the night shift at their school because it was cheaper than the earlier shifts. This made them more vulnerable to acts of violence, because more gang members attended the night shift, and because the lack of public transportation options at that hour required the brothers to walk to school and back. In another case, a ten-year-old boy from Honduras was kidnapped by a gang. His mother managed to locate and release him, but was later threatened for taking her son home. Some of the migrants fleeing forced recruitment had already seen relatives killed for the same reason, making the threats against themselves seem more real.

**Extortion.** Extortion represents perhaps the main source of illicit income for gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America. An unusual type of extortion,

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mentioned by teachers from El Salvador and Honduras, consisted of pressuring teachers to give their gang students undeserved passing grades. However, in general, it is the residents and, more often, the commercial establishments that are extorted weekly or fortnightly. Fishermen, ranchers, taxi drivers, and food stall or store owners had to pay fees of varying amounts.

Extortion represents perhaps the main source of illicit income for gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America. An unusual type of extortion, mentioned by teachers from El Salvador and Honduras, consisted of pressuring teachers to give their gang students undeserved passing grades. However, in general, it is the residents and, more often, the commercial establishments that are extorted weekly or fortnightly. Fishermen, ranchers, taxi drivers, and food stall or store owners had to pay fees of varying amounts.

Sometimes one can negotiate the payable amount, sometimes victims can deliver household appliances as a form of payment. However, fees tend to increase over time. This is when people can no longer meet extortion demands, as the payments affect their income and make it impossible for them to cover business-related expenses and support their families. Some migrants tried to open businesses successively in different places, but the extortion started again after each relocation.

Roque, who was extorted just like his partner, explained the gangs' *modus operandi*. "For extortion, the gangs tend to use minors, they call them flags. They put them in strategic places and give them a cell phone or a Walkie-Talkie so they can warn the gang of any movement, be it from the police or another gang or from the person they are going to extort. That is their job. They usually recruit under-18s for that. In my country there are thousands of ninis, youth who neither study nor work. The gang pays them about 1,500 lempiras a week and gives them a gun, so they feel empowered with money, with a gun, with a cell phone. Sometimes the gang sends the minors to leave the extortion message, but the moment one of them leaves you the message, there is another one talking to the gang on the phone. There are adults and minors, but the minors are the cannon fodder, 15-year-olds and younger, because if they get caught, they know that the law protects them. It is easier for minors to get out of jail. On the other hand, if they get caught, they have their code of silence, because if they get caught and put in jail, their families get money from the gangs. They are well organized. Sometimes I think they keep better track of their accounting than we did in our business."

"Sometimes they identify themselves by phone or deliver a message to let people know what day they will stop by to collect the payment. The gangs have already reached a level where they are giving scholarships to young people to study law, and when they graduate, they will become the lawyers of gang members. The gangs also recruit people with accounting knowledge to help



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them with their businesses. They create a profile of you, a business study – so they know roughly how much you can give, and they tell you how much you have to pay and how often. Sometimes it is once a week, sometimes every fortnight, sometimes once a month. And they identify themselves using the name of the gang, because for them it is very important to mark their territory, to let it be known who controls it. The problem is that some neighborhoods are divided between rival gang territories, so you do not get extorted by only one group, but by two. That is when it gets worse” (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).

The retaliation for noncompliance is severe. A woman from Honduras, whose grain business was located between rival gang territories and who had to pay the so-called “rent” to two gangs, was even extorted by her own son. The 20-year-old man, the product of a rape, was a gang member and tried to kill her when one day she could not pay what he demanded.

As Roque commented, “the gangs have what they call ‘crazy houses.’ These are places where they take people to warn them, even to kill them. They have a bat, a wooden stick, they call it *chayán*. Most people already know that *chayán* exists, they do not know where, but they know that it exists. It is no secret. Gang members prefer that it is not a secret so that you are more afraid of an attack” (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).

Another serious case concerned a Salvadoran man whose grocery business was extorted and had to be closed once its owner was no longer able to pay the growing fees. He and his wife moved to another part of the country, and the man began working as a bricklayer. However, gang members located the couple a few months later, raped the wife, and attempted to kill the man at his workplace. While the woman went to stay with relatives in El Salvador, the man fled to Mexico. The couple never reported the events, because this would not have undone what had happened.

**Suspected snitches.** People received gang threats if they were seen as infiltrators, that is, residents in the territory of a gang but who ventured into an area of a rival gang for personal or professional reasons. A young Salvadoran, for example, lived in a gang-affected neighborhood, but his work as a food deliveryman took him to different gang territories. When their members verified the address on his ID, they thought he had been sent to spy on them and beat him.

Xenia, who was a primary school teacher and was finishing her Bachelor's Degree in Pedagogy, narrated how gangs watched over all the teachers at her school. “Gang members were your worst enemies. My house was in an area of the Barrio 18 and I worked in an area controlled by the MS. Members of the Barrio 18 chased me to school and discovered that it was in an area controlled by a different antisocial group. In the end, I could not leave the institution without being discovered. I was scared, because outside my school gunfire began between the gang members of that school area and those from my home area,

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who came to keep an eye on me. The MS thought that I was watching what was happening in their area and was reporting back to my neighborhood, and the gang in my neighborhood thought the same in reverse. That is why they threatened me. If I had kept working in a place controlled by a gang that did not match the place where I lived, they would have killed me. I had to choose one of two things: my life or my job. I had a permanent position as a teacher, but since I had my family, I had to leave my job and flee” (Xenia, 35 years old, Honduras).

The gangs’ reactions could be just as severe when they thought that people in the areas under their control collaborated with the police or had some direct link to law enforcement officers. A young Salvadoran, the son of a police officer, was perceived as an informant and, therefore, a target of gang violence.

**Forced collaborations.** Gangs not only seek to recruit new members, but also force individuals to collaborate to facilitate crimes or prevent arrest and imprisonment.

Facilitation of access to targets. Two cases were reported in which migrants claimed to have been threatened for refusing to facilitate access to gang targets. A man from Honduras let his brother, an ex-gang member, stay at his home to recover from an injury. The perpetrators of the first attack tried, unsuccessfully, to kill the injured man who managed to flee. The gang threatened to kill the interviewee and his family unless he revealed his brother’s whereabouts.

A Salvadoran refugee recounted how he faced an assassination attempt for obstructing the path between rival gang territories that crossed his property. “Since I lived at the point where the three groups’ territories butted up against one another, my house was sometimes used as a bridge. If the Barrio 18 gang members wanted to go and murder someone in MS territory, they could easily climb on the roof of my house and return that same way to their territory. I had very nice trees in my garden, but since the gang members used them to climb on the roof, I had to cut down everything I had planted in my garden. That caused me problems, because the gang members came and asked me why I was getting in their way, why I had cut down all the trees. But cutting down the trees did not stop them, because they always came up with something else. They had all sorts of tricks to get on the roof and do something illegal. To stop this situation, without knowing anything about construction and brickwork, I bought bricks and built a wall with my own hands. Both gangs thought that I was collaborating with the other side. The Barrio 18 tried to kill me, because they thought that I collaborated with the MS, and the MS tried to kill me, because they thought that I collaborated with the Barrio 18. Following that, I was seriously attacked in my home” (Manuel, 33 years old, El Salvador).

Signs of perceived rudeness. Another Salvadoran refugee recounted how gang members killed his brother-in-law and then resented the fact that the grieving family turned their backs on them. The widow was even asked not to express her grief on Facebook, a reaction that suggested that the gang was monitoring

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members of the community on social media. Subsequently, the interviewee fled the threats to Guatemala where he felt that he was being followed. He then returned to El Salvador where he spent about five months hiding in a relative's home, located in the territory of a rival gang. Unable to return to a normal life, he decided to leave El Salvador. "I missed working. I felt like I was suffocating. Sometimes I felt dizzy, I felt all weird, because I was locked in a room. You are traumatized. I got depressed and was desperate to get a job" (Carlos, 22 years old, El Salvador).

Lending of motorcycles or cars. In one of the cases in this area, a Salvadoran migrant reported that a gang murdered his brother after he refused to lend his motorcycle to transport drugs. The interviewee filed a complaint, but a week after the funeral, his family was threatened and given 24 hours to leave the country. The family moved to Honduras, but the paint shop where the migrant worked was extorted. After an assassination attempt for non-payment of the fee, the interviewee fled to Mexico..

Storage of drugs and weapons. In two cases, migrants from Honduras stated that gangs forced them to store drugs in their business or store weapons at their homes.

Drug sales. Two migrants from Honduras reported that gangs approached their families for support in the sale of illegal substances. A woman left the country with her daughter because gang members wanted to force her to market drugs at her secondary school. "Gang members have their rules. If you do not do what they ask, they come and hurt you. Then what do you do? It is very difficult. They feel superior, they say they rule. When you have daughters, it is very difficult. You are always afraid that they will get hurt" (Juana, 49 years old, Honduras). Roque, who had owned a clothing business, was asked to distribute drugs from there. "I had a shop selling second-hand clothes and shoes. Sometimes I also got office jobs, so I combined both things. The business was helping me pay for university, because I was studying local development. At one stage in my life, I fell into the clutches of alcohol. I have been sober for four years now. When you have an alcohol problem, you are desperate for a drink. You try to get one anywhere. At midnight, the places that sell alcohol are not great places, but you do not care if you can calm your anxiety. The place where I used to go to buy alcohol was near a corner where they sell drugs. I tried marijuana a couple of times, but it was not my thing. But some friends said to me, 'Buy me a marijuana joint.' So, I got to know some MS-13 members. At some point the gang members sent me an acquaintance, a relative of those who were most involved in selling drugs. They looked for me, because they knew that I had bought alcohol in that area and had a shop selling clothes and shoes. Businesses like that are places that people go to and they serve as fronts for the gangs. They wanted me to sell drugs at night, and in the morning they were going to pay me 100 lempiras a day, that is, 3,000 lempiras a month. With 3,000 lempiras a month, plus any other income that you may have, you can continue to study without problems. But accepting that is a commitment. I told him that I was going to think about it, but

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Sara, my partner, had already received threats, so I had no choice but to say no. I thought, 'Let us see what they say, if they leave me alone.' But they told me I had to pay protection for the business. I did not want to give them a single cent, so I thought I had better give away all the clothes and prepare my trip to Mexico" (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).

Manufacture of handmade weapons. One migrant claimed that a gang forced him to make homemade weapons. "I am a welder, and the MS asked me to make them some shotguns. But I did not want to make them, because I knew they were going to be used to hurt people. I got beaten up really bad and was hospitalized for a week" (José, 47 years old, El Salvador).

Warnings of police presence. Those who lived in gang territories commented that it was common for residents to be asked to alert gang members to the arrival of police patrols, thus allowing them to flee or hide. Delmi, a street vendor from El Salvador, recounted how this type of forced collaboration, like the others, involuntarily turned people into accomplices of the gangs. "There is no age limit for the gangs. They can use anyone who lives in their neighborhoods. They asked me if I had seen a patrol car outside. At the beginning when they asked me, I said, 'I do not know.' I was angry that they asked me, because maybe they wanted to hurt someone. Later when they asked me, I said, 'I was not paying attention,' because if you collaborate with them, you become an accomplice to evil. How can you complain about them if you get involved in evil yourself?" (Delmi, 54 years old, El Salvador).

Provision of confidential police information or military training. Members of the security forces represent attractive targets for gangs because they have access to inside information and firearms. A Salvadoran migrant indicated that he requested his discharge from the Armed Forces so as not to be pressured to collaborate with gangs. A former soldier from Honduras stated that he was unsuccessfully approached by the Barrio 18 to work for that group and share with it his knowledge and military training.

Entry of illicit items into prisons. One Honduran migrant, a former soldier who worked for several years as a guard in detention centers for juvenile offenders, explained how his refusal to comply with the gang members' requests resulted in threats and led him to quit his job. "The gang members in the center wanted me to do favors for them, to pass them drugs, weapons, even a grenade, to bring them extortion messages. They start with small things, but then they ask for more and more, but they offer you more money too. First, they try to persuade people. I was offered 200,000 lempiras to smuggle in a grenade. I could have done it, because I was head of the group of guards. But I always refused to work for the gang members. As a guard, you either agree to their requests or a family member dies. They are smart. They do not kill the guard, because they need him. They threaten to kill a loved one of yours, so that you will agree to their demands. I endured the threats for a long time without agreeing to their requests,

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because you cannot do that. If I had agreed, I would be working for them. If you start this, you do not get out of it. The country is small, and there are more criminals than good people. Gang members know where the guards live, they know their routes. They keep us under surveillance from the moment we leave the center. It is very complicated. To avoid problems, I decided to resign quickly and leave my country” (Alexis, 33 years old, Honduras).

The interviewees faced threats for their refusal to collaborate with the gangs. However, many people agree to collaborate, reluctantly and knowing that they can get into trouble, because they are effectively participating in the facilitation or commission of crimes. However, they do so because their fear of gangs is greater than their fear of being apprehended by the police and receiving a criminal sanction.

**Forced dating.** Teenage girls and women who refuse to be girlfriends or partners of gang members are subject to retaliation, including murder, as are their partners and family members who seek to prevent these relationships. A migrant from Honduras claimed to have been abducted to live with a gang member, but managed to escape with the help of a girl who worked at the house. In two cases from El Salvador, the victim's current partner was severely beaten, and one of the women was even raped for refusing to be with the gang member who was chasing her.

Rosa, a Salvadoran woman whose husband had died in an accident, was sexually harassed by her brother-in-law and had to flee to Mexico with her two young children. “I had been with my husband for ten years and it was not easy that he was gone. The first three months after he died, I did not feel well. I got depressed. I had insomnia. I tried to take my own life and woke up in the hospital. By the mercy of God, I am alive today. My mom took me to a psychologist, and I started getting better. At first my mother-in-law and my brothers-in-law came to comfort me, to support me. One of my brothers-in-law was a member of the Barrio 18. He stopped by with dinner and asked me if I needed anything. But then he started telling me that he was in love with me, that he wanted to be with me, and that he was going to take over my husband's business. I told him that it was not possible; that I held him in high esteem, but only as a brother-in-law. That is when he began to tell me that if I would not be with him, he was going to kill me; that he could not be with anyone else. With that problem, I stopped seeing people. I stopped talking to people. I could not even stay in my house, because he knew where I lived. I decided to sell the cattle and close the store. I abandoned the house and secretly came here with my two children” (Rosa, 25, El Salvador).

**Perception of threats.** Gang threats, that is, words of warning that are often combined with physical violence, such as beatings or shootings, must be taken seriously. This is especially the case when a green light has been issued, or an order to kill. Migrants who fled gang threats believed that ignoring them would



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have serious, likely fatal, consequences for themselves and their families. Often, they were given only 24 hours to leave the country, and those with the necessary resources left with their entire family. When such funds were not available, only the person who seemed to be at greatest risk moved, resulting in painful family separations and leaving people in uncertainty and concern for the safety and well-being of their loved ones. Furthermore, the near impossibility of internal relocation, due to limited financial means, restrictions on mobility between gang territories, and the gangs' ability to track people, made it imperative that victims of gang violence sought shelter abroad. The conviction that staying in their own country was unrealistic was reaffirmed by the belief that the gang problem had spiraled out of control and that the gangs were even better armed than the police. "Those boys are well armed, better than the police. As a Salvadoran it hurts me to say it. When one PNC [National Civilian Police] officer goes on patrol, four soldiers go with him to protect him. That is not normal!" (José, 47 years old, El Salvador).

## Violence of Criminal Groups

Some migrants specifically referred to threats received from criminal groups, not from street gangs like Mara Salvatrucha and the Barrio 18. The eight cases, mostly from Honduras, suggested that groups involved in different illicit activities, especially drug trafficking, seek to recruit citizens from different walks of life to commit crimes such as drug smuggling and money laundering.

A Honduran woman left the country with her 11-year-old son, because he was expected to be the successor to his deceased father's criminal empire. That expectation went against the mother's wish not to see her son grow up in the criminal underworld. The two, along with the woman's new partner, spent six years hiding in different and increasingly remote places. The impossibility of going unnoticed forced the family to finally leave the country.

In two cases from Honduras and one from Guatemala, the migrants claimed that they had been asked to smuggle drugs across the border. The migrant from Guatemala not only refused to do so, as did the individuals from Honduras, but he also reported the moneylender who had offered him this job and, in return, suffered two assassination attempts.

Similarly, a Honduran refugee stated that a member of a criminal group murdered his brother. In retaliation for the complaint, the assailant killed the parents and threatened the other family members.

In two other cases from Honduras, the individuals made the decision to leave the country after someone close to them was asked to collaborate with a criminal group, but refused to do so. The first migrant and his family fled when his mother, the owner of a trucking business, was beaten and raped for refusing

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to cooperate in the transportation of drugs. The second migrant, a moneylender's bodyguard, moved to Mexico with his family after his boss rejected the idea of using his business as a front for a money laundering scheme and was killed in a shooting.

Finally, a Honduran woman claimed to have been abducted, raped, and forced –for unknown reasons– to strip naked before an unknown assailant who took photos of her. She was later released, but soon after, an unidentified man kept the mother and her children prisoners in their own home and raped the woman on multiple occasions. The children managed to escape from the house and notify the police, but these events made the woman feel violated and unable to stay in Honduras.

## State Violence

People left their countries not only because of the violence exercised by non-state actors, but also because of political persecution and physical attacks perpetrated by state agents, specifically the police and the military.

Mario, who participated in protests against the administration of President Juan Orlando Hernández, claimed that his activism led him to be included in a list of enemies of the government and pushed him to move to Mexico. “The government has wanted to privatize electricity and health. That is why we joined the opposition. I collaborated in many protests, we looted, we closed roads, we burned businesses. There were deaths on both sides, that of the police and that of my friends. I have friends and family in the police, and they told me that the government had identified us as protesters. Two of my friends were disappeared. So, to avoid putting my mom's life at risk, the only option I saw was to come here” (Mario, 39 years old, Honduras).

In four cases, mostly from El Salvador, the migrants reported acts of police and military harassment which did not cause forced migration, but were part of a pattern of insecurity and unbearable violence. A Honduran man claimed to have been harassed for a month by a group of soldiers patrolling his neighborhood, after he complained that they had taken away his pay on an earlier occasion. A Salvadoran refugee who fled from gang threats recounted how the police suspected him, without foundation, of being an accomplice to these groups. On one occasion, police officers raided his home and planted marijuana in an apparent attempt to incriminate him for drug possession.

Gregorio, who worked as a bus driver in his native El Salvador, recounted how police officers mistreat young men suspected of being gang members. “There is a lot of abuse of authority. When we are bored, among friends we always look for someone to talk to outside a house. We drink a coke or have a snack. Just because three or four people are hanging out together, or because you have a

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tattoo, no matter what it means, you are already a criminal for them. This is El Salvador. The police beat you, check your wallet and phone, take off your clothes and leave you in your boxers, in the public space! That is why there have been many deaths of police officers, because people's relatives feel resentment. So the police themselves are causing part of the insecurity. The last time they frisked me, they made us kneel for about 40 minutes outside my friend's house" (Gregorio, 28 years old, El Salvador).

Andrés, also from El Salvador, had similar experiences of police harassment. But his resentment arose largely because he was wrongfully arrested after denying a police officer a bribe and spending five years in prison. "One day I went to downtown San Salvador to buy some pirated copies of movies. When I got off the bus, the police officers stopped me to frisk me. They wanted to see if I had tattoos. One of them said to me, 'Look, if you give me 400 dollars, I let you go. I want to spend December 24 with my family at the beach.' 'Well, then work!', I told him. They made up that I was a gang member and was fleeing from a murder scene. They put me in the back of a patrol car and put me in jail for five years. That is how long the investigation took. In the end they offered to let me go if I accepted the charge of illicit associations. I accepted and they let me leave prison with conditions. I did not report what happened, because when police officers do that to you, what is the point? Better leave it at that. I really do hate them for what they did to me. At the same time, I learned many things. Before, I judged those who were imprisoned, I saw them as less. But there were many who had been through the same thing as me, who were being accused without evidence" (Andrés, 30 years old, El Salvador).

Police abuse that triggered forced migration was reported from El Salvador, where a woman told of an attempted rape by a police officer and the subsequent cover-up of the crime. The refugee claimed to have been mistakenly arrested and taken to the local police station. There, an officer attempted to rape her as part of a bogus medical examination, but was caught on the spot and arrested. However, in an attempt to prevent her from testifying at the court hearing, she was kidnapped by a group of gang members and severely beaten. She managed to be rescued and, together with her husband, she was taken to a state shelter, but its director feared that the couple was not safe and recommended that they leave the country.

## Misgovernment

The perception of widespread corruption and institutional weaknesses, if not absences, instilled in migrants the belief that the situation in the Northern Triangle was not going to change significantly in the near future. Although many people were homesick for their countries and would have preferred not to leave, there was a sense that forced migration was inevitable and a return difficult, if not impossible. Several people attributed economic, social, and security

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problems to the political class's indifference to the needs of the average citizen. In electoral times, political candidates and parties were reaching out to poor neighborhoods to bring groceries and seek votes. Once in power, they did not keep their promises or, worse yet, turned out to be corrupt.

Nelson argued that the population of El Salvador did not see marked differences between rightist and leftist governments. "The various governments have acted at their convenience. They do not lift the country out of its stagnation. There has been diversion of funds with ARENA [Nationalist Republican Alliance] and in the ten years of the FMLN [Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation]. They promise a lot, but do not deliver. The rulers are not interested in change, in less crime. There are many private security companies, including some that are owned by congressmen. It suits them that there is insecurity, because then people contract private security services. In elections they approach people, but they are indifferent the rest of the time" (Nelson, 40 years old, El Salvador). Julio regretted the rulers' lack of sensitivity. "Governments do not understand what we migrants are experiencing, because they are not experiencing it. They have everything, they do not struggle to earn their daily bread" (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). Some of his fellow Honduran citizens guessed that politicians owed themselves to those who had financed their electoral campaigns and were therefore more committed to repaying favors, rather than governing for the people. Honduras, they argued, is a fiefdom of the powerful who seek to monopolize all resources.

*"There is a lot of abuse of authority. Just because three or four people are hanging out together, or because you have a tattoo, no matter what it means, you are already a criminal for them. This is El Salvador. The police beat you, check your wallet and phone, take off your clothes and leave you in your boxers, in the public space! That is why there have been many deaths of police officers, because people's relatives feel resentment."*

*Gregorio, 28 años, El Salvador*

The government of President Juan Orlando Hernández was mentioned as the worst case of how corruption and the absence of effective accountability and democratic controls can severely undermine the enjoyment of human rights. The migrants complained that foreign aid did not reach the people, because corrupt officials were pocketing it and the President had decided to strengthen the security forces in order to suppress dissent and remain in power. "The politicians are involved in illegal things. They do what they want, because they are the maximum authority of the country. Nobody can say anything to the corrupt ones. The farmer is not free to raise his voice and claim his rights. Either you get out or you die" (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). Systematic violations of

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human rights and attacks against human rights defenders are taking place. Freedom of expression is restricted, especially for the poor. "The Honduran citizen is alone. If he takes to the streets, he is repressed. The government created the Public Order Military Police, and when these police see a protest against the President, they use teargas and beat people. The people made up the phrase 'Get out JOH!' because they do not want the President. A police officer who hears a citizen say that will detain them for 24 hours. They are shutting people up. There is no freedom of expression" (Norman, 38 years old, Honduras). Gustavo added, "If you are poor, your voice does not count" (Gustavo, 39 years old, Honduras).

Migrants from the three countries considered corruption to be widespread, not only among politicians, but also in the police and the prison system. Given the institutional breakdown, people had very limited expectations of public institutions, or harbored resentment or fear of them. People felt that gangs and criminal groups could buy or intimidate security agents and politicians. Gustavo suggested that organized crime had, in fact, penetrated deeply into local and national politics. "Politicians and organized crime are the same" (Gustavo, 39 years old, Honduras). He added that corruption and abuse were visible to the entire world. But other countries and regional and international organizations were complicit in the status quo, because they had decided not to intervene in injustices and electoral fraud or even to support and legitimize an illegitimate and oppressive government. Gustavo continued, "Honduras is being trampled on by everyone, because the other countries are in favor of JOH's government. Mexico, the United States, the European Union, and the OAS [Organization of American States] know what is happening, but they turn a blind eye" (Gustavo, 39 years old, Honduras).

Migrants, especially those from Honduras and El Salvador, recognized that the state is absent in many communities. Gangs had filled this governance void and established themselves as an alternative form of authority. In both countries there was a sense that the gangs had expanded and had virtually taken control of communities and schools. "The gang members are the owners of the neighborhood" (Wilfredo, 41 years old, Honduras). Roque explained how gangs govern local territories and obtain social legitimacy. "They divide up the territories. There are areas where the gangs do not allow the extortion of businesses, where they do not allow robberies of product delivery vans, because they make money from drug sales. In other words, the gangs act like the police. For example, if my cell phone gets stolen, I would rather go to the gang than to the police, because I know that the gang is more likely to get my cell phone back, not the police. It is really appalling that in certain areas the population gives gang members legitimacy, because they are the ones who protect the neighborhood. These are exceptions, but the gangs are turning into a power that must be respected" (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).



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Most migrants did not trust the institutions in their countries and did not report threats or other crimes against them. They thought that the police were, at best, useless or, at worst, dangerous, because many officers were bribed or threatened to collude with gangs or criminal groups. Most of those who fled threats or violence never reported these acts to the authorities, as they felt that they would not be helped or, more often, that this would involve retaliation. "You no longer know who is a criminal and who is a police officer. You cannot report anything" (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). Some believed that police officers were underpaid and therefore corruptible or hesitant to risk their lives for others. Axel thought that in a country that offers little protection to anyone, police officers were perhaps more motivated by a human factor of concern for their own physical integrity and that of their family. "Cops are scared too. The criminals tell them they know where their children live and study" (Axel, 17 years old, Honduras).

Those who filed a complaint with the police, or sometimes with the Attorney General, saw that their experiences confirmed widespread fears and suspicions. The information they provided was either leaked to the suspected perpetrators or was not used to initiate an investigation and offer protection to the victims. A woman from Honduras said that she felt helpless when she heard that the police officer who took her complaint laughed at her and exclaimed that the people named in the complaint were his friends and would never go to jail. Brayan, also from Honduras, maintained that "I had filed a complaint with the police. The next day the same gang members who had extorted me came to my house to make me swallow the complaint with blows. I ate the complaint" (Brayan, 30 years old, Honduras).

Manuel spoke of the helplessness he felt when he went to the police to report gang threats. "I was seriously attacked in my home. The kids of the MS came and put a pistol to my head. They said they would give me 24 hours to leave my house, otherwise they were going to kill me and my whole family. I was so scared that I went to the police station that same day and told them what has happening, that I did not know what to do anymore. But the officer said to me, 'There is nothing we can do. I cannot send an officer to take care of you, because all the gang would do is turn around and retaliate. Not only are you going to be the victim, but your family and friends will be too. Because the gang members do not act against those they hate, they act against the people close to that person. So what you do is create more conflict. I cannot go and stir things up. If you do not feel safe, go away, find yourself another place to live.' And that was exactly what happened. A patrol car came to the house, and the gang members came and shot at me. I had no choice but to flee my home. If I had felt a little more protected by the police, I would not have left El Salvador. I was expecting a different kind of response. I was expecting to be told that they were going to open an investigation. But the police never even gave me hope that they were going to investigate or that they were going to do something" (Manuel, 33 years old, El Salvador).

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The absence of the state in many communities, both urban and rural, means that people are vulnerable to attacks by gangs and criminal groups. But it also encourages people to take the law into their own hands to resolve conflicts or defend themselves against unwanted actors. According to a migrant from Honduras, in the villages people tend to arm themselves because there is no authority. He left the country because a relative wanted to kill him in a family dispute, and a woman, also from rural Honduras, was raped and her husband killed in retaliation for a homicide that was falsely attributed to the husband. Several migrants reported, and approved of, the fact that people formed self-defense groups in certain communities to rid them of gangs. "In our community security is good, because it is the same people that take care of the people. We do not allow authorities there, because the authorities bring the mafia with them. The people fix their problems alone. In major cities, gang members rule. But in the communities, it is different. There are places in Honduras where gang members are not accepted" (Edson, 30 years old, Honduras).

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## V. The Experiences of Exile

The violences that trigger the exodus from Central America also accompany migrants, in one way or another, during their stay outside the borders of their countries. The logistics and dangers involved in the transit to and through Mexico, or even the United States in the case of those who traveled the route more than once in their lives, migrant detention, the asylum application process, as well as the struggles to live and excel in Mexican society unleashed different difficulties, challenges or even crises for people.

### The Journey to and through Mexico

The sudden departure from the country of origin, as well as the uncertainty about the road ahead, the destination, and the future, could be terrifying. “I do not know how I summoned the courage to come here. At first, I cried, I felt bad. I felt depressed, because I did not know when I would see my son again” (Jenny, 35 years old, El Salvador). Unlike Jenny, other Salvadorans first went to neighboring countries, but found that the political or economic situation was not adequate. One family initially went to Nicaragua, but protests and civil unrest made it impossible for them to stay in that country and prompted them to relocate to Mexico. “When the conflict started, you could not live in peace. The students entrenched themselves, there were barricades, and every day there were shootings, there was looting. There was no law” (Jonathan, 26 years old, El Salvador). Another family grabbed some clothes and rushed to Belize, where their asylum application was denied due to lack of evidence. The absence of a residence permit made it impossible to obtain work. “We did not know where to go. We decided to go to Belize. We were there for two months, but they denied us asylum because we had no proof of what had happened to us. But honestly, things happen so fast that there is no time to collect evidence or anything. You just take your belongings. Without papers, we could not find work. So, we left with only 100 Belize dollars and practically spent this money on the first bus to Guatemala City. We had to ask for a ride to get to the border with Mexico” (José, 22 years old and Catarina, 21 years old, El Salvador).

The migrants took very small amounts of money with them, perhaps a few dollars, which were often insufficient to pay for transportation and food. Members of a Honduran family had to eat iguanas, for want of other food. Mario commented that sometimes it was necessary to ask strangers for money. “It is horrible when you have to ask for money, but you need cash along the way. Once I had to do it just to have some money for transportation. I felt very embarrassed” (Mario, 22 years old, Honduras).

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Migrants traveled using different means of transport, such as buses and freight trains, but they also walked many kilometers. Those who got on the train commented that they forced themselves to stay awake or tied themselves to the railings so as not to fall off the roof. Mario described the strenuous nature of his trip as follows. “I traveled to Guatemala by bus, then I took a boat to Mexico. We asked taxi drivers to give us rides, but they overcharged us. We walked for two days, day and night. It was extremely hot. There was no water, my feet hurt. I felt like I could not take it anymore. We were hungry, but there was nothing to eat. I just asked God to help me, because I still had a long way to go” (Mario, 22 years old, Honduras).



*A Honduran migrant of Garifuna origin refreshes his feet after several days of walking. ©Rubén Figueroa*



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During their passage through Central America and Mexico, migrants were overcharged for services such as the rafts crossing the Suchiate River, and suffered acts of corruption by Guatemalan and Mexican police or officers of the National Institute of Migration (INM) of Mexico. Julio recognized that corruption was a common experience for migrants passing through Guatemala. “For us, it is normal that a police officer asks you for money” (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). Wilmer, who was asked for his ID on a bus in Mexico, commented that “the migration officers got on the bus and asked me for my papers. One of them asked me if I had money. I told him that I only had about 70 pesos. He started to search my bags and took all my money, like a thousand pesos” (Wilmer, 29 years old, El Salvador).

Xenia summarized the difficulties of irregular transit as follows. “The most unfortunate thing is the departure from there to here. That is another story that one lives through. When we left Honduras, we abandoned everything. We did not bring anything, neither clothes nor anything else. We had to hide, see how we were going to get food and water, because traveling without money is the worst. We endured rain, hunger, and thirst. We slept under a bridge, with our eight-month-old baby. We tried everything so he would not cry” (Xenia, 35 years old, Honduras). For some migrants, these difficulties were a reason not to take their children to Mexico.

*“When we left Honduras, we abandoned everything. We did not bring anything, neither clothes nor anything else. We had to hide, see how we were going to get food and water, because traveling without money is the worst. We endured rain, hunger, and thirst. We slept under a bridge, with our eight-month-old baby. We tried everything so he would not cry.”*

*Xenia, 35 years old, Honduras*

People who crossed the country on foot or by train reported the occurrence of armed assaults in which their belongings, such as money, cell phones, and backpacks, were taken from them. The attackers were Mexicans, including *garroteros* (train security guards), or other Central American migrants. When the assaults occurred on a moving train, some of the victims were injured, sometimes with serious consequences. Wilson, who fell off the train when robbers took his backpack, narrated that “in Irapuato I wanted to catch the train. That is when I injured my leg. The train was not going fast, so I grabbed it and got on it. When I was on the roof, someone pulled on my backpack. That is when I fell. When I tried to get up, I opened my eyes, looked around and saw my severed leg. I passed out. Then two Salvadorans showed up and helped me. They never told me their names or anything, they just helped me. They applied a tourniquet to stop the bleeding, but I had already lost a lot of blood. I was at the



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train tracks for about an hour and a half, heavily bleeding, until the ambulance arrived. At the hospital in Guadalajara they put me to sleep. When I woke up, I wanted to die. The world had ended for me. Then the people from the FM4 came to visit me, they asked me if I wanted to come to the shelter. I still feel like crap. But there are times when you think that life is beautiful. If God left me alive, it is for a reason. I must not squander the opportunity that God has given me" (Wilson, 19 years old, Honduras).

Four migrants described how they had suffered one or even two kidnapping attempts in different parts of Mexico, including one near a migrant shelter located in a northern border state. A Salvadoran man who was abducted in complicity with an INM officer stated that "in Tabasco, I had a problem with a migration officer. We got into an argument, and since I was not going to shut up, he threatened to kill me. He took me to a small town called C-31, which is just outside Cárdenas. There he sold me to some guys from Los Zetas. They held me kidnapped in Comalcalco for 17 days. They asked my mom for 5,000 dollars, but in the end my mom did not give them anything. They beat and raped me, and because of the rape I got an infection. The place was like a warehouse, with a tiled floor and a canal underneath the building. You could hear people getting killed in the other rooms. The man who was abusing me, maybe he was fond of me. I also had some respect for him. Thanks to him they let me out and made me work in a bar in Coatzacoalcos for three months. In that bar, it was very ugly, I met women from Central America who were there, prostituted them. I was helping in the kitchen. In that place they kept drugs and weapons. Sometimes people from the Attorney General's office came to do a search, but they were just pretending. They did it just for show. After three months, I was let out to rent a room, and when I saw that, I ran away" (Alexis, 27 years old, El Salvador).

Four women reported that they had been raped while passing through Mexico, either by other migrants or by security agents. A Salvadoran woman became pregnant after being raped by her then partner. A Honduran woman, who was previously raped by a bus driver in her country, contracted HIV when she was raped by a security agent in Mexico.

Another Honduran woman, whose husband was unable to leave the country due to his employment contract, was raped on the train by another migrant. Subsequently, she joined a Salvadoran migrant for greater protection. The two even planned to get married so that he could obtain asylum more quickly in Mexico, since the woman had already been granted refugee recognition. Regarding her decision, María commented that "a woman by herself gets hurt. But if she is accompanied by a man, she is safer" (María, 29 years old, Honduras).

A third Honduran woman, who emerged unscathed from an earlier rape attempt, suffered a sexual assault while traveling by train. "I went to Mexicali, but I never found a job there. I slept on the street. I could not stand the heat or the hunger. Then there was a group on its way back and I decided to go with

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them to Guadalajara. I travelled on the train, and got to Los Mochis in Sinaloa. Only men were on the train. I tried to stay by myself because I was alone. I was so tired and that was when I got raped. When I arrived in Guadalajara, I was not going to say anything. I was going to keep quiet. I was desperate. I looked for Migration to turn myself in and leave. But that day Migration was closed. So I came to the shelter, and when I was interviewed I could not hold back the tears and had to say that they I had been raped. I was taken to the hospital and given treatment to prevent pregnancy and infection. I was also given a rapid HIV test and an antiretroviral. It was very hard” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).

One Honduran migrant, a former soldier, related the torture he suffered at the hands of police officers in Ciudad Juárez. “I had a job here in Mexico. I was working on a construction site, building houses in Ciudad Juárez. Another guy and I were migrants from Central America. The others were Mexicans. They were against us. They humiliated us and discriminated against us. I asked them to stop it, but they joined together and called some municipal police officers. The officers tied my hands and feet together, put me in the back of a patrol car, and took me to a police station. There they tortured me for several hours before leaving me locked up in a cell. I spent three days there. Then some people walked up to the cell and tried to shoot at me, but their weapons did not fire. Then I was taken out of there and was able to walk away. God has saved me from death, but I still have torture marks on me. I made no complaint. I kept silent out of fear” (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras).

Some migrants reported that they had been offered to work for criminal groups in northern Mexico, for example as hawks or, in the case of men, especially as mules. A Honduran refugee was asked if he wanted to take migrants across the Tijuana border, but he rejected the offer. In Altar, Sonora, Rafael, a fisherman from El Salvador, was asked to carry out surveillance in exchange for receiving help to enter the United States. “In Altar there is a man named ‘El Licenciado.’ He is supposed to be one of the big drug traffickers there. I was looking for a job, and he said to me, ‘You are going to be a *puntero*.’ *Puntero* means you are going into the desert with a radio, watch cars go by, and pass the information to another *puntero*. There are about six *punteros* on that road. I had to work three months to make the passage north, in addition to receiving 1,500 dollars so that I could continue on my way after crossing over to the other side” (Rafael, 39 years old, El Salvador). Another Salvadoran explained why he decided not to accept the job that was offered. “I was approached by a kid who worked for the Jalisco Cartel. He said, ‘Hey, buddy, what is up? Do you want to work with us? We have got work. You can fertilize and water marijuana plants if you want to.’ He was a guy almost my age. He was armed and everything. I was afraid and said no. No man, I do not want that life!” (Kevin, 22 years old, El Salvador).

In other cases, people acknowledged that their financial needs led them to get involved in illegal activities. Mario, a Honduran migrant who had previously

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been deported from the United States, explained how he had come to smuggle drugs to the United States. “At the Sonoyta border, you went to the park and got asked, ‘Who wants to work? Who wants to go to the United States?’ They selected those who looked relatively strong and said, ‘You ten, get in!’ It is the Sinaloa Cartel, but it has many cells at that border. They took you to a safe house where you took a nap, ate some food, and could take drugs if you wanted to. You stayed there until a guide arrived who selected the people he needed. You were given a uniform and the marijuana you had to carry through the desert. You entered and arrived in Santa Rosa or Casa Grande to be taken to Phoenix, Arizona. When I tried to enter the United States, I was arrested with about 38 kilos of marijuana. I had to serve more time in prison, because I had committed a crime” (Mario, 39 years old, Honduras).

A Honduran woman initially agreed to do intelligence work for a criminal group in Puerto Vallarta, but fear and the working conditions made her change her mind. “I first went to Puerto Vallarta. There I met some people from Honduras – they had already worked for the mafia in that city. I was offered work, giving them the heads-up if the navy or the state and federal police were nearby. Out of necessity I accepted, and they took me in for a few days to teach me the ropes. Then I felt a little caged, I could not stand it, because I could find no way in or out. I was practically living on the street, eating on the street, trying to bathe on the street. It scared me a little too, so I decided I had better get out of there” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).

Some of the migrants who fled threats from gangs or criminal groups believed that earlier security problems might follow them to Mexico. They were afraid, because they thought they had seen gang members among the migrant population in transit, in detention centers or in shelters. Some of them specifically recognized gang members from their community. Jonathan, for example, stated that “in Ciudad Hidalgo we rented a house. We lived there for some time and were already half used to it. But the neighborhood was filled with MS members. They let us know that they thought we from the Barrio 18. One day they even broke into the house. They gave us 24 hours to leave, otherwise they were going to kill us” (Jonathan, 26 years old, El Salvador). Such security incidents led the affected migrants to conclude that their stay in southern Mexico was unsustainable and that they had to move as far as possible from Central America.

## **Migrant Detention**

Migrant detention in Mexico has been widely criticized because it involves the deprivation of liberty of people who committed administrative offenses, not crimes. In addition, numerous reports by the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and NGOs have over the years documented the poor

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conditions in migrant detention centers, frequent due process violations, and the degrading treatment of migrants in these facilities.<sup>80</sup> Even so, access to these centers by independent monitors continues to be severely restricted. In this research, more than one person questioned the purpose of the detention. Vilma, a Honduran migrant who was detained in Tapachula, asked herself: “Why did I have to be a prisoner in the Siglo XXI detention center if I did not commit any crime? My only crime was to come here, but I did so because of the problem in my country” (Vilma, 36 years old, Honduras).

Others regretted that the detention conditions had been inhumane. For example, the number of hygiene kits had been insufficient and the food of poor quality. “For almost five days we were not given any hygiene kit, because there were supposedly none. The same with the food. We were given very little to eat. Once they gave us rotten food, but we had to eat it regardless” (José, 22 years old and Catarina, 21 years old, El Salvador). Regarding the overcrowding of the facilities, Sonia, a mother of four children, explained that “it was horrible. One week we slept next to the toilet, because there was no space anywhere. You could not even set foot anywhere. Urine fell on our mattress. Then some girl took the mattress from us. My daughter cried and said to me, ‘Where are we going to sleep?’” (Sonia, 47 years old, Honduras).

The migrants reportedly received verbal abuse. José commented, “It is ugly, there is a lot of racism. Just because you are a migrant, the officers want to intimidate you. My wife got sick and vomited blood, and our son was also sick. I begged Migration to transfer me to the single parent section because my wife could never get to sleep, but I was not allowed to. I felt sick from worry, because our son was sick and I was not allowed to see him. I started crying and asked the officers if they were parents. One of them told me, ‘I am a father, but I am not putting my children at risk.’ I said to him, ‘You do not know why I am here, so you do not need to talk to me like that.’ ‘Calm down,’ he said, ‘otherwise we are going to lock you up for three more days’” (José, 22 years old and Catarina, 21 years old, El Salvador). In addition, acts of corruption by INM personnel were observed. The officers allowed prohibited items such as cell phones and drugs in the detention center. “Inside the center people have telephones, marijuana, and cigarettes. The officers are the ones who bring these things along” (José, 22 years old and Catarina, 21 years old, El Salvador). “Money moves everything,” sentenced José (José, 32 years old, El Salvador).

Carlos, who was being held in the Mexico City migrant detention center, recounted how INM officers feigned his kidnapping to extort money from his mother. “I was going to Tijuana, but when I left Mexico City, Migration grabbed me at a checkpoint. They put me in the Iztapalapa detention center. There I spent about two months in detention, until UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] got me out. In the detention center the officers immediately took away my cell phone and money. They took information from

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my cell phone and called my mom to tell her that I had been kidnapped. I have an audio recording where they tell her that they are going to cut off my fingers. My mom believed them and sent them 3,000 dollars through Western Union. We filed a complaint with the PGR [Attorney General of the Republic], but nothing was done about it. Mexico is a country that helps migrants, but there is a lot of corruption. I think there should be more controls or evaluations of public servants, especially those in higher ranks, because they are the ones who are stealing” (Carlos, 31 years old, El Salvador).

## The Asylum Application

Central Americans who had applied for asylum with the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) had quite different experiences. Some were able to make an appointment with an asylum officer shortly after their arrival in Mexico and received a positive resolution in less than two months. For others, this process involved long waiting times, especially once COMAR was inundated with requests from members of the caravans and extracontinental refugees. People spent four months, even a year, waiting for the resolution. Alexis stated that he had not received clear instructions about the process. “In November 2018, the COMAR told me that I no longer had to report at their office and sign the logbook, that I just had to wait for them to call me for the last interview. But I have been waiting for a year and nothing has happened” (Alexis, 33 years old, Honduras).

This situation meant that people felt great uncertainty about their future. It left them in a limbo, since they could not return to their country of origin, but without a residence permit they could not get a job and settle in Mexico. Some refugees struggled to survive to the point where they hardly ate and did not feel strong enough to walk long distances to do paperwork, study or work and find more accessible and affordable housing.

*“The work women normally do there is in bars, in pubs at night, and I was not going to do that. I walked around the center of Tapachula. I went to the stores that had “Staff Wanted” signs. But they said to me, ‘Are you not from here in Mexico?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘I am Honduran.’ ‘Oh no, just Mexicans,’ they told me. I managed to get a job in a beauty salon. I got paid little, like 100 pesos a day, but it is worse not to work.”*

*Sara, 46 años, Honduras*

## Survival and Integration in Mexico

Mexico lacks an asylum support system. People can apply for asylum, but accessing the labor and housing markets or the health and education systems is



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much more difficult. NGOs and UNHCR intervene to help fill this gap, and beneficiaries generally were grateful for the help they had received and thought they could not have done without it. But this still leaves many people without the systematic assistance they need to meet rent requirements, counter discriminatory labor practices or labor rights violations, and get affordable health care.

## **Housing**

Some migrants who tried to rent a place to live in Tapachula were turned away by the landlords for being Central Americans. “If we try to rent a house, the first thing they tell us is that they do not accept Central Americans. They say that some migrants have already caused trouble. So we all end up paying for a few bad apples” (Jonathan, 26 years old, El Salvador). Single mothers found it especially difficult to find housing as they were considered low-income. More often, people discovered that rents were prohibitively high or that landlords asked for recommendations and deposits that migrants could not afford.

People often described living in precarious conditions. FMCAP researchers confirmed these circumstances during a visit to the home of two refugee families in Aguascalientes. It was not unusual for migrants to be overcharged for rent, to have little or no furniture, and to live in cheaper but remote neighborhoods that were not well connected to public transportation.

## **Access to Health**

Access to health services proved difficult for those who needed them. A Honduran mother in Aguascalientes had cysts, but could not afford the operation that was required to remove them. In Mexico City, a Guatemalan mother and her gravely ill daughter were rejected at the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), because the daughter had been too busy studying and working to register with the IMSS. They had to spend hours going to another hospital and paying for a consultation that they could not afford.

## **Access to Education**

Migrants recognized the value of education, but many were more concerned with making ends meet and sending remittances to their families than with social mobility. Some families were interested in obtaining educational scholarships for their children, and sometimes also for the adults, to pay rent and food, not necessarily because they aspired to achieve higher educational levels as such.

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## Work

Interviewees stated that it was difficult for them to get or keep jobs because they were Central American migrants. “I have gone to many places, asked in many restaurants. When they see me or hear me speak, or I tell them that I am Honduran, they say ‘No, thank you.’ Sometimes employers are in urgent need of staff, but they prefer not to hire me because I am Honduran. We have received much contempt, many acts of racism, and this makes us more desperate. Without work, what are we going to live on?” (Viviana, 19 years old, Honduras). At the southern border, where more migrants compete with locals for jobs, the situation can be even more complicated. Sara, who spent a year in Tapachula, expressed that “it was very difficult to find work. To begin with, you do not have a work permit. The work women normally do there is in bars, in pubs at night, and I was not going to do that. I walked around the center of Tapachula. I went to the stores that had “Staff Wanted” signs. But they said to me, ‘Are you not from here in Mexico?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘I am Honduran.’ ‘Oh no, just Mexicans,’ they told me. I managed to get a job in a beauty salon. I got paid little, like 100 pesos a day, but it is worse not to work” (Sara, 46 years old, Honduras). Some people were unable to keep their jobs, because their employers did not want to give them time off to complete bureaucratic formalities with the COMAR or the INM.

Migrants without a residence permit worked on construction sites, in markets, beauty salons or poultry shops, did painting or cleaning work, fixed pipes or made bracelets for sale. A young Salvadoran mother who could not leave her two young children alone decided to sell *pupusas* and coffee. An older Salvadoran mother and her adult son sold water and snacks at a stoplight.

Those who already had a residence permit often performed temporary jobs that involved long hours, little pay, and no statutory benefits. Sometimes they were not even fully paid their already low wages. Manuel, who spent a few years living in Tapachula before moving to Saltillo with the help of the UNHCR's local integration program, said, “I have noticed that many people come here with every intention of getting ahead in this country. But there are places, especially at the southern border, where nobody gives migrants work, even if they have all the required documentation. And if you get work, you get paid very little and receive no benefits. During the three years that I lived in Tapachula, I had jobs where my Mexican colleagues earned 600 pesos a week, but I, as a Central American, earned only 300 pesos a week, and my work was the same or even harder than that of the Mexicans. I never received any benefits or social security or anything like that. Mexicans complain when Americans mistreat migrants over there, but Mexicans over here treat us worse” (Manuel, 33 years old, El Salvador).

Refugee claimants were perhaps more vulnerable to labor exploitation than migrants with resident status. “When I arrived at the migrant shelter in Huehuetoca, I spoke with the priest. I presented my case at the COMAR and one

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day the priest told me about a factory that needed workers. They paid for a room to live in and 1,500 pesos a week. After six months, the factory started to treat us badly – it did not pay my overtime. We were about 20 people living in one room, all of us working for the company and in an asylum process with the COMAR. After nine months I quit. They did not want to give me my severance pay. They said that I had no right to it. For the nine months I had worked, they only gave me about 900 pesos” (Alexis, 33 years old, Honduras).

Roque, another Honduran in an asylum process with the COMAR, was even the victim of a labor fraud. “In one place I was offered a job as an administrative and human resources assistant. First, they asked for 250 pesos for the photo ID. You think, ‘Why not, I am going to get the money back,’ because they offered me 1,500 pesos base salary plus performance bonuses. I mean, they paint such a rosy picture that you fall for it. Then they said, ‘You are not going to work in sales, but in order for you to demonstrate your problem-solving capacity, we need you to sell two sets of pillows worth 1,500 pesos each.’ That is when I handed over the money for our rent, the 3,000 pesos, plus 250 pesos. I was the only foreigner there, but nine Mexicans did the same. Apparently, the pillows were bought in Tepito, but that was not the problem. When I started looking into it, I realized that the company did not exist. It was a fraud. But how do you get your money back? So, I am disappointed. I want to get out of here now” (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).



*The detention center of the National Institute of Migration in Tapachula, Mexico. ©Sonja Wolf*

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## Discrimination

A cross-cutting theme was discrimination against Central American migrants, which emerged particularly in discussions about access to housing and employment. Working adults felt that, compared to Mexican workers, they were asked to work longer hours for less pay or were treated unfairly in other ways. Carlos, who spent some time working in Piedras Negras, reported that “the Mexicans asked me why my boss gave work to me, to the fucking Salvadoran, if I was not from Mexico” (Carlos, 32 years old, El Salvador). A Guatemalan mother recounted how one of her daughters was repeatedly turned away despite having resident status, because employers preferred to hire Mexicans instead of Central Americans.

At the root of this discrimination was racism towards Central Americans. “Many Mexicans oppose the presence of migrants. I have been insulted on the street, just because of the way I talk” (Óscar, 31 years old, Honduras). Marlon, who was in Mexico with his sister and their respective families, explained that “one person has been rude to us. ‘What are you doing here? Go to back your country,’ they told us. You immediately feel rejected, but we gave them blessings. You need to be optimistic, have high self-esteem” (Marlon, 44 years old, Honduras).

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## VI. The Impacts of Forced Migration

Regardless of the drivers of forced migration, people acknowledged a number of material, affective, and psychological impacts related to the uprooting itself as well as to the events that led to and followed it.

### The Loss of Houses

Migrants who fled threats, gang violence or criminal groups had to leave their communities and country suddenly, usually without the possibility of taking belongings and documents or saying goodbye to their families. Those with houses often could not sell them, because nobody wanted to live in gang-controlled areas. The houses were abandoned, in other cases they were looted, turned into destroyers (gang hangouts) or occupied by gang members or their families.

Manuel, who had to leave his home after being threatened by gang members at gunpoint, says that “two days after I left my house, gang members vandalized it and turned it into a gang hangout. My mom had already moved, because I was scared and asked her to leave. She got together with a man, one of those farmers who is not afraid of the devil himself. I heard that he went with a machete, ready to cut off the head of whoever was in the house. The man painted and restored the house a little, but nobody in my family has the courage to go and live there” (Manuel, 33 years old, El Salvador).

### The Loss of Jobs and Income

Those who were self-employed or worked in a company, and tried to relocate to another part of the country to elude gang surveillance, encountered great difficulties in making a living, especially when they also had to support a family.

Carlos, who had worked as a credit and collection manager at a bank, moved four times within El Salvador and accepted low-paying jobs in order to hide from the gangs. “I had to start from scratch. To avoid trouble, I looked for jobs as a mechanic and a truck driver. I earned less than ten dollars a day and had to rent a little room, buy a bed, clothes, shoes, and send money to support my children. The money was not enough, it was quite difficult. I lived alone. I moved about four times, because the gang members always located me” (Carlos, 31 years old, El Salvador).

Lucas let his brother, a gang member, stay at his home while recovering from a gang attack. When Lucas and his family began receiving threats, he sought help from the authorities, but was simply told that he must move elsewhere. The internal relocation forced him to quit his job, and thereafter he had trouble



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finding work. “We found ourselves in a rather difficult situation that required us to start again. Unfortunately, the place where the problem with my brother had happened, was the place where I worked. I went to work elsewhere, but I had one of those jobs that pays 120, 130 lempiras. Who is going to put food on the table with that? I quit my good job to avoid those problems. If I had had money, I would have simply moved and would have gone to work in a car or on a motorbike. But since I only have a fucking bike, it was very difficult for me. If I get asked to commute 20 kilometers to be able to keep my same job, I cannot do that, because I only have a bike. That is when the poor need to make some pretty ugly decisions, because coming here is difficult too. It is difficult here, it is difficult there” (Lucas, 42 years old, Honduras).

People who had to close their businesses when they could no longer pay the extortion, had to sell their products in a hurry or even give them away so that they could get rid of their businesses in the shortest possible time. Teachers who fled threats for refusing to give gang members passing grades without studying, or for living in rival gang territory, lost their permanent positions when leaving their countries.

### **Educational Disruption**

Young migrants who had to drop out of school discovered that their educational processes were on hold while they were passing through Mexico. Those who had applied for asylum or obtained refugee status sometimes managed, with the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to access scholarships that allowed them to continue their education. Even several adults, who in their countries had had few opportunities to enter the educational system, studied to take exams in primary, secondary or high school. Some migrants showed interest in starting or resuming university studies, but few scholarships were available for this academic level.

People who had obtained school degrees in their countries would have preferred to revalidate their degrees rather than return to study for previously achieved degrees. However, some of them failed to recover the necessary documents; for others, the revalidation of academic titles was expensive. For those who wanted to continue studying, the main difficulties were related to their limited resources and the few possibilities of getting time off to take exams.

### **Family Separation**

For all migrants it was painful not to be able to be with their loved ones. Those who had to leave the country quickly after receiving threats, often had no time to say goodbye to their family or decided not to do so. In Mexico, some people had

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not been able to communicate with their relatives, because they had lost their phone numbers or had their cell phone stolen. Others maintained communication with their families, even if sporadically, but were devastated because they lacked the necessary funds to bring their mothers, wives, or children to Mexico. “It hurt so much when I got out of there. I have not been able to bring my wife and my son. We are too poor. I had just enough money for myself. I arrived in Guatemala, and there I had to ask for money to get to Mexico. Here I have not been able to find work and send my family money for food. I think about them a lot” (Marlin, 27 years old, Honduras).



*A street vendor in downtown San Salvador, El Salvador.*  
©Sonja Wolf

## Psychological Impacts

In many migrants, both men and women, the unforeseen displacement, the violence suffered in the country of origin or in transit to or through Mexico, even the struggles to build a new life in Mexico, left psychological affectations. According to Rafael, it was the sudden departure that created a feeling of being

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uprooted. “A resounding change in my life accompanied me from that moment, because I had to leave at *that* moment” (Rafael, 39 years old, El Salvador). Others were disappointed that the police did not offer them protection from gang threats or that police officers were even part of the problem. Those who had lost their businesses or homes expressed resentment at having lost everything they had worked so hard for, as well as feelings of injustice and helplessness, because the perpetrators were able to act with impunity.

There was a general feeling of sadness at having left behind the country of origin, family and friends, work and studies, the lifestyle known until then. “Sometimes I feel sad for having left what has cost me so much. Clothing is something material, here I can have something better. But why do I have to leave my job, my friends, and my parents who are the best that has ever happened to me?” (César, 17 years old, Honduras). Kevin said he wished he could turn back the clock. “It is an emptiness that you carry around, a thought that you cannot throw off. You are thinking of your family day and night, and of those who are no longer around. It is not nice to talk about it, but somehow you let off steam. I always think, ‘Fuck, I would like to go back now!’ But how, dammit? I was used to being with my mother, I always took care of her when she came home from work, made her coffee, cooked for her. I really miss that. Sometimes she would come up and say, ‘Son, how are you?’ That hurts a lot. Now, after so long, the pain and remorse have eased a little. But I would like to go back to when we were all eating together at the table” (Kevin, 22 years old, El Salvador).



*In the migrant shelter in Saltillo, Mexico. ©Sonja Wolf*

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It was clear that many migrants had experienced a sense of trauma due to the violence that preceded or triggered the displacement. "I did not tell you my whole story. If I did, you would be in tears. My stepfather wanted to kill me. He wanted to abuse my sister, so we went at each other with machetes. I showed him who was in charge. My mind is not healthy. Yes, I was never involved with gangs or anything, but I think I have more experience than a guy my age. I am 16 years old, but I have been out on the street since I was eight. Right now, I write poems. One says, 'Do not worry when life gets hard, just look up, because God always helps you.' Another one says, 'If your body were a jail, your arms a chain, that would be the best place for me to serve my sentence.' That is cool, is it not?" (Marvin, 16 years old, Honduras). A Honduran family spoke about the stress of violence that had affected the parents and their children. Xenia commented that "my nine-year-old daughter watched the gang members walk around the neighborhood carrying guns. She was suffering from psychological trauma. She no longer slept. If she heard gunshots, she would fall to the ground. 'Mommy, we are going to die now. I am afraid that I will die mommy,' she said to me. At school, my daughter already had a problematic profile. She had already learnt how to read, but she lost that ability because of the stress caused by the violence. When we came to Mexico from Honduras, she had psychological treatment. It affects us as parents, it affects us greatly. Now that we are here in Mexico, she is calmer" (Xenia, 35 years old, Honduras). Marlon, her brother, explained that "because of everything that was happening we did not sleep, we were worried. You shed tears just thinking about what you were experiencing. You did not know what end you would have. And to imagine after so many struggles, all the effort you left behind. You feel helplessness, psychological trauma. You had to concentrate to pretend that everything would be okay in front of the children, so that the children did not suffer" (Marlon, 44 years old, Honduras)

During the transit to or through Mexico, the migrants suffered recurrent assaults and violations. Three Honduran women acknowledged that they had been raped, one of them in her home community, two of them while in Mexico. Patricia, one of these two women, was raped in front of her partner. She even contracted HIV and decided to remain in an abusive relationship with her partner. He stayed with her despite her illness and instilled values in Patricia's son. The women who had suffered sexual assaults agreed that it was difficult for them to trust again. Experiences like these are difficult to process and made people seek psychological treatment or think they should get it.

Some of the refugees who had suffered threats or violence from the gangs spoke about their continued fear and recurring nightmares. They often think that gang members are lurking in a corner, or feel scared when they see a tattooed individual, because in Central America tattoos remain a cultural taboo and are primarily associated with gang members.

Those who were asylum seekers, or had been granted refugee status, reported feeling stressed, because they had to obtain income for rent and food, but struggled

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to find work. The long wait for the adjudication of the asylum application and the granting of a visa, as well as the obstacles to finding work, renting a place to live, and accessing affordable health services were sources of frustration. Some of the beneficiaries of the UNHCR's local integration program were disappointed at what they perceived as limited support for settling in an unfamiliar city and country.

*"It is difficult when you have to leave your house and everything that you have fought so hard for. Only God gives you strength. It makes me very sad, but you need to plough through and keep going."*

*Sara, 46 años, Honduras*

Integration difficulties, compounded by memories of what they once had, and had lost, in the home country, sometimes created bouts of depression and motivational problems. "It is difficult when you have to leave your house and everything that you have fought so hard for. Only God gives you strength. Roque is often depressed. It also makes me very sad, but you need to plough through and keep going" (Sara, 46 years old, Honduras). God was often mentioned as the sole source of support in difficult times, whether during the journey across borders or when the obstacles in Mexico seemed insurmountable. "Sometimes I would catch the train, sometimes I would not. Sometimes I had to walk two days to reach a town, without food, without water. My feet hurt and wherever I stayed, I fell asleep by myself. In Chiapas they assaulted me twice and took the only 500 lempiras from me that I brought. I asked God to help me keep moving forward, to give me strength and courage, to cover me with his blood and robe" (Axel, 17 years old, Honduras). "Right now, I am cut off from all my relatives. The only one who is with me is God," sentenced Rafael (Rafael, 39 years old, El Salvador).



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## VII. Hopes for the Future

People expressed illusions about their own future as migrants, related to the possibility of having stability and security in their lives, accessing decent jobs, housing, and health care, and walking in the streets without a constant fear of being attacked or assaulted. They also shared expectations of social, economic, and political transformation both in Central America and in Mexico and the United States.



*The former Libertad cinema in downtown San Salvador, El Salvador.*

*©Sonja Wolf*

### Changes in the Countries of Origin

Interviewees recognized that migration will not be gradually reduced unless the Northern Triangle countries undergo significant and lasting changes in policies and institutions. At the same time, they considered that, due to the complexity of the problems, the changes will require time, if they ever occur. Some of those who left for economic reasons thought they might spend some time working and earning incomes that they cannot obtain in Central America, and at some point,

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return to their countries with the savings accumulated abroad.

Those who fled threats from gangs or criminal groups reasoned that their return was unlikely. Some people even ruled out an eventual return to their countries, because they had serious doubts about the feasibility of the changes they saw as necessary. This skepticism arose as a result of the perceived co-optation of government institutions or the structural or chronic nature of the problems. In this regard, Manuel commented, “the changes that I would like to see are related to the conflicts that the country is experiencing, but I cannot understand how El Salvador might return to being a peaceful country without as much violence as today” (Manuel, 33 years old, El Salvador).

*“Rulers should be smarter and more human; they should try to be fair to people. Politics is everything. If politicians, the people in authority, felt the same as us, things would be different.”*

*Julio, 27 years old, Honduras*

Generally, migrants believed that as citizens they should be able to live with dignity and have the confidence that their human rights are respected. There were frequent calls for the creation of more stable jobs, with better remuneration and statutory benefits, as well as greater investment in public services and infrastructure, especially in rural areas. Some people stressed that governments should prioritize social investment, not investment in security. More support was also requested for poor families and single mothers, including financial aid or for the construction of houses and the creation of children's soup kitchens.

Public security turned out to be one of the most controversial issues, as opinions revealed important differences about responses to gangs and the role of the Armed Forces in providing public security. Some people recognized that security policies should attack the social roots of crime and gangs. “It is because of that poverty, because of this marginalization that us poor people face, that there is so much crime. If I were 22 years old and saw that my neighbor was in politics, had a two-story house and a luxury car, while I hardly have enough to eat, what would I think? Get into a gang and hit those over the head who are robbing the people! So, I think, the gangs, the people, organize and start to screw us over. Because the poor see this injustice!” (Lucas, 42 years old, Honduras). It was suggested that rehabilitation programs for gang members should be created. In this sense, Manuel affirmed, “I would like to see El Salvador heal the wounds of its violence and become a country where you can walk safely through the streets without breathing in so much tension, a country where you can feel protected by the police, and do not worry that the police themselves are afraid of gang members. El Salvador is in a silent war. Governments should sit down to develop more effective policies to reduce violence, not continue failed iron-fist policies” (Manuel, 33 years old, El Salvador).

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However, there was a recurring feeling that the gang problem had gotten out of control and required more drastic actions, either by the state or by the citizens. Several people believed that iron-fist policies were necessary, that more soldiers should be deployed on the streets and gang members be jailed or even physically eliminated so that they could no longer harm anyone.

“The gangs are a plague. Sorry for saying that. Those people are useless. The cleanups of criminals are fine. They should just get rid of them!” (María, 29 years old, Honduras and Carlos, 32 years old, El Salvador). In the case of El Salvador, where the government of President Nayib Bukele has promised to recover territories under gang control, Kevin commented that, “I think it is good that Bukele has deployed many soldiers who are looking after us. Because soldiers are respected. They are trained for war, and they fight for the people. It would cause a war, but it is the only way this can be done. Because if they do not finish off everyone who is involved in the gangs, the seed remains in the ground. And that seed will grow, and things will never change” (Kevin, 22 years old, El Salvador).

*“Mexico catches us because of the money the United States pays for each deportation. It is a business. Organized crime harasses us. It is another business. We are sacks of money for the government and for organized crime.”*

*Diego, 33 years old, Honduras*

Others affirmed that, although the police should be better paid so that they “do not let themselves be blackmailed by organized crime,” the limited presence of the state in large parts of Central America cannot be ignored. “The gang problem has already gotten out of hand. As much as you want to, you cannot control it. People must be encouraged not to be afraid, to rise up against the gangs and not be extorted or manipulated. There are many places where the gangs have not been able to enter, because the population has not allowed it. If they go in, they will get killed. The only way is to form community self-defense groups, because there are not enough police in the villages” (Alexis, 33 years old, Honduras).

Many of the interviewees were concerned about the quality of government, particularly the exercise of power in favor of the citizens, not in search of personal gain, and checks on discretion to reduce corruption. More responsible politicians were needed, from mayors and deputies to Presidents of the Republic, who worked for their country and were not thinking of “filling their pockets.” As María explained, “things do not change because of the bad decisions of the people who are in power and do nothing for the country” (María, 29 years old, Honduras).

Some of the migrants stated that problems such as unemployment or underemployment, extortion, and insecurity continued to occur, because they

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did not affect people in government, and these were insensitive to the needs of citizens. “Rulers should be smarter and more human; they should try to be fair to people. Politics is everything. If politicians, the people in authority, felt the same as us, things would be different” (Julio, 27 years old, Honduras). In order to bring about a change in the mentality of the rulers, citizens would need to be more educated and not vote for politicians of little or no integrity, but instead demand a new political class.

Hondurans insisted that nothing less than a change of government was required, but pessimism about the possibilities of change was also palpable. “The President devours the people,” said María (María, 29 years old, Honduras). Mario maintained that “the current government is a dictatorship. In the elections, Hernández had lost the presidency, but he invented the reelection and declared himself President. He will be in power for many more years; he does not plan to leave power. He did something good, I will not deny it, but something that benefited him more than the people, because he extradited all the drug traffickers in the country” (Mario, 39 years old, Honduras). Others were convinced that it would be difficult to remove the President from power, because he had control over the instruments of repression and enjoyed the support of external actors.

“Honduras is not going to change if we do not remove JOH [Juan Orlando Hernández]. The United States is the key actor in change, but the United States does not care about poverty or violence in Honduras. God only knows when we will see the light at the end of the tunnel” (Diego, 33 years old, Honduras). Roque said that other countries and international organizations should stop trampling on Honduras or being complicit in injustices and repression. “There is no point in changing the government if corruption is not fought. The problem is that corruption is encouraged by the UN [United Nations Organization] and the OAS [Organization of American States], because they endorse governments, because the United States interferes in the OAS. I consider Luis Almagro, the current OAS Secretary General, to be a puppet of the United States. They are the ones who have endorsed the current President of Honduras, which is incredible, since everyone knows that he is the brother of a drug trafficker” (Roque, 51 years old, Honduras).

Among Salvadorans, an unexpectedly positive view of the administration of President Nayib Bukele was notable. Several people thought that, in his first year in office, he was doing a good job and applauded his willingness to crack down on gang members, for example, by cutting off communications between incarcerated and street-based gang members. They deduced that Bukele had “new ideas,” just like the name of his political party, and that things would be different with the young President, because he is not (currently) affiliated with either of the two traditional political parties, both marred by corruption allegations. Furthermore, he would not steal like some of his predecessors,

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because he was an affluent person with no need to steal from public coffers. “He gives me hope that he will actually change things and not just talk. First, he was mayor of a small municipality, then of San Salvador, and he says that if he could change a municipality, why not a country. He has demonstrated it with facts” (Kevin, 23 years old, El Salvador).

## Policy Changes in Mexico

Although the Central American countries require profound changes, their scope and the time required for their implementation are uncertain. Meanwhile, migrants require assistance and protection from transit and destination countries. In this regard, Marlon observed that “for migration to ease, our country must improve. Right now, Honduras is complicated because of the President’s attitude. There is no security, there is no more respect. We only ask Mexico to remain patient, because more migrants are on their way” (Marlon, 44 years old, Honduras). Some people, who have encountered gang members among the refugee population, suggested that the shelters put in place more controls to prevent genuine asylum seekers from being exposed to danger.

Most of the proposals focused on various policies, especially in the areas of migration and asylum. People called for fewer obstacles and less repression on migration routes. A much-talked-about case was that of Marco Tulio, a Honduran migrant who was going to the United States with his little daughter and who was fatally shot by a police officer in Saltillo in August 2019. The officer alleged that he had fired in self-defense, and the crime scene was later altered to frame the migrant as an armed drug mule. The murder caused great sadness and outrage among the migrants who were in the shelter at the time. “Mexico,” said Diego, “catches us because of the money the United States pays for each deportation. It is a business. Organized crime harasses us. It is another business. We are sacks of money for the government and for organized crime” (Diego, 33 years old, Honduras).

*“Latino migrants are the engine that powers the United States. Americans do not get their hands dirty, it is we who do it. So we deserve a little respect, a little help. The laws should be fairer.”*

*Norman, 38 years old, Honduras*

People who were victims of extortion for alleged traffic violations or simulated kidnappings in migrant detention centers argued that stricter measures should be instituted to reduce corruption among police and migration officers. Others stated that the asylum process should be expedited. In addition, asylum seekers and recognized refugees should receive more help to access quality



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public services and housing, in the latter case through assistance with recommendations and deposits. The Mexican population should also be made more aware of the human rights of migrants so that the latter experience less discrimination, for example, in hiring practices. Central Americans ask not to be treated differently from Mexican citizens for the simple fact of being migrants.



*The Friendship Park, on the border between Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, United States. ©Karla Castillo*

## **Policy Changes in the United States**

People understood that migration from Central America would not stop as long as inequalities and injustices existed. “Migration is never going to stop,” said Gerson. “We all have the right to a better life” (Gerson, 17 years old, Honduras). Several interviewees pointed out that a deterrence-based migration policy, as promoted by the United States, is not only ineffective but also harmful. Mario observed that “the politics of the United States makes everything worse. It makes me laugh, because Trump is not going to stop migration. They deport many people from the United States, but many people also leave Central America. There is corruption at the border. People get through anyway” (Mario, 22 years old, Honduras). Some people expressly criticized the harmful effects of

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the deterrence strategies pursued by Mexico and the United States. Norma considered that “if that man were not like he is, there would much less risk for migrants. If they were not so hard on the migrants, none of this would happen” (Norma, 37 years old, Honduras).

Some recognized that fugitives or individuals who sought to harm others were among irregular border crossers. But most unauthorized migrants were decent people who were not thinking of hurting anyone. Consequently, Nelson declared, “I would ask Mexico and the United States not to call us criminals” (Nelson, 40 years old, El Salvador). Rather, governments should be more empathetic to migrants and understand that they left their countries to avoid starving to death or getting killed by gangs. If the governments of Mexico and the United States looked at people’s individual stories and needs, they would realize that Central American migrants deserved a chance of a better life. This would imply providing greater access to asylum as well as more options for legal migration, especially to the United States. Temporary work permits would reduce the risks on the way north, but these were not being granted due to racism toward Latino migrants. “We would like a temporary work permit, something like the TPS [Temporary Protected Status],” said Norman. “Latino migrants are the engine that powers the United States. Americans do not get their hands dirty, it is we who do it. So we deserve a little respect, a little help. The laws should be fairer” (Norman, 38 years old, Honduras).

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## Conclusion and Recommendations

Forced migration from Central America is due to a series of socio-economic, political, and institutional factors, in many cases some combination of them. The individuals interviewed for this study referred to problems such as job insecurity and poverty, the effects of climate change as well as the low coverage and quality of public services. In addition, the migrant testimonies highlighted discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ population, domestic violence, child sexual abuse and, especially, violence by street gangs, criminal groups, and the state. Misgovernment, a notion that for many migrants sums up corruption, indifference, and abandonment, underlies the above conditions. This is, and should be, perhaps the most striking and worrying aspect of the endless exodus of Central American individuals and families.

The absence of the state in large parts of the Northern Triangle, which manifests itself in scarce and deficient basic services and the lack of security and justice, is widely exploited by non-state actors. Due to their readiness to resort to violence, gangs and drug trafficking groups instill fear in the affected populations. But sometimes they are also interested in establishing a semblance of authority, giving jobs, and solving people's daily problems. This trend has been evidenced in the context of the health contingency caused by COVID-19. In El Salvador, for example, some gangs have strictly enforced social distancing measures or distributed food packages among low-income families.<sup>81</sup> These apparent gestures of support and protection not only allow non-state actors to position themselves as beacons of stability in times of uncertainty, but also risk further strengthening their legitimacy and power as actors of local governance.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, this will make it infinitely more difficult for the state to regain citizen trust and the territorial control that have been gradually eroded.

Looking at the factors of expulsion more closely, it is evident that many Central Americans face tremendous, if not insurmountable, difficulties in finding work due to favoritism, educational requirements, or the availability of limited and poorly paid jobs. This reality means that in certain areas people even decide to accept lawful jobs offered by drug trafficking groups. Many more established their own micro-businesses, often as a substitute for formal employment, but gang extortion made it impossible to maintain these businesses. The impact of climate change, particularly on agricultural productivity, also reduced the possibilities of income generation. The prevalence of informal or short-term, poorly paid jobs, combined with the rising cost of living, makes it difficult to support a family and cover children's school fees.

Another important expulsion factor, with different aspects, is violence, exacerbated by structural discrimination and racism. Violence against girls, women, and LGBTQ people, but above all violence by gangs, organized crime

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groups, and the state itself stand out. Gangs have developed in marginal areas in the absence of social and economic opportunities, particularly for adolescents and young adults, and the lack of adequate policies and interventions. The presence of these groups, in addition to constituting a source of anxiety for residents, hinders mobility between rival gang territories, thus restricting social contacts, school attendance, work-related transfers. In addition, their gradual influence on local governments and security agencies, in search of extortion and job opportunities or intelligence and weapons, causes state institutions to be decreasingly effective and responsive to the needs of the general population.

The effects of gang violence are compounded by the small size of the Central American countries. It is impractical for victims to start a new life beyond the reach of these groups or to expect state protection. People in gang-affected communities have no choice but to accept collaborations aimed at facilitating criminal activities or evading law enforcement, paying extortion, or being subjected to harassment for sexual purposes (women) or recruitment (men). Those who refuse to collaborate or comply with gang demands get threatened, making the victims' flight urgent and inevitable. Since the Central American isthmus is a drug transit zone, it should come as no surprise that criminal groups seek to involve people in narcotics trafficking or money laundering.

More disturbing is the violence carried out by state agents, specifically in the context of political protests and iron-fist security policies that have emboldened the police and military to commit abuses without worrying about the repercussions. Widespread corruption and impunity have undermined citizen trust in governments and public institutions, to the extent that people tend not to report crimes or, in the worst case, take justice into their own hands. The disillusionment with the political class is so deep that people have little hope that conditions in their countries can improve.

The unplanned and often sudden departure from countries of origin, precipitated by violence and followed by difficulties in transit and exile, leaves many forced migrants struggling to reorganize their lives. The uprooting involved material losses (houses, businesses, income) and emotional upset associated with the separation of family and friends. A lingering feeling of sadness, injustice, and resentment, as well as violence-induced trauma, were difficult to overcome even once the victims reached safety. The clandestine journey to and through Mexico involved many hardships and, often, new aggressions. Extortion, robbery, and assault, including sexual abuse, were frequent, which in some cases resulted in serious injuries and health problems. The ease with which criminal groups operate along the routes, kidnapping or recruiting migrants for drug trafficking or surveillance, points to complicity by state agents and the apparent disinterest in stopping crimes against migrants.

Psychological distress can be exacerbated by automatic, often prolonged, detention in INM-operated migrant detention centers. The detention conditions

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are notoriously difficult, given that civilian detainees have not committed any crime and should not be deprived of liberty. In fact, disproportionate detention can constitute torture if it is carried out to punish or deter irregular migrants.<sup>83</sup> INM officers, empowered to carry out deportation orders, use the possibility of indeterminate detention to discourage asylum claims. After the long wait for refugee recognition and a residence permit, the uncertainties associated with a new life in a country that is unfamiliar but comparable, in terms of physical and economic insecurity, to the Central American nations continue.

*“The exodus from the Northern Triangle will continue if underlying factors such as poverty, underemployment, gangs, violence, corruption, and impunity are not decisively addressed. Doing so requires constant political commitment to reform institutions, create effective public policies, and allocate adequate resources. Mexico and the United States, as transit and destination countries, must participate positively to help improve development and security in Central America if they hope to gradually reduce northward migration.”*

The sharp increase in asylum claims, coupled with the COMAR's extremely inadequate financial and personnel resources, produces an asylum process, typically six weeks long, that can now take up to a year. Waiting for the resolution is made more agonizing by the fact that Mexico lacks an adequate asylum support system. Even though asylum applicants have, in principle, access to housing and public services, in practice people face many obstacles and depend on NGOs and shelters for temporary accommodation and the satisfaction of their basic needs.

UNHCR provides technical assistance to the COMAR and works with shelters that house asylum-seeking families and offer legal advice. In addition, the agency provides integration supports, including access to vocational training and employment opportunities, particularly in northern industrial cities.<sup>84</sup> However, even with legal residence, forced migrants face discrimination, especially when they seek housing or work, and struggle to make ends meet. Mexico is a country of emigrants that has repeatedly called for more dignified treatment for its citizens in the United States. Paradoxically, there still seems to be little public understanding and government recognition of the nature of the Central American exodus and the responses it requires.

The interviewees expressed a yearning for stability and security in their lives, especially the hope of accessing decent work and housing, health care and of being able to walk the streets without a constant fear of being attacked. They also conveyed the illusion of structural transformations in Central America, although skepticism prevailed regarding their feasibility, due to the apparent



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indifference of the political class and the challenges involved in installing more ethical, honest, and qualified rulers. The exodus from the Northern Triangle will continue if underlying factors such as poverty, underemployment, gangs, violence, corruption, and impunity are not decisively addressed. Doing so requires constant political commitment to reform institutions, create effective public policies, and allocate adequate resources. Mexico and the United States, as transit and destination countries, must participate positively to help improve development and security in Central America if they hope to gradually reduce northward migration.

Unfortunately, this situation is now exacerbated by the emergence of COVID-19, which will drain already scarce resources and deepen the existing crisis due to the projected drop in wages, employment, and migrant remittances.<sup>85</sup> Governments in the region have invoked emergency powers to deal with the pandemic. For example, the Honduran president issued a decree that temporarily restricts freedom of expression rights, supposedly to combat disinformation about the virus. His Salvadoran counterpart has imposed a nationwide quarantine, enforced by the police and the Armed Forces, which detain quarantine violators in sanitary confinement centers.<sup>86</sup>

The risk is that measures that allow indefinite detention and infringements of freedoms of expression and assembly, as well as the role of the security agencies in their enforcement, may impact civic and political life for the foreseeable future. Once mobility restrictions have been relaxed, migration is likely to increase again in response to the economic consequences of the pandemic. In Mexico and the United States, the attention of policymakers will inevitably also focus on alleviating the impact of COVID-19 on health systems and economies, making the assistance and protection of forced migrants a distant but lasting concern.

Mexico needs to continue structural and institutional reforms aimed at increasing security, reducing corruption, and guaranteeing economic and social rights for the benefit of its citizens and irregular migrants alike. But the country must also build an adequate support system for asylum seekers and ensure a timelier adjudication of asylum applications. The automatic –and in practice indefinite– detention of unauthorized migrants needs to be reconsidered, even more so during a health contingency. Migrant detention centers, just like refugee camps, tend to be overcrowded and lack adequate health and sanitation services. These conditions facilitate the spread of communicable infections and make it imperative that states create alternatives to detention that better protect the health of migrants.<sup>87</sup> The Mexican government was ordered to release at least the especially vulnerable migrants to COVID-19 and guarantee their access to health and social services.<sup>88</sup>

Beyond these extraordinary current circumstances, Mexico and the United States must also rethink their border and immigration policies. While border controls are necessary, they must be carried out with respect for human rights.

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This means not rejecting asylum seekers at the border or expelling irregular migrants without a proper assessment of their international protection needs. Migration policies must be sensitive to social realities. Strategies based on arrest and deportation will not deter people who see migration as the only escape from continued assaults on their lives or livelihoods. This type of revolving door policy is wasteful and exposes people to unnecessary danger.



*Central American migrants camp on the Puente Nuevo, Matamoros, Mexico. ©Esteban Martínez*

The United States has continued deportations even during the pandemic, running the risk of spreading the virus in countries with already poor health systems.<sup>89</sup> In addition, an order from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) establishes, under the pretext of public health, a process of summary expulsion that suspends the asylum procedure on the Mexico-United States border for a renewable period of 30 days.<sup>90</sup> Rather than placing forced migrants in even greater vulnerability, the United States and Mexico should defer deportations, but not assessments and determinations of international protection needs. Furthermore, they should provide residence and work permits to facilitate migrants' access to rights.<sup>91</sup>

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In the long term, addressing forced migration from Central America will require stronger asylum support systems and procedures that are in tune with the multiplicity of factors that uproot people. It also requires an expansion of legal avenues for migration, given the limited reasons for refugee recognition. There is a moral imperative to give displaced people a new home when the old one is no longer habitable. But it is also time to recognize that deterrence-based policies only exacerbate the problem they are intended to solve and use resources that would be better spent on implementing sustainable responses to forced migration.

## **Recommendations**

Considering the findings presented in this study, the following recommendations are made:

### To the Countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America

- 1 | Urgently address the factors that drive people to leave their country, especially issues such as poverty, widespread violence, corruption, and impunity.
- 2 | Create fiscal policies aimed at the eradication of extreme poverty and the reduction of social inequality.
- 3 | Strengthen the capacity of families, particularly single-parent homes, to care for and protect their children through programs that support them in exercising their parental responsibilities.
- 4 | Make a transparent and efficient use of public resources and seek the progressive reallocation of resources for punitive security policies to inclusive social policies.
- 5 | Guarantee universal access to quality and affordable health services, and improve the availability of affordable medicines.
- 6 | Establish sustainable water management to meet economic and environmental needs and guarantee equitable access to drinking water and sanitation.
- 7 | Protect food security, guaranteeing access to basic grains and promoting sustainable agriculture.
- 8 | Create a safe and protective environment in schools that helps guarantee the right to education.
- 9 | Promote the development of human capital through training and certification of skills.

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- 10 | Strengthen agricultural activity as a source of employment.
  - 11 | Support industrial transformation to reduce dependence on remittances.
  - 12 | Create a comprehensive employment strategy that aims to promote full and decent employment.
  - 13 | Design and implement policies and programs to eliminate stigmatization, stereotypes, and discrimination against LGBTQ people, or those perceived as such.
  - 14 | Implement crime policies that guarantee fundamental rights and promote the social prevention of violence and crime.
  - 15 | Design and implement gang policies that make it possible to recover territorial control with respect for human rights, address social factors that favor gang development, and include interventions that allow youth to withdraw from gangs.
  - 16 | Create internal and external accountability systems that ensure that law enforcement agencies carry out their functions properly and that they are held accountable if they fail to do so, in order to maintain police integrity, deter misconduct, and restore confidence citizen in the police.
  - 17 | Establish a plan aimed at the progressive withdrawal of military forces from public security and the professionalization of civilian police forces.
  - 18 | Strengthen the investigative capacity of the Attorney General's offices and install effective special mechanisms, supported by international cooperation, to assist in the fight against corruption and impunity.
  - 19 | Implement policies to combat corruption, based on the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and access to information.
  - 20 | Build merit-based civil service systems to increase bureaucratic capacity and improve the quality of services.
  - 21 | Correct the excessive application of pre-trial detention, avoiding its arbitrary, unnecessary, and disproportionate use.
  - 22 | Collect and use accurate data on forced internal displacement, and adopt humanitarian assistance, protection and durable solutions measures for internally displaced persons.
  - 23 | Refrain from signing safe third-country agreements with the United States or other countries in the region, since the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America do not meet the conditions to receive asylum seekers.
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- 24 | Support and strengthen consular representation in Mexico, particularly in the areas where most migrants travel, to assist migrants in detention or in transit and to ensure they have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation.

#### To Mexico

- 25 | Ensure that all migration verification operations, including those on freight trains, are not carried out in circumstances that put migrants at unnecessary risk of accidents or involve excessive use of force.
- 26 | Ensure that all agencies involved in migration control adhere to use-of-force protocols, and undertake effective investigations and sanctions in cases of abuse.
- 27 | Withdraw the National Guard from migration control operations.
- 28 | Create adequate accountability mechanisms for all agencies involved in migration control to ensure that misconduct is investigated and sanctioned.
- 29 | Implement a security policy that allows a sustainable reduction of crime and violence on migration routes and the rest of Mexico, especially sexual violence, kidnappings, extortion, homicides, and human trafficking.
- 30 | Ensure that all migrants who have experienced sexual or physical violence have access to appropriate medical and psychological services.
- 31 | End the automatic and indefinite detention of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, ensuring that detention is exceptional and used only when necessary and proportionate to a legitimate purpose.
- 32 | Guarantee that the detention conditions in migrant detention centers comply with the minimum human rights standards, especially in terms of health, medical care, and food.
- 33 | Ensure that migrants in administrative detention are fully and adequately informed of their rights and have access to free and independent legal advice.
- 34 | Provide ongoing training to migration officers on dealing with people who have suffered trauma.
- 35 | Guarantee the access of the National Human Rights Commission, international organizations, national and international NGOs, journalists, and academic researchers to migrant detention centers in order to monitor detention conditions, conduct private and confidential interviews with detainees and staff, and provide legal advice.



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- 36 | Guarantee that persons deprived of liberty have the right to appeal the legality of their detention, including the right to legal assistance and the power of the court to order the release of detainees.
  - 37 | Guarantee that people are not summarily expelled and have the right to appeal the legality of their deportation order.
  - 38 | Respect the principle of non-refoulement, avoiding that people are rejected, expelled or placed at the borders of another country where their lives or liberty are in danger.
  - 39 | Adopt measures, such as the issuance of visas or transit permits, that facilitate entry and transit through Mexico through regular channels, reducing clandestine migration and the vulnerabilities that it entails.
  - 40 | Encourage the regularization of migrants, avoiding precariousness in working conditions and access to basic services.
  - 41 | Strengthen cooperation and coordination with the United States, Central America, and other countries in the region so that migration takes place in a regular and safe manner.
  - 42 | Provide humanitarian assistance, temporary visas, and work permits to asylum seekers in the US Migrant Protection Protocols (“Remain in Mexico”) program.
  - 43 | Facilitate, in coordination with consular representations, people’s access to identity documents, regardless of their migration status.
  - 44 | Grant the exemption or reduction of the costs of issuing migration documents, considering people’s situation of vulnerability.
  - 45 | Promote family reunification with migrants who have obtained some regular migration status or form of international protection.
  - 46 | Guarantee the right to access a fair and efficient process of refugee status determination when people are under the jurisdiction, authority or effective control of Mexico, even if they are outside its territory.
  - 47 | Implement an early detection system that improves the identification of potential asylum seekers when they encounter officers of the National Institute of Migration.
  - 48 | Provide the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance with the material and human resources that allow it to expand its national reach and improve its ability to receive and process the growing number of asylum applications in a timely manner.
  - 49 | Improve reception conditions to ensure that migrants and asylum seekers
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have access to shelter, food, and medical care.

- 50 | Move asylum applicants with security concerns from border areas to other parts of the country to await resolution of the process, with special emphasis on victims of gangs and organized crime groups.
- 51 | Establish programs aimed at sensitizing the population to the situation and human rights of migrants, promoting interculturality and preventing, investigating, and punishing all acts of discrimination and xenophobia.
- 52 | Facilitate migrants' access to affordable and adequate housing in terms of facilities, clean water, gas and electricity, sanitation, and waste disposal.
- 53 | Guarantee people's access to affordable medical care and medicines, including sexual, reproductive, and mental health services, regardless of migration status.
- 54 | Promote access to primary, secondary, and university education for all people, regardless of their migration status or the availability of identity documents or school reports.
- 55 | Consider simplified procedures for the recognition of academic qualifications and the recognition of professional skills and other accreditations.
- 56 | Promote the access of migrants, on an equal footing with citizens, to fair working conditions, including decent remuneration, a maximum number of working hours, the right to social security, health, and safety standards as well as protection against unfair dismissal.
- 57 | Guarantee that migrant workers are aware of their labor rights, and promote access to free legal aid so that migrant workers can claim their rights, should they be violated.
- 58 | Pursue and punish those employers who commit abuses against migrant workers and ensure due reparation for victims.
- 59 | Promote people's financial inclusion, facilitating access to the necessary documentation to open and use bank accounts, regardless of migration status.
- 60 | Guarantee people's effective access to justice, assistance, protection, and comprehensive reparation for damages suffered, regardless of migration status and in conditions of equality with citizens.
- 61 | Monitor international money transfers made through companies such as Western Union or MoneyGram, avoiding that these services are used to pay for –real or simulated– kidnappings of migrants.

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## To the United States

- 62 | Immediately abandon attempts to reject people with international protection needs at the borders without proper analysis of their asylum claims.
- 63 | Respect the principle of non-refoulement, preventing people from being expelled or placed at the borders of another country where their lives or liberty are in danger.
- 64 | Properly inform people of their right to apply for asylum and ensure that they have access to fair and effective asylum procedures.
- 65 | Improve reception conditions to ensure that migrants and asylum seekers have access to shelter, food, and medical care.
- 66 | Suspend the Migrant Protection Protocols (“Remain in Mexico”) program, as well as any other plan and action that requires asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border to wait in Mexico until their asylum claims have been resolved.
- 67 | Increase the number of immigration judges and their support staff to ensure the timely and fair resolution of asylum cases.
- 68 | Grant asylum seekers access to affordable, independent, and competent legal advice, ensuring adequate attention to their needs for international protection.
- 69 | End the automatic and indefinite detention of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, ensuring that detention is exceptional and used only when necessary and proportionate to a legitimate purpose.
- 70 | Abandon safe third-country agreements with the governments of the Northern Triangle of Central America, recognizing that the countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras lack the capacity and security to receive and host asylum seekers from other nations.
- 71 | Strengthen cooperation and coordination with Mexico, Central America, and other countries in the region so that migration takes place in a regular and safe manner.
- 72 | Provide funds and support to expand Mexico's capacity to receive and process asylum applications and provide social support to refugees and asylum seekers.
- 73 | Provide funding and support to legal clinics that provide free legal assistance, advice, and representation to refugees and asylum seekers in Mexico.
- 74 | Decriminalize irregular entry into the United States and ensure that administrative penalties applied to unauthorized entry are proportionate.

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- 75 | Expand the channels of regular migration, taking into account the domestic labor market and the economic needs of forced migrants.
  - 76 | Address, through diplomacy and external aid, the factors for forced migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America, including the lack of sustainable economic development, violence, corruption, impunity, and the weaknesses of democratic institutions.

#### To the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

- 77 | Carry out awareness campaigns on the situations and rights of migrants, with the aim of preventing discrimination and xenophobia against migrants.
- 78 | Promote intergovernmental cooperation and coordination between the United States, Mexico, Central America, and other countries in the region so that migration takes place in a regular and safe manner.
- 79 | Strengthen alliances with NGOs and universities to promote research and advocacy on the reasons for departure and the situation of migrants.

#### To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- 80 | Carry out awareness campaigns on the factors of expulsion and the rights of forced migrants, with the aim of preventing discrimination and xenophobia against refugees and asylum seekers.
- 81 | Promote cooperation and coordination among governments, the private sector, civil society, and academia in the United States, Mexico, Central America, and other countries in the region with the aim of strengthening the assistance, protection, and integration of refugees and asylum seekers.
- 82 | Support legal clinics that provide free legal assistance, advice, and representation to refugees and asylum seekers in Mexico.
- 83 | Strengthen partnerships with NGOs and universities to promote research and advocacy on expulsion factors and the situation of refugees and asylum seekers.
- 84 | Strengthen the local integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Mexico and increase the transparency of the local integration program, publishing program documents with objectives, goals, indicators, activities, and results.

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## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> Paulo Saad, Jorge Martínez Pizarro y Zulma Sosa, *Atlas of Migration in Northern Central America* (Santiago de Chile: CEPAL, 2018), 13.
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- <sup>15</sup> Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on Citizen Security and Human Rights* (Washington, DC: IACHR, 2009), 11.
- <sup>16</sup> CIDH, *Situación de los derechos humanos en Honduras*, 39.
- <sup>17</sup> IACHR, *Report on Citizen Security and Human Rights*, 12.
- <sup>18</sup> IACHR, *Violence, Children and Organized Crime*, 15.
- <sup>19</sup> Clare Ribando Seelke, *Gangs in Central America*, CRS Report for Congress RL34112 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> IACHR, *Violence, Children and Organized Crime*, 14.
- <sup>21</sup> CIDH, *Situación de los derechos humanos en Honduras*, 39.
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<sup>31</sup> María Martín, "España es el país de la UE con más peticiones de asilo por la presión de Latinoamérica," *El País*, 23 de febrero de 2020, [https://elpais.com/politica/2020/02/22/actualidad/1582400826\\_726947.html](https://elpais.com/politica/2020/02/22/actualidad/1582400826_726947.html).

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Violences in Central America have increasingly fueled forced internal and external migration. However, the governments of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) have been reluctant to recognize the existence of this phenomenon. Mexico and the United States, the countries of transit and destination, have responded to the arrival of forced migrants with deterrence-based policies, hindering or denying people access to human rights, basic services, and asylum. There are not yet much systematic and reliable data on forced migration from Central America, nor sustainable and effective assistance and protection programs and policies.

This book is based on 134 semi-structured interviews conducted in Mexico with forced migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America. It is argued that people turn into forced migrants when they are compelled to leave their communities and countries of origin due to threats to their lives and/or well-being. Through a detailed analysis of the testimonies, the author discusses the violences that migrants experienced at home and in exile as well as the ways in which these altered their lives unexpectedly and irrevocably. What motivated migrants to participate in the research and share their stories? How did they feel about doing so? What hopes do they have for their own future and that of their countries of origin? These and other questions have wide-ranging public policy implications in the areas of development, security, and migration in Central America, Mexico, and the United States.

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