

Foreign Policy Is Migration Policy: Lessons from the Drivers of Central American Child Migration

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Summary

From 2011 to 2016, about 179,000 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala were apprehended entering the United States. While the crisis received ample media attention, limited data has meant little rigorous analysis of what made those children move. Using unprecedented data on each apprehension, we measure how violence in these children's hometowns shaped their migration. In the average municipality the children came from, 10 additional homicides caused about six additional apprehensions. This implies that additional cost-effective investment in regional violence prevention during this period could have substantially reduced the suffering and costs associated with unaccompanied child migration, and suggests unexplored opportunities for US foreign policy to complement US immigration policy goals.

Violence, poverty, and child migration in the Northern Triangle

Parts of the Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—are some of the most violent places on earth. Homicide, extortion, and kidnapping have been common over the past decade, carried out by *mara* street gangs, drug cartels, and other transnational criminal organizations. To appreciate the scale of violence, consider that the greater Washington, DC area would have needed 13,532 *additional* homicides in order to reach the per capita homicide rate that Santa Rita, Honduras suffered in 2016. Economic opportunity is

also severely limited: In Santa Rita, each person's average *annual* income would purchase the same standard of living as \$3,500 in Washington, DC, at the same prices.

From 2011 through the end of 2016, 178,825 unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala were apprehended by the US border patrol. If just the 17-year-olds among them had been apprehended in a single year, they would represent one out of every twelve 17-year-olds in their home countries.

Federal and local government agencies in the United States have struggled to

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Topline Findings

- In the average municipality of the Northern Triangle, every 10 additional homicides across the years 2011–2016 caused six additional children to be apprehended as UACs.
- Economic conditions in the region were also an important driver of UAC migration, explaining roughly as much of this mixed, complex migrant wave as violence.
- Sudden increases in violence do more to explain child migration than persistent violence. But chronic, persistent unemployment explains more than transitory spikes in unemployment.
- The UAC migration wave “snowballed”—that is, it became partly self-sustaining, with about one-third of each year’s additional flow an aftershock of growing migration networks.
- Each UAC apprehension required a US federal expenditure of roughly \$50,000. Since fiscal year 2014, the government has spent roughly 10 times on managing UAC arrivals in the US as on violence prevention assistance in the Northern Triangle.

address this wave. There has been controversy about whether these “unaccompanied alien children” (UACs) should be legally treated as refugees or as voluntary economic migrants. Less discussed has been whether US foreign policy could have effectively and efficiently reduced this migration in the first place.

Research findings: A search for safety and opportunity

The research draws on unprecedented data, provided by the Department of Homeland Security, on all UACs apprehended from the Northern Triangle between 2011 and 2016. It links these apprehensions to “push” factors: changing conditions of violence, job opportunities, and demographics in the children’s Central American hometowns. This allows the first quantitative measurement of the

effects of violence and economic conditions at home on the migration decisions of UACs.

The analysis shows that, spread out over the 2011–2016 period, each 10 additional homicides in the average municipality caused an additional, cumulative total of six UAC apprehensions in the United States. This cause-and-effect relationship goes beyond simply showing that municipalities with higher homicide rates had higher UAC rates. For example, it controls for the fact that some municipalities, because of their geographic location or degree of urbanization, would naturally have higher homicide rates and UAC rates. It also shows that the 2011–2016 wave of Northern Triangle UACs was a complex, mixed flow of migrants, driven in roughly equal measure by the desire for safety and the desire for opportunity. UAC migrants inspired and assisted future UAC migrants, causing the wave to snowball over time.

The effects of violence and economic conditions are inextricable. Violence creates a strong impetus for child migration, to which relatively better-off and better-connected families

are able to respond. Violence outbreaks create comparatively less pressure for UAC migration in the poorest areas (where migration is most difficult), including areas with limited connections to international networks. These findings suggest that economic development without lasting reductions in violence is unlikely to reduce future pressure for child migration. Figure 1 shows that the largest reductions in migration pressure would have arisen from reduced violence across El Salvador, in western coastal and central Honduras, and in limited portions of Guatemala (the capital region and El Petén).

Fiscal costs and opportunities

UAC apprehensions cause substantial fiscal costs to the US government. Table 1 shows rough estimates of those costs. The “low” column includes

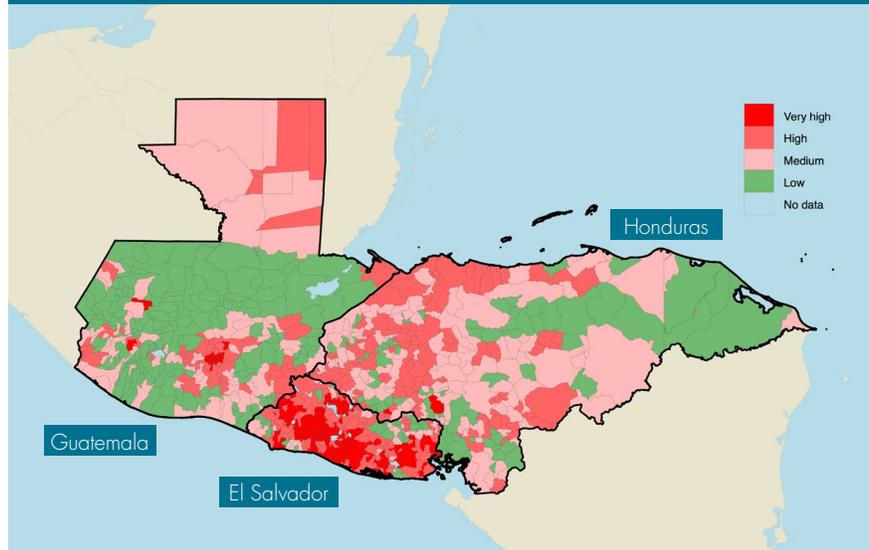
only actual expenditures directly related to UAC apprehension and processing in fiscal year 2015 by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). This total implies a lower bound of \$28,200 per UAC.¹

The “high” column of table 1 reports the amounts requested by several federal agencies to handle the 2014 UAC wave, divided by the estimated number of children expected. This yields a cost of \$45,200–61,600 per UAC.² As a whole, table 1 suggests that any policy measure that could have deterred a single UAC from attempting the journey would have saved US taxpayers, on average, roughly \$50,000.

These expenditures can be compared to federal outlays to prevent violence in the Northern Triangle. Federal funding for the Central American Regional Security Initiative, in areas plausibly related to violence prevention, was \$348.5 million in fiscal year 2016. It averaged \$260 million per year from 2014 to 2016.³ These amounts, compared with table 1, imply that over the past three years the federal government has spent roughly 10 times as much on managing UAC apprehensions in the United States as on violence prevention in the Northern Triangle.

The findings allow a very rough estimate of how effective violence prevention assistance would need to be. Avoiding one homicide *per year* in the region during 2011–2016 (six total homicides), would have prevented approximately four UAC apprehensions over the same period. At a fiscal cost of roughly \$50,000 per UAC, avoiding

Figure 1. Where in the Northern Triangle a given reduction in homicides would reduce UAC pressure the most (red: greatest reduction, green: least reduction)



these four apprehensions would have produced a fiscal savings of approximately \$200,000. Therefore, the 2016 increase in foreign assistance for violence reduction was efficient in budgetary terms if each additional \$200,000 spent averted roughly one homicide per year on average.⁴

Policy Implications

- *Foreign policy is a form of migration policy.* Decisions about US assistance to Central America during 2011–2016 likely affected the rate of UAC migration to the United States and the burden it placed on other federal agencies, though this cannot be precisely measured.

1. This should be considered a “low” estimate because it does not allocate fixed costs of the agencies to UAC related activities, and does not include related expenditures of all involved government agencies.

2. This might be considered conservatively high because it reports requested funds rather than actual expenditures, though it omits future costs (beyond fiscal year 2014) resulting from the same UAC apprehensions.

3. From Clare Ribando Seelke (2016), *Gangs in Central America*, CRS Report RL34112, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, p. 15. Includes only Economic Support Fund (ESF) and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds. These numbers are conservative overestimates because 1) a portion of CARSI funds go to governments outside the Northern Triangle, and 2) only a portion of ESF and INCLE funds directly target violence prevention.

4. The one independent, randomized evaluation of USAID assistance for violence prevention in the region finds that it caused a marked decrease in reported homicides: Berk-Seligson, Susan, Diana Orcés, Georgina Pizzolitto, Mitchell A Seligson, and Carole J Wilson, *Impact Evaluation of US-AID’s Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America*, Latin America Public Opinion Project. Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2014. The evaluation outcome is the frequency of survey respondents reporting a homicide in their neighborhood, not the number of homicides that occurred. Because one averted homicide could be reported by several survey respondents, that methodology does not allow an estimate of the corresponding decline in the homicide rate, or the number of homicides averted per dollar of expenditure.



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Table 1. Total expenditures of federal agencies directly related to UAC apprehension, detention, care, and legal processing⁵

Federal government department	Low (FY2015 actual expenditures)	High (FY2014 supplemental request)
Homeland Security (ICE)	23,744,000	1,104,000,000
Homeland Security (CBP)	155,953,000	432,000,000
Homeland Security (USCIS)	?	?
Health & Human Services (ORR)	948,000,000	1,800,000,000
Justice (EOIR)	?	52,900,000
Justice (general)	?	1,100,000
Total	\$1,127,697,000	\$3,390,000,000
No. of UAC cases	39,970	55,000–75,000
Cost/UAC	>\$28,200	\$45,200–61,600

ICE=Immigration and Customs Enforcement; CBP=Customs and Border Protection; USCIS=US Citizenship and Immigration Services; ORR=Office of Refugee Resettlement; EOIR=Executive Office for Immigration Review

- *Economic development without violence reduction is unlikely to greatly reduce future migration pressures.* This is because the effect of development on migration depends on violence, and vice versa.
- *Federal agencies with separate mandates have common interests.* Effective assistance for violence reduction in Central America has inherent humanitarian value. But beyond this, effective security assistance can complement efforts to enforce US immigration law and promote safer, more orderly migration by children and others.
- *Data can reveal opportunities for targeting foreign policy to complement migration policy.* This study shows how data collected by separate government agencies can be shared to explore opportunities for mutually beneficial policy. It also implies that geographic and sectoral targeting of foreign assistance can greatly enhance its complementarity with immigration policy, making the most of scarce public resources.

5. Budget sources: FY2015, ICE: [DHS FY2017 Congressional Budget Justification Vol. 2](#), PDF p. 52. CBP: [DHS FY2017 Congressional Budget Justification Vol. 1](#), PDF p. 763. ORR: [HHS Administration for Children and Families Operating Report FY2016](#), p. 2. Number of cases is actual UAC count for calendar 2015. FY2014: [Emergency Supplemental Budget Request](#), July 8, 2014 (estimated number of cases used for those cost estimates, 55,000–75,000, on p. 7). These estimates do not include any future costs of deportation, and do not include state and local fiscal expenditures, such as for legal assistance.



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