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Why are families leaving Central America?

From the earliest days of U.S. history, our country has welcomed people who are escaping persecution and poverty. People who make the decision to leave home and come to the United States, in recent years as in the past, generally have few other options. Factors beyond their control have made their circumstances too hungry and violent for them to remain.

These causes of migration are often called “push factors,” because many migrants from Central America are primarily being “pushed” to the United States by conditions at home, rather than “pulled” here by opportunities. The main push factors are hunger, violence, and extreme poverty.

Undocumented immigration is less about the United States and more about hunger, extreme poverty, and conflict in the three countries of Central America’s Northern Triangle—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. War and extreme poverty have created similar situations from Syria and Nigeria to Yemen and Myanmar. Forced migration is on the rise worldwide.

Poverty, hunger, and violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle

POVERTY

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Percentage of population living below poverty line	59.3%	29.2%	64.3%
Percentage of children under 5 who are stunted	46.5%	13.6%	22.7%
Homicide rate per 100,000	27.3	82.8	56.5

Sources: data.worldbank.org and fao.org/faostat/en

- Central America’s “Northern Triangle” countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—are among the poorest in the world, with very high levels of hunger and malnutrition.
- More than half of the residents in these three countries live below their own national poverty lines; nearly two-thirds of all Hondurans live in poverty.¹
- Nearly half of Guatemala’s children are chronically malnourished, along with nearly 20 percent of children in Honduras and El Salvador.² Malnutrition kills many young children and causes irreversible damage to many who survive, including lifelong health problems, difficulty learning in school, and stunted physical development.

- In a World Food Program survey of migrants from the Northern Triangle, the majority cited “no food” as a reason for leaving their countries.³
- The region’s brutal civil wars have come to an end, but continuing high levels of violence mean that, for many, home still resembles a war zone. The 2016 murder rate in the three Northern Triangle countries was more than 10 times the U.S. murder rate.^{4,5}
- Most people have very good reasons to migrate. For example, when women arriving from the Northern Triangle and Mexico were screened in 2015, 82 percent were found to qualify for entry to the United States as refugees based on the legal standard of a “credible fear of persecution or torture” if forced to return to their countries.⁶

U.S. CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEE POLICY

In 2014, the Obama administration announced a new refugee program for Central American Minors (CAM). Recognizing that these children were migrating primarily because of fears for their lives and safety rather than by economics, the program accepted, as lawful entrants, eligible minors from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras with parents living in the United States as citizens or permanent residents. The CAM program was expanded in 2016 to include immediate family members or caregivers. Those who applied for the program were screened either in their home countries or in Costa Rica, with those who were accepted then admitted to the United States. The program was still limited to the admissions quotas of the larger U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The Trump administration terminated the CAM program in January 2018.

Source: <https://www.uscis.gov/CAM>



As efforts to reduce widespread hunger and restore the rule of law begin to produce results, however, people will be better able to make a decision to remain close to family and friends and contribute to their communities' well-being. While it is ultimately the responsibility of each country to provide for its own citizens and protect them from violence, the United States should support neighboring countries in this endeavor for both moral and strategic reasons.

The United States should strengthen its diplomatic efforts and development and humanitarian assistance to help countries in the region respond to and address the causes of forced migration. In addition to efforts to stem violence and strengthen governance and institutions, these should include food security and nutrition programs. Evidence shows that growth in the agricultural sector reduces hunger and poverty more than growth in any other sector.

As our country continues to debate immigration policy, we must acknowledge the United States cannot have a comprehensive immigration strategy without a focus on supporting countries' efforts to create environments that help people survive and thrive in their homes and communities.

For a more comprehensive analysis of immigration policy on both sides of the border, see Bread for the World Institute's resource "From Hunger to Hunger: Undocumented Immigrants Face Hunger on Both Sides of the Border."⁷

U.S. Government Policy on Push Factors

Any truly effective immigration policy must include lasting solutions to the key push factors mentioned earlier: hunger, malnutrition, extreme poverty, and violence. Migration should be a choice. Like parents everywhere, parents in the Northern Triangle feel a tremendous responsibility to ensure that their children are properly nourished and explore all possible ways of accomplishing this. Stricter U.S. immigration laws and harsher border enforcement policies alone will not keep desperate parents from trying to give their children a better future.

Endnotes

¹ "World Bank Open Data." The World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/>

² "World Bank Open Data." The World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/>

³ "Food Security and Emigration: Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras." WFP, IADB, IFAD, OAS, IOM. 2017. https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000022124/download/?_ga=2.130631439.164542571.1540403811-1321486272.1538076080

⁴ "World Bank Open Data." The World Bank. <http://data.worldbank.org/>

⁵ "2016 Crime in the United States." FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/murder>

⁶ "Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico." United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNCHR). 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html>

⁷ From Hunger to Hunger: Undocumented Immigrants Face Hunger on Both Sides of the Border. <http://www.bread.org/library/hunger-hunger-undocumented-immigrants-face-hunger-both-sides-border>