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# Background Paper

JUNE 2017

## From Hunger to Hunger

### Undocumented Immigrants Face Hunger on Both Sides of the Border

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#### Immigration Is a Hunger Issue

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Dating back to before the colonial era, people from all over the world moved to what is now the United States. In the 1500s, people from Spain, France, and England began to arrive. In the 1800s, millions of people fled Ireland to escape famine after the potato crop failed. Many of these earlier arrivals were motivated by both the need to escape hunger and deep poverty at home, and the desire to build a better life.

Likewise, many immigrants today are leaving their countries to escape hunger, extreme poverty, and violence—whether from civil war or criminal gangs. Once here, they generally want to work and contribute, but they may be isolated by a combination of factors, such as poverty, limited English proficiency, and discrimination.<sup>1</sup>



Laura Elizabeth Pohl/Bread for the World

#### DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Undocumented immigrants are **TWICE** as likely to be **hungry** and up to **THREE** times as likely to live in **poverty**.

Families can pay **as much as \$10,000** in immigration court fees from raids and deportations—more than half the income of a low-wage worker.

Children with a detained parent are **THREE TIMES** as likely to develop mental health problems, speech delays, and weak academic performance.

These factors also prevent many immigrants, particularly those without documentation, from contributing to their fullest potential and from providing for their families and

saving to guard against hunger in the future. People who live and work without documentation are more likely than the general population to experience hunger (24 percent compared to 14 percent).<sup>2</sup>

As a Christian organization, Bread for the World is working to end hunger around the world and in the United States by 2030. To achieve this goal, we must look at undocumented immigration as a hunger issue and address its root causes to develop a long-term solution.

#### Undocumented Immigration: What Is Happening?

From our research and analysis,<sup>3</sup> we have learned that any approach to immigration policy must consider factors both in the United States and in immigrants' home countries. Immigrants are most visible to Americans once they have crossed the border, but at its core, undocumented immigration is an international hunger issue. We must identify the root causes that force immigrants to flee to the United States, and, while it will not be easy, we must help find solutions to these problems.

## *Undocumented Immigrants Are Often “Pushed” From Their Home Countries*

As mentioned earlier, the United States has attracted people seeking opportunity and prosperity since precolonial times. The number of immigrants who are here primarily because they are *fleeing* their home countries, rather than mainly because they are *seeking* more opportunities, is increasing. Many undocumented immigrants are not so much being “pulled” here as “pushed” out of their home countries by factors beyond their control.

“Push factors” are reasons that force migration, including deep poverty and hunger, violence, civil war, and others. High levels of hunger and malnutrition increase the need to migrate. We see this type of forced migration all over the world. However, host governments, including the U.S. government, often do not grant people who are fleeing entrenched hunger and poverty, or armed conflict outside of war (such as organized gang violence), the legal status appropriate to their circumstances.

### **DID YOU KNOW THAT...**

Many people pushed out of their countries are not granted the proper legal status. One study found that 82 percent of the women fleeing Central America would qualify for asylum based on “a credible fear of persecution or torture.” Yet many are considered simply undocumented immigrants rather than refugees, and thus they are at risk of being detained or deported.

## *Fleeing for Their Lives—Push Factors in Central America*

Widespread poverty makes communities less resilient and leaves people with fewer choices in their lives. Often, poor countries struggle to strengthen law enforcement institutions that may be ineffective or affected by corruption. If parts of a country then come under siege from drug cartels, organized crime, and/or street gangs, people fear for their lives and often

An undocumented immigrant woman from El Salvador recounts how violence and extreme poverty pushed her to risk her life to flee her country. “We were so poor. There was a lot of poverty. I think there is a little more poverty now. There is a lot of crime and it’s everywhere. The problem is there are way too many gangs coming in and they have killed members of my family. After 8 o’clock, you can’t be on the street anymore. If you’re on the street, you will be killed.” Accounts such as this are not uncommon among undocumented immigrants. Many have left home because of violence, hunger, extreme poverty, and other push factors.

have little legal recourse in their home countries. They may have only two options—go along with or even participate in violent crime, or flee. Such increasingly common situations are causing an increase in undocumented immigration by women and children from Central America.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data, in 2014 there were more undocumented immigrants from Central America apprehended at the U.S. southern border than from Mexico. The same was true in 2015 and 2016. Last year, more than 90 percent of the families apprehended at the border were coming from three countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, together known as the Northern Triangle countries.<sup>4</sup>

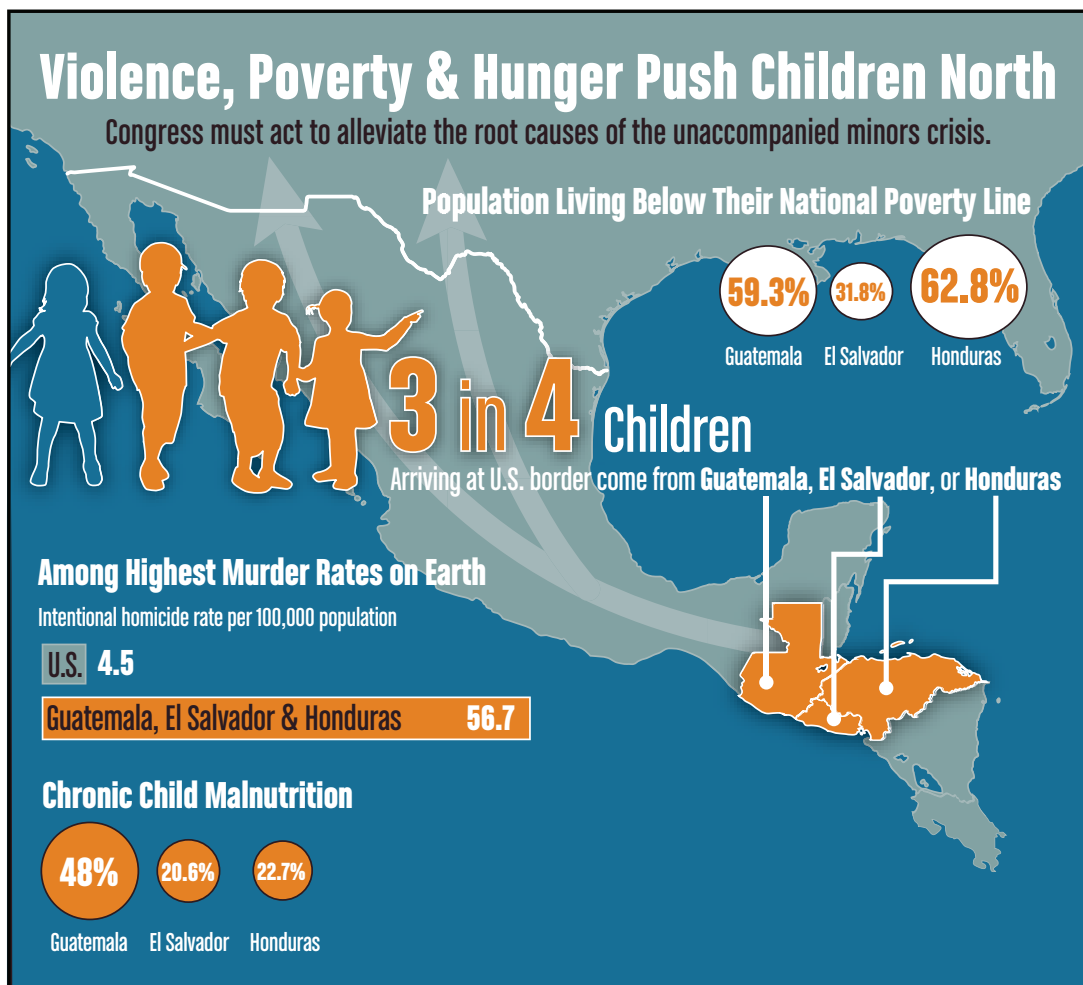
The Northern Triangle is among the poorest regions in the world, with more than half of the population living below their respective national poverty lines.<sup>5</sup> People suffer from the high levels of hunger and malnutrition that are a hallmark of extreme poverty. Nearly half of Guatemala’s children are chronically malnourished<sup>6</sup> and thus likely to sustain lifelong damage to their health and development.

The U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) characterizes the conditions in the Northern Triangle that people are fleeing as “refugee-like.” As mentioned earlier, however, the United States does not necessarily consider them refugees because there is no acknowledged war. Instead, the United States considers them “undocumented,” despite symptoms of violent conflict such as the 2014 murder rate in the Northern Triangle being 12 times the U.S. murder rate.<sup>7, 8</sup> Yet, with a few exceptions, U.S. policy toward immigrants from the Northern Triangle is to intensify border enforcement actions and increase the number of people being detained and deported.

## *Hunger and Poverty—Push Factors from Mexico*

At least since the 1990s, the majority of undocumented immigrants entering the United States have come from Mexico.<sup>9</sup> More recently, the numbers of new arrivals have been declining, but Mexico is still the home country of the largest share of undocumented immigrants currently living here.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps conditions in Mexico are not as immediately life-threatening as those in the Northern Triangle, but Mexico nonetheless has push factors that have driven people to cross the border.

While Mexico’s overall economy has improved, its poverty rates have essentially remained the same. About half of all Mexicans live below the poverty line.<sup>11</sup> This means that the gains from economic growth have not reached lower-income people. The poorest 20 percent of the population—25.4 million people—have only 5 percent of the national income.<sup>12</sup> Mexico has a daily minimum wage, but it is the equivalent of just \$3.98,<sup>13</sup> not enough to lift a family out of poverty.<sup>14</sup> The poorest 20 percent also live in “food poverty,” meaning



that their income is not enough to purchase even basic food needs.<sup>15</sup> The combination of these factors pushes people to go to the United States to earn enough money to feed their families at home.

## From Hunger to Hunger

Undocumented immigrants leave their home countries to escape deep hunger and poverty, but many remain at high risk of hunger and poverty once they arrive in the United States.

Undocumented immigrants are nearly twice as likely as the overall U.S. population to be food insecure (24 percent compared to 14 percent).<sup>16</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data specifically on the poverty rate of undocumented immigrants, but we know that the poverty rate among immigrants in general is 30 percent. The median household income of undocumented people is \$36,000—almost \$20,000 lower than the median income of the U.S. population as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Their lower incomes, combined with the reality that undocumented people have far fewer employment opportunities, mean that undocumented immigrants, and their 4.5 million children who are U.S. citizens, could have poverty rates nearly three times the national rate of 13.5 percent.

## DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Contrary to popular belief, undocumented immigrants are not eligible to receive SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), cash assistance, TANF, or Medicaid.

This makes undocumented families even more vulnerable to hunger because they have no plan B in times of need.

## Why the Higher Hunger and Poverty Rates?

We often hear the claim that undocumented immigration across the border with Mexico is rising rapidly—people are “pouring into” the country to join the large numbers of undocumented immigrants already here. But the new arrivals peaked in 2007, and almost 70 percent of undocumented people have lived here for 10 years or longer.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, despite living and working here long-term, many undocumented immigrants are still likely to hold low-wage jobs with few or no benefits. This, combined with the lack of access to safety net programs, a greater risk of unsafe working conditions, weaker health care, and the risk of being detained and



deported all contribute to higher levels of hunger and poverty.

**Ineligibility for Safety Net Programs**—Unlike other low-income families being paid minimum wage and needing additional support, undocumented families are not eligible to participate in SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly food stamps) or in other support programs such as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).<sup>19</sup> This makes undocumented families particularly vulnerable since they have lack access to a federal safety net to be their “Plan B” in times of need.

Citizen children are eligible for SNAP, but the amount is calculated based on only the family members who are citizens—not covering the needs of the *entire* household since older siblings and parents who are undocumented are not included. The lack of additional support through SNAP, TANF, and other programs helps us understand why undocumented immigrants are twice as likely as the general household to be food insecure.

**Unsafe Working Conditions and Lack of Health Insurance**—Undocumented workers are more likely to endure hazardous working conditions because they have few alternatives<sup>20</sup> and need to put food on the table. They also lack access to health care since they are far less likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance. Hazardous job sites may lead to injuries or serious illnesses such as cancer. But in jobs without health coverage and paid leave, even coming down with the flu could lead to the loss of a job—and with it, money for food, rent, and other essentials. Without the proper support, a parents’ ability to work and provide for their family is threatened altogether.

**Threat of Raids and Deportation**—Removing a parent from a home also removes her/his income. Detention and deportation separate families and make it harder to make ends meet. When someone is deported, there’s a permanent loss of the income of a working adult. Even in cases where people are detained and later released, the immediate costs may include court fees and other legal expenses. These can total \$10,000 in immigration bond and court fees alone<sup>21</sup>—which is two-thirds of the entire annual income, before taxes, of a minimum wage worker.

Immigration raids, detention, and deportation can damage children’s development and performance in school. Children with a parent in detention are nearly three times as likely to develop mental health problems<sup>22</sup> and can suffer speech delays and academic decline.<sup>23</sup> Any of these problems can pose barriers to that child’s ability to get a job and avoid hunger as an adult.

## The truth about good immigration policy

Bread for the World works for policy changes that will reduce



Laura Elizabeth Pohl/Bread for the World

**Catholic Relief Services: Mexico has made reducing migration a fundamental goal of its programs, including “For a Just Market.” CRS worked to improve the productivity and marketability of apple farmers in Chihuahua. The program has provided alternatives to migration for the farmers and their families by increasing their incomes.**

hunger and its root causes. Reforming our broken immigration system to ultimately end hunger will require solving problems on both sides of the border—providing better opportunities for undocumented people in the United States and reducing poverty in home countries, particularly the Northern Triangle.

### *Good Immigration Policy Must Provide Better Opportunities for Undocumented Immigrants*

Enabling families to remain together and earn a living means establishing a path to becoming “legal” as well as providing protections for workers. It is particularly ironic that undocumented immigrants have such high rates of hunger and poverty, because most are employed<sup>24</sup> and many work significantly more than 40 hours a week. Work protections and opportunities for earned citizenship reduce hunger and poverty among undocumented households while preventing the 4.5 million American children in these households from falling deeper into hunger and poverty. These measures would not only help individual households—they also help increase the national GDP and reduce overall hunger and poverty in

the United States.

Some studies show that the mass deportations some have proposed would reduce the U.S. GDP by 1.4 percent immediately and, cumulatively over the next 10 years, by \$4.7 trillion.<sup>25</sup> Undocumented immigrants currently pay \$11.6 billion annually<sup>26</sup> in state and local taxes across the country. And if they were instead granted legal documentation, there would be an additional \$2 billion in tax contributions each year. This would increase their effective tax rate to 8.6 percent—more than the 5.4 percent effective tax rate of the wealthiest 1 percent of taxpayers.<sup>27</sup>

### *Good Immigration Policy Must Reduce Poverty and Increase Opportunity in Home Countries*

Immigration policy seeking to curb undocumented immigration must put in place lasting solutions that address the push factors leading people to leave their homes. Until widespread poverty, hunger, and violence are reduced, the number of people seeking relief in the United States is not likely to decrease. Stricter immigration laws and border enforcement alone will not stop people who are suffering.

While it is ultimately the responsibility of each country to provide for its own citizens, and reduce hunger, poverty, and violence, the United States should support these efforts for both moral and strategic reasons. Strengthening the home countries' efforts to respond to the root causes of forced migration from

their countries—both economic and security causes—is in the best interest of all. Supporting growth in agriculture does more to reduce hunger and poverty than supporting growth in other areas, such as manufacturing or urban infrastructure. That is why the United States should emphasize supporting smallholder farmers as well as food security and nutrition programs that have been proven effective in reducing hunger and malnutrition.

## Conclusion

Immigration is a hunger issue. Addressing hunger on both sides of the border is essential to reaching a long-term solution. Making improvements in the available paths to legal immigration,<sup>28</sup> and protecting all workers in the United States regardless of immigration status, are critical to reducing hunger in our country. Supporting other countries in reducing hunger—by fostering environments of opportunity and stability—is important for U.S. security, and it also enables people to stay in their home countries. But this requires responding to the push factors that force people to flee hunger, poverty, and violence in the first place. Taking this approach will enable the United States to have an immigration strategy that is coherent domestically and internationally, which in turn will help put us on track to end hunger here and abroad by 2030.

## Endnotes

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