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Honduran Migrants in Mexico: From Transit to Settlement

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Policy Brief Series

POPULATION



Honduran migrants in Mexico: From transit to settlement



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SUMMARY

Migration is not a linear and sequential process. Migrants adapt their strategies and change their plans according to both obstacles and opportunities they face during their transit. Consequently, locations where migrants originally intended to simply pass through can become their destination (at least for a period of time). In this way, temporary locations can become more or less permanent. We present the case of Honduran migrants whose original plan was, and may still be, to reach the United States, but who find themselves somewhat settled in Chiapas and Veracruz, two strategic points on the main migratory route through Mexico. Considering the ever-increasing restrictions on migration northwards —“remote control” U.S. policies aimed at externalizing its borders across Mexico, as well as the increased dangers along the migratory route through Mexico— together with the rising levels of violence experienced in migrants’ places of origin, the topic of migration towards the United States becomes ever more complex and calls for an analysis and exploration that addresses the dangers and abuses experienced by migrants passing through Mexico.

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Managing irregular migration in transit, often seen as a threat that must be stopped by all means, has become a bargaining chip between destination and transit countries, illustrated clearly by the tendency to externalize the borders of those countries considered to be the main destination countries. In Europe, for example, this trend has seen countries such as Greece and Spain, but also Morocco, Libya, and Turkey act like retaining walls for the rest of Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, Mexico has become increasingly committed to working with the United States on migration control, strengthening its policy for administering “migratory flows in transit” as outlined by the Programa Integral de la Frontera Sur (Integrated Program for the Southern Border), established in 2014, to detain and deport migrants in transit through Mexico without the required migratory documents.

In order to understand the complexity behind transit migration,¹ it has been explained as a precarious condition or a situation in which migrants are 'stranded'.² However, these interpretations are insufficient. We need to delve deeper into the reasons, circumstances, and dilemmas that lead men and women to leave their homes and countries, staying for an indefinite amount of time in destinations where they did not initially plan to stay, or where they only planned to stop temporarily on their journey. Likewise, we need to avoid simplifying this phenomenon into one of two dichotomous concepts: that those who migrate are running from the law, or on the contrary, are victims of human rights violations and other dangers.³

Taking a simplistic view of this phenomenon, we might wager that deported migrants are unlikely to attempt to migrate again once they have been returned to their place of origin. However, in the case of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the countries that form what is known as Central America's Northern Triangle, this speculation is unrealistic considering the high levels of violence in these areas. Therefore, it is important to view transit migration as indefinite and uncertain, given that no one, neither the migrants nor those making or implementing policies, is sure how long the migrants will stay in those places that were originally planned as provisional stopgaps.⁴ A location initially intended to be a temporary stop can become a destination while at the same time, a destination may also become temporary, all depending on a number of different factors.

Not all migrants continue on their intended journeys; not all migrants who remain in Mexico do so because they are stranded or trapped; not all migrants who settle have given up hope on the American dream; and not all migrants who settle do so in only one place

Focusing on the complex reality of those Honduran migrants found in key locations along the route to the United States, namely Chiapas and Veracruz in Mexico, we can make the following observations: not all migrants continue on their intended journeys; not all migrants who remain in Mexico do so because they are stranded or trapped; not all migrants who settle have given up hope on the American dream; and not all migrants who settle do so in only one place. There is a growing population of people whose transit through Mexico is slow and who have lived in at least one place in Mexico for months, or even years. Many of these migrants are concentrated in the Soconusco region in the state of Chiapas, which has long since been a destination for many Central Americans, as well as other emerging regions such as Xalapa and its surrounding areas in the state of Veracruz.



Map 1 highlights the main routes that Honduran migrants follow to reach the United States and the aforementioned areas where Hondurans tend to settle whether temporarily or permanently.

To stay or to continue the journey

How long migrants stay in one place does not answer the question why Honduran migrants settle en route, or continue towards the United States. The question is difficult to answer because there are various factors at play, such as economic resources and social networks that support the journey to the United States; life course stage; the relationships formed in the places where migrants have 'temporarily' settled; the characteristics and strength of the migrant's ties with Honduras. Each migrant's decision is based both on his/her personal circumstances and goals, but as these are shaped by local, national and international contexts, the decision to settle, continue, or return home can also change over time.

In this brief, we present the voices of Honduran migrants located in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Veracruz (see Table 1 for a summary of the methods employed). Our research highlights the complex relationship between the length of time migrants stay in a place of “transit” and the factors that influence their decision to remain or continue on their journey north. Each one of the individuals quoted here shared their personal circumstances, commitments, ties and attachments. They are representative of a large number of s collected cases. For the Chiapas area, the testimonials and analysis resulted from fieldwork carried out in the Soconusco region during 2008-2010 and 2012-2014,⁵ while for Veracruz, they come from ethnographic observations, interviews and visits with 40 Hondurans between 2014 and 2016.⁶

Table 1. Research methods employed in this study

Research in Chiapas	Research in Veracruz
Project: “Settlement and integration Process of Honduran residents in the Soconusco region of Chiapas” (2012 – 2014).	Project: “Living on the margins. Central American migrants in the central region of Veracruz” (2014-2016).
Interviews with key informants in Tapachula and Huixtla (in Chiapas) and Tegucigalpa. Honduras	Interviews with key informants in Cordoba, Orizaba, Amatlán de los Reyes, Yanga and Xalapa.
206 completed questionnaires	Participant observation with the group “Vive Migrante” in Guadalupe La Patrona, within the municipality of Amatlán de los Reyes.
17 interviews with Hondurans living in Tapachula or Huixtla: 5 men and 12 women.	Interviews with 40 Hondurans who were resident in Xalapa and its surrounding areas or who were passing through.
13 of the 17 interviewed took part in a participatory photography activity.	Visits to the migrant hostels in Saltillo, Coahuila, Ocotlán, Jalisco, Amatlán de los Reyes and Córdoba, Veracruz.



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Migrant voices in the Soconusco region

Mexico's southern border and the Soconusco region in particular remains a key region for transitory migration towards the United States

Restrictions to US immigration increased in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City and the War on Terror. Indeed, they have further escalated in Mexico since 2014. Yet, Mexico's southern border and the Soconusco region in particular remains a key region for transitory migration towards the United States.

In Tapachula and Huixtla, the most important towns of the Soconusco region in Chiapas, it is possible to find people who have arrived from a variety of countries, particularly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the latter being the country of focus in this policy brief. When discussing whether she will ever try to go to the United States (her original intended destination), Soledad, a 41-year-old woman originally from San Pedro Sula who has been living in Huixtla for more than 13 years said: ⁷

"No, I thought about it once [continuing on to the United States], but when I heard there had been what they are now calling a massacre of people coming from here [referring to the 72 Central Americans found dead in San Fernando, Tamaulipas], I got so scared and with that, the dream stopped there. I might travel later on, not to leave here, but maybe to go out and see parts of Mexico around here and return. I would like to go and see what it's like there, but not to leave. It scares me. I'm afraid because of what you see or hear and what you see on the television: they say that if I went over there, it's hard too, even for work. So, I think it's the same, they will kill me, they will... who knows what, maybe even sell me, perhaps, or who knows what they would do with ... because there are many things. All kinds of things could occur to me and it makes me scared just thinking about going there... and not returning; it scares me."



Like Soledad, 22-years-old Arturo is from San Pedro Sula. He has been living in Tapachula for a year and a half:

— What is your plan after here? — he was asked
— When I am finished here, as I tell my friend, I'm going to look for an apartment; but the plan, supposedly our plan was to leave; finishing this, I was going to go leave and go back on the road—responded Arturo.
—Where?
—North, to the United States.
—Yes, and what happened?
—We have been analyzing everything, and I tell him, OK. He says “let's try, let's try!” There is no shortage of willingness, but I am also not one who likes to do things in a frenzy, in a crazy way, I have always liked to sit.

Arturo's words illustrate the dilemma faced by many migrants on whether to continue or not. The time spent in the region and their age makes them less mobile.

In both cases, is it undeniable that time spent in the “temporary” destination is an important factor, albeit not the only factor. In Soledad's case, the number of years she has spent in the region has allowed her to create ties where she has settled, which makes the idea of staying a more viable option than leaving. For Arturo, on the other hand, the plan to continue northward is more present. In both cases, contextual elements also play a part: the dangers and difficulties involved in moving on are contrasted by the available work and the social network found in the place of settlement. These elements are powerful enough to make Arturo doubt whether he should continue on his journey and convince Soledad that Chiapas is her best option.





Photo credit: María Teresa Rodríguez

Migrant voices from Xalapa

The urban core of Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz in Eastern Mexico, is one of the locations where Hondurans have recently begun to settle on either a temporary or more permanent basis

Today, the urban core of Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz in Eastern Mexico, is one of the locations where Hondurans have recently begun to settle on either a temporary or more permanent basis. Up until the first decade of the twenty-first century, this area did not appear on the main migratory routes. This implies that, with a few exceptions, Hondurans have yet to benefit from having ties with permanent residents or networks that allow them to enter the work force in Xalapa, as it happens more often in Tapachula and

Huixtla. Some Honduran migrants in the area are in transit towards the country's northern border, either to settle in another Mexican city where they have contacts, or to try and cross into the United States. When faced with the difficulties of crossing the border, some migrants explore the possibilities of settling in Xalapa or in another place in Eastern Mexico, surviving on the help they can get on the streets and at crossroads.

There are also those migrants who have settled in Xalapa following a complicated journey that has lasted months or years. Some

of these migrants have taken jobs in the informal sector (mostly door-to-door sales and construction) without any benefits or social security. Such is the case of Omar, a young 24-year-old who is unmarried and originally from Puerto Cortés, and who has lived in Xalapa since the middle of 2013:

—I found work here as a builder's workhand —says Omar—, I am paid one thousand pesos a week ... It's really hard work; look... I'm sunburnt. I'd love to have a good job, buy a piece of land, build a house and have a family.

— Have you tried to find another job? —he is asked.

—I don't know; I don't know how to do anything. I don't have any schooling. It makes me depressed to think about going back on the streets to beg. I don't want that. I did it for a time and, I really don't like it. Believe me, sometimes I really want to go to the other side, but it's difficult to cross, and I have already been deported three times. I am thinking about going to Canada, but I haven't decided.

—Do you have friends or people you know in Canada?

—No, but they say there is more work there and they pay well. Here I am living from day to day. What I earn is not enough to send to Honduras. I send money, but very little, sometimes nothing. But I have to see if I can. How good it would be if it was just nothing more than to say "I'm going!"

Alberto, 22, has been living together with Paula, 18, since 2014 with their 1-year-old daughter on a ranch in Chiconquiaco where Paula is from. Alberto alternates his life in the countryside with temporary visits to Xalapa, where he occasionally goes to beg:

—I wanted to go to the United States, but not anymore; now I'm not going anywhere. I'm not moving from here. I have my daughter! And the ranch is beautiful, everything is green with beautiful landscapes where you can breathe fresh air. You can walk around no problem, nobody bothers you. Everyone knows me and says hello. When there's work, they call me, to cut the coffee plants, to sow, to put up a roof, a fence, whatever. I didn't know how to do any of that kind of work. I grew up in San Pedro Sula, which is a city. It's really huge!

—So, do you think you will stay indefinitely in El Naranjo?

—Yes, that's what I want. My in-laws gave us some land at their house and I'm going to make a room. But I don't have any money. On the ranch there isn't any work and they pay 100 pesos a day. Can you imagine? What can that cover!

—And that is why you are here in Xalapa?

—Yes, well, I'm going to be here for about 8 days. I have to get some money together to take back to the ranch.

For some, the idea of getting to the United States is more like a dream or desire rather than a concrete plan. In many cases, the thought of returning to where they are from is not an attractive option either, since migrants no longer feel part of the communities they left behind. Returning to Honduras implies starting over under difficult conditions

Omar's story shows the difficulties of finding satisfactory employment in Xalapa, leading him to consider whether it would be better to get back on the road and head north, to another destination. Despite having spent three years living in the city, the absence of family and emotional ties makes him think about trying to forge a new life, even though he is still a long way from being able to put it into action. The characteristics of Omar's migratory trajectory so far have also influenced his decision to take things slowly, despite his situation in Xalapa being very different from what he had envisioned when he left Honduras. Meanwhile, Alberto also faces economic hardship and limited job opportunities. However, his family situation and social environment, albeit economically insecure, provide him with strong motivation to stay.

These testimonials illustrate the variety of possibilities and reasons why migrants decide not to continue north and how the length of time spent in a place does not necessarily affect whether migrants will leave or stay. For some, the idea of getting to the United States is more like a dream or desire rather than a concrete plan. In many cases, the thought of returning to where they are from is not an attractive option either, since migrants no longer feel part of the communities they left behind. Returning to Honduras implies starting over under difficult conditions.



Photo credit: Gerardo Espinoza Santos, 2013



Arriving to remain?

As shown by the aforementioned case studies, the length of time migrants stay in one place is not the only variable affecting decision to reside permanently. Likewise, we cannot predict whether someone who appears to be established in a place will remain without changing his or her mind in the future. Nevertheless, we can identify some factors that seem to contribute to migrants' decisions to stay, either by hindering migrants' ability to further migrate northward, or by making settlement more attractive. Among the former, the ever-increasing violence in sending communities in Central America, an ever more dangerous journey through Mexico and Central America, and migratory policies in the United States and Mexico aimed at detaining and deporting migrants hinder in-transit flows. Among the latter, "stabilizing" elements like gaining stable employment or forging family and other social relationships motivate migrants to stay.

In the case of Tapachula and Huixtla, the majority of Honduran residents do not have the economic stability they imagined to achieve in the United States. However, after 20 years in which these places have received significant immigrants from Hondurans, nationals from that country have encountered and shaped conditions that make settlement possible, at least for a time. On the other hand, in Xalapa, the majority of Honduran residents find themselves in unfavorable circumstances both economically and

in terms of employment. Yet, despite not being able to return to their country or being able to complete their initial plan to reach the United States, they share common elements with their fellow countrymen in Chiapas.

Reasons to settle in Mexico

The research carried out in Xalapa shows that such cases tend to be Honduran men in relationships with Mexican women. On the contrary, the majority of Honduran women arriving to Xalapa have come accompanied by their partners from their places of origin or have entered a relationship with someone they met on the way

As a result of this research we can identify four main elements that motivate and allow migrants to stay in a place that was first intended to be transitory.

1. Having a stable intimate relationship with a member of the local community can be a key motivational factor to remain in a place. Even in a place where its policies for integrating foreigners is not necessarily its strength, having a relationship with a member of the local population is, without a doubt, one element that can change someone's mind. The research carried out in Xalapa shows that such cases tend to be Honduran men in relationships with Mexican women. On the contrary, the majority of Honduran women arriving to Xalapa have come accompanied by their partners from their places of origin or have entered a relationship with someone they met on the way. The case of Alberto —who lives with his partner, Paula, with whom he has a daughter— shows how having a partner is a fundamental factor when deciding whether to settle. Despite the fact that he has not been able to regularize his migratory status, his sense of belonging from being part of a family provides emotional stability and access to a community which he feels part of.



Photo credit: María Teresa Rodríguez

2. Having Mexican children and/or reuniting with children born in the country of origin is an important factor. In addition to having a partner, children, whether they were born in Mexico or in Honduras, play an important role in the decision to settle. Being mother or father to a Mexican child will enable the migrant to regularize his or her immigration status; that is, having a Mexican child enables migrants to get a residence visa, even if they do not have a formal work contract, which is the case for the majority of migrants from Central America. Having a child who was born in Mexico also legitimizes the status of the migrant within the local community as it can suggest commitment to the place, justifying their presence. On a similar note, bringing children to live in Mexico involves mobilizing resources and depends on economic, emotional and practical support from people in both the country of origin as well as the destination. Reuniting with families already settled in the destination implies expenses, legal formalities and the need for families to adjust. It also indicates greater commitment to the place. As illustrated by Alberto's situation, children are a decisive factor when deciding to settle in the state of Veracruz.

3. Living in a place where there are different ways to make a living is another key factor. Unlike other key locations on the main migratory route, Huixtla and Tapachula are the most important areas within the southern border region in economic terms; despite the uncertainty and informality of its employment opportunities, it offers options to meet basic needs. Even though what these places offer is far from what was expected of the United States, the economies of these communities make sending money home a possibility. These cities are alternatives which allow for permanent residency or at least a longer stay than first expected.

On the other hand, in the case of Veracruz, we have seen that having a significant relationship with a local person and having children living with you provide strong motivation for migrants to settle, despite having a low income and without a steady job. Furthermore, in this area, there are young single migrants –mostly male– who manage to survive by a form of begging on the streets, at crossroads and in other spaces known as “charoleo”.⁸ In spite of the precariousness of their sources of income, they have options to get the resources necessary to cover their most basic needs (food, shelter and clothing). Even though this was not the original plan when these young people decided to migrate and despite the limitations they have in finding work, albeit informal, they survive on the help of the local

people. Thus, Xalapa has become a place where young Hondurans who have not achieved their goals to reach the north have decided to settle permanently or for a relatively long period. Nonetheless, it is clear that this region is not as favorable for them as the Soconusco region.

4. Living in a location that is close to Honduras is a factor that has influenced the decision of Honduran residents in Soconusco. Knowing that Honduras is not so far away, especially when dealing with close relatives, can influence the decision to choose a border town for residency. Traveling to Honduras, even without migratory documents is much more of a possibility than doing so from the United States; crossing the Suchiate river that divides Chiapas from Guatemala is no great difficulty. Even when there are no substantial ties to Honduras through regular or occasional visits, the perception of being close to your country of origin is important if only so that the person stops identifying themselves as a migrant in transit but as someone who might eventually settle.

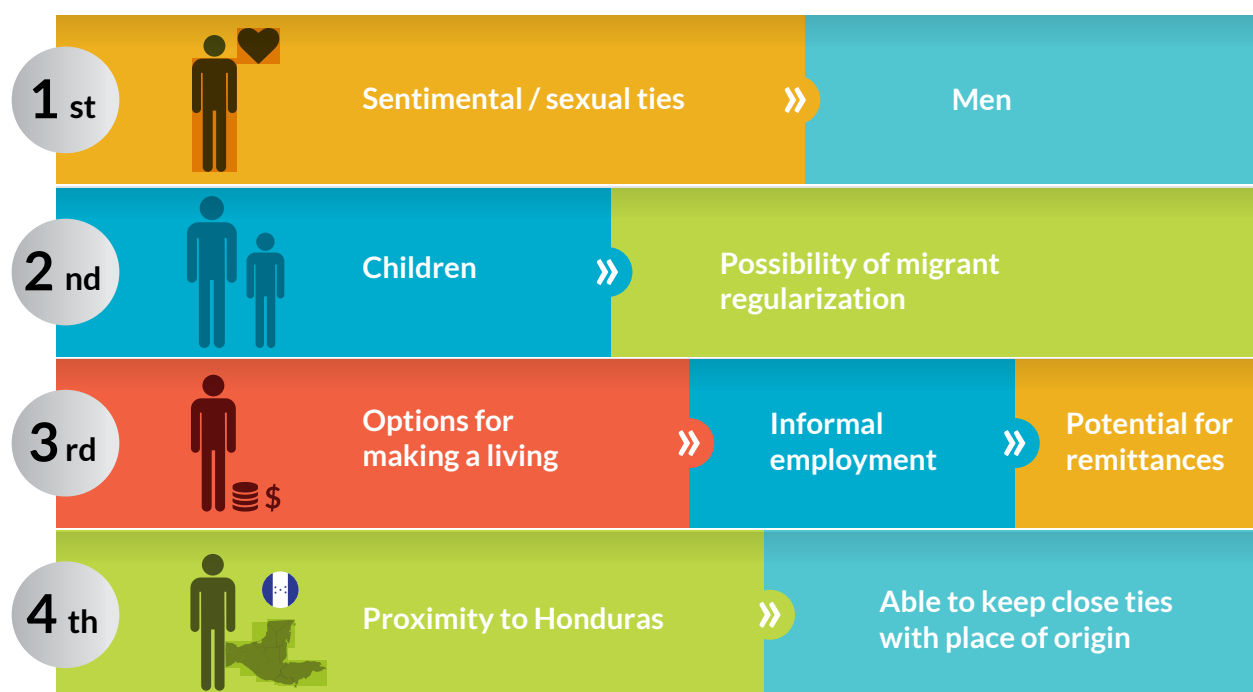


Figure 1. Factors contributing to the settlement of Honduran migrants in Mexico

Conclusion

- The migration from Honduras towards the United States encompasses many more factors than simply having the fortune to reach the U.S. or the misfortune of being sent back. Between reaching the desired destination and the unhappy return, there is a journey that transcends the act of moving from one place to another. Migrants interact with other people they meet on their journey, including the places where they settle, in addition to maintaining long distance ties with those who have stayed behind or who have migrated to other places. They interact with the possibilities and the limitations that their circumstances present, from global and regional economic and political conditions to the possibilities and limitations on a local level.
- Denying that the transit countries are in and of themselves a destination is to ignore the logic of how people connect with other people and with places. It is oversimplifying this reality, denying the urgency for an integration policy for those migrants in transitory status, that could extend their stay or even settle on permanent basis.
- Distinguishing between a migrant in transit or a temporary resident is not a question of time and how long they have been in a place. Other factors come into play when a person decides to settle rather than remain a transitory migrant (or in transit). His or her level of commitment to the local structures and opportunities found in the place where settlement takes place⁹ is an important element that should not be overlooked.
- Within an ever-changing context but under an overall restrictive global and national outlook, the answer to when a transition has come to its conclusion may never be answered completely. Even so, we must draw attention to the fact that migration is made up of people, not “flows.” Therefore, migratory policies should not simply try to resolve the problem in abstract terms but should be designed taking into consideration how people who migrate are people who decide, act, have needs and face challenges based on the contexts in which they live and transit.
- Honduran migration is a response to violence and poverty found within the places of origin and to the restrictions encountered when entering the United States, which result in places of transit becoming places where migrants settle. The absence of legal settlement policies has and will increasingly bring problems related to how migrants adapt and integrate into local structures, and thus into the potential contribution of migrants to Mexican society.

Policy recommendations

- There is a need for additional research collecting statistical data about the presence of Hondurans in Mexico —as well as for Salvadorans and Guatemalans— not only in the locations mentioned in this research but also for other cities such as Tenosique, Monterrey, Mexico City or Tijuana, where the significant settlement of migrants has been noted.
- In addition to statistical data regarding how many migrants are living in these areas, it is necessary to collect information about their living conditions and the challenges they face to regularize their immigration status and exert their rights as non-Mexican residents.
- There is also a need to design programs that facilitate and encourage migrants to regularize their migration status, in particular those who have settled amidst precarious circumstances and whose migration situation is irregular making them unable to meet the requirements established in the migration laws that came into force in 2012.
- Further, the Mexican government should design, promote and facilitate campaigns and programs that raise awareness and communicate the rights of migrant people amongst officials within various public departments.
- Likewise, government and civil society should launch national campaigns to raise awareness of the circumstances in which migrants settle and live, and which also should be aimed at counteracting the increasingly xenophobic attitudes towards Central American migrants.
- These institutions should also promote employment opportunities for Honduran men and women based on their skills and abilities, including the design and implementation of training to those seeking work as well as for self-employment.
- NGOs and governmental agencies should pay special attention to young migrants from Honduras as well as those from other Central American countries to encourage spaces for socializing, training and employment.
- In addition to job opportunities, these efforts should also train migrants on human rights and migratory regularization.
- Public school systems across the country should also guarantee the right to education, healthcare and identity for Hondurans (and Central Americans in
- Finally, NGOs and public health institutions should promote psycho-social support for migrants in transit.



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The main objective of the CANAMID project is to generate useful and current evidence to support the design of public policies that address the problems of Central American migrants, including the conditions they face in their countries of origin, in transit, and upon arrival to the United States or settlement in Mexico, as well as their potential return to their places of origin (El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras).

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