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## Three Decades of Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America: A Historical and Demographic Outlook

BY CARLA PEDERZINI, FERNANDO RIOSMENA,  
CLAUDIA MASFERRER, NOEMY MOLINA



# Policy Brief Series

POPULATION



# Three decades of migration from the northern triangle of Central America: A historical and demographic outlook



CARLA PEDERZINI,<sup>a</sup> FERNANDO RIOSMENA,<sup>b</sup>  
CLAUDIA MASFERRER,<sup>c</sup> NOEMY MOLINA<sup>d</sup>

## SUMMARY

In spite of a major economic slowdown in 2007-2009 and an increasing escalation of immigration and border enforcement in both the United States and Mexico over the last decade, unauthorized migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA, i.e., El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) has persisted. These trends are puzzling and stand in contrast to those of unauthorized migration from Mexico, which has decreased over the last seven years. To understand these trends, we briefly describe the history of international migration dynamics from the NTCA countries, discussing their main drivers, features, and demographic profile. We explain the role of economic and political contexts of emigration from each NTCA nation as well, and review the immigration policy and the contexts of reception in the U.S. and Mexico; we then relate this to the socio-demographic profiles of the NTCA population in both countries. The continued history of political turmoil, violence, and uneven and unstable economic development –along with the growth and strengthening of migrant networks– largely explains the continuation of sustained emigration flows from all three NTCA nations despite the rise of unwelcoming contexts of reception and transit in Mexico and the U.S. Among different contemporary issues, we discuss the recent rise in the flow of unaccompanied minors, and the respective roles of the sending, transit, and destination countries in driving the continuation of these flows. Finally, in light of this historical and demographic overview, we offer a set of basic policy recommendations for the management of the different migration flows, and the establishment of new data and research needs to better understand their drivers and future trends.

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<sup>a</sup> Universidad Iberoamericana

<sup>b</sup> University of Colorado  
Boulder

<sup>c</sup> Institut National de la  
Recherche Scientifique/El  
Colegio de México

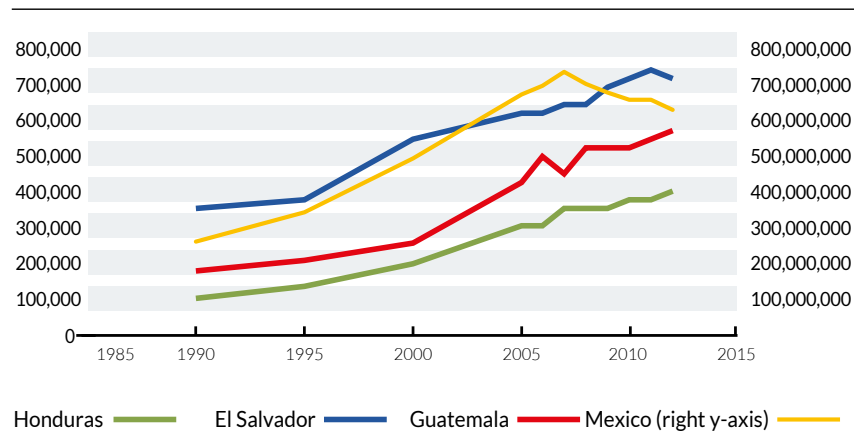
<sup>d</sup> Fundación Iris de  
Centroamérica-Partners El  
Salvador



**T**he international migration dynamics originating from, transiting, and returning to Honduras and El Salvador, known as the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), have experienced considerable transformations over the last few years. Emigration out of the three NTCA nations, mostly directed towards the U.S. and passing through Mexico, has continued at high levels in the recent past, leading to a persistent growth of the NTCA-born population in the U.S., particularly of those in unauthorized statuses (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> This persistence and growth has taken place despite the fact that recent economic and immigration enforcement developments would suggest a decline in the unauthorized population from the NTCA and elsewhere. In particular, unauthorized migration should have decreased during the most recent financial crisis stemming from the U.S. housing bust in 2007 and its aftermath of relatively slow recovery.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this slowdown would be particularly warranted given the ramp-up in immigration enforcement at the U.S. border, in the U.S. interior, and throughout the Mexican territory.



**Figure 1.** Estimates of the unauthorized foreign-born population from the NTCA and Mexico in the U.S. by year and country of birth



Source: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/12/11/unauthorized-trends/>. Last accessed Aug 24, 2015.

*While an adverse economic context and immigration enforcement policies have recently been associated with lower unauthorized migration from Mexico, immigration from the NTCA appears to be impervious to these forces*

Indeed, over the last decade a growing number of NTCA and Mexican nationals has been deported (or, in modern administrative parlance, “removed”) from the U.S. interior, or apprehended at the U.S. or Mexico borders and “removed” or “returned” (a more simple procedure of removal) to their places of origin. While an adverse economic context and immigration enforcement policies have recently been associated with lower unauthorized migration from Mexico,<sup>3</sup> immigration from the NTCA appears to be impervious to these forces. Combined with the slowdown of Mexican migration,<sup>4</sup> the persistence of flows from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala has resulted, for the first time in recorded history, in more apprehensions at the U.S. border of NTCA nationals than Mexicans.

The migration of highly vulnerable population groups is an important and telling case. The number of unaccompanied minors from each of the three NTCA nations apprehended in the U.S. surged in 2014. Apprehensions grew from 1,000-3,000 per year during fiscal years 2009 and 2011, to 6,000-8,000 in FY2013, and doubled and tripled in FY2014 to levels between 16,000 and 18,000.<sup>5</sup> A similar trend was observed in Mexico where the number of unaccompanied minors born in the NTCA apprehended and returned by Mexican authorities increased from 2,300 in 2000, to 3,300 in 2012, 4,200 in 2014; and to 6,800 just during the first five months of 2015.

Less publicized, the number of people apprehended trying to cross to the U.S. as part of a family unit almost quadrupled in FY2014 compared to FY2013. Apprehensions for El Salvador in FY2013 were 14,833, with 12,006 for Guatemala, and 34,495 for Honduras. In contrast, only 5,639 Mexican apprehensions were considered part of a family unit in FY2014.<sup>6</sup>

What motivates families and unaccompanied minors to risk life and limb on the migrant journey? Why is enforcement less effective for migration from the NTCA compared to its recent effect on Mexican adult migration?



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In order to understand the Central American response (or lack thereof) to these economic and enforcement conditions, it is necessary to recognize the economic and socio-political contexts in which emigration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has taken place historically. Despite having gained prominence in recent years, these population movements from the NTCA countries like most migration flows of this same magnitude, have been some time in the making. They have been produced not only by recent exceptional circumstances but also by long-standing structural conditions in the sending nations.<sup>7</sup> In this policy brief we summarize the international migration dynamics from each NTCA nation with a historical perspective, disentangling their drivers, and raising new questions for the future. We also describe Mexico and the U.S. as destination countries and Mexico as a transit space for Central American migrants. We wrap up both by discussing policy recommendations with regards to the management of the flows in light of their history and structural underpinnings, and also by pointing to the need for additional data sources and new research to better understand their drivers and future trends.

## Historical contexts of emigration and return in Central America

Central America has a long and complicated political-economic history that has produced large social, economic, and political inequalities. Political turmoil, strife –in the case of El Salvador and Guatemala– armed conflict<sup>8</sup> and –in all three nations – gang-related violence – has produced large movements of people out of the NTCA, and to the United States in particular. In the following sections, we provide a summary of each nation’s recent history and population movements. However, it is important to note that throughout the 20th Century, authoritarian regimes in all three NTCA nations imposed an “export-oriented” political economy based around basic agricultural commodities, mainly bananas in the Caribbean lowlands of Honduras and Guatemala, and coffee in the Eastern highlands of Guatemala and El Salvador. This national political-economic project favored large domestic producers and foreign investment, fostering the dislocation of a large number of peasants.

During the first half of the 20th century, international migration out of Central American nations mainly occurred intra-regionally (e.g., Salvadorans migrating to Honduran plantations). Also, since the early 20th Century, economic hardship, lack of land, violence, and the impact of natural disasters have influenced the departure of many people from the NTCA countries.



Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica became major recipients of refugees in the region, mostly in camps or settlements along their borders. The level of commitment to assist refugees differed substantially over time and across the national origin groups involved, as discussed in more detail below in the case of the United States and Mexico.

#### CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS AND POLICY MILESTONES

Year/Period	Country(ies)	Event
1940s	El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras	Fall of dictatorships who had come to power in the early 1930s
1952	El Salvador	First law managing migration in the country. Included complex controls (Updated in 1993 and 2004)
1954	Guatemala	Guatemalan Coup d'état (June 18) by Carlos Castillo Armas with support from the CIA, who became president in July 7th
1964	U.S.	End of the Bracero Program
1965	U.S.	Immigration and Nationality Act. Creation of permanent immigration preference system favoring family reunification and only allowing labor-related migration
1969	Honduras and El Salvador	Migration from El Salvador to Honduras increased creating border tensions. Four day "Soccer War"
1980	Honduras and El Salvador	Peace treaty
1982	Mexico	Economic crisis
1983	Guatemala	Return of democracy
1983	Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, and Colombia	Meeting in Contadora Island to draft regional peace plan. The war continued until 1985
1986	U.S.	Passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, (backbone of the current immigration enforcement system) 3 million migrants were regularized
1986-1987	El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica	The Esquipulas process: A plan for reconciliation, democratization, and economic cooperation within the region was signed
1989	Mexico	Short-term multiple-entry visitor visas put in place that allowed Guatemalans residing in border regions to enter Mexico's Southern border
1989	5 Central American countries, Mexico, and Belize	International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) where refugee rights, repatriation and integration, and assistance were discussed
1990	Mexico	Promulgation of first general law on asylum
1991	U.S.	Settlement of <i>American Baptist Churches v. Thornburg</i> case, allowing Salvadoran and Guatemalan irregular migrants to reapply for asylum after their cases had been previously quickly dismissed

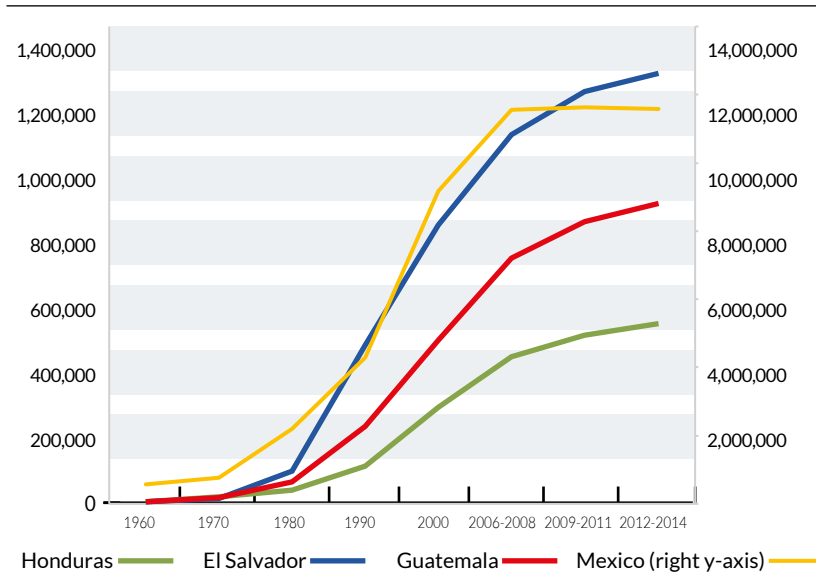
Year/Period	Country(ies)	Event
<b>1991-1992</b>	El Salvador	Negotiation between government and guerrillas. Political violence, disappearance, and violations of human rights continued
<b>1993</b>	Mexico	Creation of the Mexican Office of Migration Affairs (Instituto Nacional de Migración) to manage and control migration
<b>1994</b>	Mexico, US, Canada	North American Free Trade Agreement came into force January 1 <sup>st</sup> creating a trilateral trade block
<b>1996</b>	Guatemala	End of Civil War with a peace accord negotiated by the UN between the government and the guerrillas. Return of Guatemalan refugees
<b>1996</b>	U.S.	Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act passed. Increased burden of proof for asylum cases and lower bar for deportation
<b>1997</b>	Mexico	Short-term multiple-entry visitor visas program was expanded to include agricultural workers
<b>1997</b>	U.S.	Nicaraguan and Central American Adjustment Act (NACARA) passed. Granted effective “amnesty” to Nicaraguans and Cubans arriving before 1995, and allowing Guatemalans and Salvadorans to reapply for asylum
<b>1998</b>	Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador	Hurricane Mitch brought historic rainfall and catastrophic flooding in the region
<b>2001</b>	El Salvador	A 7.7 Earthquake on January was followed by a 6.6 earthquake on February, producing significant damage in the country
<b>2005</b>	Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras	Hurricane Stan hits Central America, with most of its fatalities and damage in Guatemala
<b>2009</b>	Honduras	<i>Coup d'état</i> creates a general climate of social and political violence
<b>2011</b>	Mexico	Migration Law signed in response to increasing settlement and transit migration

Gradually, since the 1960s and 1970s, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were incorporated into the North American migration system, generating considerable growth in the NTCA-born population living in the United States (see Figure 2). While some of this growth might have been associated with increasing political repression in these nations, flows from El Salvador and Guatemala increased rapidly in the 1980s due to the continuation and escalation of violent conflict between left-leaning guerrilla groups and conservative governments in Guatemala and El Salvador, within the geopolitical context of the late Cold War. In Honduras, while full-scale violent conflict did not break out, emigration would accelerate throughout the 1990s for the reasons discussed below. Additionally, once migrant communities were established in the U.S. and Mexico, additional population movements also followed the devastating economic effects of the armed conflict; regional economic crises (e.g., the Latin American “lost decade” of the



1980s); and natural disasters (e.g., hurricane Mitch in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in 1998, as well as the earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001).<sup>9</sup> Throughout, family reunification motivations and migrant networks have also played an important role in directing and sustaining migration flows.

**Figure 2.** Estimates of total stocks of foreign-born individuals from the NTCA and Mexico according country of birth



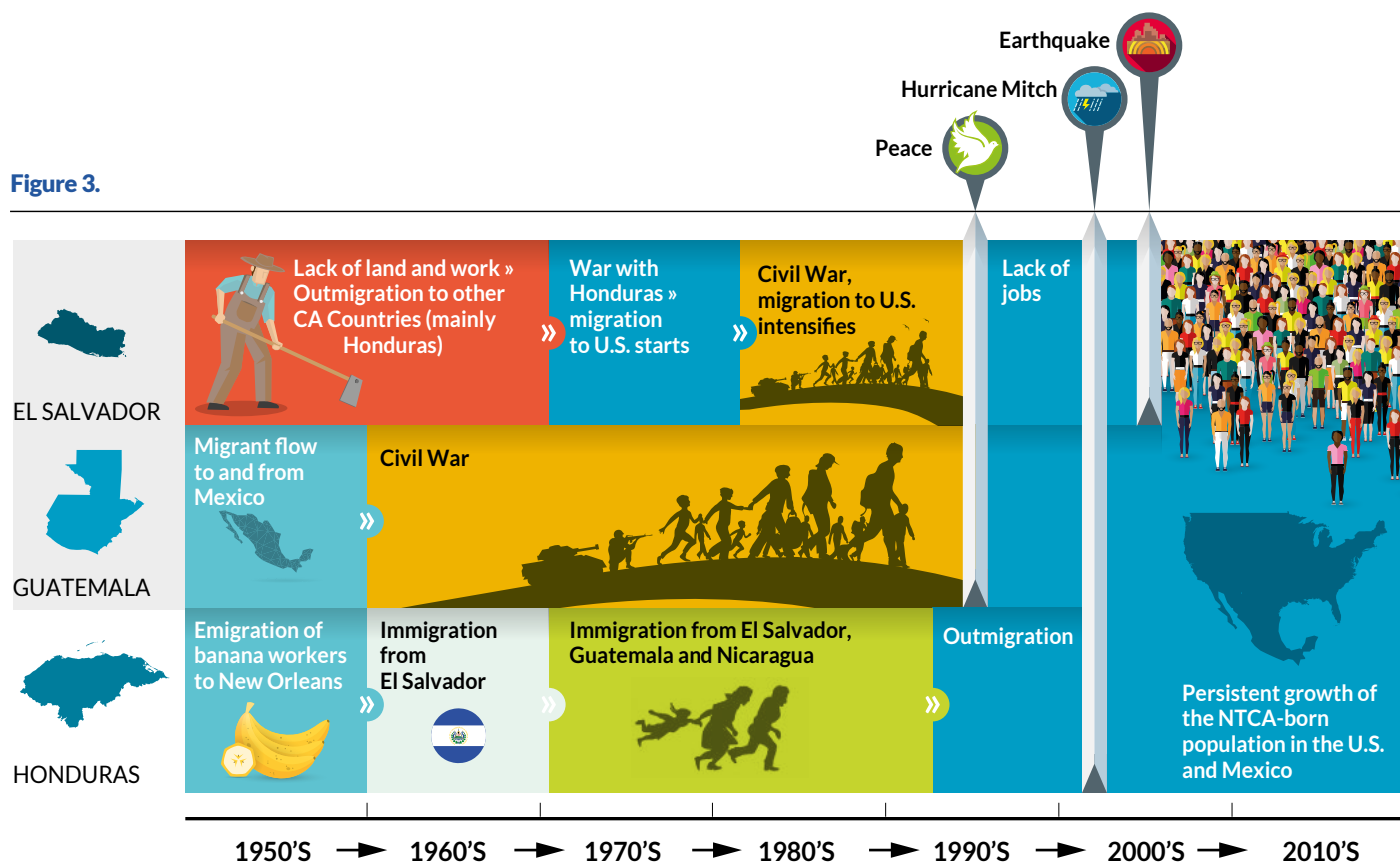
Source: Authors' calculation from data from 1960-2000 based on decennial census data long forms; data from 2006-2008 through 2012-2014 based on three-year averages from the 2006-2014 American Community Surveys.

These migration flows took place despite the fact that NTCA nationals faced somewhat unfavorable reception in the U.S. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this unwelcoming context of reception was (legally, but also economically) particularly evident with regard to the possibilities of obtaining asylum. Despite the reality of their motivations, not even during the worst times of the different civil wars, emigrants from the NTCA nations were treated like refugees or asylees.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, migrants –most hailing from the NTCA– have faced hostile contexts of transit and reception in Mexico, especially in recent years.<sup>11</sup> Next, we discuss these contexts of emigration, transit and reception in more detail. See also Figure 3 for a streamlined illustration of the different migratory context for each of the NTCA countries over time.

### Guatemala: three decades of conflict

Labor flows between Guatemala and Mexico, mostly in their Pacific Ocean border area –known as the Soconusco region– had been well established for decades prior to the beginning of the long Guatemalan Civil war (1960-1996), which disproportionate-

Figure 3.



ly affected the Mayan population. The Guatemalan army regarded highland Mayans as subversive and supportive of the leftist insurgency operating in their region at the time. Security forces responded with a contra-insurgency war in which acts later documented as genocidal took place. The first large-scale emigration began in the late 1970s sparked by the conflict, when a flood of refugees, overwhelmingly Mayan, moved across the border with Mexico. Many of them ended up in refugee camps run by UNHCR in the southeastern states of Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. With the intensification of the war in the early 1980s, 440 highland Guatemalan villages were destroyed and 150,000 highland Mayas were reported as disappeared. Around one million Mayan villagers were internally displaced and some 200,000 fled over the border to Southern Mexico (though only 23% of them to refugee camps). Economic activities were also affected by violence: commercial-trade patterns were disrupted, and due to the army's brutality, Guatemala was cut off from international economic assistance. Both of these factors further stimulated additional migration.

After 1996, and during the post-war era, Guatemalans became a more significant share of the foreign-born population in the U.S. (almost 900,000 in estimates from 2012-2014).<sup>12</sup> Most of these

new migrants were labor migrants building on family and community contacts with immigrants and refugees already in the U.S., where over the prior fifteen years, social violence stemming from high levels of common crime and coercive practices of gangs and organized crime has triggered more forced displacement of Guatemalans.

### **El Salvador: 12 years of civil war and its implications on emigration**

During the alid moments of the armed conflict (1980-1991), an upsurge in violence and political persecution worsened a series of structural economic problems and contributed to the intensification of northbound migration flows. Once the armed conflict ended in 1992, a vision of peace contributed to a deceleration of the outflow and to the return of many migrants who left during the war. However, longstanding economic problems reappeared. Unemployment, inequality, lack of opportunities, and political confrontation pooled together with the effects of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the 2001 earthquakes to rekindle emigration. Increasingly, gang-related violence (initially, very much fueled by the deportation of gang members from the U.S., as discussed later) would also increasingly contribute to emigration.

In addition to this out-migration, the most recent period has witnessed the reverse phenomenon: a massive (mostly forced) return from Mexico and the U.S. More than 400,000 returns of Salvadorans are estimated between 1999 and 2013, with 45% of them returning from the U.S. by air, and the rest returning from Mexico by land.<sup>13</sup> The number of deportations from both the U.S. and Mexico to El Salvador rose dramatically from 2001 to 2002 (from 3,200 to 20,423 events). Most of the increase (80%) can be explained by land deportations, suggesting a change in Mexican policy in 2002.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the number of deportations has remained high (around 30 thousand a year) with a peak number in 2005 (43,017).

### **Honduras: A later but swifter full incorporation to the North American migration system**

Migration flows from Honduras to the United States are technically more than a century old. Since the end of the 19th century, a significant flow of Afro-descendants, employees of banana companies, emigrated from the Northern Coast of Honduras to New Orleans in the U.S., where the parent companies of these operations were located. From this period, emigration continued at a stable and modest rate until the 1990s (Figure 2). This would be





the foundation of Honduran immigration to the United States in the years to come.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the high level of political violence in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador –caused by dictatorships and the armed groups fighting against them– brought a large flow of immigrants to Honduras. Most Nicaraguan and Salvadoran migrants only went to Honduras seeking safe passage further North, to Mexico and the U.S.<sup>15</sup> Those that sought refuge in Honduras however, found a different context of reception depending of which conflict they were fleeing: Salvadorans and Guatemalans were hosted in camps and settlements, while Nicaraguans fleeing the Contra-Sandinista conflict were allowed to move and work freely, a situation similar to that faced by immigrants from these same nations in the U.S. Meanwhile, emigration from Honduras to the U.S. continued, albeit growing at a more modest pace relative to that from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico (Figure 2).

Honduras-U.S. migration increased at the non-trivial rate of 10% per year in the 1970s and 1980s, and continued unabated in the 1990s, likely due to the liberalization of labor markets.<sup>16</sup> Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998, had devastating consequences for the Honduran population (6,500 deaths and 1.5 million displaced or homeless)<sup>17</sup> and contributed to continued migration out of the country.

Nowadays, Honduras is one of the most violent nations in the world. Its second largest city, San Pedro Sula, caught in the cross-fire between criminal gangs, has a murder rate of 171 per 100,000

and has been identified as the largest source of the 18,000 Honduran children who have fled to the U.S. in recent years.<sup>18</sup> Confrontation and political violence originated by the military coup in 28 June 2009 has further increased migratory flows.<sup>19</sup>

While data in the sending country is scarce, this growth can be appreciated in both the growing stock of the Honduran-born population in the U.S. (see Figure 2) and in the rising number of Honduran deportees from the U.S. and Mexico, as immigration enforcement increased. For example, the number of Hondurans deported from Mexico increased from 20,600 in 2010 to 33,000 in 2013, and to 41,600 in 2014; in other words, it doubled in a five-year period. Likewise, the number of Honduran removals in the U.S. went from 31,515 in FY2012 to 37,049 in FY2013, to 40,695 in FY2014.

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## **Mexico: a country in the middle of the migration transition**

With about 12 million Mexicans residing in the U.S. today, Mexico is by far the largest immigrant group in the country, a figure rising from around 500,000 in 1965 (see Figure 2). Besides a 2,000 mile shared border, migration between Mexico and the U.S. over these five decades has been the result of labor demand in the U.S., political, demographic, and socio-economic conditions in Mexico, strong social networks and cultural ties that enable migration, and U.S. immigration policies that shape its size, geography, and nature. The legal and temporary nature that characterized the pre-1965 period has been transformed itself over time. During the last decade, Mexican emigration from Mexico has declined substantially and return migration from the U.S. to Mexico has increased, including a large number of deportees and U.S.-born minors of Mexican parents. The end result of this reversal in historic trends has been zero net migration from Mexico to the U.S. and a stable, or even declining stock of Mexican-born immigrants in the U.S.

Mexico's historical position as an emigration country is well known, and the phenomenon of the Mexico-U.S. migration era has been well documented. However, it was not until very recently that the role of Mexico as a country of transit migration, settlement destination for temporary and permanent migrants, as well as return migration, has gained academic and political attention. Next, we review how the legal context of reception in Mexico has evolved in the last three decades in relation to the arrival of NTCA nationals, and we provide a basic socio-demographic description of immigrant stocks from these NTCA countries.

## The historical legal context of reception of NTCA nationals in Mexico

While Mexico had accommodated the immigration of Jews, Lebanese, Eastern Europeans, Spaniards, and other groups fleeing persecution throughout the twentieth century, it had not established any legal mechanisms to provide refugee status when displaced Nicaraguans arrived in the late 1970s, and would only do so when UNHCR camps were installed within its territory to receive Guatemalans and Salvadorans during the early 1980s. The magnitude of the arrival of Central American migrants to Mexico at the end of the 1970s challenged Mexican asylum policy with the upsurge of Central Americans fleeing political instability. The processing of asylum and refugee claims according to Mexican legislation –and following international agreements– had to be based on an individual’s rating of danger of persecution, but soon turned logistically unfeasible due to the high volume. In 1980, Mexico created its Commission for Aid to Refugees (COMAR) and even though it was intended to oversee all refugees in the country, it ended being limited to the attention of Guatemalan refugees in camps receiving support from UNCHR due to budget constraints. Although it is estimated that about 200,000 Guatemalans sought refuge in Mexico between 1981 and 1983, only 46,000 registered officially with the UNHCR).<sup>20</sup> In 1993, COMAR organized the first mass return of Central Americans and, at the same time, the UNHCR, COMAR and the Mexican Office of Migration Affairs (INM) began a process known as “migration stabilization”, which sought to facilitate the integration of refugees who wished to remain in the country.<sup>21</sup> In 1990, Mexico created a legal framework regulating asylum and providing temporary visas for Guatemalans to enter and work in its Southern border region.

However, not all settled in Mexico. It has been estimated that a total of half a million Salvadorans and 200,000 Guatemalans had left their countries by 1990. For instance, according to data from COMAR, more than 4,000 Guatemalan refugees returned to their country by 1989 within a special program of voluntary return, with another 39,000 doing so by 1999. Because of Mexico’s restrictive immigration policies, and their urban origins, Salvadorans were more likely to move further north to large cities in the U.S. or Canada than Guatemalans.

With the creation of the INM in 1993, Mexico started defining formal channels to control and manage migration through the development of special programs, as well as gathering statistics on arrivals and removals. Examples of such programs include the Paisano program supporting the reincorporation of Mexican return-







ees, the Repatriation program, aiming to ease the return of deportees, and the Grupo Beta, which provides basic support to migrants at risk at the Northern and Southern border.

In response to a rise in transit migration from Central America during the 2000s, an increase in violence towards migrants, and an escalation of human rights violation cases mainly from organized crime, the Mexican government adopted a new migration law (Ley Nacional de Migración) as well as a refugee and protection law (Ley de Refugiados y Protección Complementaria) in 2011. The first law aimed at securing the rights of the foreign-born population regardless of their legal status, their intention to settle in the country, or transit to the U.S. However, although it has created channels to provide access to public services and concrete rights, such as basic access to health care via the Seguro Popular (see Policy Brief PB05 of this series) the implementation of the law has been challenging. While the Ley Nacional de Migración facilitates immigrant regularization and the granting of permanent residence for high-skilled immigrants, the two laws provide limited options for Central Americans. Various other Policy Briefs in this CANAMID series provide full details about the issues that have recently arisen in Mexico as a new country of immigration, transit and return migration. We here provide a general demographic and historical context.

## Mexico as country of destination of Central Americans: A basic demographic profile

A look at the trends in the demographic profiles of Central American migrants in Mexico provides valuable insight into the changing migrant flows to Mexico and complements the historical discussion presented in the previous section. Empirically, it is hard to know if the Central American population living in Mexico at any particular point in time is aiming to reside temporarily, permanently, or is just in transit on their way to a northern country. Lack of longitudinal data, or cross-sectional data that allow distinguishing how long NTCA migrants have been in Mexico blurs our understanding of the phenomenon. It is hard to determine how many Central Americans lived in Mexico prior to 2000 because of a lack of nationally representative data publicly available from Mexican Censuses and surveys. Mexican census data show that the NTCA population “normally residing” in the country increased by 50% between 2000 and 2010, going from 33,000 to 50,000 (see Table 1). The majority (more than 70 percent) of NTCA nationals in Mexico in 2000 were born in Guatemala, reflecting a migratory tradition and stronger relations and exchanges than with the other countries. Towards the end of the decade however, the relative presence of Salvadorans and especially Hondurans increased, motivated by the economic, political and violent context described above.

Table 1 shows basic demographic characteristics (sex, age, and educational attainment) of the NTCA population in Mexico in 2000 and 2010<sup>22</sup> by period, country of origin, and place of residence five years prior to the Census. This last dimension allows us to distinguish between recent and earlier arrivals.<sup>23</sup> The Central American population from these three countries living in Mexico is predominantly female, and the Salvadoran population is on average older than the other NTCA nationals. In both time periods, the Guatemalan population has had on average the lowest educational attainment in contrast with the Salvadoran population which has the highest average years of schooling. This is consistent with the characteristics of out-migrants, as well as average differences in the countries of origin. However, distinguishing between recent and earliest arrivals, and place of residence in 1995 and 2005, we note several differences by country. First, we observe that the Salvadoran population of recent arrivals is predominantly male and younger than earliest arrivals and than those who had previous migration experience in the U.S. Second, Salvadorans constituted the oldest group in 2010, and Guatemalans showed the highest proportion of immigrants who were already residing in Mexico prior to 2005, consistent with the



**Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the NTCA-born population living in Mexico by Period, Country of Birth, and Place of residence five years prior**

I. All durations of stay																			
		Female		Age					Yrs. schooling		Moving from country   Residence 5 years prior (1995/2005)		State of residence						TOTAL (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	Origin country	U.S.	Chi- apas	Q.Roo	DF	Edo- Mex	Others	
2000	El Salvador	52.2	(0.5)	37.4	(15.1)	8.7	65.3	20.3	5.6	9.6	(5.3)	10.7	4.0	12.3	2.2	16.8	12.9	55.9	5,533
	Guatemala	52.3	(0.5)	32.1	(16.5)	21.0	58.8	15.2	5.0	3.7	(4.8)	16.1	0.8	59.8	7.1	4.6	2.8	25.8	23,950
	Honduras	57.9	(0.5)	32.4	(15.2)	15.5	67.8	12.6	4.1	9.6	(5.1)	25.3	3.3	26.3	4.0	14.3	7.4	47.9	3,718
2010	El Salvador	58.9	(0.5)	40.1	(16.6)	11.9	47.3	33.8	7.0	9.1	(5.1)	11.8	6.8	22.4	2.7	10.3	13.4	51.2	8,864
	Guatemala	54.8	(0.5)	33.2	(16.4)	21.5	54.7	19.9	3.9	5.0	(5.1)	16.8	2.4	65.9	4.5	3.4	2.1	24.2	31,888
	Honduras	54.0	(0.5)	31.7	(12.8)	15.3	69.6	13.9	1.2	8.1	(4.3)	20.4	4.5	34.6	2.5	4.4	7.1	51.5	9,980
II. Recent move: Living in their country of origin five years prior																			
		Female		Age					Yrs. schooling		Moving from country   recent int'l move		State of residence						TOTAL (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	Origin country	U.S.	Chi- apas	Q.Roo	DF	Edo- Mex	Others	
2000	El Salvador	46.5	(0.5)	27.7	(12.8)	20.4	71.8	4.9	2.9	10.9	(6.1)	-	-	22.0	0.8	19.9	7.6	49.7	592
	Guatemala	54.4	(0.5)	23.7	(12.9)	44.4	48.4	6.0	1.3	5.1	(5.9)	-	-	81.5	0.8	4.8	2.4	10.6	3,859
	Honduras	58.5	(0.5)	24.4	(10.9)	28.9	68.0	2.4	0.8	10.2	(5.3)	-	-	38.8	3.1	13.4	4.7	40.0	939
2010	El Salvador	46.8	(0.5)	25.4	(13.0)	43.1	49.7	7.0	0.3	10.6	(4.9)	-	-	38.5	0.0	0.1	25.0	36.5	1,045
	Guatemala	55.1	(0.5)	24.3	(12.7)	43.8	46.7	8.2	1.3	5.5	(6.0)	-	-	81.1	2.4	3.6	0.3	12.6	5,346
	Honduras	54.1	(0.5)	23.7	(11.2)	39.8	54.9	5.4	0.0	8.3	(4.7)	-	-	42.8	2.2	1.5	1.7	51.9	2,034
III. Recent move: Living in the U.S. five years prior																			
		Female		Age					Yrs. schooling		Moving from country   recent int'l move		State of residence						TOTAL (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	Origin country	U.S.	Chi- apas	Q.Roo	DF	Edo- Mex	Others	
2000	El Salvador	54.3	(0.5)	33.9	(10.8)	5.9	82.3	10.5	1.4	9.6	(4.3)	-	-	1.8	0.9	7.7	5.4	84.2	221
	Guatemala	54.4	(0.5)	32.2	(10.3)	7.7	80.2	11.0	1.1	9.0	(4.9)	-	-	7.7	0.6	6.6	3.9	81.3	182
	Honduras	59.8	(0.5)	29.8	(10.5)	13.2	78.5	7.4	0.8	9.8	(4.4)	-	-	6.6	0.8	6.6	5.7	80.3	122
2010	El Salvador	56.0	(0.5)	33.8	(12.7)	5.0	75.8	16.5	2.7	9.9	(3.9)	-	-	0.7	0.0	0.0	3.2	96.2	600
	Guatemala	43.4	(0.5)	35.9	(12.5)	6.4	70.2	23.4	0.0	9.6	(4.1)	-	-	14.6	2.9	0.0	21.8	60.8	762
	Honduras	23.1	(0.4)	33.7	(11.1)	2.0	82.0	14.0	2.0	8.4	(3.2)	-	-	5.8	1.3	2.7	4.2	86.0	450
IV. Earlier move: More than five years in Mexico																			
		Female		Age					Yrs. schooling		Moving from country   recent int'l move		State of residence						TOTAL (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	Origin country	U.S.	Chi- apas	Q.Roo	DF	Edo- Mex	Others	
2000	El Salvador	52.9	(0.5)	39.4	(14.5)	5.8	64.7	23.2	6.3	9.5	(5.3)	-	-	11.4	2.5	16.4	13.9	55.8	4,556
	Guatemala	51.8	(0.5)	34.8	(15.9)	13.6	62.7	17.7	6.0	3.4	(4.5)	-	-	55.5	8.6	4.4	2.8	28.7	18,959
	Honduras	58.3	(0.5)	36.5	(14.9)	7.7	69.4	17.2	5.7	9.5	(5.0)	-	-	22.4	4.7	14.7	8.6	49.7	2,495
2010	El Salvador	48.4	(0.5)	26.9	(14.8)	34.0	54.5	10.5	1.1	10.2	(4.5)	-	-	27.4	0.0	0.2	17.6	54.8	1,794
	Guatemala	52.6	(0.5)	23.1	(14.6)	46.1	44.2	8.7	1.0	6.9	(6.0)	-	-	73.9	2.2	4.8	2.9	16.4	7,056
	Honduras	47.7	(0.5)	24.3	(12.9)	36.8	56.3	6.6	0.3	8.4	(4.5)	-	-	36.5	1.9	2.3	2.0	57.4	2,686

Source: author's calculations using data from Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). Data from 2000 come from the complete set of records of the 2000 Mexican Population Census and data from 2010 come from the 10% analytic sample of the 2010 Mexican Population Census. Weighted estimates for 2010.



**Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the NTCA-born population living in the United States by Period, Country of Birth, and Duration of Stay in the United States**

I. All durations of stay																		
		Female		Age					Yrs. schooling		State of residence							Sample size (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	CA	TX	DC Area	NY Area	FL	NC-GA	Others
1980	El Salvador	56.7	(0.7)	30.1	(0.2)	20.2	65.1	12.2	2.5	9.3	(0.1)	71.8	2.6	4.1	13.3	2.1	0.2	7.0
	Guatemala	54.5	(0.9)	30.5	(0.3)	22.5	60.9	13.8	2.8	9.6	(0.1)	57.8	2.3	3.5	14.2	3.6	0.3	19.8
	Honduras	59.5	(1.1)	33.4	(0.4)	20.2	56.5	18.2	5.0	10.3	(0.1)	18.0	3.5	2.7	34.5	12.3	0.5	26.4
1990	El Salvador	48.4	(0.4)	29.8	(0.1)	21.6	65.6	10.3	2.6	8.4	(0.0)	60.0	10.0	9.6	11.6	2.2	0.5	8.1
	Guatemala	49.0	(0.5)	30.1	(0.2)	21.2	64.8	11.4	2.6	8.9	(0.1)	60.2	4.7	3.7	10.9	4.7	0.7	18.6
	Honduras	56.1	(0.8)	31.4	(0.2)	21.7	59.9	14.4	4.0	10.2	(0.1)	23.3	9.6	3.5	23.5	20.5	0.8	32.2
2000	El Salvador	48.5	(0.3)	34.3	(0.1)	12.0	67.7	16.8	3.5	8.5	(0.0)	43.9	12.2	13.8	13.0	3.0	2.8	14.1
	Guatemala	44.8	(0.4)	32.9	(0.1)	15.6	65.3	15.9	3.2	8.6	(0.0)	43.8	5.5	5.1	12.5	6.4	4.5	28.0
	Honduras	50.3	(0.5)	33.4	(0.1)	15.4	64.7	16.0	3.9	9.6	(0.1)	16.7	11.9	5.5	22.6	18.0	6.5	32.4
2008-2012	El Salvador	48.7	(0.3)	39.1	(0.1)	6.9	60.3	27.6	5.3	9.5	(0.0)	34.5	13.9	16.0	13.0	3.5	4.4	17.9
	Guatemala	41.3	(0.3)	35.0	(0.1)	11.3	64.5	20.5	3.7	9.1	(0.0)	31.5	7.3	7.0	13.1	8.0	6.0	34.6
	Honduras	47.3	(0.5)	36.1	(0.1)	9.3	65.3	21.2	4.1	9.9	(0.0)	12.2	15.8	8.8	16.6	17.0	8.1	33.8
II. 5 years or less in the United States																		
		Female		Age					Yrs. schooling		State of residence							Sample size (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	CA	TX	DC Area	NY Area	FL	NC-GA	Others
1980	El Salvador	53.0	(1.0)	25.2	(0.3)	29.6	62.7	6.3	1.4	8.2	(0.1)	73.0	3.7	4.2	11.1	2.2	0.3	6.8
	Guatemala	52.0	(1.4)	24.3	(0.4)	35.1	56.9	7.0	1.1	8.4	(0.2)	65.2	2.0	3.1	10.4	2.9	0.3	17.9
	Honduras	58.4	(2.2)	24.5	(0.7)	39.5	50.8	6.9	2.9	9.5	(0.3)	22.5	3.4	3.4	29.8	13.4	0.4	30.3
1990	El Salvador	45.2	(0.6)	24.2	(0.2)	34.5	59.1	4.9	1.5	7.2	(0.1)	55.5	8.5	13.4	13.2	2.3	0.5	8.7
	Guatemala	45.1	(0.8)	23.7	(0.2)	32.1	62.9	4.3	0.7	7.8	(0.1)	61.5	4.9	4.2	10.3	5.1	0.8	17.7
	Honduras	53.0	(1.2)	23.4	(0.3)	36.6	57.5	4.8	1.1	9.1	(0.2)	24.2	10.8	3.7	22.6	22.3	0.9	34.3
2000	El Salvador	43.9	(0.6)	24.6	(0.2)	33.3	58.7	5.4	2.5	7.7	(0.1)	28.7	14.2	18.8	15.4	3.9	4.9	17.9
	Guatemala	36.5	(0.7)	24.0	(0.2)	32.3	61.3	4.9	1.4	7.4	(0.1)	28.7	6.3	7.1	14.2	8.5	7.9	35.6
	Honduras	43.8	(0.8)	25.4	(0.2)	27.8	65.8	5.1	1.3	8.7	(0.1)	13.0	15.6	7.4	19.2	15.4	11.5	31.5
2008-2012	El Salvador	48.1	(0.8)	27.3	(0.2)	24.0	66.4	7.5	2.1	9.1	(0.1)	26.0	14.3	19.0	14.9	3.6	5.4	19.8
	Guatemala	34.3	(0.7)	25.2	(0.2)	23.7	70.5	4.7	1.1	7.7	(0.1)	21.8	8.1	8.7	13.9	8.8	8.1	38.8
	Honduras	39.2	(0.9)	26.9	(0.2)	20.5	73.0	5.4	1.1	8.8	(0.1)	8.3	20.0	10.1	13.4	13.0	11.0	31.7
III. More than 5 years in the United States																		
		Female		Age					Schooling (years)		State of residence							Sample size (N)
		Mean	(S.E.)	Mean	(S.E.)	0-19	20-44	45-64	65+	Mean	(S.E.)	CA	TX	DC Area	NY Area	FL	NC-GA	Others
1980	El Salvador	60.6	(1.0)	35.0	(0.3)	10.5	67.6	18.3	3.6	10.0	(0.1)	70.6	1.4	4.1	15.5	2.0	0.2	7.2
	Guatemala	56.1	(1.1)	34.7	(0.3)	14.1	63.6	18.4	4.0	9.9	(0.1)	52.9	2.4	3.9	16.7	4.0	0.4	21.0
	Honduras	60.0	(1.3)	36.8	(0.4)	12.7	58.8	22.7	5.9	10.3	(0.1)	16.2	3.6	2.4	36.3	11.9	0.6	24.8
1990	El Salvador	50.1	(0.5)	32.8	(0.1)	14.5	69.1	13.2	3.2	8.8	(0.1)	62.4	10.9	7.5	10.7	2.1	0.5	7.8
	Guatemala	51.6	(0.7)	34.4	(0.2)	13.9	66.0	16.2	3.9	9.4	(0.1)	59.3	4.6	3.4	11.3	4.5	0.6	19.3
	Honduras	58.2	(1.0)	36.9	(0.3)	11.6	61.5	20.9	5.9	10.6	(0.1)	22.7	8.8	3.3	24.2	19.3	0.7	30.8
2000	El Salvador	49.6	(0.3)	36.7	(0.1)	6.6	70.0	19.7	3.8	8.6	(0.0)	47.8	11.7	12.5	12.4	2.8	2.2	13.1
	Guatemala	48.0	(0.4)	36.4	(0.1)	9.2	66.8	20.1	3.9	8.8	(0.0)	49.6	5.3	4.3	11.9	5.6	3.2	25.1
	Honduras	53.6	(0.6)	37.5	(0.2)	8.9	64.2	21.7	5.2	9.8	(0.1)	18.6	10.0	4.5	24.3	19.4	3.9	32.8
2008-2012	El Salvador	48.8	(0.3)	41.1	(0.1)	3.9	59.2	31.1	5.8	9.6	(0.0)	36.0	13.8	15.5	12.6	3.5	4.3	17.5
	Guatemala	43.5	(0.4)	38.1	(0.1)	7.3	62.6	25.5	4.6	9.3	(0.0)	34.6	7.1	6.5	12.8	7.7	5.3	33.3
	Honduras	49.8	(0.5)	38.9	(0.1)	6.0	63.0	26.0	5.1	10.1	(0.0)	13.4	14.5	8.4	17.5	18.3	7.2	34.4

Source: authors' calculations using data from IPUMS-USA (Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0 [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015. Last accessed September 9, 2015). Data from 1980-2000 come from Decennial Censuses and the 2008-2012 American Community Survey. Weighted estimates.





*Mexican census data show that the NTCA population “normally residing” in the country increased by 50% between 2000 and 2010, going from 33,000 to 50,000*

idea that Guatemalans have a longer tradition of settlement in the country. Third, Guatemalans (except for those with previous residence in the U.S.) are highly concentrated in Chiapas, while Salvadorans and Hondurans show a wider distribution in other states (see Table 1). Fourth, the change in the geographic distribution, along with the stark decline in the share of the population already living in Mexico in 2005, reflects the fact that Salvadoran and Honduran populations include a larger share of recent immigrants, who arrived in the 2005-2010 period both from the U.S. and from their countries of origin. The population from the NTCA with residence in the U.S. five years prior to the Census increased more than

threefold between 2000 and 2010 (3.1, 4, and 4.6 times respectively for Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans). This last fact is consistent with the knowledge that many Central Americans aim to return to the U.S.

### **Mexico as country of transit migration for Central Americans: Recent trends**

Estimates on the flow of unauthorized Central Americans through Mexico show an increasing trend since the mid-1990s until 2005, when it reached its highest point with an annual volume estimated between 390,000 and 430,000 migrants. Between the years





2006 and 2009, the flow suffered a drastic slowdown of about 70%, and then stabilized in 2010-2011, after which the flows increased once again reaching 183,000 migrants in 2012.<sup>24</sup> Since 2012, data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Mexico's INM, show a sustained increase of apprehensions from NTCA countries, with Honduras at the top, followed by Guatemala and El Salvador. Mexican data show that Mexican authorities apprehended 81,000 NTCA nationals in 2012, and this number increased to 118,000 in 2014 (23,000 nationals from El Salvador, 47,800 Guatemalans, and 47,500 Hondurans). Without considering data on immigration enforcement from the interior, but only apprehensions in U.S. southwest border, it is possible to note how transit migration through Mexico increased. In FY 2013 CBP apprehended on the southwest border 31,000 nationals from El Salvador, 29,000 from Guatemala,

*There is a large number of Mexican and NTCA nationals in the U.S. without authorization to live or work in the U.S. The latest estimates put these numbers at 5.8 million Mexicans in 2012, 675,000 Salvadorans, 525,000 Guatemalans, and 350,000 Hondurans*

and 53,000 Hondurans. In FY2014 this increased to 66,600, 81,000, and 91,000 for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, respectively. One of the main differences before and after 2009 is the increase in the proportion of unaccompanied minors who are detained by Mexico and the U.S. Almost 21,000 unaccompanied NTCA children were apprehended at the U.S. Southwest border in FY2013, and this more than doubled to 51,000 in FY2014. Salvadoran and Honduran minors mostly drive this increase. In Mexico, while the share of minors travelling alone or accompanied was similar in 2009, two thirds of the minors detained in 2012 were traveling unaccompanied through the country. This decreased later; during the first semester of 2015 8,500 NTCA unaccompanied minors were detained by Mexican authorities, fifty three percent of the 16,000 NTCA minors who were detained in Mexico from January to June 2015.

## **The U.S. as a country of destination of Central American migrants**

### **Historical context of reception: U.S. Immigration Policy**

Many scholars have pointed out how large unauthorized inflows from the NTCA, Mexico, and elsewhere are the product of deeply-entrenched historical processes in which conditions in sending areas described above, labor demand in the U.S., family reunification needs, and immigration policy itself have engendered unauthorized movement.<sup>25</sup> In particular, despite being ineffective overall as a strategy to stop the flows *per se*,<sup>26</sup> U.S. immigration enforcement policies and practices have had a very deep effect on how unauthorized migration takes place (who leaves, under what conditions, and where they settle). This is particularly true for migration from the three NTCA countries.

Major reforms to U.S. immigration law between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s restricted legal flows from Latin America by establishing a preference system heavily favoring family reunification, and for the first time in history setting limits on immigration from nations of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, the new system offered virtually no legal permanent migration options to “unskilled” laborers without family ties to U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents, in 1965. As implied in the 1960 estimates shown in Figure 2, only a few NTCA nationals or even Mexicans had such family ties or resident status. While legally closing the door to unskilled migrants, the law did not change the structural conditions in which prior international flows of labor –including those from



Mexico and NTCA nations such as Honduras– had emerged: at the end of the Bracero Program (a large guest worker program that was in place between 1942 and 1964, and under which more than 5 million Mexican migrants used to migrate to the U.S. temporarily). Employers continued to use immigrant labor, except now more irregularly. From the point of view of the employers, these restrictions in immigration did not greatly affect things given that –since at least the mid-1950s– immigration law explicitly allowed for the hiring of unauthorized migrants (and did so until 1986). In this environment, unauthorized labor migration, especially from Mexico and, eventually from the NTCA, increased and in a way, “flourished”. For more details about how this legal context impacted on Central American labor conditions in the U.S., see Policy Brief PB03 in this series).

Legal refuge and asylum options also were severely limited for most NTCA nationals despite the fact that they were leaving conflict-ridden areas in the 1970s and 1980s. Overall, the U.S. government effectively did not consider the cases of the vast majority of the thousands of Guatemalans and Salvadorans as worthy of asylum, granting it to only 2-3% of applicants from these two nations throughout most of the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> While many Salvadorans and Guatemalans would eventually obtain legal permanent residency via asylum, this only took place in the 1990s –more than a decade after the arrival of most migrants. Major social mobilization and legal battles by immigrants and allies, were won in out-of-court settlements which helped to have bills passed to give those previously rejected new opportunities to obtain asylum.<sup>29</sup>

This included the creation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a mechanism that provides provisional but renewable relief from deportation and also grants work authorization to people from countries affected by political strife or natural disasters. TPS, created by Congress in 1990 first offered protection to Salvadorans from removal, but has ever since covered a range of national origins and situations (though never in the case of Guatemalans, not even at the height of armed conflict in their country of birth). Salvadorans were covered for a second time in 2001 in the context of the devastating earthquakes that deeply affected the country that year (their TPS status is still current for those present in the U.S. today thanks to several renewals). Eventually, both Salvadorans and Guatemalans –whose asylum pleas had been seemingly all too easily thrown out in the 1980s– were allowed to re-apply for asylum throughout the mid-late 1990s thanks to the settlement of the American Baptist Churches (ABC) v. Thornburg suite or via the provisions of the Nicaraguan and Central American Adjustment Act (NACARA), passed by Congress in 1997.<sup>30</sup>



## A basic demographic outlook of Central Americans in the U.S. (1980-2012)

There is a large number of Mexican and NTCA nationals in the U.S. without authorization to live or work in the U.S. The latest estimates put these numbers at 5.8 million Mexicans in 2012, 675,000 Salvadorans, 525,000 Guatemalans, and 350,000 Hondurans.<sup>31</sup> As shown in Figure 1, while the population of unauthorized migrants from these nations was already substantial in 1990 (40,000 Hondurans, 120,000 Guatemalans, 300,000 Salvadorans, and 2 million Mexicans), they have experienced considerable growth over the last two and a half decades, especially for Hondurans, for whom these figures increased almost nine fold. For Guatemalans, these numbers quadrupled while they more than doubled for Salvadorans during that period. Finally, while they almost tripled for Mexicans, this growth took place before 2007, after which the stock of unauthorized Mexicans seem to have stabilized.

As described before, migrants from Guatemala and El Salvador started emigrating to the U.S. in somewhat larger numbers when their respective national civil conflicts broke out in the 1970s and 1980s, severely affecting lives and livelihoods in many communities. Table 2 depicts the basic socio-demographic profile of the NTCA-born population in the U.S., regardless of status.<sup>32</sup> Like in the case of Mexico, the NTCA migrant population in 1980 in the U.S. was disproportionately female, young, and well-educated. In the case of El Salvador and Guatemala, it was highly concentrated in California where 73% and 65% of recent arrivals from El Salvador and Guatemala respectively.

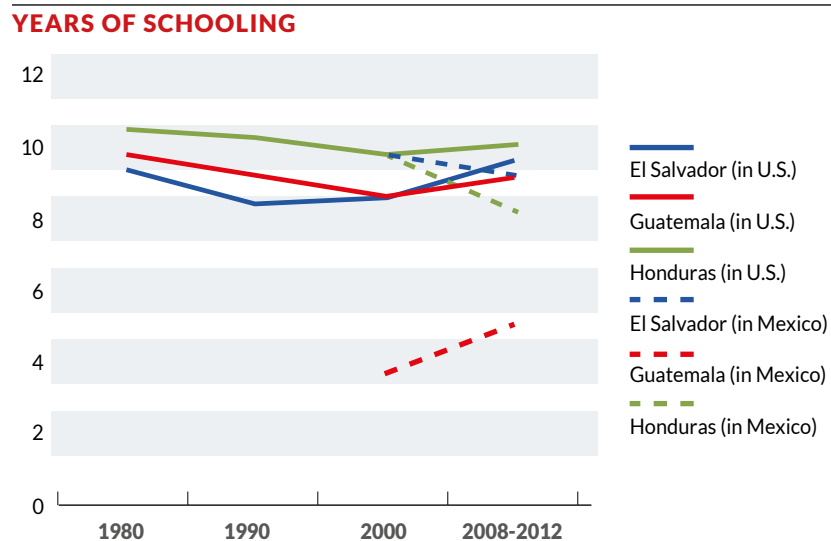
Because these movements took place after the 1965 reforms of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, and due to their relatively low levels of human and social capital, many people from the NTCA seeking to escape violence did not have access to legal labor or family reunification options. Some of those arriving irregularly up to the early 1980s would be able to regularize their status using two legalization programs contained in the Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA) of 1986. However, because these programs required continued presence in the country since

*The harsh reality of a new setting was most striking for immigrant children. While moving into the safer environment of a developed nation was most certainly welcome for many, conditions were not fully safe in many of the neighborhoods and schools where NTCA immigrants settled in cities like Los Angeles*

1982,<sup>33</sup> this helped only a minority of Salvadorans and Guatemalans displaced by the conflicts in their countries. It is estimated that 136,000 Salvadorans and 50,000 Guatemalans were legalized through IRCA.<sup>34</sup> This represents around a fifth of the unauthorized population from these nations in 1990 (see Figure 1).

While it remained quite youthful, with much larger inflows the incoming population from the region became less feminized after IRCA than in 1980. This suggests large movements of men and minors post-1986. On average, people arriving in the late 1980s also had slightly lower levels of schooling than those arriving in the late 1970s (see Table 2 panel II and figure 4). As these populations arrived, Salvadorans in particular settled in slightly more diversified destinations than the traditional Californian stronghold of NTCA nationals, expanding their reach to Texas, and the Washington D.C. area. Eventually, NTCA migrants (like their Mexican brethren) would also begin settling in the Southeast in larger numbers, as shown in Table 2.

**Figure 4.** Average years of schooling of the NTCA-born population living in the United States and in Mexico by period and country of birth



Note: Mexican data until 2010.  
Source: Tables 1 and 2.

## Irregularity and exclusion among at-risk Central American youth

Although court and policy battles solved the legal situation of many NTCA nationals in the 1990s, they continued to live in tenuous and grey legal statuses such as TPS for many years, which has left a deep imprint on migrants' lives<sup>35</sup> and made the transition into their new lives in the United States particularly difficult. Adapting to a new setting and country is rarely easy for migrants, especially for those displaced. Being uprooted means that one does not always











have the resources to migrate or navigate the destination's terrain (e.g., the contacts to find affordable housing, jobs, to understand the schooling system, etc.). Because of the disruptive nature of displacement, the destination States generally provide refugees and asylees with financial aid and other forms of support. Yet, because the U.S. government did not deem that most Salvadorans and Guatemalans had valid claims to asylum for several years after their arrival, their adaptation was even more difficult than it had been for other migrants and refugees.<sup>36</sup> They struggled to find good jobs and housing even more than other groups who were also settling in Los Angeles because they lacked the social capital that even relatively poor Mexican migrants had.

The harsh reality of a new setting was most striking for immigrant children. While moving into the safer environment of a developed nation was most certainly welcome for many, conditions were not fully safe in many of the neighborhoods and schools where NTCA immigrants settled in cities like Los Angeles. Like many other at-risk youth across the world,<sup>37</sup> immigrant kids from the NTCA joined gangs such as 18th Street, and formed their own such as MS-13 to protect themselves, socialize, and find a sense of belonging.

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### **Deportation of Central Americans and the dangers of circularity in immigration policy**

After U.S. interior immigration enforcement toughened in the late 1990s, hundreds of thousands of both unauthorized migrants and permanent residents have been deported to Mexico and the NTCA: Between FY2012 and FY2014, more than 100,000 Hondurans, 67,000 Salvadorans, 141,000 Guatemalans, and 725,000 Mexicans were formally removed from the U.S. Around a third of this cohort came from the U.S. interior, and thus composed of people who had been living in the country for some time.<sup>38</sup> Because many deportees had been uprooted from their families and customary lives, their adaptation to their countries of birth has often been difficult, especially for young people. Also at the population level of the NTCA countries, the relatively massive influx of deportees and related returnees was challenging for labor and housing markets and for educational systems.

Changes in U.S. immigration law in 1996 lowered the bar of deportability for legal permanent residents with prior convictions. Sadly, this change was applied retroactively and without clear knowledge of the situation of many of these families and individuals, sending thousands of unauthorized and otherwise legal immigrants back to Central America.<sup>39</sup> This group also included many



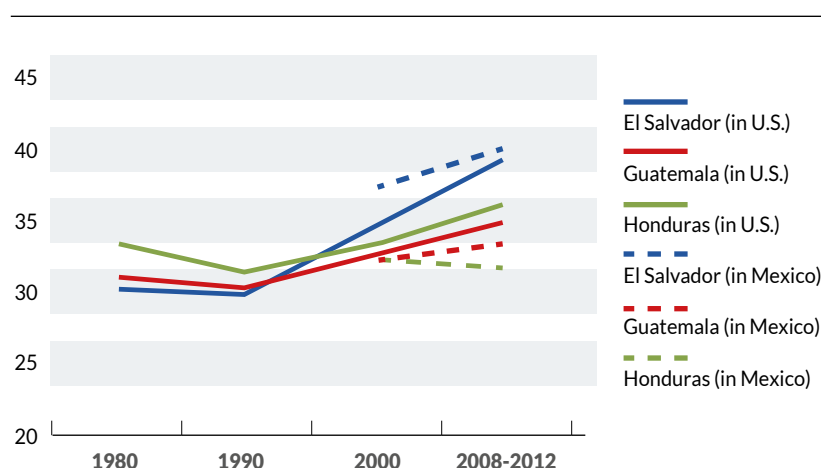


active and former gang members. In addition to the deportation figures discussed before, the demographic effects of deportation on the population of long-term residents in the United States born in NTCA countries is apparent on Table 2, panel III. In both 2000 and 2008-2012, these populations have become somewhat older, likely due to the natural aging of a group increasingly composed of even more experienced migrants, but also reinforced by the deportation of many minors and young people in particular (Figure 5). For instance, the percentage of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran long-term migrants (i.e., with more than 5 years in the U.S.) who were younger than 20 years-old decreased noticeably from 10.5%, 14.1%, and 12.7% in 1980, respectively, to 6.6%, 9.2%, and 8.9% in 2000. By 2008-2012, these figures stand at a paltry 3.9%, 7.3%, and 6.0%, a change too quick and large to be only driven by aging. In contrast, note that recent arrivals (shown in Table 2, panel II) were still heavily composed of young people in 2000, with a quarter to a third of recent migrants being younger than 20 years-old.





**Figure 5. Average age of the NTCA-born population living in the United States and in Mexico by period and country of birth**



Note: Mexican data until 2010.  
Source: Tables 1 and 2.

Specialists in the topic emphasize that only a minority of at-risk youth eventually join a gang, and that only a minority of those who join, engage in hardcore activities such as serious violence and crime.<sup>40</sup> Yet, because the large growth in gang membership throughout the 1980s and 1990s indeed cast a wide net, hundreds of NTCA immigrant youth did get in trouble with the law. Many – including a nontrivial share who had recently gained legal permanent residence by way of family sponsors, IRCA, or asylum– ended up serving prison sentences.

Because deportation is a form of uprooting, readjustment after removal –even to one’s own country of birth– may be as challenging as adapting to more traditional forms of displacement out of one’s



*Because deportation is a form of uprooting, readjustment after removal—even to one's own country of birth—may be as challenging as adapting to more traditional forms of displacement out of one's country of birth*

country of birth. With family, work, and school life severely disrupted by separation, the involuntary return weighs on people in a variety of ways.<sup>41</sup> Children and adolescents are, again, not only more psychologically vulnerable to the disruptions of relocation, but often do not have a frame of reference to readapt to since they may not remember or know their places of birth in any significant way, and may not even speak the language fluently. As a result, they find themselves lost, in unstable living arrangements, and with poor educational and job prospects.

After deportation, many youngsters formerly belonging to gangs in the U.S. formed cliques in all three countries especially in El Salvador maintaining the 18th Street and MS-13 symbolic culture while recruiting new members, effectively bringing the street conflicts of Pico-Union and Koreatown to their neighborhoods. Gang-related violence spread to the NTCA with a vengeance because of the vulnerable economic social conditions these youth came into, and was aggravated by the weak judicial systems in the NTCA. A further aggravating factor was that members of rival gangs which had been organized in broad and distant territories in L.A. and other American cities, ended up living next to each other in barrios populares upon their forced return to their country of birth, making conflict more likely.<sup>42</sup>

The spread of gangs to Central America via massive deportation has been a key contributing factor to the rapidly rising homicide rates in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala over most of the last two decades, among the highest in the world today.<sup>43</sup> While these gangs have continued to increase their ranks more from home-grown recruitment than from deportees,<sup>44</sup> U.S. immigration policy had a preponderant role in their growth and, thus, the violence.

Coming full circle, this mounting violence has now permeated these societies enough to be a likely major driver of emigration out of all NTCA nations,<sup>45</sup> now including Honduras too.<sup>46</sup> In particular, the link between violence and displacement seems to be clear enough for those most at risk of getting caught up in it. According to a recent UNCHR report, many adolescents and children have fled their home communities and try to make it to the U.S. on account of this and other forms of violence.<sup>47</sup> While migration of unaccompanied minors from Central America is by no means a new phenomenon,<sup>48</sup> the almost uninterrupted rise in violence described before, could indeed help explain the recent surge of these flows from the NTCA.



## Conclusion

In light of the deep history of NTCA migration dynamics to Mexico and the U.S. summarized here, the persistence of emigration from the NTCA despite the recent temporary economic slowdown in the U.S. and more sustained heightened enforcement in both the U.S. and Mexico, is not fully surprising. This perseverance may be mainly attributed to the general political-economic and insecurity situation in all three sending nations, the continued demand for immigrant labor in several sectors of the U.S. economy, as well as to “multiplier effects” created by the now long history of migration from the region, some of which derive from the “unintended” consequences of U.S. immigration enforcement.

Every act of migration contributes to changing conditions in both the destination and sending areas that can stimulate the migration of others in the future. Some of the mechanisms by which this occurs are common to many other labor migrations flows and are, in fact, one of their most regular features. Most notably, this includes the role that migrants already play in destination areas facilitating the migration of relatives and other fellow countrymen embedded in the same networks of kinship, both of blood and of the legal and traditional kinship of in-laws and compadres, friendship, and other forms of ethnic and regional or national solidarity among paisanos. A specific example of these, also common in other labor migration flows but perhaps more common in the NTCA (especially Honduras in recent years), is the motivations of many adolescents and children to migrate in order to reunite with family members who had previously migrated to the U.S. – a situation that, despite its recent growth, is not new in the NTCA but dates back a few years.

The deportation of migrants well established in the U.S. creates harsh difficulties for returnees and for their communities of origin in the sending countries. However, U.S. immigration enforcement policies and practices have ironically contributed to creating the conditions that motivate many people from the NTCA to leave their home communities today and help to “perpetuate” unauthorized migration. As described above, the large influx of deportees from the U.S., particularly during the 1990s contributed to the escalation of gang-related violence in the region. Additional violence, caused by drug trafficking in places like the Eastern Honduran and Guatemalan lowlands, involves Mexican cartels moving cocaine from the Andean region to the U.S. The worst of this violence has helped displace people, perhaps especially the very adolescents and children who have filled up detention facilities in the U.S. and more recently, in Mexico.

This is one of several issues discussed in this policy brief in which the shared responsibility between destination, transit and sending countries is quite clear, but there are several others, regardless of whether or not countries hold equal responsibility. The situation today urges for action from all involved parties with the design of plans for change that are transnational in nature and scope. With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations.



## ◉ Policy recommendations

Recommendations are targeted to the three types of “functions” performed by each of the five countries involved, namely as countries of destination, transit, and origin.

### ➤ ***Countries of destination***

Evidence shows that immigration enforcement has not been an effective immigration policy, bringing much pain to separated families and to the social fabric of immigrant communities in destinations and sending areas alike. Instead, we recommend that countries of destination:

- 1) Enact a more formal recognition of violence, insecurity, and persecution as motivations for emigration from the NTCA. Both the United States and Mexico should revise the processes for claiming asylum and refugee status and respect the application of non-refoulement – the non-return of refugees to places where their lives are threatened –, stopping the deportation, especially of children who have limited networks and resources in origin countries, and who lack appropriate representation in, e.g., U.S. immigration courts. Mexico and the U.S. should stop coordinating efforts to return migration from the NTCA in their Southern borders until they properly identify and process asylum cases.
- 2) The U.S. Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or other forms of regularization (e.g., the still yet to be implemented Deferred Action for Parental Arrivals Program) that grant protection from return to violent conditions in sending countries should be extended not only to Salvadorans arriving after 2001, but to Guatemalans and Hondurans fleeing or unable to return to their sending countries due to difficult situations caused by violence in their communities.

### ➤ ***Countries of transit***

- 3) The provision of legal status and documentation for transit that provide access to health care, education, labor, housing, and the full respect of human rights. These provisions need to go beyond the mere creation of the legal frameworks but must include a reasonable budget and bureaucratic channels that allow for its implementation on the ground, something that has been extremely slow, for example, in the case of the Mexican Migration Law signed in 2011.

## ➤ ***Sending countries***

- **4)** In addition to continuing their work aimed at improving the living and safety conditions of all residents, to develop effective programs targeted to the specific needs of different populations that facilitate the reintegration of migrants upon return. For example, the formation and use of socio-demographic profiles of those deported by the Mexican or U.S. border patrols, by interior immigration enforcements, or who return for reasons of health status, family or economic considerations, nostalgia, etc.
- **5)** Improve migration data from population-based Censuses and surveys in order to understand who has emigrated from and returned to the NTCA, and for which reasons. One of the challenges associated with studying the migrant populations has been the lack of nationally representative data. Convinced of the importance of empirical studies, we make the following specific recommendations.
  - a) To include in future surveys and censuses a question on the year of arrival to the country and date of first emigration from the country of origin.
  - b) To include a question on the place of residence one year prior to the census in order to identify recent flows. The new question would be in addition to the question on residence 5 years prior to the census currently in place in most US and Latin American censuses.
  - c) These data should be used to investigate the different causes that motivate migratory movements –defined in a broad manner, capturing the different stages of the migration process in order to enable a better characterization of the contexts of emigration, transit, reception, and return.
  - d) Finally, these data should be shared between countries and institutions, creating repositories of regionally comparable data.

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# ***Three decades of migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America: A historical and demographic outlook***

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## SUMMARY

In spite of a major economic slowdown in 2007-2009 and an increasing escalation of immigration and border enforcement in both the United States and Mexico over the last decade, unauthorized migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA, i.e., El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) has persisted. These trends are puzzling and stand in contrast to those of unauthorized migration from Mexico, which has decreased over the last seven years. To understand these trends, we briefly describe the history of international migration dynamics from the NTCA countries, discussing their main drivers, features, and demographic profile. We explain the role of economic and political contexts of emigration from each NTCA nation as well, and review the immigration policy and the contexts of reception in the U.S. and Mexico; we then relate this to the socio-demographic profiles of the NTCA population in both countries. The continued history of political turmoil, violence, and uneven and unstable economic development—along with the growth and strengthening of migrant networks—largely explains the continuation of sustained emigration flows from all three NTCA nations despite the rise of unwelcoming contexts of reception and transit in Mexico and the U.S. Among different contemporary issues, we discuss the recent rise in the flow of unaccompanied minors, and the respective roles of the sending, transit, and destination countries in driving the continuation of these flows. Finally, in light of this historical and demographic overview, we offer a set of basic policy recommendations for the management of the different migration flows, and the establishment of new data and research needs to better understand their drivers and future trends.

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