



Dr. Dinorah Azpuru is Associate Professor of Political Science at Wichita State University, Kansas. She is also an associate of Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES).



Violeta Hernández is an analyst and investigator at the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES) in Guatemala City.

MIGRATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

MAGNITUDE, CAUSES AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Dinorah Azpuru / Violeta Hernández

Migration from Central America to other countries, particularly the United States, has been occurring for many decades. But in the summer of 2014 it reached crisis proportions when thousands of Central American minors – most of them not accompanied by an adult and after a dangerous journey through Mexico – crossed the border between Mexico and the United States and willingly surrendered themselves to the U.S. Border Patrol.¹ It was the tip of the iceberg of deep-rooted problems in Central America (more specifically in the Northern Triangle)² that involve not only poverty and lack of access to basic services such as health care or education, but also growing violence in those societies. Moreover, it exposed the dysfunction of the U.S. immigration system.

These incidents made headlines for several weeks and prompted the adoption of short-term measures to stop the flow of undocumented young migrants and women with small children. Government-led media campaigns to stop the migrants, the deportation of many of them

1 | The number of unaccompanied children encountered by the U.S. Border Patrol has increased steadily since 2010, but the surge was dramatic in the summer of 2014.

2 | The countries that historically comprise Central America are Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The so called Northern Triangle includes Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. See John Booth/Christine Wade/Thomas Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion and Change*, Boulder, 2015. Panama and Belize are included in some studies, but their historical and cultural background, as well as their historical relationship with the United States is different from that of the five typical Central American countries.

by U.S. and Mexican authorities,³ as well as the late summer heat in the desert areas of the border helped to slow down the upsurge. However, the underlying causes remained and normal patterns of migration continued. In November 2014, the three presidents of the Northern Triangle – Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – launched in Washington D.C. a long-term plan, called “The Alliance for Prosperity”, to promote development in these countries and thus discourage migrants from leaving their homes. Therefore, it is worth examining the extent of migration from Central America in recent years, presenting a profile of the migrants, and discussing the push and pull factors, as well as other structural variables that contribute to migration. An assessment of the feasibility of the Alliance for Prosperity will complement the analysis.

SCOPE AND TYPES OF MIGRATION

Different studies agree that the current migration patterns in Central America took shape in the 1970s, largely as a result of economic crisis, political problems and civil wars.⁴ Orozco and Yansura indicate that since the 1970s the region has had at least three migratory periods, each characterised by different triggering factors.⁵ Thus, in the 1970s to 1980s, migration was intensified by political

In the 1970s to 1980s, migration was intensified by political instability and more specifically by the armed conflicts in the region.

3 | According to Save the Children in 2014 around 18,000 minors were returned from Mexico and the United States to their countries of origin: 8,400 children to Honduras, 4,500 to El Salvador and 5,300 to Guatemala. See “Se duplica el número de menores deportados desde Estados Unidos y México a Centroamérica en 2014”, EuropaPress, 30 Dec 2014, <http://europapress.es/internacional/noticia-duplica-numero-menores-deportados-estados-unidos-mexico-centroamerica-2014-20141230000257.html> (accessed 25 Jan 2015).

4 | See Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL)/International Organization for Migration (IOM) / Interamerican Development Bank (IDB), *Informes nacionales sobre migración internacional en países de Centroamérica*, Santiago, Chile, 2002. We use the terms civil wars and armed conflicts interchangeably.

5 | Manuel Orozco/Julia Yansura, *Understanding Central American Migration, The crisis of Central American Child Migrants in Context*, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington D.C., Aug 2014.

instability and more specifically by the armed conflicts in the region.⁶ The second period ranges from the 1990s to the early 2000s, after the end of the civil wars; during this period the majority of migrants left for economic reasons, in the aftermath of a series of natural disasters. The third period begins with the new millennium, when migration to the United States and other countries has been driven by a combination of non-political violence, desire for family reunification and economic need.

Around 80 per cent of migrants from Central America live in the U.S. To a lesser extent, there has been migration to Mexico, Spain and Canada, as well as migration within the region.

Throughout these three periods, the United States has been the main destination for Central American migrants. It is estimated that around 80 per cent of migrants from that region live there.⁷ To a lesser extent, there has been migration to other countries like Mexico, Spain and Canada, as well as migration within Central America⁸ (details can be seen in Table 1).⁹ With regards to the total migrants by country, El Salvador with almost a fifth of its population living abroad largely surpasses the others, while Costa Rica on the other extreme, has a low percentage of migrants.

6 | During the Central American crisis in the late 1970s to 1980s, citizens of the Northern Triangle countries fled because of fear of repression by authoritarian regimes or out of fear of being caught in the middle of the fight between the military governments and the revolutionary guerrillas. Many migrated to the United States and stayed there after the end of the civil wars, but many Guatemalans sought refuge in border towns in Mexico and returned when the peace accords were signed in the early 1990s. Nicaraguans fled to Costa Rica escaping the counterinsurgency war against the Sandinista government.

7 | See Orozco/Yansura, n. 5, p. 3.

8 | We do not include in this discussion the seasonal workers that migrate for short periods of time to seek temporary jobs.

9 | The figures in Table 1 were obtained from the IOM website interactive map on 21 Jan 2015, <http://iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/about-migration/world-migration.html>. According to the IOM, the data in the map was published by the World Bank in 2010. For the most part, only recipient countries with more than 1,000 Central American migrants are included in the table. The total population of the countries of origin in 2010 was obtained from the report *Estado de la Nación* produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Centroamérica - Informe actual*, <http://estadonacion.or.cr/estado-de-la-region/region-informe-actual2011> (accessed 23 Jan 2015).

Table 1
**Migrants from Central America by Country
of Destination**

	Country of origin					Total in country of destination
	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	
USA*	753,720	1,116,420	469,202	242,886	82,624	2,664,852
Canada	18,282	49,801	6,013	10,588	3,428	88,112
Mexico	35,022	7,869	5,314	3,684	3,155	55,044
Spain	6,699	8,130	27,059	11,540	3,296	56,724
Germany	1,037	768	896	937	1,177	4,815
Migrants within Central America						
Guatemala	n/a	14,855	6,534	6,668	906	28,963
El Salvador	8,528	n/a	11,207	7,507	841	28,083
Honduras	2,849	5,474	n/a	4,802	532	13,657
Nicaragua	1,387	3,291	14,597	n/a	7,284	26,559
Costa Rica	3,294	14,379	4,861	373,548	n/a	396,082
Total migrants by country	830,818	1,220,987	545,683	662,160	103,243	3,362,887
Population size in 2010	14,361,666	6,183,002	7,621,106	5,822,395	4,563,539	38,551,708
Percentage of migrants	5.8	19.7	7.2	11.4	2.3	8.7

Source: Prepared by authors with 2010 migration data from the IOM. Population size from UNDP.

* The conservative Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), based on public-use files of the 2012 American Community Survey collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, indicated that in 2012 there were 2.7 million immigrants from Central America, with the following breakdown: El Salvador 1.3 million; Guatemala 880,000 and Honduras 536,000. CIS points out that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (U.S. DHS) estimates that 60 per cent of them are in the United States illegally, <http://cis.org/central-american-immigrants-us> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

Note: Other countries with more than 1,000 migrants from Central America in 2010 were: France (1,745 Guatemalans and 1,119 Salvadorans) and Sweden (2,899 Salvadorans). In addition, 20,070 Guatemalans lived in Belize. A map with migration data prepared by the authors can be seen here: https://public.tableausoftware.com/profile/vhernandez#!/vizhome/Migration_7/Dashboard1 (accessed 25 Feb 2015).

Migration to the United States

First, the differences in the types of migrants must be emphasised. While it is true that a large percentage of Central American immigrants to the U.S. traveled north in precarious conditions, crossed the border illegally, and live as undocumented workers, there is another type of migrant.¹⁰ In its 2011 State of the Region Report¹¹ the UNDP indicates that Central America is one of the two regions of the Americas with the highest brain drain to developed countries. The percentage is particularly high in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua: almost 30 per cent of the labor force with a university education from those countries resides in the United States.¹² This has a clear impact on those countries, since the percentage of their population with a college degree is very low, particularly in the Northern Triangle: 2.8 per cent in Guatemala, 3.4 per cent in Honduras and 7.7 per cent in El Salvador.¹³

According to Terrazas, Central Americans with a completed university education only represent around ten per cent of the total migrants from that region. He points out that in 2009 almost half of the Central American immigrants 25 and older (48 per cent) did not have a high school diploma and about 25 per cent had a high school diploma as their highest level of education. The remaining 17 per cent had received some college education.¹⁴ It is likely that many or most of the immigrants with higher education have legal status, but all together Terrazas mentions that more than two of every five Central American immigrants lack legal immigration status and that one in ten lives in the United

10 | It is estimated that 40 per cent of all undocumented immigrants in the U.S. overextended their visas, but specific data for Central America was not available.

11 | See UNDP, n. 9.

12 | See *ibid.*, ch. 9, p. 382.

13 | Nicaragua and Costa Rica had a higher percentage with eleven per cent and 17.5 per cent respectively. See Barro-Lee Educational Attainment Dataset, <http://barrolee.com> (accessed 25 Jan 2015). Data for 2010.

14 | See Aaron Terrazas, "Central American Immigrants in the United States", Migration Policy Institute, *Spotlight*, 10 Jan 2011, <http://migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states-0> (accessed 24 Feb 2015). He also notes that 74.0 per cent of Guatemalan, 71.8 per cent of Honduran, 71.5 per cent of Salvadoran, 59.5 per cent of Nicaraguan and 46.2 per cent of Costa Rican immigrants (age five and older) have limited English proficiency.

States under temporary humanitarian protection. The latter refers to the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) that was granted to citizens from El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua a few years ago.¹⁵



Border traffic: Several thousand people are drawn every year to enter the U.S. for diverse reasons, including commerce and tourism. The border crossing at San Ysidro between Mexico and California is one of the most frequented. | Source: Phil Konstantin, flickr ©.

Addressing the projections about the migration from Central America to the United States is also important. The Pew Research Center indicates that between 2009 and 2012

15 | According to the U.S. DHS, TPS is granted when conditions in the country of origin may “temporarily prevent the country’s nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately.” See U.S. DHS, “Temporary Protected Status”, <http://uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status-deferred-enforced-departure/temporary-protected-status#What%20is%20TPS> (accessed 25 Jan 2015). Terrazas indicates that TPS status was granted to certain Salvadoran immigrants in 1990 because of the civil war, to some Honduran and Nicaraguan immigrants after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and to more Salvadorans following two devastating earthquakes in 2001. The TPS for these countries has been extended several times and it is still ongoing. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) estimates that in 2010 TPS covered 229,000 Salvadorans, 70,000 Hondurans, and 3,500 Nicaraguans. Guatemala has requested TPS status several times but it has not been granted.

the number of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. (which comprise the majority of undocumented immigrants to the U.S.) diminished. However, in the same period the number of unauthorised immigrants from Central America grew slightly.¹⁶ Whether or not that trend continues is closely related to the changing nature of the pull and push factors – such as the state of the U.S. economy – as well as the measures and policies enacted by the government in Washington as well as the Central American governments.



Migrants may become citizens of the host country. In 2013, about 800,000 immigrants were naturalised, more than 99,000 of them were Mexicans. | Source: Michael Quinn, Grand Canyon National Park, flickr ©©.

Another perspective can be obtained by analyzing the results of a survey conducted by the *AmericasBarometer 2014*.¹⁷ Central Americans were asked if they had the intention to live or work in another country in the next three years. Fig. 1 shows the results; other countries of the Western Hemisphere are included for comparative purposes. As can be seen, one third of Hondurans and Salvadorans

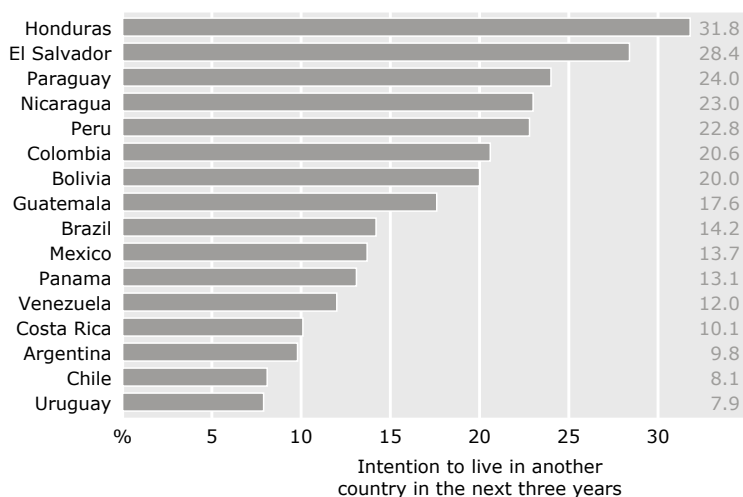
16 | Jens Manuel Krogstad/Jeffrey S. Passe, "5 facts about illegal immigration in the U.S.", Pew Research Center, 18 Nov 2014, <http://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/18/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

17 | The survey is administered every two years in 26 countries of the Western Hemisphere and is part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project based at Vanderbilt University. For details see <http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

have the intention to live or work in another country and the difference with the other countries in the graph is statistically significant. About one fifth of Nicaraguans and Guatemalans also have the intention to migrate, but the percentages are statistically similar to those Paraguay, Peru, Colombia and Bolivia. Only ten per cent of Costa Ricans said they would do so.

Fig. 1

Intention to Migrate in Latin America



Source: Prepared by authors with data from the *AmericasBarometer 2014*.

CAUSES OF MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

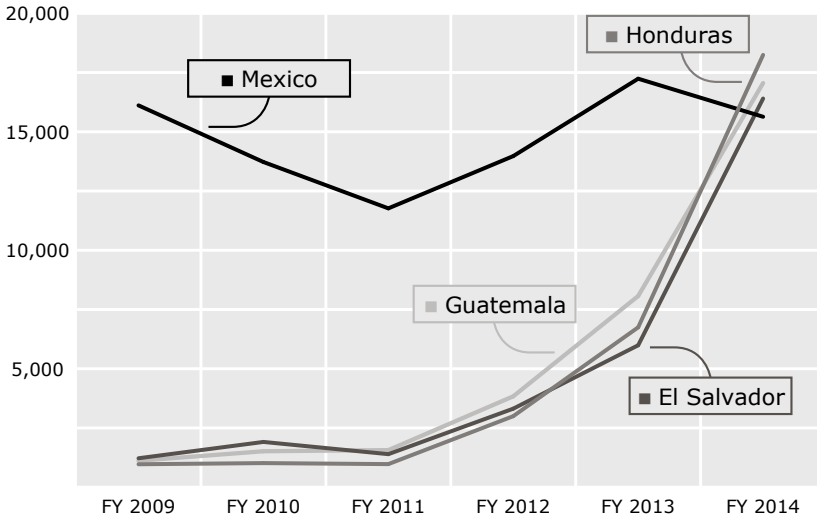
The upsurge in the migration of thousands of unaccompanied minors from Central America's Northern Triangle in 2014 (Fig. 2) exposed a series of deep-seated problems of development in that region and put the respective governments to shame in the eyes of domestic and international public opinion.¹⁸ It could be said that the crisis marked a turning point in the approach of Central American politicians

18 | There was also a shift in the apprehensions of migrants of all ages in 2014, since demographic, economic and educational changes have discouraged Mexican population to migrate. See Demetrious Papademetriou/Doris Meissner/Eleanor Sohnen, *Thinking Regionally to Compete Globally*, Migration Policy Institute, Washington D.C., 2013. The authors also mention that Mexico could become an immigrant-receiving country.

and government officials towards migration of their citizens to the United States. For many years, rather than discouraging migration, government officials from Central America generally tried to convince the U.S. government to extend benefits such as the TPS and to halt deportations.

Fig. 2

Unaccompanied Alien Children Encountered at the U.S. Border



Note: In Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 (Oct 2009 to Sep 2010) 4,444 Central American children reached the border. That number rose to 20,805 in FY 2013, and to 51,705 in FY 2014.

Source: Prepared by authors with data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children", <http://cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children> (accessed 23 Jan 2015).

Before the crisis of the unaccompanied minors, the governments of Central America did little to discourage migration, largely because the countries benefited from the remittances sent by the migrants to their families back home. The remittances not only favored the macroeconomic conditions of the countries, but also relieved the pressure of economic scarcity for thousands of families, and subsequently the pressure on the government itself. According to the Central American Monetary Council, remittances as a percentage of the GDP are especially relevant in the

Northern Triangle. In El Salvador they represented 16.4 per cent of the GDP in 2013 (compared to 13.3 per cent in 2000); in Honduras remittances represented 16.1 per cent in 2013 (6.1 per cent in 2000) and in Guatemala 9.5 per cent in 2013 (2.8 per cent in 2000).¹⁹

During the crisis of unaccompanied minors there was extensive policy and scholarly debate both within the United States and in Central America about the causes of migration and the possible solutions to discourage minors and others from leaving their countries. It became clear that multiple causes are at play²⁰ and that fast, easy solutions are impossible.

Pull Factors

The crisis at the Mexican-American border last summer not only exposed the weaknesses of development the lack of security in Central America, it displayed the dysfunctions of the U.S. immigration system. The crisis prompted hearings in the U.S. Congress as well as emergency visits to Central America from high level U.S. government officials – including Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry. The Presidents of the Northern Triangle also met with President Barak Obama in Washington to discuss the situation. There had not been so much U.S. media attention on the region since the time of the armed conflicts

19 | Together with the inflows from migrants living in Costa Rica, remittances in Nicaragua represented 9.6 per cent of the GDP in 2013. In Costa Rica they represent less than one per cent. Altogether, remittances have helped to sustain household consumption and reduced poverty levels in Central America. See Manuel Orozco, *Central America: remittances and the macroeconomic variable*, Inter-American Dialogue, 2007. However other empirical studies have shown that inflows may appreciate the real exchange rate, and consequently affect Central American competitiveness. See Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes/Susan Pozo, "Workers' Remittances and the Real Exchange Rate: A Paradox of Gifts", *World Development*, vol. 32, no. 8, 2004, p. 1407-1417. Also see Violeta Hernández, "Realidad y mitos sobre la migración centroamericana", *Observador Económico*, 2 Feb 2015, <http://perspectiva.com.gt/realidad-y-mitos-sobre-la-migracion-centroamericana> (accessed 8 Feb 2015).

20 | See for instance Dinorah Azpuru, "The Multiple Causes of the Border Crisis", *Panoramas*, Center for Latin America at the University of Pittsburgh, 20 Oct 2014, <http://panoramas.pitt.edu/content/multiple-causes-border-crisis> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

more than thirty years before.²¹ Clashes also occurred in several U.S. cities where the minors were being sent by the U.S. government, between opponents of the temporary settlement and those who expressed support.



Part of the American Dream: Minors, who came to the U.S. before 2012, have the chance to attend colleges due to the "Dream Act". | Source: Kris Price, SEIU, flickr ©①③②.

The debate in Washington was centered on whether certain policies adopted by the Obama Administration, more specifically the 2012 "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" (known as DACA or the "Dream Act") had encouraged poor parents in Central America to send their children to the United States.²² Politicians from the Republican Party blamed the Obama Administration for lax security at the border. The President asked Congress for 3.7 billion U.S. dollars to address the crisis, which included care for the

21 | Cf. Cynthia Arnson, introductory remarks at the panel of Foreign Ministers from the Northern Triangle called *Migration of Central American Minors: Causes and Solutions*. Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington D.C., 24 Jul 2014, <http://wilsoncenter.org/event/RegionalView> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

22 | DACA is a program established in June 2012. It allows youngsters 15 years or older, who arrived to the U.S. as children prior to 2012, to request deferred action from deportation for a period of three years, subject to renewal. It also makes them eligible for work authorisation and driving licenses, and facilitates their enrollment in public colleges and universities. It does not provide a path to citizenship. Cf. U.S. DHS, "Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)", <http://uscis.gov/humanitarian/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

minors in the U.S., reinforcing of the border security, hiring additional immigration judges, and funding to send and reintegrate the migrants in their countries of origin. Although Congress did not approve most of the requested funding, diverse actions were taken, including the deportation of many of the migrants and the launching of media campaigns in their countries of origin to discourage other minors from traveling north.²³

The calamity of the minor migrants was triggered in part by misinformation from human traffickers in Central America, who spread false rumors about DACA among parents in the region. But in truth, the illegal migration of Central American adults (and some minors as well) to the United States has been occurring for decades, largely driven by the possibility to work and earn an income that they would never be able to earn at home. However, beyond economic reasons, there are other pull factors, such as the desire for reunification of families who have been separated for years because one of the parents migrated or because families were split after the deportation from the U.S. of one or more members of a family.²⁴ Under the current regulations,

Illegal migration of Central Americans is largely driven by the possibility to work and earn more than at home.

23 | The priority given to the cases of undocumented minors in the immigration courts has led to the postponement of previously existing cases, some of which will have to wait until 2019 to get a resolution. See "Gobierno deja a miles de personas en el limbo migratorio: tendrían que esperar hasta 2019", *Univision.com y Agencias*, 2 Feb 2015, <http://noticias.univision.com/article/2233581/2015-02-02/inmigracion/noticias/gobierno-deja-a-miles-de-personas-en-el-limbo-migratorio-tendrian-que-esperar-hasta-2019> (accessed 8 Feb 2015).

24 | The legal term for deportations is removals. They include immigrants who are captured at the border and returned to their countries of origin, as well as undocumented immigrants who have been living on U.S. territory. According to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Office, the overall number of removals of undocumented aliens decreased from 368,644 in FY 2013 to 315,943 in FY 2014. However, the removal of Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans increased by 15 per cent: 54,423 Guatemalans were removed, as well as 40,695 Hondurans and 27,180 Salvadorans. The largest number of removals was of Mexican nationals with 176,968 (a decrease from FY 2013). In the same year, only 1,266 Nicaraguans and 245 Costa Ricans were deported. See U.S. DHS, *ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Report. Fiscal Year 2014*, 19 Dec 2014, http://dhs.gov/sites/default/files/images/ICE%20FY14%20Report_20141218_0.pdf (accessed 25 Jan 2015). The number of deported migrants from Mexico to Central America also increased in 2014, reaching 107,199. See José Mendez, "Se dispara número ▶

it is very unlikely that a Central American without much education would ever be granted a U.S. visa, and much less be allowed to legally immigrate to that country, unless they have a relative who is a U.S. citizen.²⁵



Transit migrants: Crime and unemployment drive people from Central America to leave their homes and to reach the U.S., even illegally. On their transit through Mexico emergency shelters offer help. | Source: The Greens/EFA, flickr ©.

Political leaders in the United States have been debating for years how to reform the immigration system to deal with around eleven million undocumented aliens living in the country – most of them from Mexico and Central America – as well as with the continuous flow of illegal immigrants. Even though there is consensus that the current situation is seriously flawed, the Congress has been unable to pass legislation to fix the system. In early 2013 there seemed to be momentum and some legislators from the Democratic

de deportados en 2014”, *El Universal*, 27 Dec 2014, <http://eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2014/se-disparan-numero-de-deportados-en-2014-1064483.html> (accessed 26 Jan 2015).

25 | Immediate family members who are legal U.S. citizens can petition for certain family members (parents, children under 21 years of age or siblings) to receive U.S. residence (green card), but the wait time is usually long. See U.S. DHS, “Family of U.S. Citizens”, 1 May 2014, <http://uscis.gov/family/family-us-citizens> (accessed 9 Feb 2015).

Party and the Republican Party (GOP) made a joint proposal for reforms. Prominent moderate conservatives expressed their support for the bipartisan bill.²⁶ However, the discussion stalled in the House of Representatives, largely because many Republican congressmen were afraid that supporting immigration would affect their chances of reelection in the mid-term elections in November 2014, since many voters in conservative districts oppose granting legal status to people who entered the U.S. illegally.

After the failure of the bipartisan bill, the GOP anti-immigration members of Congress have gained the upper hand.²⁷ Furthermore, the fact that the Republican Party swept the legislative elections on 4 November 2014 and has now control of both chambers, makes it unlikely to pass an immigration reform in Congress in the immediate future. In light of the lack of advancement in Congress, President Obama announced on November 20 an executive action that grants temporary shelter to undocumented individuals who are parents of a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident (Deferred Action for Paternal Accountability, DAPA). In addition, the president also extended the coverage of DACA.²⁸ It is estimated that around five million undocumented immigrants could be protected from deportation by both programs.²⁹ The most important Spanish-speaking television network in the United States – Univision – as well as pro-immigrant Hispanic groups welcomed this executive action, noting that although it does

26 | See David Nakamura, "U.S. Chamber of Commerce pushes House GOP on immigration reform", *The Washington Post*, 25 Feb 2014, <http://wapo.st/1JPFzL> (accessed 24 Feb 2015); Lisa Mascaro, "Conservative economists endorse immigration reform bill", *Los Angeles Times*, 23 May 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/23/nation/la-na-pn-immigration-letter-20130522> (accessed 8 Feb 2015).

27 | See Benjy Sarlin, "Steve King, once a GOP pariah, emerges as critical 2016 player", *msnbc.com*, 23 Jan 2015, <http://msnbc.com/msnbc/steve-king-once-gop-pariah-emerges-critical-2016-player> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

28 | See U.S. DHS, "Executive Actions on Immigration", 30 Jan 2015, <http://uscis.gov/immigrationaction> for more information about the executive action. These measures are intended to help the general population of undocumented immigrants, not the minors who crossed the border in the summer of 2014.

29 | Cf. Eyder Peralta, "Obama Goes It Alone, Shielding Up To 5 Million Immigrants From Deportation", *NPR*, 20 Nov 2014, <http://npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/11/20/365519963/obama-will-announce-relief-for-up-to-5-million-immigrants> (accessed 25 Jan 2015).

not protect all undocumented aliens, it is a significant step forward. Around 65 per cent of Hispanics in the United States approved the measure.³⁰

Obama's executive action, however, encountered strong opposition from the Republican Party. Republicans in Congress threatened to withhold funding for the Department of Homeland Security to pressure the Obama Administration for changes.³¹ Furthermore, Republican Governors from 26 states filed a lawsuit against the executive action arguing that the president overstepped his authority. On 16 February, U.S. District Judge Andrew S. Hanen ruled that there is sufficient merit in the lawsuit to suspend the new programs while the legal battle is taking place. As a result, the DAPA and the extension of the DACA is halted and undocumented aliens will not be able to obtain legal status (driver's licenses, work permits and other government benefits) until the judicial process ends. Experts believe this could take at least one year.³² Hanen's ruling still allows the Obama Administration to defer the deportation of undocumented immigrants considered a low priority, but in practical terms, millions of undocumented immigrants have been left in legal limbo.³³ Notwithstanding, some cities in the United States have begun programs to provide undocumented immigrants with some benefits and driver's

30 | Cf. Thomas Sparrow, "Are Hispanics satisfied with President Obama's executive action?", *BBC Mundo*, 21 Nov 2014, <http://bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30140369> (accessed 8 Feb 2015); Justin McCarthy, "Hispanics' Support for Obama Climbs After Executive Actions", 10 Dec 2014, <http://gallup.com/poll/180005/hispanics-support-obama-climbs-executive-order.aspx> (accessed 18 Feb 2015).

31 | Republicans in Congress delayed the approval of funding for DHS almost until the deadline at the end of February. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Republican John Boehner explained that it was not about opposition to immigration per se but to protest about executive overreach. But many Republican congressmen admitted that they were opposed to the content of the executive action itself.

32 | On February 23 the Obama Administration filed an appeal which seeks to overturn Hanen's order to stop Obama's executive action. The legal battle could continue until it reaches the Supreme Court of the United States. The 2012 DACA is not affected by this ruling.

33 | See Laura Meckler/Nathan Koppel, "Obama Administration Dealt Setback on Immigration", *Wall Street Journal*, 17 Feb 2015, <http://wsj.com/articles/federal-judge-stalls-obamas-executive-action-on-immigration-1424152796> (accessed 18 Feb 2015).

licenses. Additionally, on March 12 a coalition of 14 states filed a motion supporting the Obama Administration's request to lift the injunction that currently blocks the executive action. Those states argue that Obama's immigration action will benefit states through increased tax revenues and improved public safety.



Former Governor of Florida and potential GOP contender Jeb Bush considers deporting millions of undocumented immigrants unrealistic. In that respect, he represents a different stance than many of his fellow Republican Party members. | Source: The World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, flickr ©.

All in all, the debate about immigration has taken center stage and will likely be one of the main issues in the November 2016 presidential and legislative elections. Early campaign events give an idea of the type of arguments that prevail at the current time within the Republican Party. In January 2015 nine potential presidential candidates for the upcoming GOP primaries were invited to participate in the "Iowa Freedom Summit". Opening remarks at the event help put into perspective the stance of those attending: "Nobody from Iowa cares a sliver about immigration. All of us came from somewhere. What we do care about is illegal gate crashers."³⁴ However some prominent potential GOP contenders for 2016 who were not present appear to

34 | See Brian Tashman, "Steve King's Summit Kicks Off with Attacks on DREAMers", *Right-Wing Watch*, 24 Jan 2015 <http://rightwingwatch.org/content/steve-king-summit-kicks-attacks-dreamers> (accessed 8 Feb 2015).

have a more flexible position: Jeb Bush for instance, said that deporting millions of undocumented immigrants is not realistic: "No one is suggesting an organised effort to do that. The cost would be extraordinary. We need to find a way where they pay fines, they learn English, they work, and they get in the back of the line. But they come out of the shadows so they can be full partners in this strategy of high economic growth."³⁵

Campaign strategists have cautioned that alienating the more than 25 million eligible Hispanic voters with a harsh stance on immigration can significantly affect the party's election results.

Overall the potential GOP presidential candidates are confounded about the best way to address the topic of immigration. Moderate Republicans and campaign strategists have cautioned that alienating the more than 25 million eligible Hispanic voters with a harsh stance on immigration can significantly affect the party's election results.³⁶ At the same time, they are aware that the base of the Republican Party – which plays an important role in the primary election – is highly conservative and opposed to immigration reform.³⁷

Surveys show that the general American public is divided over the issue. A poll conducted in December 2014 by the Pew Research Center showed that 50 per cent of Americans disapproved of Obama's executive action on immigration and 46 per cent approved it. Considerable differences can be traced along party lines: 72 per cent of Democrats approved of it, but only 15 per cent of Republicans did. 44 per cent of swing voters (independents) also expressed

35 | Cf. Jon Ward, "Jeb Bush speaks up for immigrants as Republicans flock to conservative confab in Iowa", *YAHOO! News*, 24 Jan 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/jeb-bush-speaks-up-for-immigrants-as-republicans-flock-to-conservative-confab-in-iowa-224706855.html> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

36 | For a detail on the stance of other potential candidates see *A Guide to 2016 Republican Candidates' Position on Illegal Immigration*, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/01/16/a-guide-to-2016-republican-candidates-positions-on-illegal-immigration/> (accessed 8 Feb 2015). The most likely presidential candidate for the Democratic Party at this point is Hillary Clinton, who has expressed her support for immigration reform and the executive action undertaken by President Obama.

37 | The conservative branch of the GOP known as the Tea Party has contributed to the lack of advancement regarding immigration reform. See Cesar Vargas, "On immigration, will the Tea Party dominate the new Congress?", *The Hill*, 7 Jan 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/immigration/228723-on-immigration-will-the-tea-party-dominate-the-new-congress> (accessed 9 Feb 2015).

disapproval. However, in the same survey, 53 per cent of Republicans said undocumented immigrants “should have a way to stay legally”.³⁸

Push Factors

Notwithstanding what happens with regards to immigration reform in the United States, the root causes of migration lie in the countries of origin. Several analysts have concurred that poverty, lack of opportunity to improve and fear and insecurity – especially due to gang violence – were among the main drivers of the flight of unaccompanied minors in 2014.

Poverty is indeed widespread in the Northern Triangle. World Bank data from 2011 indicates that 61.9 per cent of Hondurans, 53.7 per cent of Guatemalans and 40.6 per cent of Salvadorans lived under the respective national poverty line, and almost half of those considered poor lived in extreme poverty. The three societies are also highly unequal and access to basic services like quality education and health is out of reach for the majority of the population. With respect to public safety, the three Northern Triangle countries are among the most violent societies in the world. According to the 2013 Global Study on Homicide, Honduras with 90.4 homicides per 100,000 was the most violent country in 2012. El Salvador with 41.2 homicides was number four, and Guatemala with 39.9 came in fifth.³⁹ In addition, the countries are ravaged by other types of crime such as extortion, robbery and kidnapping. The violence derives largely from youth gangs which originally were formed by deportees from the United States in the 1980s, as well as from the increased use of the territory of those countries for drug-trafficking activities.

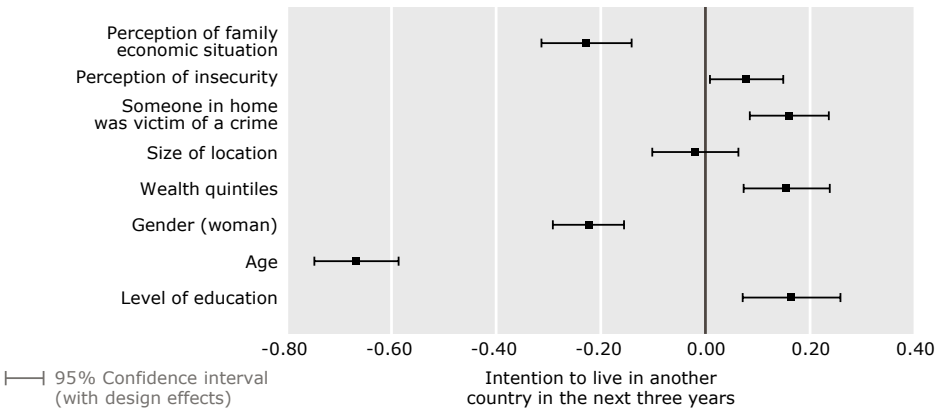
The three Northern Triangle countries are among the most violent societies in the world. Honduras with 90.4 homicides per 100,000 was the most violent country in 2012.

38 | Cf. Pew Research Center, “Immigration Action Gets Mixed Response, But Legal Pathway Still Popular”, 11 Dec 2014, <http://people-press.org/2014/12/11/immigration-action-gets-mixed-response-but-legal-pathway-still-popular> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

39 | See UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, <http://unodc.org/gsh> (accessed 25 Jan 2015).

A regression analysis using data from the *AmericasBarometer 2014* survey shows the variables that are correlated to the intention to migrate from the Northern Triangle countries. Fig. 3 shows that there is a correlation between wanting to migrate and having a negative perception of the family economic situation, as well as between the intention to migrate and living in a household where someone was victim of a crime. Men, younger respondents, and those with medium levels of income and some education are also more prone to migrate.

Fig. 3
Factors Associated with the Intention to Migrate in the Northern Triangle



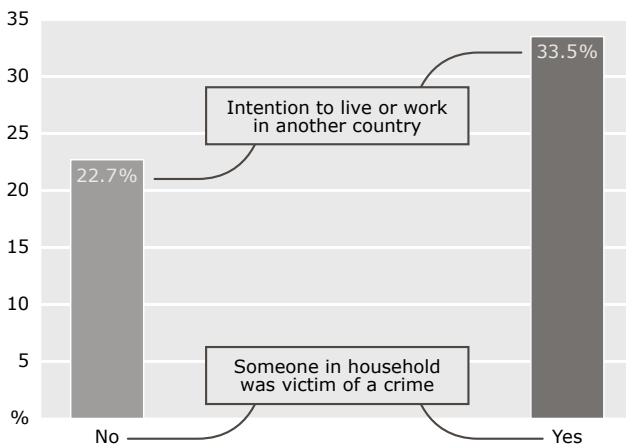
Note: To interpret this graph is important to observe the vertical line at "0". When a variable's estimated coefficient falls to the left of this line, it indicates that the variable has a negative impact on the dependent variable (i.e., the attitude, behavior, or trait we seek to explain); when the coefficient falls to the right, it has a positive impact. We can be 95 per cent confident that the impact is statistically significant when the confidence interval does not overlap the vertical line.

Source: Prepared by authors with data from the *AmericasBarometer 2014*.

It is generally the case that migration and poverty go together in different parts of the world, but the relationship between a high prevalence of crime and migration is less common. Fig. 4 shows that Central Americans from the Northern Triangle living in a household where someone was victimised by crime are much more likely to have the intention to migrate.

Fig. 4

Intention to Migrate and Crime Victimization in the Northern Triangle



Source: Prepared by authors with data from the *AmericasBarometer 2014*.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

In addition to the short-term measures implemented in the aftermath of the crisis of unaccompanied minors in mid-2014, the Presidents of the Northern Triangle countries came together and formulated a plan called “The Alliance for Prosperity” to discourage the migration of their citizens to the U.S. and other countries in a more permanent way. In a joint statement the three presidents said they wanted to make migration an option rather than an obligation.⁴⁰

The Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle has four pillars: (1) productive development, (2) investment in human capital, (3) citizen security and (4) strengthening of local institutions. The first pillar seeks to promote strategic productive sectors and foreign investment. For instance, the plan identifies investment opportunities in nine logistic corridors that could boost regional trade. The second pillar seeks to strengthen technical and vocational formation and to link the educational system with the productive system.

40 | See “Centroamérica busca garantizar que la migración sea opción, no obligación”, *NA-24 Noticias de América*, 12 Nov 2014, <http://portalproyectovida.net/index.php/noticias-4/9910-centroamerica-busca-garantizar-que-la-migracion-sea-opcion-no-obligacion> (accessed 25 Jan 2015).

In terms of citizen security the plan seeks to reinforce the programs of violence prevention and the capacity of the police force. The last pillar includes the improvement of the financial capacity of the governments and the transparency and fight against corruption. The plan is conceived as complementary to the existing development plans in each country and will be focalised in areas where there are high levels of migration.⁴¹ The three governments recognise having limited resources, low tax collection capacity and limited ability to take on more debt. Therefore, they propose alternative financial mechanisms like debt-for-nature swaps, and donations based on performance indicators. At the same time, they pledge to establish better mechanisms for accountability and transparency.



Development aid: Vice President Joe Biden, here at a meeting with Guatemalan President Otto Pérez, called for “A Plan for Central America”. It aims at improving the economic development and good governance in the Northern Triangle. | Source: DCA, MINEX GUATEMALA, flickr ©©©.

The lack of clarity regarding funding is considered one of the pitfalls of the initiative. So far only the President of Guatemala, Otto Pérez, has provided an approximate cost of implementation of the plan. He indicated that it could cost about 15 billion U.S. dollars (about five billion U.S. dollars for each country). He also mentioned that each country was willing to match the foreign aid for the plan

41 | See *Lineamientos del Plan de la Alianza para la Prosperidad del Triángulo Norte*, Sep 2014, <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=39224313> (accessed 24 Jan 2015).

with domestic resources.⁴² The Alliance for Prosperity document highlights that the three countries need international cooperation for financing. Although the plan was primarily presented to the United States as the main potential donor country, the participation of other countries is not discounted and in a visit to Guatemala in February, the President of Chile announced support for the plan.⁴³

The Obama Administration welcomed the Alliance for Prosperity to the point that Vice President Joe Biden recently called for “A Plan for Central America”.⁴⁴ He announced that the White House would ask Congress for one billion U.S. dollars in FY 2016 to promote prosperity, security and good governance in the region. American scholars and policy-makers who are familiar with Central America have indicated that the announcement is positive, but highlight that the composition of funds that will eventually be provided for Central America is far from clear and needs to be coordinated with other donors. Ellis argues that “the approach taken should also be internationally coordinated not only with our partners in the region, but with outside actors such as European and Asian nations which can potentially contribute resources and solutions.”⁴⁵ More importantly, it has been pointed out that money alone

Vice President Biden announced that the White House would ask Congress for one billion U.S. dollars in FY 2016 to promote prosperity, security and good governance in Central America.

42 | Cf. Michael D. McDonald, “Slowing Migrants to U.S. Will Cost \$15 Billion, Guatemala Says”, *Bloomberg*, 26 Jan 2015, <http://bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-26/slowing-migrants-to-u-s-will-cost-15-billion-guatemala-says> (accessed 10 Feb 2015); Government of Guatemala, “Estiman monto de inversión destinada a plan de Alianza para la Prosperidad”, 26 Jan 2015, <http://guatemala.gob.gt/index.php/2011-08-04-18-06-26/item/10867-estiman-monto-de-inversi%C3%B3n-destinada-a-plan-de-alianza-para-la-prosperidad> (accessed 10 Feb 2015). The Presidents of the Northern Triangle will announce in Washington D.C. in mid-March, more details about how the money would be spent.

43 | Cf. “Chile apoyará plan de desarrollo en norte de Centroamérica”, *Emisoras Unidas*, 30 Jan 2015, <http://noticias.emisorasunidas.com/noticias/nacionales/chile-apoyara-plan-desarrollo-norte-centroamerica> (accessed 10 Feb 2015).

44 | Cf. Joseph R. Biden, “A Plan for Central America”, *The New York Times*, 29 Jan 2015, <http://nyti.ms/1JQkCRh> (accessed 2 Feb 2015).

45 | Cf. Evan Ellis, “A New Beginning for the United States in Central America?”, *War in the Rocks*, 5 Feb 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/a-new-beginning-for-the-united-states-in-central-america> (accessed 9 Feb 2015).

will not solve the problems of the Northern Triangle.⁴⁶ The White House itself states the following: "While the United States is investing significant resources, the success of this effort will depend far more on the readiness of Central American governments to continue to demonstrate political will and undertake substantial political and economic commitments to bring about positive change in the region."⁴⁷ Indeed, some experts in the region have expressed skepticism about the continuity of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle when the current presidents of the three countries leave office.⁴⁸

It must be recalled that in view of the current divisions between Democrats and Republicans with regards to immigration, it is uncertain that Congress will approve the White House's request of funding for Central America, which triples the funding for the already existing program called Central American Security Initiative (CARSI) and other aid programs.⁴⁹ Even if the one billion U.S. dollars in U.S. aid is approved for FY 2016, it does not meet the amounts envisioned by the Northern Triangle presidents. In addition, it is unclear whether the U.S. government will continue providing that amount of funding in subsequent years.

The governments of the Northern Triangle countries have not indicated what they would do if the funding that they are requesting from the United States and other international donors for the Alliance for Prosperity does not

46 | Cf. Michael Allison, "U.S. Can't Solve Central America's Problems With Money Alone", *World Politics Review*, 3 Feb 2015, <http://worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/14996/u-s-can-t-solve-central-america-s-problems-with-money-alone> (accessed 9 Feb 2015).

47 | Cf. Adam Isacson, "White House Fact Sheet on \$US1b Aid Request for Central America", *Latin American Blog*, 29 Jan 2015, <http://thisisadamsblog.com/post/109573218159/white-house-fact-sheet-on-us-1b-aid-request-for> (accessed 9 Feb 2015).

48 | Cf. Julie López, "¿Quién asesora la política de EEUU hacia Centroamérica?", *La Opinión*, 15 Feb 2015, <http://laopinion.com/opinion-columnistas/150219569-quien-asesora-politica-eeuu-hacia-centroamerica> (accessed 18 Feb 2015).

49 | For detailed comparison between the amounts of aid in 2014 and those requested in the 2016 White House plan for Central America see Adam Isacson, "What's in the Billion-Dollar Aid Request for Central America?", Washington Office on Latin America, 3 Feb 2015, http://wola.org/commentary/a_walk_through_the_billion_dollar_us_aid_request_for_central_america (accessed 9 Feb 2015).

materialise. They are ultimately the ones responsible for changing the existing conditions of poverty and insecurity that drive migration. Among other things they can implement fiscal reforms that can increase the availability of money from within those societies, in order to enhance and multiply programs that focus on vulnerable populations that are prone to migrate. They also have to convince the business sector in their own countries that it is in their own interest to invest in the improvement of public security institutions instead of spending millions of U.S. dollars in hiring private security firms. But, moreover, and probably as important as the availability of financial resources, is the commitment that the three governments have to make to fight against corruption and poor governmental performance at all levels.

At the end of the day, the drawback of the plan is that it seems to be a long-term plan. If the lives of thousands of Central Americans do not improve in the short-term, both in terms of economic opportunity as well as in terms of personal security, migration is likely to continue, in spite of the efforts to discourage it through media campaigns and border controls.