

2016

Think of the Children: How U.S. Domestic Policy Undermined Good Foreign Policy and Contributed to the 2014 Central American Migration Crisis

Rebekah D. Vermillion
Claremont McKenna College

Recommended Citation

Vermillion, Rebekah D., "Think of the Children: How U.S. Domestic Policy Undermined Good Foreign Policy and Contributed to the 2014 Central American Migration Crisis" (2016). *CMC Senior Theses*. Paper 1391.
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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

**THINK OF THE CHILDREN: HOW U.S. DOMESTIC POLICY UNDERMINED GOOD FOREIGN
POLICY AND CONTRIBUTED TO THE 2014 CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION CRISIS**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR JENNIFER TAW

AND

DEAN PETER UVIN

BY

REBEKAH D. VERMILLION

FOR

SENIOR THESIS

SPRING 2016

APRIL 25, 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support, without which I would not be where I am today. I would also like to thank my friends, who became my second family here at Claremont McKenna College and were an invaluable source of support, comic relief, and encouragement throughout this long and stressful process.

I must also thank Professor Jennifer Taw and all of the wonderful professors I have had the opportunity to learn from over the past four years. You shaped my understanding of the world, encouraged my love of international relations, and supported my pursuit of further studies and a career in international affairs. Words cannot express my gratitude.

ABSTRACT

Why was the United States caught completely unprepared for the Central American refugee crisis during the summer of 2014? Although thousands of unaccompanied children from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador streamed across the southwest U.S. border in unprecedented numbers, the systemic problems plaguing the region stem back decades, and recent data clearly shows a trend of increasing yearly migration flows to the United States from these countries. Even in the face of the crisis, the U.S. government's response was targeted more towards mitigating the symptoms of the crisis while insufficiently addressing its underlying causes.

This is largely due to U.S. domestic policy, which undermines and conflicts with sound foreign policy. By focusing attention and resources on domestically popular foreign aid programs—primarily security initiatives and drug interdiction—rather than on programs to address the underlying, systemic causes of the crisis, like rampant corruption, lack of rule of law, and extreme poverty, U.S. policy-makers worked against their own best interests. As a result, the number of migrants crossing the U.S. southwestern border is once again rising rapidly. U.S. domestic and foreign policy must be reconciled to ensure that now and in the future, the root causes of migration crises are dealt with once and for all.

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2014, thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America streamed across the southern border of the United States in what would become one of the region's worst migration crises in recent memory. Originating primarily in the so-called Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, a wave of children under the age of eighteen made their way up the Central American corridor and through Mexico in an extremely dangerous journey that terminated in U.S. detention centers. This human flood took the world by storm as it caught U.S. law enforcement, government leaders, and scholars alike by surprise. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers and facilities were quickly overwhelmed. Temporary care centers for the children were established in other government holdings, such as military bases, and even on privately volunteered property, like churches. CBP agents trained to deal with adult criminals suddenly found themselves changing diapers and caring for very young children. Local communities in California, Arizona, and Texas became battlegrounds for pro- and anti-immigration advocates as some physically tried to block the entry of the migrant children into their towns.

The Central American migration crisis was notable for several reasons. First, it exposed the fault lines running through many southwestern U.S. communities as messages of tolerance and xenophobia were hurled back and forth. For as many Americans who welcomed the children fleeing violence and poverty into their midst and cared for them, there were others who advocated immediate deportation, barricaded roads against buses carrying the young immigrants, and even forced some of the children into slavery. Second, the crisis seemed to take the world completely by surprise. Conditions in

the Northern Triangle countries have been steadily deteriorating for years as a result of increasing gang and drug violence, vicious cycles of poverty, crumbling state infrastructure and institutions, and systemic corruption. Yet no one seemed to foresee the impending wave of migrants and refugees fleeing, in many cases, for their very lives. Third, the crisis was notable for the U.S. government's response. Many leaders in the executive agencies and the presidential administration recognized the need to address the root causes of the migration crisis, and the necessity of cooperating with foreign leaders in a constructive manner to adequately deal with the situation. However, in a mystifying turn of events the United States Congress—elected representatives sworn to follow the best interests of the people—chose instead to focus on competing priorities of drug interdiction and military aid, which have been widely shown to be ineffective in improving conditions in Latin American countries. As a result, the U.S. response to the migration crisis—simply increasing internal capacity to detain and process the children—was more akin to slapping a Band-Aid on a gaping wound than actually fixing the underlying issue.

This thesis will argue that the Central American refugee crisis of 2014 should not have been a surprise. **Chapter I** examines why exactly it was so unexpected when yearly data clearly showed a steady rise of migration flows to the U.S. It recounts the events of 2014, including facts and figures for the origins and numbers of the unaccompanied minors, and provides a brief history and background of the crisis.

Chapter II investigates why the migration flow reached crisis proportions. It first considers the causes of the crisis, including the findings of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report which interviewed about 400

unaccompanied children from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. It then identifies examples of the discourse surrounding crisis migration in the months preceding the 2014 surge, the kind of participants in these discussions, and why none of them noticed or acted on the warning signs.

Chapter III focuses on the response to the migration crisis. It explores the United States government's response, whether it was targeted more towards mitigating the causes or symptoms of the crisis or was even a cohesive effort. **Chapter IV** continues with an examination of the foreign policy implications of the migration crisis. It recounts U.S. efforts to coordinate responses with the governments of Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, and how Congressional decisions—particularly its control of the federal budget—impeded the efficacy of these responses. Finally, it concludes that domestic politics undermined sound foreign policy, the second central argument of this thesis.

Chapter V emphasizes that although the migration crisis may no longer be making front page headlines in the news, it is far from over. Despite all of the previously explained efforts, the number of migrants crossing the U.S. southwestern border is once again rising rapidly. The chapter concludes with potential solutions to ensure that now and in the future, the root causes of migration crises are dealt with once and for all.

CHAPTER I: THE CRISIS

I. History and Background

In 2007, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs justified the Bush Administration's request for funding from Congress to create a new Central American regional security initiative with the following statement:

“We have seen a rapid escalation in the activity of organized crime and narcotics traffickers in the region that is evidenced...by spiraling violence and the movement of additional drugs and resources through Central America.”¹

As early as 2007, there was clearly some awareness in the U.S. leadership that the situation in Central America was deteriorating rapidly.

The region has been plagued with problems for decades. But the issue that eventually rose to become most critical was the fact that the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador could no longer protect their people from criminal networks, whose power was growing rapidly from the business of trafficking illegal drugs, natural resources, and even human beings. As a result, as the rule of law collapsed and any sense of security disintegrated, Central Americans chose to take their chances on the perilous journey to “El Norte.”

The UNHCR has reported a large increase in Salvadorian, Honduran, and Guatemalan children and adults applying for asylum since 2009. The U.S. received the

¹ Cristina Eguizabal, Karise M. Curtis, Matthew C. Ingram, Aaron Korthuis, Eric L. Olson, and Nicholas Phillips, "Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses Are Helping, Hurting, and Can Be Improved," The Wilson Center Latin American Program, December 19, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>.

largest amount of new asylum applications by individuals from the Northern Triangle out of all of the countries of asylum that they fled to, recording 85% of the total new applications in 2012. More adults arriving at the southern U.S. border are citing fear of returning to their home countries than ever before—this figure increased exponentially from 5,369 in 2009 to 36,174 in 2013. About 70 percent of this increase resulted from Salvadorian, Honduran, and Guatemalan migrants.² Asylum requests have simultaneously increased in other countries. Belize, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama also reported that the amount of asylum requests they received from Northern Triangle citizens increased during this time by a combined 432%.³

However, the statistic that renders so incredible the surprise with which the migration crisis was met is the fact that **the number of unaccompanied children migrating to the U.S. from Central America has consistently doubled every year since 2010.**⁴ The United States government noted a large increase of unaccompanied minors apprehended from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras beginning in October 2011. The CBP apprehended 4,059 minors in 2011; 10,433 in 2012; and 21,537 in 2013.⁵ Each figure is over twice the volume of the previous year's total.

² "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 2014, http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/UAC_UNHCR_Children on the Run_Full Report.pdf.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Keeping Unaccompanied Immigrant Children Safe from Violence," MacArthur Foundation, March 12, 2014, <https://www.macfound.org/press/publications/keeping-unaccompanied-immigrant-children-safe-violence/>.

⁵ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection."

NUMBER OF APPREHENSIONS OF ARRIVING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN ²⁶						
Country	FY 2011		FY 2012		FY 2013	
	USBP	OFO	USBP	OFO	USBP	OFO
El Salvador	1,394	58	3,314	123	5,990	230
Guatemala	1,565	43	3,835	80	8,068	194
Honduras	974	25	2,997	94	6,747	308
Mexico ²⁷	11,768	1,232	13,974	1,735	17,240	1,514
All Others	355	361	361	540	788	811
Total	16,056	1,719	24,481	2,572	38,833	3,057

U.S. Border Patrol (USBP); Office of Field Operations (OFO)

II. Events of 2014

Events came to a head in 2014. Throughout the spring and summer, unaccompanied children as well as entire families began flooding the southwestern U.S. border in the highest numbers recorded in recent history. Over 10,000 children were arriving per month during June and July of 2014.⁶ By mid-June, the total number of apprehended minors had far surpassed the previous year's record, reaching a whopping 52,000. About 75 percent of the new arrivals came from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.⁷ In fact, two thirds of unaccompanied children and over 90 percent of family units apprehended since 2012 have originated from these three countries. Unaccompanied children from Mexico, who account for most of the remainder, are exempt from certain

⁶ "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children Statistics FY 2015," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, October 2015, <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2015>.

⁷ Press Release, "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border," Department of Homeland Security, June 2, 2014, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/06/02/statement-secretary-johnson-increased-influx-unaccompanied-immigrant-children-border>.

U.S. legal protections accorded to Central Americans.⁸ These will be discussed in the following section.

⁸ Marc R. Rosenblum and Isabel Ball, "Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America," Migration Policy Institute, January 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/trends-unaccompanied-child-and-family-migration-central-america>.

CHAPTER II: FROM HIGH MIGRATION LEVELS TO CRISIS

PROPORTIONS

I. Causes of the Crisis

Naturally a crisis this large and complex cannot be attributed to a single cause. Rather, it was the result of a confluence of events; both push and pull factors provided impetus for the migration surge. First of all, two pieces of legislation are often targeted as causal factors. The first of these is the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008. It was one of President George W. Bush's final pieces of legislation, and was intended to fight sex trafficking. Sponsored by a bipartisan group of policy-makers and evangelical Christian groups, the fairly uncontroversial bill was quietly enacted at the beginning of President Obama's term. The bill was intended to protect unaccompanied children entering the U.S. from countries other than Mexico and Canada. These minors cannot be immediately deported back to their home countries, but must instead receive an immigration court hearing and legal counsel in the United States. They must also be turned over to the care of the Department of Health and Human Services with the mandate to put them "in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interest of the child" and to "explore reuniting those children with family members."⁹

The Administration under President Obama blamed this law for its slow reaction to the migration crisis, claiming that since the children cannot be immediately deported, U.S. capacity to handle the influx was extremely limited.¹⁰ However, this connection seems tenuous at best, as the legislation went into effect between 2008 and 2009. It seems

⁹ Hulse, Carl. "Immigrant Surge Rooted in Law to Curb Child Trafficking." *The New York Times*. July 7, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/08/us/immigrant-surge-rooted-in-law-to-curb-child-trafficking.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

unlikely that any negative repercussions would just barely start taking effect in 2014. It seems much more likely that the Democratic Obama administration's blaming of the law enacted by a Republican presidency was a calculated appeal to partisan battle lines, a convenient scape-goat for a crisis that many (perhaps rightfully) thought should have been avoided.

On the flip side of the coin, many Republicans blame President Obama for the crisis. They claim that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which allows some undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children to remain in the country without being deported, provided a strong incentive for illegal immigration. Conservatives called for legislative changes to facilitate easier and speedier deportation of apprehended children and accused the Administration of placing false blame on the Bush law in an effort to divert responsibility from itself. Republican Representative Jeff Fortenberry defended the 2008 legislation with the assertion that the crisis resulted from multiple factors, including the "exploitation of [U.S.] laws, the ungoverned space in Central America, as well as the desperate poverty faced by those deciding to cross," and that "with all these factors in mind, it's hard to think that today's situation at the border can be directly attributed to a law that's been in effect now for six years."¹¹ Given these pointed partisan jabs, it is at least unclear and at most unlikely that either piece of legislation played a direct role in spurring the migration surge.

This work turns not to an academic examination of the nature of the surge. In order to fully understand the migration crisis, it is necessary to understand **crisis migration**. The term is not actually defined in international law. As a fairly new

¹¹ Hulse.

introduction to the international policy-making establishment, its utility and merit remain under debate. Proponents of the term argue that it is a far more inclusive way to describe movement patterns than current definitions allow for, as they place migration within a limited framework of “forced” versus “voluntary.”¹² Instead, “crisis migration” encompasses “movement either within or across national borders, temporary or permanent, or *in anticipation of future emergencies.*”¹³ Crucially, the term includes individuals fleeing both acute crises and slow-onset factors.¹⁴ This is important for any examination of Central American migration, where conditions of extreme poverty and violence can simmer for years before finally pushing people to migrate.

A migration crisis falls under the broader classification of a humanitarian crisis, and is caused by “events or processes either acute or slow-onset that are beyond the coping capacity of individuals, households, communities and states.”¹⁵ These include:

- “Extreme natural hazards that cause extensive destruction of lives and infrastructure;
- Slow onset environmental degradation, such as drought and desertification, which undermines livelihoods and may trigger famine;
- Man-made environmental disasters, such as nuclear accidents;
- **Communal violence, civil strife and political instability that do not rise to the level of armed conflict but nonetheless render communities unsafe;** and

¹² Jane McAdam, "The Concept of Crisis Migration," *Forced Migration Review*, no. 45 (February 2014): 10, <http://www.fmreview.org/crisis/mcadam>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

- Global pandemics that cause high levels of mortality and morbidity, or pose risks for the spread of disease.”¹⁶

Although slow-onset disasters are used here primarily to mean environmental disasters, they also apply to the slow degradation of quality of life due to violence and poverty that is prevalent throughout Central America.

The concept of crisis migration is especially important in the context of policy-making, so leaders can design speedy and effective responses. However, if they do not fully understand the underlying causes of the crisis, it is difficult to design an adequate response. Crisis migration encapsulates these underlying causes, which include an interconnected system of environmental, economic, social, and political factors. It is important to distinguish that sometimes these factors may be *triggered* by a singular occurrence, but not *caused* by it. Finally, some populations are more vulnerable to this type of displacement as a result of systemic inequalities and societal disadvantages.¹⁷ In this situation, the vulnerable group is the Central American children caught in a cycle of violence, poverty, lack of opportunity, and constant physical danger.

A central component to crisis migration is the concept of “**tipping points.**” These can be triggered either by specific events or by structural factors like inequality, corruption, or lack of opportunity. When an individual’s tipping point is reached—by overloading one or several of a variety of stress factors—they will be spurred to migrate. Essentially, this is the point at which leaving is seen as a better option than staying put.

¹⁶ "Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report," John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, February 14, 2013, https://www.macfound.org/media/files/Crisis_Migration_Thematic_Report_May_2013.pdf.

¹⁷ McAdam.

Tipping points are an integral aspect of any migration crisis, regardless of its specific causes.¹⁸

This is important for policy-makers to understand because crises resulting from structural issues require interventions with longer timeframes, partnerships between different institutions, and sustainable systems of funding. Since legal categories and definitions of migration determine which legal or humanitarian resources an individual may be eligible for, it is crucial that they be as accurate and fitting as possible to the situation at hand.¹⁹ Before the events of 2014, the concept of crisis migration was known outside of academic circles, but not to such a degree that it was integrated into any policies or legal frameworks, and little came of it in practical terms.²⁰

Given that theories and ideas such as these are often the basis of international laws and policy, they must be fully understood. Over the years, discussions among policy-makers and institutions have revealed that a “crisis” is primarily understood as a specific situation resulting directly from a singular emergency or event. However, this definition overlooks the weaknesses already inherent in a system, focusing attention on a specific event rather than on a comprehensive outlook. As a result, traditional development programs, such as initiatives to alleviate poverty, with pre-existing institutional and legal support are often abandoned in favor of emergency responses. However, as these responses are generally reactionary and piece-meal rather than comprehensive and structurally focused, they may alleviate the symptoms of a crisis but

¹⁸ McAdam.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

not its causes.²¹ This tendency can be seen in the case of both the 2014 Central American migration crisis, which will be discussed in the following chapter, and the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. In the latter example, conflicts arose between and within the European Union and its member states, as some provided more resources and accepted more refugees than others. However, none of them sought to address the root cause—the ongoing civil war in Syria and general regional instability in many parts of the Middle East and Africa.

The causal factors of migration are increasingly interconnected and often reinforce each other. Migration resulting from acute crises and movement as a result of structural issues often combine forces. “Mixed migration flows” are composed of migrants with many different motivations, rendering root causes much more challenging to pinpoint, much less address. These flows include “refugees, internally displaced persons, environmental migrants, third-country nationals stranded in conflict zones, and trafficked persons.”²² The vast majority are extremely vulnerable—like unaccompanied children—and should be eligible for international protection. However, international laws as they currently stand often exclude many of these groups from the legal protections afforded by official refugee status. Experts believe that migration flows will only become more mixed in the future, presenting ever more complex challenges for governments and private organizations alike.²³

That is why it is extremely important to reexamine the legal classifications that currently exist for migrants. This is what largely determines the framework used by

²¹ McAdam.

²² “Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report.”

²³ Ibid.

government leaders to determine policy and responses. Current standards are mainly based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, which sets forth the qualifications for receiving international refugee status and the rights of qualifying individuals. A “Convention Refugee” is an individual “outside the borders of his or her country of origin and unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on one of five grounds: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.”²⁴ The Convention also determines the responsibilities of its signatory countries to provide for refugees. Refugees whose lives or freedom would be threatened in their home country based on one of the five grounds of persecution may not be returned.

However, the official definition does not recognize several categories of migrants—most relevant to this situation, individuals fleeing **generalized conflict** do not qualify for refugee status.²⁵ This is extremely problematic, as the latter was and remains one of the primary motivating factors for Central Americans fleeing to the United States. Legally, the individuals cannot claim refugee status based on the standards established by the Convention, but practically, they have no other recourse. They are reacting to “situations in which there is a widespread threat to life, physical safety, health or basic subsistence that is beyond the coping capacity of individuals and communities in which they reside.”²⁶

This condition has no official recognition, but some scholars have termed it “survival migration.” This encompasses individuals “outside their country of origin

²⁴ “Crisis Migration Convening Report.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ James Milner, "Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement/Humanitarian Crises and Migration: Causes, Consequences and Responses/Crisis and Migration: Critical Perspectives," *Refuge* (0229-5113) 31, no. 2 (July 2015): 101, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=113187478&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution.”²⁷ It is an attempt to break out of the rigid confines of the current international system of classification for refugees and provide protection to a much broader proportion of migrating populations. This effort is not limited either to international refugee law or to international human rights law, but draws on the spirit and letter of both.²⁸

However, these efforts are often hindered by domestic politics, which determines the amount of asylum applications a country grants. Research on the topic of survival migration has found that changing international legal classifications and norms alone is not sufficient to motivate states to accept a larger amount of migrants. Instead, there must be domestic impetus to do so. This usually happens only when it is in the interests of local elites—a rare occurrence indeed.²⁹

The 2014 migration crisis drew closer international attention to Central America’s abundant, chronic problems. While drug trafficking is most often given sole responsibility for the recent increases in violence and subsequent migration, it is vital to recognize the many other important contributing factors. Drug trafficking is certainly a large part of the problem, causing especially high rates of violence in territory controlled or fought over by drug cartels, but it does not fully explain the situation.³⁰

The Washington, D.C. branch of the UNHCR conducted a study of the migration surge’s causal factors at the end of 2014, as the initial wave of unaccompanied children

²⁷ Milner.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Cristina Eguizabal, Karise M. Curtis, Matthew C. Ingram, Aaron Korthuis, Eric L. Olson, and Nicholas Phillips, "Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses Are Helping, Hurting, and Can Be Improved," The Wilson Center Latin American Program, December 19, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>.

was subsiding. It interviewed 404 of the minors, including about 100 each from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico, who arrived in the U.S. after October 2011. From their responses, researchers pieced together the principal motivating factors of the migration crisis.³¹

According to the interviews, the primary factors driving the children to migrate were “some of the world’s highest homicide rates, rampant extortion, communities controlled by youth gangs, domestic violence, impunity for most crimes, economic despair, and lack of opportunity,” as well as the hope of reuniting with relatives in the United States.³² In the process, researchers discovered that the children had primarily suffered from two main patterns of violence. The first was violence by “organized, armed criminal actors,” including drug cartels, street gangs, and the state itself; this will be referred to as societal violence. The second was violence experienced in the home, and will be referred to as domestic violence.³³ Domestic abuse remains at very high levels. Prolonged instances of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse in the home are common reasons for flight. Many women and girls left after initially seeking state protection, but never receiving it.³⁴ Forty-eight percent of the children said that they themselves had been victims of the increasing levels of violence in their home countries. Twenty-two percent said that they had experienced domestic violence, while eleven

³¹ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 2014, http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/UAC_UNHCR_Children on the Run_Full Report.pdf.

³² Eguizabal, Curtis, Ingram, Korthuis, Olson, and Phillips.

³³ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection."

³⁴ Marc R. Rosenblum and Isabel Ball, "Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America," Migration Policy Institute, January 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/trends-unaccompanied-child-and-family-migration-central-america>.

percent discussed “having suffered or being in fear of both violence in society and abuse in the home.”³⁵

II. Country Studies

The following sections further break down these issues by country: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The results from UNHCR interviews with Mexican children are omitted, as this paper seeks to focus on trends from the Northern Triangle countries.

a. El Salvador

In El Salvador, a truce between the country’s most violent gangs led to a sharp decrease in homicides between 2012 and 2013. However, the violence intensified once more when the truce fell apart in 2014—the year the crisis occurred. The country’s homicide count climbed until in August 2015, it reached its highest number since the country’s civil war ended in 1992, setting El Salvador on track to surpass Honduras as the world’s most dangerous peacetime country.³⁶ The UNHCR interviewed 104 children from El Salvador. Sixty-six percent cited societal violence as their primary motivation for migrating, 21 percent cited domestic violence, and 15 percent cited both. Seven percent indicated that deprivation was a factor. Only one child indicated that U.S. legislation was a motivating factor.³⁷ In the case of El Salvador, it would seem that specific pieces of legislation had no effect on migration, despite U.S. partisan claims. Interestingly, 28 percent of the children did not indicate any form of violence as a motivating factor.³⁸

³⁵ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection."

³⁶ Rosenblum and Ball.

³⁷ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection."

³⁸ Ibid.

This could indicate that they are motivated by other factors, such as seeing others around them leave.

The Salvadorian children mainly suffered from violence and threats from gangs. The children reported daily experiences including extortion, seeing people murdered, and receiving threats to themselves and their loved ones. Children who had not experienced violence themselves reported fearing it with “an air of inevitability.”³⁹ The girls shared fears of sexual violence.⁴⁰

b. Guatemala

According to the UNHCR report, the three primary motivators for Guatemalan children to migrate were deprivation (reported by 29%), domestic violence (23%), and societal violence (20%). Five percent said that they had experienced both domestic and societal violence. Almost half of the children interviewed (48%) identified as indigenous, yet they represented a disproportionately high number of those who had experienced deprivation, domestic violence, and societal violence: 55%, 30%, and 25% of the totals respectively. Sixty-two percent did not include violence as a motivating factor. Eighty-four percent cited pull factors such as the hope of meeting relatives, finding better employment and educational opportunities, or being able to send aid back to their families in Guatemala.⁴¹

These figures demonstrate the large variation in motivating factors for children who participated in the migration surge, as well as the danger in lumping different nationalities and populations together. In El Salvador, the largest causal factor was

³⁹ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

experience or fear of violence or harm, while in Guatemala, the “safest” of the three countries, the children were primarily motivated by other issues such as deprivation and lack of opportunity. However, the number of children entering the U.S. from each country in 2014 was roughly equal, despite very different motivations. The CBP apprehended 17,057 Guatemalan children compared to 16,404 Salvadoran children and 18,244 Honduran children. The number of unaccompanied child migrants surged in all three countries, although Guatemala experienced the smallest surge of the three (see the CBP chart below).⁴² Additionally, certain groups, like the indigenous communities, are more vulnerable than others. Analysts and policy-makers must be careful to distinguish between these things, as different ills cannot be treated the same way. Policies that work for one country or region will not necessarily be successful in another.

Unaccompanied Alien Children Encountered by Fiscal Year

Fiscal Years 2009-2013; Fiscal Year 2014 through September 30

Country	Fiscal Year 2009	Fiscal Year 2010	Fiscal Year 2011	Fiscal Year 2012	Fiscal Year 2013	Fiscal Year 2014
El Salvador	1,221	1,910	1,394	3,314	5,990	16,404
Guatemala	1,115	1,517	1,565	3,835	8,068	17,057
Honduras	968	1,017	974	2,997	6,747	18,244
Mexico	16,114	13,724	11,768	13,974	17,240	15,634

c. Honduras

The situation in Honduras lies somewhere between those of its two neighbors.

Forty-four percent of the 98 Honduran children interviewed said they had been victims of

⁴² "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children FY 2014," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, October 2014, <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2014>.

or were threatened with societal violence. Twenty-four percent had suffered domestic violence, and eleven percent had suffered both societal and domestic violence. Forty-three percent did not mention violence as a motivating factor, and 21 percent reported experiencing deprivation. Like many of the Guatemalan children, 80 percent of the Honduran children cited pull factors including reuniting with family members in the U.S., greater employment or educational opportunities, and being able to send aid to their families in Honduras. However, very few gave one of these as the only reason.⁴³ These results accentuate the mixture of factors involved in the creation of the migration crisis.

Despite some major differences, the three Northern Triangle countries share many commonalities. Gangs often compete for territory in local communities, leading to increased levels of violence, extortion, kidnapping, and drug sales. They utilize threats of violence and sexual assault to maintain control of communities. Children are often left to survive on their own as a result of rampant domestic violence, sexual abuse, and broken families. In this situation, they may perceive joining a gang to be their safest option or the only way to ensure their own survival. Additionally, important external factors such as weak law enforcement capacity, institutional weakness, pervasive corruption, and criminal organizations' vast influence over the state have led to extraordinarily high impunity for crime; 95 percent or more of all crimes go unsolved. There are extremely few disincentives for criminal activity, the public has little or no confidence in law enforcement agents, and many crimes are not even reported.⁴⁴ The rule of law has almost completely eroded.

⁴³ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection."

⁴⁴ Eguizabal, Curtis, Ingram, Korthuis, Olson, and Phillips.

III. Who Is This an Issue For?

Given the abundance of information available on increasing violence and deteriorating conditions in the Northern Triangle, it is perplexing that no one foresaw an impending surge in migration. It begs the question: who was this an issue for (especially in the U.S. leadership and policy-making establishment)? Were the right people just not aware of or heeding the warning signs—rising levels of violence and consistent yearly increases in migration? (The crisis tipping point is explained in Chapter IV.)

There seems to have been some discussion of the issue in academic and research circles. The Georgetown University Institute for the Study of International Migration and the John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Global Migration Initiative held a crisis migration convention in February 2013. Experts and policy-makers from a range of fields and international organizations gathered to investigate crisis migration and find ways to meet the challenges it poses to governments.⁴⁵ The initiative sought to address the fact that migration is one of the least well understood and most poorly governed aspects of globalization. While there are fairly established international organizations in fields like environment and trade, the international community is just beginning to understand and address migration as a global policy issue.⁴⁶

All of the participants agreed that existing norms and strategies to protect those engaged in crisis migration are lacking. The current legal system does not adequately provide for the diverse range of needs in migrating populations. Crisis migration is also operationally challenging because it requires close cooperation among a

⁴⁵ “Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report.”

⁴⁶ “Global Migration.” MacArthur Foundation. Fall 2008.

<https://www.macfound.org/press/publications/global-migration/>.

variety of agencies and actors. Responsibilities must be divided among many institutions. Although all migrants fall under the protection of international human rights law in principle, only a relatively small amount qualify for formal international protection, while the vast majority go without.⁴⁷

IV. Decision Not to Take Action

These conclusions show that there was some awareness of the shortcomings and potential pitfalls in the current international system for dealing with crisis migration and refugees, and it was evidently not limited to scholars, as the convention was also attended by representatives from the U.S. and international policy-making establishments.

However, this understanding seems not to have translated into practice, as no substantive change in norms or laws resulted from this or any other such meetings that occurred around this time. It is not clear why exactly this was the case. It may have had something to do with the fact that for whatever reason, the relevant actors did not perceive the problem as urgent. A report from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that the 2014 migration crisis had no impact on public concern about immigration, which has steadily decreased over the last 20 years. Even after the crisis, the percentage of the public who perceived the high levels of immigrants and refugees arriving in the U.S. as a “critical threat” remained at an all-time low.⁴⁸ The same study found that the low importance respondents placed on “controlling and reducing illegal immigration” was also unchanged as a result of the crisis.⁴⁹ Since the domestic population does not view

⁴⁷ “Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report.”

⁴⁸ “Assessing Public Opinion on Immigration.” MacArthur Foundation. October 28, 2014. <https://www.macfound.org/press/publications/assessing-public-opinion-immigration/#sthash.TOEUQCb0.dpuf>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

migration as an important issue, policy-makers are at best disincentivized to address it, and at worst actively disinclined to devote resources and attention to what may turn out to be an unpopular cause.

Tellingly, **nearly all of the participants at the Crisis Migration Convention opposed the creation of new legal systems to protect migrants, citing states' reluctance to adopt binding resolutions like treaties and conventions.** They concluded that “soft law” mechanisms like guiding principles have a greater potential to change migration laws, but require much more time to come to fruition. Participants also agreed to “engage in strategic planning for pragmatic solutions that will improve international cooperation, coordination, and burden sharing among state actors and international entities.”⁵⁰ In practice, this boils down to much talking and little or no concrete action. While it is an admirable goal, and certainly needs further development, it meant that the migration crisis during the summer of 2014 caught U.S. leadership, policy-makers, and agencies completely unprepared and unequipped to deal with the influx.

⁵⁰ “Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report.”

CHAPTER III: RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

I. U.S. Response

As the incoming wave of unaccompanied children grew, the UNHCR in Washington as well as the U.S. government declared that their primary concern in responding to the crisis was to ensure the well-being of the children, and allocated resources for this purpose.⁵¹ U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson emphasized the humanitarian nature of the crisis, in addition to its implications for national security. He described the “large numbers of children, without their parents, who have arrived at [the southwest U.S.-Mexico] border—hungry, thirsty, exhausted, scared, and vulnerable,” and declared that the children’s treatment was “a reflection of [U.S.] laws and... values.”⁵²

Addressing the rising flow of unaccompanied children required a coordinated and sustained response from the entire U.S. government. President Obama formed a Unified Coordination Group (UCG) from multiple executive agencies to respond to the crisis. The UCG was tasked with leading and coordinating a unified federal response among all of the executive agencies, mobilizing assets from the entire government in accordance with the Homeland Security Act of 2002. More than 140 employees from across the interagency participated in the initiative. The CBP was mainly responsible for ensuring border security throughout the crisis while simultaneously coordinating with U.S.

⁵¹ "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 2014, [http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/UAC_UNHCR_Children on the Run_Full Report.pdf](http://www.unhcrwashington.org/sites/default/files/UAC_UNHCR_Children%20on%20the%20Run_Full%20Report.pdf).

⁵² Press Release. "Written Testimony of FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate, CBP Commissioner Gil Kerlikowske, and ICE Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Thomas Winkowski for a Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Hearing Titled “Challenges at the Border: Examining the Causes, Consequences, and Responses to the Rise in Apprehensions at the Southern Border”." Department of Homeland Security. July 9, 2014. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/07/09/written-testimony-fema-cbp-and-ice-senate-committee-homeland-security-and>.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to ensure that the children were adequately cared for while in temporary Department of Homeland Security (DHS) custody. DHS coordinated response efforts among the various agencies, including the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, Defense, and Justice as well as the General Services Administration, with the goals of responding in a timely fashion to the current crisis and of ultimately addressing the root causes behind the crisis with broader, long-term reforms.⁵³

The Administration undertook a three-pronged strategy to deal with the crisis. First, it sought to speed up processing of the unaccompanied children. Second, it aimed to stem the tide of migrants crossing the border. Third, it emphasized the need to accomplish this “in a manner consistent with our laws and values as Americans.”⁵⁴ It designated a series of measures to be taken to achieve those aims. These can be broken into two categories: those that fell under the scope of a domestic response, which are discussed below, and those which required international coordination and foreign policy engagement, which will be examined in the following chapter.

II. Domestic Response

First, Secretary Johnson indicated that both the CBP and ICE were overwhelmed in their capacity to handle the situation alone. Additional resources were pulled from across the entire Department and the inter-agency, including equipment, facilities, and manpower. To increase the number of functioning processing facilities, DHS transferred

⁵³ Press Release, "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border," Department of Homeland Security, June 2, 2014, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/06/02/statement-secretary-johnson-increased-influx-unaccompanied-immigrant-children-border>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

some of the children crossing the Texas border to its centers in other areas like Nogales, Arizona before transferring them to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which had the primary responsibility of caring for the children in DHS custody. DHS also established other temporary facilities, such as one for adults with children on the Artesia, New Mexico campus of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. Additional processing centers were arranged in cooperation with other federal agencies to handle the rising number of migrants in the Rio Grande Valley sector. The Department of Defense (DoD) designated portions of Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, as well as of its facilities in Oklahoma and California, for this purpose.⁵⁵ This added capacity allowed DHS to process and house the children in a more timely fashion.

In addition to increasing the amount of holding facilities in operation, other steps were taken to increase federal capacity to deal with the influx. DHS acquired more transportation resources. The Coast Guard loaned air vehicles such as helicopters and airplanes, and ICE leased extra aircraft. Crucially, more personnel were brought onboard. The Department of Justice (DOJ) assigned additional immigration judges to work on the growing amount of cases in video teleconferences. The CBP assigned 115 more agents from sectors relatively unaffected by the crisis to support the overwhelmed agents in the Rio Grande Valley. Simultaneously, DHS and HHS hired more Spanish-speaking staff to manage the children's cases, answer calls from the children's parents or guardians, operate a "Parent Hotline," track shelter bed capacity, and facilitate shelter designations. They expedited background checks for sponsors of the children, into whose custody they

⁵⁵ "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border."

were released until their court hearing, and sought to integrate CBP and HHS information sharing systems.⁵⁶

Federal agencies also turned to help from outside the government to deal with the crisis. Voluntary and faith-based organizations like the American Red Cross coordinated with FEMA's National Response Coordination Center to provide blankets and other supplies. They helped arrange calls from the detained children to their relatives in the U.S. and Central America. Non-profit groups and federal grantees also provided additional shelter for the unaccompanied children.⁵⁷

As part of its commitment to ensuring the migrant children's health and safety, DHS and HHS implemented public health examinations in all of the detention facilities to screen for diseases and other threats to public health. They also provided the children with proper nutrition and hygiene by giving them regular meals, drinks, and snacks. The children were never left unsupervised, and those who required medical care received it. Meanwhile, DHS continued its emphasis on treating all individuals with dignity and respect.⁵⁸

Homeland Security Secretary Johnson also spearheaded a Southern Border and Approaches Planning Campaign with the goal of designing a strategic framework to increase U.S. southern border security. The plan designated specific, quantitative goals to improve information sharing, technological accuracy, and agency coordination. It also proposed measures to address region-specific challenges, especially within the Rio Grande Valley. In the process, the inter-agency reaffirmed its commitment to work

⁵⁶ "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

closely with Congress on the problem by providing regular situational briefs and even visits to the facilities where the children were held.⁵⁹

Finally, the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice poured additional resources into fighting the human trafficking networks that not only facilitated illegal immigration across the southern U.S. border, but also traumatized and exploited many of the children. DHS relocated sixty additional criminal investigators and staff members to Texas in order to investigate, prosecute, and break up the organizations facilitating the migration surge. A May 2014 ICE operation resulted in the arrest of 163 smugglers and dismantlement of their financial support systems. The federal agencies emphasized their continuing cooperation with the governments of Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to eradicate transnational human trafficking organizations.⁶⁰

III. Mitigating Causes or Symptoms?

All of these efforts combined to reduce the number of unaccompanied minors entering DHS custody by the end of 2014. However, with the possible exception of the last, all of these initiatives merely served to mitigate the symptoms of the crisis. Its underlying causes—systemic violence, poverty, and lack of opportunity in the migrants' home countries—were left almost entirely unaddressed and unaffected. The children were being processed more rapidly through the U.S. federal system only to be dropped right back into the hellish situation from which they originally fled. The United States government did coordinate some efforts to contain the situation with foreign governments, but due to certain constraints, its foreign policy achieved little beyond

⁵⁹ "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border."

⁶⁰ Ibid.

further superficial and short-term successes. This will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV: FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS

I. Coordination with Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala

The United States response to the 2014 migration crisis contained an international component as well. The U.S. undertook extensive coordination efforts with the Guatemalan, Honduran, Salvadorian, and Mexican governments to stem the flow of unaccompanied children streaming into the Rio Grande Valley. These efforts were targeted at increasing border security, addressing the underlying causes of the crisis in the Northern Triangle countries, and increasing the pace of deportations. Meetings occurred at the highest levels of government in all of the countries. President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry met with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, while Vice President Biden conferred with the presidents of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala in the latter country. At the meeting, Biden unveiled several new assistance programs to the region. First, Central American governments would receive an additional \$9.6 million in aid for the reintegration of the children sent back to their home countries. Second, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would receive \$40 million to expand its program in Guatemala aimed at improving security in the country. Interestingly, this is the country in which security concerns played the least role in motivating unaccompanied children to migrate. Neither El Salvador nor Honduras received individual commensurate increases in aid. Instead, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) was allotted \$161.5 million more for regional efforts to increase security and good governance.⁶¹ This program, the cornerstone of U.S.

⁶¹ Press Release, "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border," Department of Homeland Security, June 2, 2014, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2014/06/02/statement-secretary-johnson-increased-influx-unaccompanied-immigrant-children-border>.

security and development policy in Central America, has important ramifications and will be discussed further in the next section.

The U.S. led several more actions in conjunction with the Central American governments to deal with the surge. Spanish-language American public affairs efforts increased via radio, print, and TV in order to educate Central American citizens on the extreme dangers inherent in the journey from the Northern Triangle to the U.S., especially for unaccompanied children.⁶² Most of the children depend on human trafficking organizations to smuggle them into the United States. Tragically, they are often abused and preyed upon by these groups. This is in addition to the physical dangers of the daunting trek, which includes long stretches through the unforgiving desert heat, extreme risk of dehydration, and exhaustion.

Media outreach also focused on debunking misconceptions about the benefits available from immigrating to the U.S., especially surrounding the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy, allegedly circulated by smuggling groups to attract more clients. U.S. embassies in the countries of origin collaborated with the CBP to design materials tailored to local populations. Secretary Johnson addressed the unaccompanied children's parents, emphasizing the lack of "free passes or 'permisos' at the other end" of the journey.⁶³ However, as the UNHCR interviews with the Central American children reveal, only a very small percentage cite these laws as a motivation—either primary or

⁶² "Statement by Secretary Johnson on Increased Influx of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children at the Border."

⁶³ Ibid.

tangential—for migration. Therefore, the significance or impact of these efforts is doubtful.

However, perhaps even more critical in slowing the influx of children from Central America were the actions the U.S. coordinated with its southern neighbor. Mexico played a vital role in the months following the height of the crisis in the summer of 2014. The country increased the number of law enforcement officers stationed along its borders as part of a new Southern Border Program,⁶⁴ making it more difficult for migrants to illegally ride freight trains from the south to the north; this is the most common method of transportation for unaccompanied children to cross Mexico on the way from the Northern Triangle to the United States.⁶⁵ While U.S. border officials detained around 70,400 Central American migrants between October 2014 and April 2015, Mexico detained almost 93,000—nearly twice the amount from the same period the previous year (up from 49,800). On the other hand, the U.S. apprehended less than half the amount of migrants that it had the previous year, down from 162,700.⁶⁶ Mexico apprehended a greater proportion of Central American migrants crossing its southern border, which decreased the amount heading northward and eased the pressure on the United States. However, this has led to fewer Central American migrants with credible bases for applying for asylum being afforded the chance to do so. The Mexican

⁶⁴ Marc R. Rosenblum and Isabel Ball, "Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America," Migration Policy Institute, January 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/trends-unaccompanied-child-and-family-migration-central-america>.

⁶⁵ The Editorial Board, "Central America's Unresolved Migrant Crisis," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/16/opinion/central-americas-unresolved-migrant-crisis.html>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

government has a long, convoluted process for asylum applications. During the first nine months of 2014, it approved a mere 16 percent of claims filed by Central Americans.⁶⁷

These figures clearly demonstrate that the number of migrants heading north from Central America isn't really decreasing. Scores of people are still fleeing terrible conditions, but are now being halted in Mexico before they have a chance to reach the United States. It is still critical that the cycles of violence and poverty spurring migration are broken. However, although Mexican efforts have provided relief for overwhelmed U.S. agencies and facilities, they have unfortunately also served to "mask the sense of urgency that...should be [felt] here in the United States about Central America's humanitarian crisis."⁶⁸ This is an insidious problem with extremely far-reaching implications. Policy-makers tend to act only when there is substantial domestic pressure to do so. Without that pressure, there is less incentive to spend potentially billions of dollars on aid to Central America, expenses that will ultimately have to be justified to the American people. The ability to determine the federal budget is one of Congress's most powerful tools—one that is prone to strong influence from U.S. domestic sentiment. This can be dangerous when public attention shifts from critical issues like the ongoing crisis in Central America. It can also lead to misaligned priorities in the budget. This is discussed in the following section.

II. The Central American Regional Security Initiative

U.S. spending on foreign aid is generally channeled through individual federal agencies. Among the most prominent are the Department of State and the Department of Defense. Funding for the Department of State is lumped together with spending for

⁶⁷ The Editorial Board.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

“Other International Programs,” most notably including USAID, the program through which most U.S. development programs are coordinated. This is important because in the case of Central America, foreign aid is generally channeled towards two policy objectives: increasing development, stability, and opportunity in the region; or increasing security, primarily through efforts to halt illegal drug trafficking. The former is handled largely by the State Department and USAID, the latter by the Department of Defense.

Therefore, it is fair to conclude that whichever agency receives the most funding from Congress represents the policy with the highest priority. For the past decade, the federal budget has overwhelmingly favored defense spending. The table below compares the amount of discretionary funding in the federal budget in for the Department of State and USAID against the that figure for the Department of Defense from FY 2010 to FY 2014, the year of the crisis.

Fiscal Year	Federal Budget for the Department of State and Other International Programs (in billions)	Federal Budget for the Department of Defense (in billions)
2010	\$49.3	\$530.8
2011	\$51.4	\$549.1
2012	\$50.9	\$553.0
2013	\$51.6	\$525.4
2014	\$40.3	\$495.6

All data sourced from the Office of Management and Budget at whitehouse.gov.

The Defense Department is consistently given over ten times more funding than the State Department and USAID combined. This shows a clear policy preference for military spending over efforts to reduce poverty and “promote free, peaceful, and self-

reliant societies with effective, legitimate governments.”⁶⁹ Nowhere is this more readily apparent than in Latin America, whose most prominent bilateral programs with the United States are security initiatives—all of which are primarily aimed at stopping illegal narcotics trafficking. Mexico has the Mérida Initiative, South America had Plan Colombia, and Central America has CARSI (the Central America Regional Security Initiative).

Although CARSI does contain programmatic elements intended to address issues of development and social well-being, its main target is the elimination of the drug trade and its resulting violence. This came about as Central America steadily became a more important stop for drug traffickers bringing their product from South America to the United States. In 2013, the Department of State estimated that more than 80 percent of the total amount of cocaine smuggled to the U.S. was trafficked via the Northern Triangle. Additionally, up to 87 percent of U.S.-bound flights carrying cocaine from South America stop in Honduras.⁷⁰

Although Mexico has traditionally been the most important passage for drug trafficking, Central America is steadily overtaking it. The amounts of cocaine confiscated in Central America and Mexico between 2000 and 2005 were roughly equal.⁷¹ This shift is largely the result of the so-called “War on Drugs” led by the U.S. in Mexico, which was provided with arms, experts, and funding to combat narcotics trafficking. Under the

⁶⁹ "Mission, Vision and Values," USAID, January 7, 2016, <https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/mission-vision-values>.

⁷⁰ Cristina Eguizabal, Karise M. Curtis, Matthew C. Ingram, Aaron Korthuis, Eric L. Olson, and Nicholas Phillips, "Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses Are Helping, Hurting, and Can Be Improved," The Wilson Center Latin American Program, December 19, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

bellicose policies of Mexican President Vicente Fox, the war with Mexico's drug cartels ratcheted up immensely. As violence exploded throughout the country, cartels and trafficking routes were pushed southward, moving to more fertile territory in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador until by 2011, officials seized over 13 times more cocaine in Central America than in Mexico.⁷² Critically, **this is the year that migration flows to the U.S. began doubling.**

In response to the Northern Triangle countries' growing importance in the drug trade, in 2007 the Bush Administration requested \$550 million for a security program called the Mérida Initiative. It was intended to fight drug trafficking, organized crime, and the resulting violence. It would also reform the judicial system, build democratic institutions, fight corruption, strengthen the rule of law, and increase maritime security. The portion of the program focused on Central America eventually separated from the Mérida Initiative to become CARSI in 2010.⁷³

The U.S. Department of State notes that CARSI is based on five specific goals that shape its assistance programs to the participating countries of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. These are to:

- “1. Create safe streets for the citizens of the region;
2. Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America;
3. Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments;

⁷² Eguizabal, Curtis, Ingram, Korthuis, Olson, and Phillips.

⁷³ Ibid.

4. Re-establish effective state presence, services and security in communities at risk; and

5. Foster enhanced levels coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region, other international partners, and donors to combat regional security threats.”⁷⁴

To accomplish this, U.S. agencies work with their Latin American counterparts to reinforce law enforcement capabilities, to prevent crime and violence in communities by focusing outreach efforts on vulnerable youth populations, and most especially to increase drug interdiction.⁷⁵

A few CARSI programs have been successful. In some target areas, programs to reduce crime in communities have increased citizens’ feelings of safety and confidence in local police, while the amount of reported crime has decreased. However, many other aspects of the program suffer from severe weaknesses—such as lack of host government commitment or lack of sustainability—and sheer ineffectiveness. **CARSI is simply not a comprehensive strategy.** Its policies sometimes contradict each other; some agencies involved prioritize a traditional focus on combatting the international narcotics trade and increasing the rule of law, while others emphasize eliminating crime in communities. These differing ideas often work against each other, ultimately undermining the program’s solid goals. Overall, current U.S. assistance mainly focuses on increasing government institutions’ operational capacity instead of addressing the systemic causes of violence, such as generalized corruption and impunity for criminals. Even after years of

⁷⁴ "The Central America Regional Security Initiative: A Shared Partnership," U.S. Department of State, March 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2014/223804.htm>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

security assistance, Central America continues to have soaring homicide rates, abysmally low criminal conviction rates, and extremely overcrowded prisons. Ultimately, CARSI has had extremely limited success in reducing the overall levels of crime and violence that are motivating Central Americans to flee to the United States.⁷⁶

Exacerbating the situation is the fact that CARSI is usually not subject to comprehensive evaluations, especially in the areas of institutional strengthening and drug interdiction—its largest components. Instead, the program’s efficacy is determined by the amount of drug seizures, arrests, and individuals trained. But there is little evidence that these measures have actually reduced rates of violence and crime or strengthened countries’ institutions.⁷⁷ It is doubtful that CARSI as it currently exists is suited to solve the problems suffered by Central America, especially the Northern Triangle countries. All too often, policies like CARSI are based on flawed premises heavily influenced by domestic priorities, in this case drug interdiction and military spending. Not only has this not improved the situation in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, but it may have even directly spurred the increase in migration to the United States.

III. Domestic Politics Undermine Good Foreign Policy

Despite clear and abundant evidence that it is necessary, U.S. politicians continue to demonstrate little interest in dedicating sufficient resources to appropriately address the underlying factors pushing Central Americans to migrate north. To be clear, these are deep, institutional issues that the U.S. may not be able to solve even with additional funding. However, it would certainly be able to improve conditions if it funneled resources to the programs with the highest demonstrated efficacy. In 2014, the Obama

⁷⁶ Eguizabal, Curtis, Ingram, Korthuis, Olson, and Phillips.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Administration closely examined the factors motivating Central American migration in order to devise a plan that would actually improve the region's economies and reduce the violence. President Obama requested \$1 billion from Congress for this purpose, declaring that the migration crisis underscored the severity of systemic problems in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. However, Congress ultimately allocated less than \$300 million in foreign aid for Central America—and the vast majority was designated for security initiatives.⁷⁸ This is not only extremely shortsighted, but downright foolish. American legislators are allowing domestic pressure to interfere with sound policy-making through their control of the federal budget. This will only come back to haunt them once crises flare up again, as they inevitably will since the underlying causal factors of migration are not being addressed.

At the root of this problem is both Congressional and Administrative conflation of drug trafficking and violence. The debate surrounding the migration crisis reveals this tendency, as time and again the drug trade alone was blamed for increasing rates of violence in the Northern Triangle. At the same time, no other explanation was offered. As a result, programs like CARSI which are intended to solve the situation are ill equipped to do so. As its focus is divided between citizen security and countering narcotics trafficking, seeking to address both simultaneously, it cannot effect true change. This reflects the fact that Congress, the federal agencies, and the Administration often have widely differing opinions on the matter. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Department of Justice, and the military (through the Department of Defense) are inclined to focus on

⁷⁸ The Editorial Board.

traditional counter-narcotics and law enforcement efforts, while agencies such as USAID and the Department of State’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs—which coordinates CARSI—emphasize preventing violence and strengthening institutions in general in order to promote greater public security.⁷⁹ Inaccurate frameworks and competing priorities among the domestic and foreign policy establishments have thus hamstrung efforts to address regional insecurity and decrease migration flows from the Northern Triangle.

Additionally, U.S. policies and practices often directly contribute to the region’s problems. The United States is an extremely high source of demand for Latin American drugs, creating market opportunities that cartels fight—and kill—to supply. The U.S. could certainly address this problem with measures like drug addiction rehabilitation programs, which would decrease the demand fueling the drug trade. However, this would require increases in social spending, which has proven to be a very unpopular domestic policy in recent years. Another way the U.S. helped create the current problem was through its policy of deporting scores of gang members back to Central America throughout the 1990s and 2000s. This transferred the problem of violent street gangs to the Northern Triangle. As most of the deported gang members were Salvadorian, that country now has the most gangs in the region. Honduras has the second-highest amount, and Guatemala has the third. Finally, weapons bought both legally and illegally from the United States have flooded Central America, increasing the “lethality and morbidity of

⁷⁹ Eguizabal, Curtis, Ingram, Korthuis, Olson, and Phillips.

crime.”⁸⁰ Attempts to cut off the supply of firearms from the U.S. encounter many domestic political barriers, leaving it to continue unabated.⁸¹

Finally, the American public as a whole is very divided on how to solve the crisis. A poll conducted by CNN and the Opinion Research Corporation during the summer of 2014, at the height of the migration crisis, asked respondents for their opinions on dealing with the situation. The poll first found that 54 percent of Americans favored a bill that would allocate an additional “several billion dollars to care for the children that are being detained, increase the number of officials who can determine whether they should be deported, and return them to their countries if they are not allowed to stay in the U.S.,” while 44 percent were opposed.⁸² Second, 62% favored “a bill that would make it easier for the U.S. to deport all unaccompanied children who have entered the country illegally,” with 36% opposed.⁸³ Third, when asked to define which stated view most closely matched their own, 51% believed that “most of [the unaccompanied children] are refugees who are fleeing violence and poverty in their countries,” while 45% believed that “most of them are illegal immigrants whose parents are trying to exploit a loophole in the U.S. immigration system.”⁸⁴ The degree to which the latter belief was so widely held, despite being factually disproven, is indicative of the toxic amount of misinformation and prejudice swirling around the issue. Finally, 57% of respondents would be willing “to have some of those children relocated to a security facility in the city or town where [the respondent lives] until their cases are resolved,” while 41%

⁸⁰ Eguizabal, Curtis, Ingram, Korthuis, Olson, and Phillips.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² "CNN/ORC Poll." CNN. July 24, 2014. <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/07/24/rel7d.pdf>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

would be unwilling.⁸⁵ In each response, the numbers were fairly evenly split between those sympathetic to the children and those taking a more conservative, hard stance against them. With this much division in public opinion, it is no surprise there is so much disagreement on how to handle the issue among U.S. policy-makers as well.

⁸⁵ "CNN/ORC Poll."

CHAPTER V: SOLUTIONS TO AN ONGOING PROBLEM

I. Events Through The Present

The number of unaccompanied Central American minors entering the United States declined after reaching its peak during the spring and summer of 2014. However, data from the CBP shows that this downward trend did not last long—the number of unaccompanied children and families from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador apprehended at the southern U.S. border is increasing once more. After experiencing a decline at the end of 2014, numbers started rising again at the beginning of 2015.⁸⁶ While 2,118 unaccompanied children were apprehended in January, the monthly total of children being apprehended had doubled by September 2015 (up to 4,485).⁸⁷ In fact, the months of October and November 2015 saw the highest amount of unaccompanied juvenile migrants ever apprehended (4,943 and 5,608 respectively), second only to the amounts observed during the months of March through July 2014.⁸⁸ Similarly, the number of unaccompanied minors and family units apprehended in March 2016 was much higher than the number apprehended that month in all previous years except 2014.⁸⁹

This resurgence of migration has occurred despite increased efforts by both the U.S. and partner countries like Mexico, which stepped up the apprehensions and

⁸⁶ Marc R. Rosenblum and Isabel Ball, "Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America," Migration Policy Institute, January 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/trends-unaccompanied-child-and-family-migration-central-america>.

⁸⁷ "United States Border Patrol Southwest Family Unit Subject and Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions Fiscal Year 2016," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, March 2016, <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>.

⁸⁸ Rosenblum and Ball.

⁸⁹ "United States Border Patrol Southwest Family Unit Subject and Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions Fiscal Year 2016."

deportations of Central American migrants at its southern border. In fact, a November 2015 report published by the Washington Office on Latin America suggests that this program not only failed to decrease migration to the U.S. in the long run, but pushed many of the migrants into even more dangerous situations as many simply found riskier, alternate routes northward. Mexico has focused on deporting more migrants rather than addressing underlying issues of insecurity and organized criminal violence. The introduction of this program actually led to an increase in the amount of human rights abuses and crimes committed against migrants, including kidnapping, murder, robbery, sexual assault, and human trafficking.⁹⁰ Further, the additional Mexican security forces sent to apprehend migrants participate in many of these crimes, as well as extortion, beatings, and “inhumane detention.”⁹¹ However, this has not received the same media attention as the 2014 crisis—in fact it is not really considered a crisis at all—despite continuing human rights concerns and the lack of a sustainable system for dealing with refugees.

This may be due to the fact that the decrease in migration by the end of 2014 lulled people into thinking that the crisis was over. However, this is clearly not the case. Most, if not all, of the problems that spurred the original migration surge in the summer of 2014 remain unabated. Systemic poverty, violence, and lack of opportunity continue to drive Central Americans to flee the Northern Triangle. In addition, gender-based persecution remains highly prevalent. 82 percent of the 16,077 female immigrants from

⁹⁰ “Mexico’s Migration Crackdown Creates Spike in Apprehensions, Dangerous Shifts in Migrant Routes,” *Washington Office on Latin America*, November 9, 2015, http://www.wola.org/news/mexicos_migration_crackdown_creates_spike_in_apprehensions_dangerous_shifts_in_migrant_routes.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

the Northern Triangle applying for asylum in the U.S. in 2015 met the initial requirement of having “credible fear of persecution if returned to their home country” based on soaring rates of sexual and other forms of violence targeted at women specifically.⁹² Finally, an often-overlooked environmental factor pushing migration is the drought that has affected the region for the past two years. This has created food insecurity for many households—13% in El Salvador, 25% in Guatemala, and 36% in Honduras.⁹³ This is an example of slow-onset environmental factors causing crisis migration.

In the face of the resurgence of unaccompanied children crossing the southern U.S. border, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it was still seeking ways to ensure border security, address the root causes of migration, discourage future migration, and protect those with “legitimate humanitarian claims.”⁹⁴ It also emphasized the need to continue cooperating with Latin American partners to resolve the issue. In the meantime, the Office of Refugee Resettlement took measures to continue expanding the capacity of facilities holding detained children. In November 2015, the number of beds available increased from 7,900 to 8,400.⁹⁵ Interestingly, 2016 is the year that the CBP finally seemed to publically admit that the problem may not be temporary. The press release accompanying its FY 2016 statistics is the first not to claim that “border apprehensions have only slightly increased during this time period, and remain at historic lows.”⁹⁶

⁹² Rosenblum and Ball.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ "United States Border Patrol Southwest Family Unit Subject and Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions Fiscal Year 2016."

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

The CBP's press treatment of the crisis is problematic in several ways. First of all, it is representative of the way that both the crisis itself and its underlying causes are so often swept under the rug by the governing establishment. This creates a public perception that migration—or at least migration as a response to humanitarian issues, and not migration motivated by criminal activity—is not really a problem. When the domestic audience does not perceive an issue as a problem, there is no push to hold leaders accountable for finding a long-term, sustainable solution. So the problem remains festering and ugly just under the surface of public awareness, until it can no longer be contained. This is what happened during the summer of 2014. However, lulled by government claims that the situation was being handled and the media's pursuit of the next big issue, the American people have once more turned a blind eye to what was happening with no hope for a lasting solution in sight. This is evident in the fact that today, mainstream media sources seldom, if ever, publish pieces on Central American unaccompanied children. The current discourse on immigration is mainly limited to the traditional “path to citizenship” debate and the Donald Trump-instigated furor over whether to build a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico.

II. Finding A Solution

Although no long-term solution has yet been found or implemented, both academic research and practical experience with migration crises have raised areas for improvement. Perhaps the most critical issue to address is the ad hoc and reactive nature of most responses to migration crises. By now it should be obvious that rapid increases in migration—whether or not they are officially deemed a “crisis”—in response to acute and slow-onset factors are going to keep occurring. And unless something changes, they are

going to keep challenging and likely overwhelming governments' abilities to respond effectively. It is time for national and international bodies to develop institutional frameworks to respond to them. Operational systems must merge with humanitarian and legal systems to create a comprehensive approach to dealing with surges in migrating populations.

Participants of the 2013 MacArthur Foundation Crisis Migration Convention compiled a collection of recommendations to avert future crises. Although these were not implemented in time to mitigate the 2014 Central American migration crisis, or even the 2015 European refugee crisis, they carry potential for long-term success as long as the appropriate actors are willing to investigate and act on them. This is more difficult than it might seem, as all too often, simply mustering the political will to act is the most challenging part of the process. Nevertheless, these recommendations for future solutions are summarized below.

1. First, migrants must be ensured better protection under U.S. and international legal systems. Refugee and asylum law must be redesigned to accommodate individuals fleeing for reasons that are not acknowledged under the current scheme.⁹⁷
2. These factors often fall under the category of "slow-onset." More research into the causal factors and tipping points associated with slow-onset issues such as climate change and conflict must be conducted. This may enable

⁹⁷ "Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report."

analysts to determine when slow-onset problems are about to reach a tip over into a crisis.⁹⁸

3. Vulnerable populations must be strengthened in order to resist the stress factors that would otherwise push them into crisis migration.⁹⁹ This is accomplished through community-based development programs, including certain aspects of CARSI. However, these must be designed and carried out with a thorough understanding of the problems they are meant to address, and not with a divided or foreign agenda (like U.S. programs primarily focused on drug interdiction in Central America with little regard for their long-term effects on local communities).
4. Mechanisms must be developed to provide early warning of impending migration surges. Most such efforts today are focused on predicting natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis.¹⁰⁰
5. National and international agencies must update their directives to include swift and effective responses to migration crises. Most importantly, they must systematize close cooperation with each other.¹⁰¹
6. Measures must be taken to provide for migrants whose home governments cannot or will not protect them.¹⁰² The Central American governments are currently extremely corrupt, controlled by criminal organizations, and/or lacking in resources to effectively help their people. Yet this should not mean

⁹⁸ “Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

that these people cannot receive basic human rights and international protection.

7. Finally, change must first occur within states themselves, as effective progress does not result from international norms or regulations without pressure within domestic populations as well. Countries must take a “bottom up” approach to effecting change.¹⁰³

III. Conclusions

Responding to the symptoms of the 2014 Central American migration crisis was well within U.S. capabilities. The inter-agency coordinated efforts, resources, and facilities to process, house, and care for the influx of unaccompanied children. The overarching problem is not the United States government’s ability to handle an immediate surge in migration; rather, it is the country’s broader migration and refugee policy—both in terms of protecting the migrants and in terms of establishing a sound foreign policy to address the underlying causes of migration.

To be clear, the ideal foreign policy is not simply to pour more money into already existing programs. Rather, policy-makers should heed the numerous studies that have shown that drug interdiction is not an effective investment or means of establishing stability in Latin America. The bigger issue here is that the majority of current funding is going towards military spending. At best, drug interdiction is ineffective at reducing the motivating factors of migration; at worst, it has directly led to the increases in violence and organized criminal activity that push people to flee the Northern Triangle. Given this, resources need to be directed away from drug interdiction programs and security

¹⁰³ “Crisis Migration Convening Thematic Report.”

initiatives and into programs that actually contribute to increasing work and educational opportunities, fighting corruption, and strengthening important state institutions like the justice system. Once these things occur, violence will naturally decrease as organized criminal groups lose power, the rule of law is reestablished, and living standards improve.

Ultimately, U.S. domestic policy must adapt to the realities of a world in which migration and its causes—both acute crises as well as slow-onset factors—are increasingly globalized. The United States must not only admit that its policies have played a large role in contributing to the current crisis, but also take steps to rectify them. First, it needs to update refugee policy in the above-mentioned ways and expand the definition of migrants who qualify for refugee status, as the current classification system is extremely limited. Second, it needs to stem the flow of guns into Latin America, as these weapons are often used by cartels to commit atrocities against innocent civilians as well as state security forces. Third, U.S. demand for drugs must be recognized for its instigating role in drug trafficking and violence and treated accordingly. This could include legalizing drugs, providing rehabilitation programs for addicts, or some other method, but a factor so key to the current pattern of violence cannot be ignored. And fourth, government and non-government actors must find a way to reconcile their differing opinions on the issue so that the above domestic policy recommendations are possible. Regardless of partisan lines, it is in everyone's interests to ensure that the underlying causes of migration surges are addressed, and not merely the symptoms. It is strongly in U.S. national interests to learn from the experiences of 2014 and beyond in order to implement lasting, effective foreign policy solutions. However, as long as

citizens and policy-makers alike are blind to this necessity, it is unlikely that the cycle of crisis, reaction, dismissal, and resurging crisis will be broken.

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