

Violence and crime in the Northern Triangle Countries (NTC) of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras continue to endanger citizen security in those countries, as well as in Mexico and in the United States.



# Crime in the Northern Triangle

Mark L. Schneider

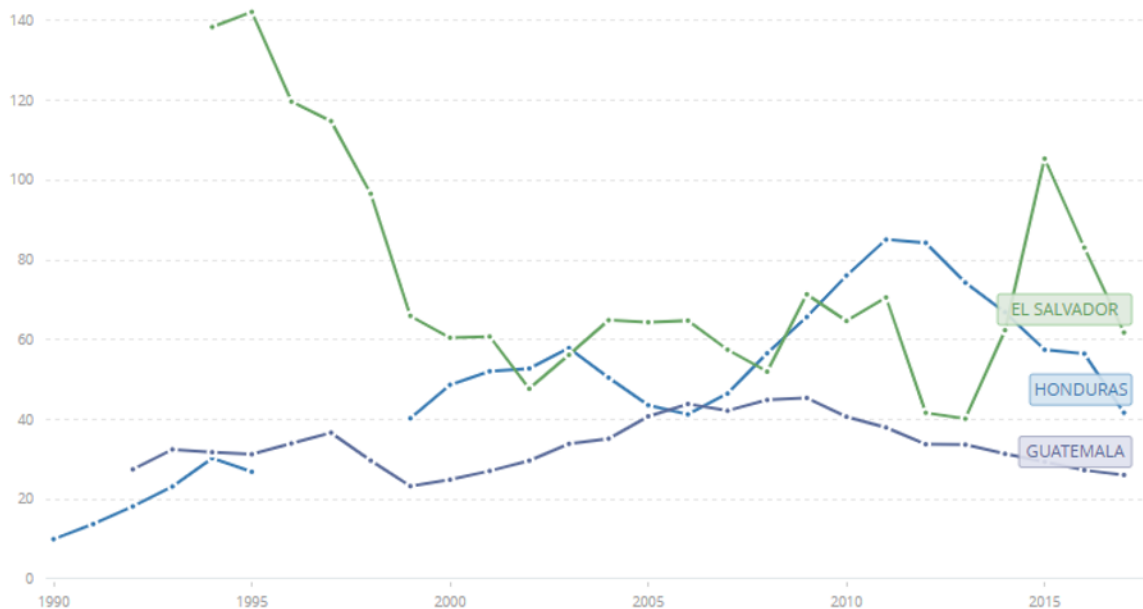
Violence and crime in the Northern Triangle Countries (NTC) of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras continue to endanger citizen security in those countries, as well as in Mexico and in the United States. The extent, conditions, and policy responses are important in and of themselves, but also because this violence constitutes one of the significant factors driving migration toward the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In examining security in the NTC, the historical context is important. For at least three decades, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the Cold War brought armed conflict to all three countries.<sup>2</sup> In El Salvador, the civil conflict of the 1980s produced some 75,000 victims with multiple massacres and war crimes.<sup>3</sup> In Guatemala, repression began as early as the 1950s and lasted until the mid-1990s with the deaths of some 200,000 people—83 percent indigenous—with victims still being identified in mass graves 13 years after the 1996 peace accord.<sup>4,5</sup> In Honduras, while deadly internal repression occurred during the 1980s, the violence was concentrated along its borders with Nicaragua where the Contra War was focused.<sup>6</sup> Violence has lingered from the aftermath of unresolved military government repression violence in the 1960s and 1970s and outright civil war in the 1980s, and has persisted

due to weak governance and corruption.<sup>7</sup>

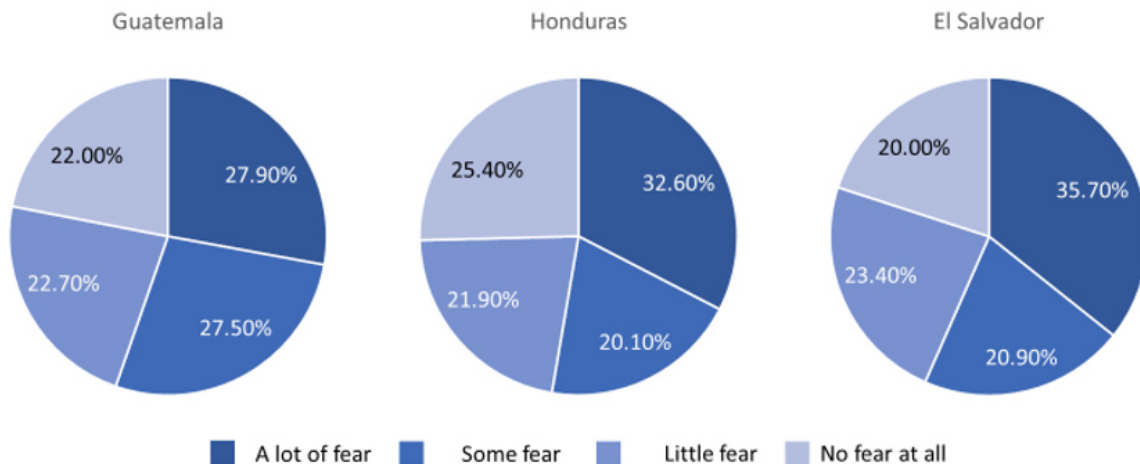
Between 2015 and 2018, the homicide rates in El Salvador and Honduras were among the highest in the region and, for countries not at war, in the world. (See chart below from the World Bank).<sup>8</sup> Guatemala's rates remained almost unchanged despite the end to its civil conflict, and actually rose at the outset of the 21st century.

All three countries faced compounding drivers of violence. First, the Colombian cocaine routes to the large U.S. market increasingly passed through Central America on the way to Mexico and the U.S. border. Some 80 percent of cocaine shipments coming north use the Pacific Ocean routes, with shipments hidden in legitimate cargo ships and in a diverse illicit network of surface and submarine vessels.<sup>9</sup> The shipments land in Guatemala most frequently, although also in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and southern Mexico. Cartels then fight to take control of the shipments and move an unimaginably profitable product to market—bribing, coercing, or killing anyone who gets in their way, including competitors, police, military, or local farmers.<sup>10</sup>



International Homicides (per 100,000 people) – Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala (Source: World Bank)

# Level of Fear of Being a Victim of Violence



Source: Inter-American Dialogue and LAPOP 2017; based on 9,300 individual interviews conducted across Central America

United Nations estimates assumed USD 4 billion in cocaine (wholesale price) traveled through Guatemala in one year with retail (street price) values of the same amount many times higher.<sup>11</sup> The remaining 20 percent travels through the Caribbean, and the bulk of those air and sea routes pass through Honduras before going overland through Guatemala to Mexico and further north. The accompanying violence can be seen in the data showing rates of homicides; the corruption is also documented in court cases by local prosecutors, DEA, U.S. security officials, and generally described each spring in the International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports (INCSR) to the U.S. Congress.<sup>12</sup> All three countries were listed in last year's INCSR among the world's 23 drug producing and/or drug-transit countries.

Second, in the aftermath of the civil conflicts, hundreds of thousands of Central Americans fled to the United States. A small percentage, particularly of youth, were initially recruited by local gangs in Los Angeles and elsewhere, and then returned home voluntarily or by deportation. Over time they established their own local gangs, which from 2000 to 2010 had morphed into serious criminal organizations whose desire to control their neighborhoods placed communities, local police, and society at large at great risk.<sup>13</sup> The major gangs, the "18th Street" gang known as M-18, and the Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13, have continued to battle for territory, with members in the NTC estimated at some 85,000. While the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has its own gang membership numbers totaling 54,000, the breakdown has remained about the same, with 40 percent each in El Salvador and Guatemala and 20 percent in Honduras.<sup>14</sup> However, given the different populations in the three countries, their concentration is far greater in El Salvador.

Finally, poverty, corruption, and extortion by local criminal networks cause levels of fear and insecurity that frighten entire communities.<sup>15</sup> Families whose children are threatened with rape, kidnapping, or death by gangs or by criminal groups wind up without any place to hide.

It is not surprising that violence and crime continue to be one of the primary drivers of migration from these three countries toward the United States.<sup>16</sup> El Salvador's Central Bank in 2016 issued a report estimating that extortion alone cost some USD 756 million to families, small shops, and businesses.<sup>17</sup> A report by the International Crisis Group found gangs operating from prisons in Guatemala were directing 80 percent of the extortion in the country, and the National Council of Small Business in Honduras has been cited as reporting that some 80 percent of small and informal businesses faced regular extortion demands as recently as 2017.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the role of violence and insecurity in driving migration comes from the people themselves. The Congressional Research Service cited a Latin American Public Opinion Project where 25 percent of those surveyed reported being victims of crime in 2017.<sup>19</sup> They also noted that the Latin American Research Review found that Salvadorans and Hondurans who have been victims of crime were 10 to 15 percent more likely to migrate. More recently, a variety of organizations have been surveying migrants as they travel north. Most are currently located in camps in Mexico where they await some resolution of asylum claims. Doctors without Borders found that 40 percent of those surveyed reported either being attacked or being threatened as the main reason for their flight.<sup>20</sup>

In a strange way, the U.S. government acknowledges the Northern Triangle Countries are not safe for anyone, even as it has pressed the three countries to accept each other's migrants in special settlements while they file for asylum in the United States. The latest Travel Advisories of the State Department essentially warn U.S. citizens to "Reconsider Travel" to these countries and include the following warnings:

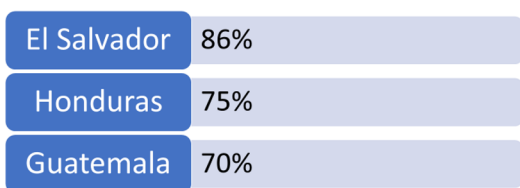
**El Salvador:** "Violent crime, such as murder, assault, rape, and armed robbery, is common. Gang activity, such as extortion, violent street crime, and narcotics and arms trafficking, is widespread. Local police may lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents."<sup>21</sup>

**Honduras:** “Violent crime, such as homicide and armed robbery, is common. Violent gang activity, such as extortion, violent street crime, rape, and narcotics and human trafficking, is widespread. Local police and emergency services lack the resources to respond effectively to serious crime.”<sup>22</sup>

**Guatemala:** “Violent crime, such as armed robbery and murder, is common. Gang activity, such as extortion, violent street crime, and narcotics trafficking, is widespread. Local police may lack the resources to respond effectively to serious criminal incidents.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition to security concerns, two other factors are also dominant drivers of migration. The first is corruption and the population’s sense that their governments are less concerned with the well-being of the population than their own personal or political interests. Recent polling has shown that:

“The country is governed by certain powerful groups for their own benefit”



Source: Latinobarometro 2018

Recently, The Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies (ICEFI) published an exceptional study entitled, “Corruption: its Paths and Impact on Society and an Agenda to Combat it in the Central American Northern Triangle” that traces the linkages between transnational organized crime, local gangs, and corrupt officials—particularly among the police—undermining citizen security, governance, and economic opportu-

nity.<sup>24</sup> While they acknowledge their numbers are seriously underestimated because they derive only from cases publicly reported, the cost of corruption is staggering.

In Honduras, the ICEFI study found that fraud in public procurement and corruption in social security institutions and pensions alone were equal to 4.3 percent of GDP, constituting more than twice the budget of the Secretary of Infrastructure and Public Services and 70 percent of the budget of the Secretary of Health.<sup>25</sup>

In El Salvador, again focusing only on cases with convictions or pending trials, they estimated that public procurement fraud and contracting alone cost the equivalent of 2.1 percent of GDP each year from 2009 to 2014.<sup>26</sup>

In Guatemala, in just one case, known as “La Linea”—the telephone line in the offices of the vice president and president allegedly used to authorize evasion of customs duties—the tax revenue loss was USD 87 million in 2013 alone. The La Linea network took in an estimated USD 16 million. This case brought the resignation and trial of the country’s president, vice president, their chiefs of staff, and dozens of officials.<sup>27,28</sup>

A third driver of migration relates to the economic and social situation of families. In each country, there has been little improvement in economic life over the last decade. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras essentially had no improvement in the numbers of people living in poverty. According to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), they also are among the countries with high levels of income disparity.

Over the course of the past year, Guatemala family migrations north have eclipsed both Salvadorans and Hondurans. Many of these Guatemalan families are indigenous, coming from the country’s northern highlands. Recently, drought has made subsistence farming almost impossible in these areas,



## Confident in Armed Forces



☐ Honduras: 35%

☐ Guatemala: 33%

☐ El Salvador: 27%

## Confident in Police



☐ Honduras: 33%

☐ Guatemala: 25%

☐ El Salvador: 22%

## International Poverty Line



□ El Salvador: 34.7% (2017)

□ Guatemala: 54.7% (2017)

□ Honduras: 53.5% (2016)

## National Poverty Line



□ El Salvador: 29.2% (2016)

□ Guatemala: 59.3% (2014)

□ Honduras: 60.9% (2016)

WWW.CSIS.ORG

Source: Inter-American Development Bank

Source: World Bank

and lack of food has exacerbated one of the world's most serious chronic malnutrition conditions.<sup>29</sup> Looking at the migration data, it is evident that current hardline policies of deportation, walls, and cutting aid to the NTC are not producing the end result anyone wants.<sup>30</sup> The chart below shows the latest data from the U.S. Border Patrol at the Department of Homeland Security.

It underscores several factors, including the downward trends in migration from El Salvador between fiscal year 15 and fiscal year 18. This trend reflects the demonstrated success of several USAID-funded programs to reduce homicides in El Salvador. With the major shift in U.S. migration policy, which included cutting off funding for anti-corruption programs and for all development cooperation, the numbers began to rise again. Additionally, the Guatemala and Honduras numbers have virtually exploded in the past 18 months.

There have been some programs—in most instances jointly involving the countries themselves and supported by USAID and other donors—that have addressed the conditions driving migration. They have succeeded in many cases, but they all require sustained domestic and international political support, as well as sustained funding. All too often, this has been lacking.

<sup>1</sup> *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, IF11151 · VERSION 2, July 13, 2019. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Amelia Cheatham, "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>3</sup> "El Salvador," *The Center for Justice and Accountability*, 2016, <https://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Press Briefing, March 1, 1999, "Press Conference by Members of Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission." <https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990301.guate.brf.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexa Keefe, "Family Photos and Mass Graves Reveal the Horrors of Guatemala's Civil War," *National Geographic*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2015/12/08/family-photos-and-mass-graves-reveal-the-horrors-of-guatemalas-civil-war/> (Accessed February 2020).

mass-graves-reveal-the-horrors-of-guatemalas-civil-war/ (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Cody, "Honduras Feels Impact of Contra War," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1986, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/11/11/honduras-feels-impact-of-contra-war/a9f7b841-29b3-4b10-956b-643d88f50d57/> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel F. Runde and Mark L. Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel F. Runde and Mark L. Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>9</sup> *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, September 2012. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA\\_CACaribb\\_cocaine\\_SAmerica\\_U.S..pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA_CACaribb_cocaine_SAmerica_U.S..pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Salvador Rizzo, "Do Mexican drug cartels make \$500 billion a year?" *Washington Post*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/24/do-mexican-drug-cartels-make-billion-year/> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>11</sup> *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, September 2012.

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA\\_CACaribb\\_cocaine\\_SAmerica\\_U.S..pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA_CACaribb_cocaine_SAmerica_U.S..pdf).

<sup>12</sup> *Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Drug and Chemical Control*, INCSR 2019 Volume 1, March 2019.

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/INCSR-Vol-1-1.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Claire Ribando Seelke, *Gangs in Central America*, Congressional Research Service, RL34112, August 29, 2016.

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34112.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, September 2012. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA\\_CACaribb\\_cocaine\\_SAmerica\\_U.S..pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/toc/Reports/TOCTASouthAmerica/English/TOCTA_CACaribb_cocaine_SAmerica_U.S..pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Seth Robbins, "3 Crime Factors Driving Northern Triangle Migrants Out," *InSight Crime*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/crime-factors-pushing-northern-triangle-migrants-out/> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>16</sup> *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, IF11151 · VERSION 2, July 13, 2019. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Margarita Peñate et. al, *Estimación del Costo Económico de la Violencia en El Salvador 2014*, Redibacen, April 2016, <https://www.bcr.gov.sv/bcrsite/uploaded/content/category/1745118187.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, Inter-

Unaccompanied Alien Children Encounters by Country							
Country	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20 TD JUL
El Salvador	16,404	9,389	17,512	9,143	4,949	12,021	1,820
Guatemala	17,057	13,589	18,913	14,827	22,327	30,329	6,964
Honduras	18,244	5,409	10,468	7,784	10,913	20,398	3,460
Mexico	15,634	11,012	11,926	8,877	10,136	10,487	10,544

**Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children Encounters\* by Country.**  
Numbers below reflect Fiscal Years 2014 – 2019 and FY20 TD.

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**Southwest Border Family Unit\*\* Encounters\* by Country**  
Numbers below reflect Fiscal Years 2014 – 2019 and FY20 TD.

*national Crisis Group*, Latin America Report No62, April 6, 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/62-mafia-poor-gang-violence-and-extortion-central-america>.

<sup>19</sup> *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, IF11151 · VERSION 2, July 13, 2019. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/tow/IF11151.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> *FORCED TO FLEE CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE: A NEGLECTED HUMANITARIAN CRISIS*, Médecins Sans Frontières, May 2017. [https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/msf\\_forced-to-flee-central-americas-northern-triangle.pdf](https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/msf_forced-to-flee-central-americas-northern-triangle.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> "El Salvador International Travel Information," *U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs*, October 1, 2019. <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/International-Travel-Country-Information-Pages/ElSalvador.html> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>22</sup> "Honduras International Travel Information," *U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs*, June 24, 2019. <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/International-Travel-Country-Information-Pages/Guatemala.html> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>23</sup> "Guatemala International Travel Information," *U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs*, February 28, 2019. <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/International-Travel-Country-Information-Pages/Guatemala.html> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Carlos Melgar, "Executive Summary – Corruption: Its Paths and Impact on Society and an Agenda for Combat It in the Northern Triangle of Central America," *Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales (ICEFI)*, September 26, 2017 [https://icefi.org/sites/default/files/executive\\_summary\\_0.pdf](https://icefi.org/sites/default/files/executive_summary_0.pdf) (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Arron Daugherty, "Guatemala's Big Corruption Scandal, Explained," *In-Sight Crime*, July 20, 2015. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/guatemala-la-linea-customs-scandal-explained/> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Monica Pinna, "Guatemala: nearly half of children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition," *EuroNews*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/17/seven-years-of-drought-sends-guatemalans-fleeing-chronic-malnutrition> (Accessed February 2020).

<sup>30</sup> "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2020," *U.S. Customs and Border Protection*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions> (Accessed February 2020).

\* Beginning in March FY20, USBP Encounters statistics include both Title 8 Apprehensions and Title 42 Expulsions.

\*\* Note: Family Unit represents the number of individuals (either a child under 18 years old, parent or legal guardian) apprehended with a family member by the U.S. Border Patrol.

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