



ATLANTIS 2.0: HOW CLIMATE CHANGE COULD MAKE STATES DISAPPEAR – AND WHAT THAT MEANS FOR GLOBAL SECURITY

Andrew Holland¹ and Esther Babson²

INTRODUCTION

In the Fourth Century B.C., Plato wrote of how the great city of Atlantis was submerged beneath the ocean as punishment by the gods for becoming corrupt and greedy. In Plato's telling, an advanced civilization was lost forever in a single day because its people had strayed from the will of the gods. Since then, the story – whether based in historical truth or only a lesson in morality – has captivated generations. Now, 2300 years later, the world may be facing a new Atlantis, as sea level rise – caused by climate change – is threatening to inundate civilizations again.

The threat is global, but it is not shared equally. Like most of the effects of climate change, those most harmed by it are the populations with the fewest resources. At first, the greatest impacts will be felt by those living on low-lying islands like Kiribati and the Marshall Islands in the Pacific or the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. Life is difficult enough on these small islands, surrounded by the vastness of the ocean, without adding the challenges of sea level rise, more dangerous extreme weather, and the loss of food and fresh water resources.

Unlike Plato's Atlantis, however, the threat to small islands is easily predictable, if not preventable. Thankfully, we don't expect the islands to disappear in "a single day and night of misfortune" as Plato said of Atlantis' fate.³ Allowing for some uncertainty, we know how sea level rise has accelerated on these islands over the past century, and we can predict the impacts. However, the effects will not be limited to only the small population of people living on islands. Alone, their economic and geopolitical

significance is miniscule. But, great powers remain interested in the strategic value of islands, and sea level rise will present a series of tests to them about how to manage conflicts. In the near term, the fate of small islands will present a series of “mini crises” about how and where to relocate peoples and societies, and who retains control of the resources they once owned. But, how the world manages those crises will offer a preview of how the world will respond to the far greater challenges that may lie decades hence; for one day, our civilization’s great cities may face the same fate Atlantis did.

CLIMATE CHANGE IS ALREADY ADDING TO RISK ON SMALL ISLANDS

The science leaves no question that the Earth’s climate is changing, and the seas are rising as a consequence. Since 1951 temperatures have risen by at least .72°C, and within the past decade, sea levels have risen at a rate of at least 2.8 mm/year.⁴ While the entire globe will be impacted by climate change, small island states have become a “poster child” for climate change. For good reason: small island states with large populations near sea levels have already seen rates of sea level rise four times higher than global averages.⁵

This higher rate is due to a few factors, such as winds and gravity, that create regional differences in sea levels around the globe. For example, winds blowing in one direction move water the same way, creating higher sea levels in the direction the wind blows. A similar concept can be applied to ocean currents with a slower current leading to a “pile up” of water. Gravity also plays a major role in shaping sea levels. Whether they are polar ice sheets or a mountain range under the ocean, these features have additional gravitational force and, therefore, can draw more water towards them, creating a bump on the surface.⁶ Finally, Earth’s rotation creates a bulge around the equator as the middle of the Earth must move faster than the poles to complete a revolution in the same amount of time.⁷

All this means that different places around the world will see differing amounts of sea level rise, depending on location. Many of the most vulnerable islands are on the equator, leading to a naturally higher sea level to begin with. In the Maldives and Tuvalu, 100% of the population lives less than 16 feet above sea level.⁸ Within the Marshall Islands and Kiribati, over 95% live below that mark.⁹ With just 3 feet of sea level rise, the Maldives are likely to be submerged.¹⁰

Clearly, continued increases in sea level will have disastrous effects. Even if island nations aren’t completely pushed beneath the waves, there are significant consequences. Islands are already seeing increased coastal inundation, erosion and even community displacement as the rising seas eat away at their land. Rising tides threaten to flood fresh water reserves with salt water. At the same time, a recent drought in the Marshall Islands caused more than 16,000 people to suffer from food and water shortages.¹¹

The ocean itself is also affected by increasing temperatures. Growing ocean acidity and warming water have resulted in serious concern about the stability of coral reefs – and declining coral health undermines island communities because the reefs provide a source of food and income, as many are reliant on fish sales and tourism. Coral reefs have the added benefit of acting as a natural barrier against storm surges. Unfortunately, the impacts of a warmer ocean are already visible in many nations. Kiribati has seen unprecedented bleaching events with some islands seeing 100% coral mortality within the lagoons.¹²

Changes in human systems are equally apparent within many small island nations. Shifting biodiversity ranges, decreasing freshwater due to saltwater intrusion, changing precipitation patterns, more coastal development, and increasing incidence of diseases are all currently observed impacts.¹³ Future trends are likely to only expand and multiply.

PROSPECTIVE RISKS FOR THE FUTURE

While modeling for islands is incredibly difficult due to scale, predicted trends are not optimistic. Even with a decrease in emissions today, the climate will continue to warm into the future. Predictions vary by region but studies suggest a 1.2°C to 2.3°C increase in temperatures by 2100.¹⁴ Such an increase will result in serious consequences for the future of these islands. Estimates suggest that sea levels could rise up to 3 feet by 2090, submerging Kiribati, Tokelau, and Tuvalu.¹⁵

Many of the phenomena occurring already will accelerate.¹⁶ In addition to rising seas, extreme precipitation is expected to increase, with both floods and droughts becoming more common. Increasing storm surges on already higher oceans will leave coastal communities at risk. If greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue to increase, the consequences will be far greater. A catastrophic melting of Greenland alone would result in about 6 feet of sea level rise, easily submerging entire cities and countries.¹⁷

As the impacts of climate change become more and more pronounced, secondary and tertiary consequences will begin to unfold. Due to the high dependence on reefs as a source of revenue, livelihoods will be threatened by the increasing level, temperature and acidity of oceans. Beyond loss of property and livelihood, one of the greatest concerns is complete loss of country. Rising seas will not submerge all islands, but many are severely threatened by even a meter of sea level rise. Where will these people go? What will happen to their submerged territory? And who will care enough to do anything about it?

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INHABITANTS?

Because of the inexorable nature of sea level rise, for many of the islands the best hope is not to protect the land with new sea walls, but to undertake controlled migration away from the islands. That will mean finding ways for people to move to new islands within the country or to new land in a new country. The president of Kiribati has announced an arrangement to buy land in Fiji.¹⁸ That land is now being used to produce food for the inhabitants of Kiribati, but one day it could provide a new homeland. Such a controlled migration – which the Kiribati government calls “migration with dignity” – is unique in that it amounts to a government planning its country’s demise. This process depends on foresight by the government, extra resources to buy the land, and a willing seller. Unfortunately, those aren’t always paired in poor countries with weak governance.

Instead, what we should expect is more uncontrolled migration from island to island, to cities, and developed countries. This could play out similarly to Australia’s asylum policies, which have pushed the country to turn boats away and detain migrants in offshore processing centers in countries such as Nauru and Papua New Guinea. It is a high-profile humanitarian disaster. When migrants are forced from their homes in an unplanned manner. The evidence suggests that this acts as a trauma that can undermine their long-term quality of life.¹⁹

Clearly, the better alternative is to attempt to replicate the Kiribati alternative as closely as possible. The society must debate how to adapt, whether through migration or coastline protection, then plan for it in an organized way and execute the plan together. Unfortunately, the realities of migration mean that decisions about when and where to migrate are usually made at the individual or family level. Seldom do entire communities pick up and move – and even when entire communities are physically removed, their lives are forever altered.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE RESOURCES?

Countries are afforded territorial rights to resources within their borders under customary international law. For islands, the relevant portion of law is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which codifies rights to resources within what is called an “Exclusive Economic Zone” (EEZ). These can be sub-sea deposits such as oil or natural gas, or resources such as fisheries that exist within the sea itself. Under Article 21 of UNCLOS, an island is entitled to an EEZ extending 200 miles into the sea, from a baseline point that is always above sea level. However, they must be considered an island and not just a “rock.” A rock is defined as a place “which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own.”²⁰ Rocks, therefore, are not eligible to have a surrounding EEZ or territorial waters.

As the seas rise, we could see portions of countries change from “islands” under international law, to “rocks.” They do not even need to become permanently submerged, only incapable of sustaining “human habitation or economic life.” One potential scenario could be previously habitable islands losing their fresh water sources due to salt-water intrusion. Fortunately, it seems that the architects of the Convention gave some thought to the problem of shifting baselines, stating under Article 7 that, if a baseline is drawn in accordance with the rules of the Convention, and the lines are submitted and publicly disclosed, then the baselines are deemed permanent until changed.²¹

This would imply that the threat of sea level rise is not a threat to a nation’s EEZ, so long as the nation remains. However, that raises a bigger question: if a country ceases to have any land, does it cease to be a country? And, if it ceases to be a country, what body retains the rights to the resources within the EEZ?

There is little precedent for this within international law. In the past, countries have willingly ceded their rights to territory, and their very existence, to another country; East Germany joined the Federal Republic of Germany to become a single German state in 1990. Or, is this a case more akin to the lawfully elected governments of many European states during World War II reconstituting themselves as “governments in exile” in London. If, for example, the government of Kiribati moved its people and leadership to its purchased land in Fiji, would it remain a full Member of the United Nations General Assembly? Would it maintain rights to the resources within its EEZ? Would it be a country? Or would these people simply be migrants to Fiji? The answers to questions like these are not obvious, and are fraught with moral and legal permutations.

These questions of international law would seem to make for an interesting academic exercise, aside from the fact that they present very real challenges for those living through these challenges.

THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LOST ISLANDS

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in funding from China to the South Pacific, an area traditionally dominated by aid from New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.²² In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a state visit to Fiji to herald a closer relationship. China’s efforts in the South China Sea show how much the country values sea borders and maritime control.

There are several geopolitical reasons for the great powers to compete over influence and access to resources.

The first is the global power of many voices speaking as one. Founded in 1990 as the voice of the Small Island Developing States in debates concerning climate change, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) has become a key voice in international climate forums, far outreaching their small population size and economic status. Together, the AOSIS includes 44 states, of which 39 are independent nations with voting status in the UN General Assembly. As China becomes a stronger global player, they have made efforts to portray themselves as a leader of developing countries. By courting favor with this bloc, China could bring a strong voice, with many General Assembly votes, to their side.

Secondly, great powers have recognized the military importance of island bases for centuries. Since the Second World War, the United States has built military infrastructure around the world on islands that now are at risk from sea level rise. Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, for example, is a critical logistics hub for the U.S. and U.K. militaries in the Middle East. On Kwajalein, an island in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific, the United States has invested billions of dollars into significant radar and ballistic missile defenses. Furthermore, both Kwajalein and Diego Garcia are used as ground stations assisting the operations of the Global Positioning System (GPS) navigational system.²³ A sea-level rise of several feet would cause the American military to lose geographically strategic outposts around the world.

CONCLUSION –A RISK NOT LIMITED TO SMALL ISLANDS

If the plight of the small nations of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, or Tuvalu do not rise to the level of great geopolitical crisis, perhaps we should argue instead that they are the canaries in the coal mine. These problems are not unique to small, poor island nations. It is only that they will be forced to deal with them first. Already, in the United States, communities in coastal Louisiana and northern Alaska are reckoning with moving their entire towns because of sea level rise and coastal erosion. The costs are significant.

Not far down the line, however, the great metropolises of the world face similar threats. In the United States, cities such as Miami and New Orleans face an existential threat from sea level rise. Likewise, the low-lying Pearl River Delta region of China, around which China's economic powerhouses of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou are clustered, could see vast swaths of its land submerged. This is not inevitable: prompt action to slow global warming and stop polar ice melt could save these cities. But, if the world fails at the relatively easy and predictable coordinated challenge of evacuating small islands, and solving their legal challenges, we should be pessimistic about solving the real challenges of Atlantis 2.0 that could come decades later.

NOTES

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- 2 Program Manager for Climate Security at the American Security Project
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Climate Change and National Security: **Understanding the threat to prepare for the future**

A compilation of American Security Project research

In Brief

The effects of climate change—extreme weather, droughts, wildfires, sea level rise, flooding, and warming polar oceans—present growing risks to national security. While climate change alone does not cause wars, it contributes to and exacerbates conditions that lead to conflict. Further, extreme storms and changing resources threaten American military installations at home and abroad. As a global power with strategic interests around the world, climate change is strategically important to the U.S. through the impacts it has on U.S. readiness at home and the regional stability of our allies abroad. Addressing the threat is critical to maintaining U.S. national security.

Introduction

The effects of climate change—extreme weather, droughts, wildfires, sea level rise, flooding, and warming polar oceans—present ever-growing risks to national security. The [U.S. National Climate Assessment](#) highlighted these threats in their latest assessment of the state of knowledge on the science of climate change.

The Department of Defense has recognized the threat that climate change could pose in defense planning documents dating to the George H.W. Bush Administration in 1990.

- 1990: [National Security Strategy](#)
- 2008: [National Defense Strategy](#)
- 2010: [Quadrennial Defense Review Report](#)
- 2014: [Quadrennial Defense Review](#)
- 2019: [Report on Effects of a Changing Climate to the Department of Defense](#)

These documents have established that climate change acts as an “accelerant of instability” and a “threat multiplier” in fragile political and security situations; it has created new domains where geopolitical rivals will compete for influence and control; it undermines military readiness; it harms allies and threatens global systems.



American Security Project

Climate change alone does not cause wars. It contributes to conditions of resource scarcity, economic stress, and political instability that often lead to conflict. As a global power with strategic interests around the world, climate change is strategically important to the U.S. through the impacts it has on U.S. readiness at home and the regional stability of our allies abroad.

Threats to Global Security

A changing climate acts as an accelerant of instability around the world, exacerbating tensions related to water scarcity, food shortages, natural resource competition, underdevelopment and overpopulation. The effects of climate change can lead to conditions of instability and even state failure. Such “ungoverned spaces” are noted areas where [terrorist groups](#) grow and thrive. This is not theoretical: there is a strong evidence that global food price increases led to increased political unrest. Studies have also found that groups like [ISIS](#) used the instability in Syria and Iraq to recruit members for its caliphate.

[Preventing Tomorrow’s Climate Wars](#)

[Climate Change and Migration in Central America’s Northern Triangle](#)

[Bay of Bengal – A Hotspot for Climate Insecurity](#)

[Climate Change, Sub-Saharan Africa, and US National Security](#)

[Could the Syrian Conflict be a Symptom of Climate Change?](#)

[Climate Change: The Missing Link in Tackling the Mali Crisis](#)

[Climate Change, The Arab Spring and Food Prices](#)





Great Power Competition

Climate change is not simply a challenge for weak and failing states: it can be used by strong rivals of the U.S. as a new tool for international affairs. The 2018 National Defense Strategy pivots from combatting non-state actors to preparing for conflict with near-peer adversaries. ASP has produced clear [analysis](#) of how climate change may exacerbate vulnerabilities and threats from near-peer adversaries like China and Russia. Every major military around the world is planning for the effects of a changing climate – and will look for asymmetric advantages. Climate change has opened an entirely new domain in the Arctic, where great power politics may yet play a significant role.

[National Defense Strategy: Climate Change in the Age of Great Power Competition](#)

[China's New Arctic Strategy Challenges the U.S. in the High North](#)

[US Withdrawal from Arctic Drilling Cedes Leadership](#)

[Americas Role in the Arctic: Opportunity and Security in the High North](#)

[Global Climate Security Index](#)

Threats to U.S. Military Installations, Readiness, and Operations

The capability of the United States military to protect national security and project power rests on its ability to respond quickly to a crisis at home or abroad. Climate change will impact the ability of the Department of Defense to ensure military readiness. At the installation level, physical changes to the environment will impact the military's infrastructure, including bases, training fields, and airstrips. These add costs and reduce the ability to train and equip. The Department of Defense must prepare for the coming changes by investing in both low-cost short-term solutions, and long-term adaptation strategies.

[MilitaryBaseResilience.org](#)

[Interactive Map: The Vulnerability of America's Military Bases to Climate Change](#)

[Climate Security Report: Climate Change & the Homeland](#)

[Resilience in the Face of Rising Seas: Regional Approaches to Sea Level Rise](#)

[Protecting the Homeland – The Rising Costs of Inaction on Climate Change](#)



Department of Defense Energy Innovation

Technological innovation is critical for retaining U.S. superiority in national security. The Department of Defense (DOD) has continued to develop clean energy technology to maintain superiority and reduce vulnerability. From 2001 until 2010, more than half of the American casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, over 18,000 men and women, were from convoy operations – missions focused on bringing fuel and water to sustain the force in the battlefield. Greater efficiency and alternative fuels allow troops to operate longer in hostile environments. The department has invested \$1.6 billion-a-year alone in energy research and development of clean energy technology to support its operational energy needs and global installations.

[Fact Sheet: Powering the Department of Defense](#)

[Micro Nuclear Reactors: Prospects for Deploying Land-Based Nuclear Energy for the US Military](#)

[Powering Military Bases: DoD's Installation Energy Efforts](#)

[Advanced Biofuels and National Security](#)



The Hidden Driver
*Climate Change and Migration in
Central America's Northern Triangle*



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Perspective

—
Laura Sigelmann

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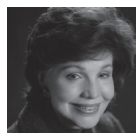
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Vice Admiral Lee Gunn, USN (Ret.)

Vice Admiral Gunn is the President of the Institute of Public Research at the CNA Corporation, a non-profit corporation in Virginia.



The Honorable Chuck Hagel

Chuck Hagel served as the 24th U.S. Secretary of Defense and served two terms in the United States Senate (1997-2009). Hagel was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; and Intelligence Committees.



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John Kerry is a distinguished fellow for global affairs at Yale University. In 2013, Kerry was sworn in as the 68th secretary of state of the United States. Kerry served for more than twenty-five years as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts.



General Lester L. Lyles, USAF (Ret.)

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In this Report:

While individuals have migrated from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador for decades, it is only recently that large numbers of families and unaccompanied minors have migrated to the United States. Migrants from these countries, known as the Northern Triangle, are fleeing local instability and violence, poverty, and drought, among other reasons. As climate change deepens poverty and food insecurity in the Northern Triangle, it is likely that the United States will continue to see a rise in the number of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. This requires a thoughtful and comprehensive overhaul of the U.S. asylum system, significant investment in border infrastructure, and targeted development aid.

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IN BRIEF

- The number of Central Americans crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without appropriate documents has reached a 16-year high.
- Most migrants are families and unaccompanied minors from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador – a region known as the ‘Northern Triangle.’
- Migrants are fleeing many factors, including violence, poverty, and food insecurity.
- Many migrants are from rural areas that are highly susceptible to the effects of climate change.
- Climate change will increase temperatures and reduce precipitation, decreasing crop yields by 30-87% by 2100.
- To address migration, policymakers must understand push factors and adjust the asylum system to meet the needs of the new demographics of migrants.

About the Author

Laura Sigelmann is a third-year dual-degree graduate student at the University of Texas-Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs and Jackson School of the Geosciences. In May 2020, she will graduate with a Master of Global Policy Studies and Master of Energy and Earth Resources. In her studies, Laura has specialized in climate security, with a focus on climate change, migration, and conflict in fragile states.

Introduction

In May 2019, more than 130,000 migrants were apprehended along the U.S.-Mexico border,¹ reaching an 11-year high.² Eighty percent of those migrants were families and unaccompanied minors fleeing Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.³ These three countries make up a region in Central America known as the ‘Northern Triangle’ (Figure 1) – an area with high rates of gang violence, poverty, and food insecurity.⁴ While the area has been politically unstable for decades,⁵ it is only recently that more families and unaccompanied minors than single men have migrated to the United States.

Understanding the trends and motivating factors for migration is critical for managing migrant flows. Several push factors contribute to the decision to migrate, including local instability and violence, poverty, and drought. Oftentimes, migrants move within their country first, only crossing international borders after the situation in their home country deteriorates.⁶ In the Northern Triangle specifically, difficult socioeconomic and security conditions are the primary drivers of migration, while drought, family reunification, and poor governance exacerbate those conditions.⁷



The effects of climate change are worsening the underlying conditions in the Northern Triangle, intensifying food insecurity and undermining families' livelihoods. Repeated droughts since 2014 have destroyed crops and resulted in levels of food insecurity previously unseen in the region; this has contributed to changing migration patterns to the U.S.⁸ Up to 10.6 million people in Latin America could become internal 'climate migrants' by 2050,⁹ stressing the resources of countries that are already insecure and impoverished.

As climate change deepens poverty and food insecurity in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, it is likely that the United States will continue to see a rise in the number of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. This requires thoughtful and comprehensive overhaul of the U.S. asylum system, significant investment in humane border infrastructure, and targeted development aid to the Northern Triangle.

Central American Migration Trends

Prior to 2014, most migrants seeking asylum in the United States were single adult men from Mexico looking to find work.¹⁰ While Mexican men still constitute the largest foreign-born group in the U.S., the number of Mexican immigrants has declined and, in 2016, the number of Central American asylum-seekers surpassed Mexican asylum-seekers.^{11,12}

Based on data from the Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (CAMPI) at the University of Texas, the type and country of origin for migrants has largely changed.¹³ CAMPI compiled data from U.S. and Mexican immigration authorities to create a model for Central American migrants by type and country. The model uses data on apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as statistical assumptions about recidivism and the number of migrants never detected. The model also breaks down inadmissibles by country – inadmissibles are migrants that go directly to ports of entry to seek asylum and are only found in the U.S. context. The data has a few limitations, since Customs and Border Protection (CBP) first published data on unaccompanied minors and families in 2008 and 2012, respectively. Data for U.S. fiscal year 2019 contains information from October to June.

The data elucidates several key trends. Since 2011, and particularly since 2017, migration to the United States from the Northern Triangle has increased rapidly (Figure 2). This is primarily driven by large increases in numbers of migrants from Guatemala and Honduras. From October 2017 to June 2019, the number of migrants entering the U.S. from Guatemala and Honduras increased by 190% and 270%, respectively.

The general increase in numbers of migrants hides a more important trend: the increase in numbers of families and unaccompanied minors. In 2012, families and unaccompanied minors accounted for less than 10% of total migration numbers (Figure 3). Since then, the number of families from the Northern Triangle seeking asylum in the U.S. each year has increased nearly 25,000%, from 1,488 in U.S. fiscal year 2012 to 373,110 in 2019. The number of unaccompanied minors has increased over 440%, from 10,146 in U.S. fiscal year 2012 to 55,109 in 2019. The number of single adults entering the U.S. saw a peak in 2013 and has plateaued around 130,000 per year since.

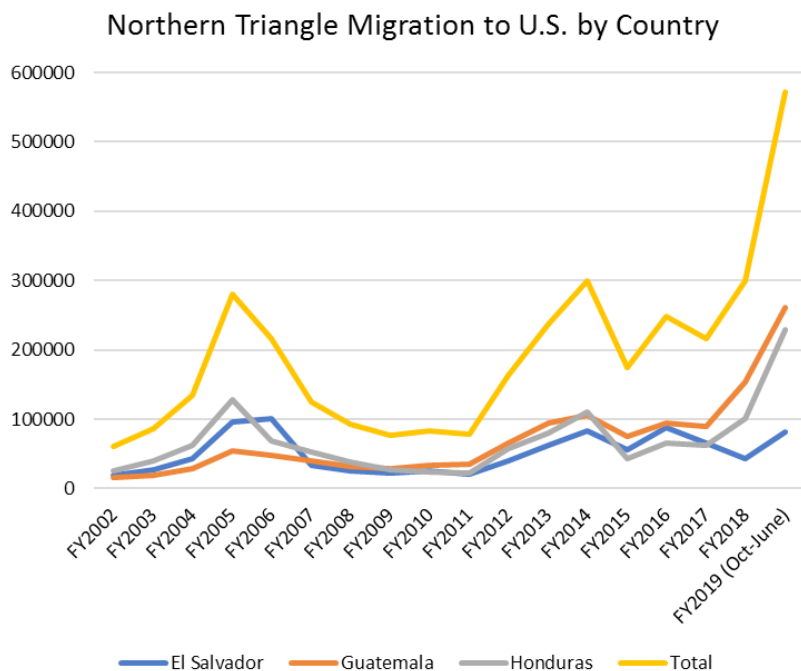


Figure 2 - Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).

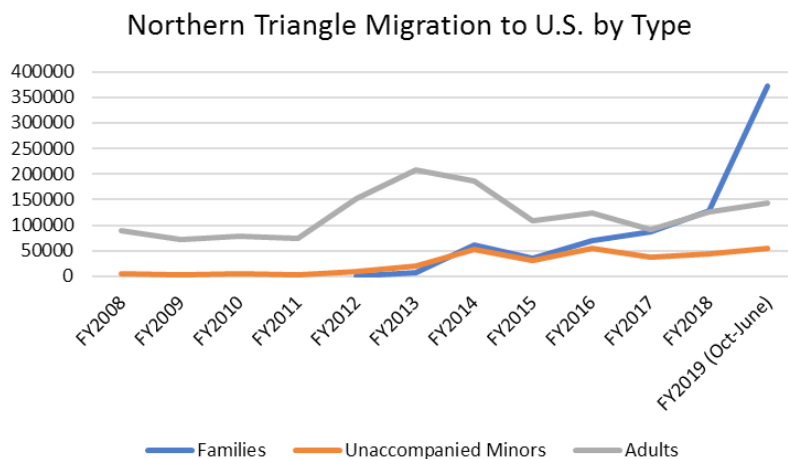
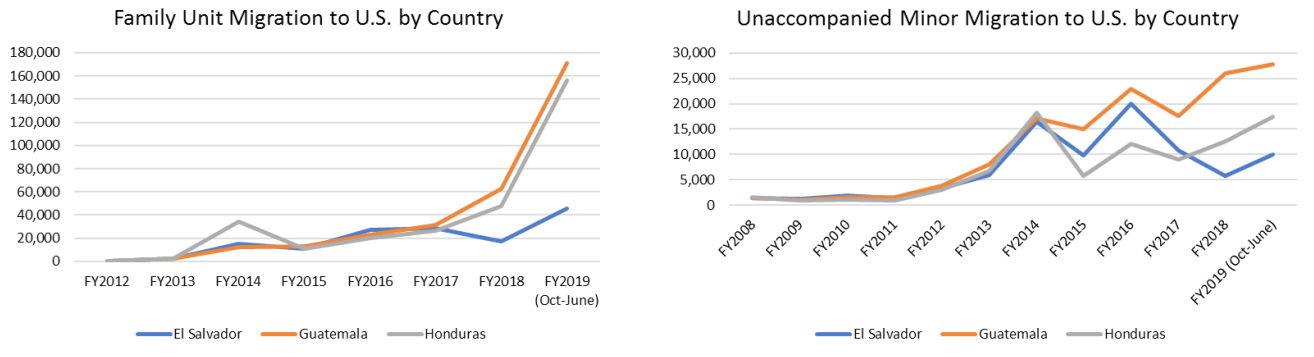


Figure 3 - Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).

Of those families and unaccompanied minors migrating to the U.S., the majority are from Guatemala and Honduras (Figure 4). This trend is particularly clear with family units. In 2015, 32% of family units were from El Salvador, 37% were from Guatemala, and 31% were from Honduras. By 2019, those numbers were 12%, 46%, and 41%, respectively.



Figures 4.1 and 4.2. Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative.

The large increase in family migration is more clearly shown when accounting for the population of origin countries. Figure 5 shows outmigration per 100,000 people, including migrants who did not make the full journey to the U.S. According to the CAMPI model, an average of only 8% of migrants never attempted to enter the U.S., and the trends of migrant types were similar to those ultimately reaching the United States. In 2002, 351 people per 100,000 migrated out of El Salvador. By June 2019, that number had increased to



Figure 5. Data from Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative (Leutert and Spaulding).

1,272 per 100,000, a 260% increase. In Guatemala, the rate of outmigration increased from 168 in 2002 to 1,510 per 100,000 in 2019, a nearly 800% increase. Honduras had an outmigration rate of 407 per 100,000 people in 2002 and 2,415 per 100,000 in 2019, a nearly 500% increase.

Push Factors for Migration

The decision to migrate, leaving one's home country and loved ones, is deeply personal and complex. Many rural migrants first move within their country to large urban areas,¹⁴ only fleeing internationally after socioeconomic or environmental conditions worsen. Urban migrants and those escaping violence frequently migrate directly to the United States. Central American migration is often characterized as mixed – some individuals migrate for economic opportunity, some flee violence, and others escape for a combination of reasons. In 2018, the International Organization for Migration conducted a survey of a Salvadoran “caravan”: nearly 52% cited economic opportunity as their reason to migrate, 18% cited violence and physical insecurity, 2% cited family reunification, and 28% cited a combination of factors.¹⁵ A 2014-2016 World Food Program survey of migrants from the Northern Triangle's dry corridor found that the most frequently cited reason for migration was “no food.”¹⁶ These results demonstrate the complexity of motivations and intertwined nature of factors.

A 2018 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean found that most migrants from the Northern Triangle during the years 2002-2012 came from rural areas.¹⁷ During that time, there was an increase of nearly 59% in irregular migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Irregular migration is the “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination.”¹⁸ Irregularity does not refer to the migrants themselves, but rather to their migratory status, which can change over time. Nearly two-thirds of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador left rural areas and more than half of remittances sent to Guatemala went to rural households.¹⁹ Remittances are private international monetary transfers that migrants make, often sent to family members who remained in their home countries. Only 11% of Honduran returnees went to cities, the remainder returned to rural areas.²⁰ According to the report, most migrants were fleeing food insecurity, climate shocks, lack of economic opportunity, and the erosion of the social fabric of their communities.²¹

The migrants entering the U.S. in 2019 are often vulnerable families and unaccompanied minors fleeing deep poverty and food insecurity in rural regions of the Northern Triangle. Climate change will likely worsen poverty, deepen food insecurity in vulnerable regions, and contribute to deteriorating security conditions, which will accelerate migration and further stress U.S. resources.

Socioeconomic Conditions and Economic Opportunity

All three countries in the Northern Triangle have high poverty rates and lack economic opportunity. Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have poverty rates of 59.3%, 61.9%, and 29.2%, respectively.²² Due to historic colonial rule, land ownership has been concentrated in the hands of a few elites, leaving a legacy of deep inequality.²³ While neoliberalism led to greater macroeconomic stability, those gains have not resulted in improved living conditions for the majority of Northern Triangle residents.²⁴ In rural areas in particular, poverty rates and socioeconomic conditions are worse; 76% of residents in the Western Highlands of Guatemala live below the national poverty line and 27% live in extreme poverty.²⁵ The rural poor are the most sensitive to economic, political, and climate shocks.

All three countries also have large youth populations that are expected to grow. Approximately 54% of Salvadorans, 66% of Guatemalans, and 65% of Hondurans are under the age of 29.²⁶ For people aged 15-29, there is net migration into large cities – defined as 500,000 people and above.²⁷ While this may present an opportunity for economic growth due to the influx of working populations, the lack of employment options²⁸ in the region may leave large populations under- or unemployed. This may lead people to seek informal employment or migrate for economic opportunity.

Additionally, the presence of large unemployed youth populations in cities may create a security risk, further undermining the stability of each country. It is easier for gangs to target and recruit youth without employment options.

Agriculture and Food Insecurity

Rural residents are particularly vulnerable to environmental change in Northern Triangle countries. Guatemala and El Salvador are among the top 15 countries world-wide most exposed to natural disasters, especially earthquakes and droughts.²⁹ Agriculture is the main source of economic activity for approximately one third of all Northern Triangle residents, most of whom grow maize, beans, rice, and coffee.³⁰ Repeated or sudden drought, particularly in the dry corridor (Figure 6), has led to chronic malnutrition in children under 5. In Guatemala, the rate reached 59.6% in rural areas.³¹ Malnutrition drives migration, particularly for families seeking a better life for their children.

Climate change directly impacts agriculture through drought and rainfall variability. Changes in the onset, duration, or intensity of rainfall can destroy crops. Because agriculture is one of the main sources of work for rural farmers, particularly subsistence farmers, drought and the El Niño phenomenon can decimate rural livelihoods.

When harvests are destroyed, rural populations must find alternative livelihoods or apply coping mechanisms.

A recent World Food Programme (WFP) study found that dry corridor residents often apply a variety of coping mechanisms to reduce food insecurity before migrating internationally.³² These can include reducing food consumption, adjusting finances, selling assets or land, and then finally migrating.³³

Levels of food insecurity rose to 32% in the dry corridor of the Northern Triangle following drought in 2014.³⁴ A WFP survey of dry corridor households with a recently emigrated family member found a 47% rate of food insecurity.³⁵ Seventy-two percent of interviewed households had applied at least one emergency coping mechanism to manage food insecurity in their household. The study concluded that for this region in particular, emigration is the ultimate coping strategy to manage food insecurity. One year later, the 2015 El Niño drought phenomenon destroyed 60% of maize and 80% of bean crops, resulting in more than 3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, 1.5 million people affected by food insecurity, and a \$17 million funding gap in Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) aid.³⁶

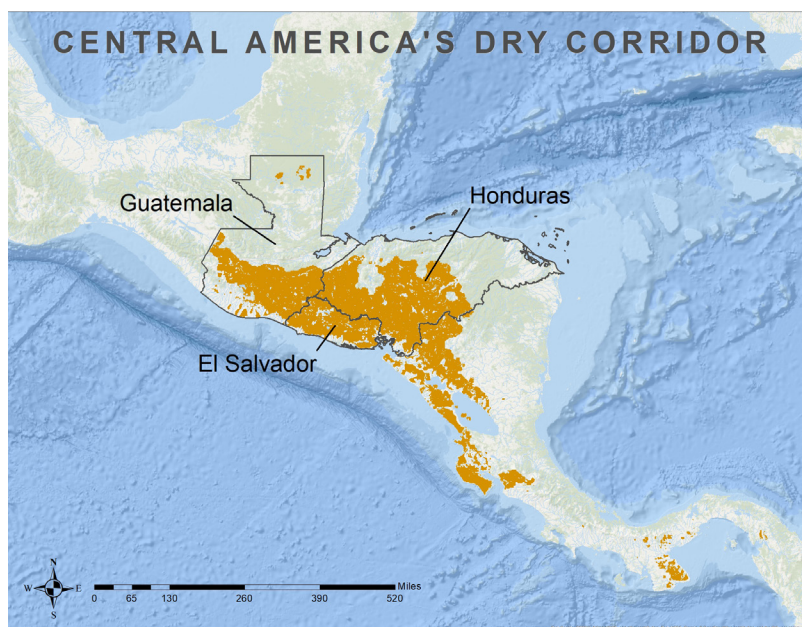


Figure 6. Data from Climate Risk Index (Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical -World Bank and United Nations Environmental Programme, 1999).

In 2018, a delayed start to the rainy season in the dry corridor of the Northern Triangle ruined up to 70% of the first harvest, while excessive rainfall ruined up to 50% of the second harvest.³⁷ The 2019 El Niño phenomenon destroyed more than half the crops of subsistence farmers in the Northern Triangle’s vulnerable dry corridor, leaving an estimated 1.4 million people in need of urgent food assistance.³⁸ These two years correspond to the greatest increase in the rate of Central American migrants traveling to the U.S.

Climate change can also expand the reach of diseases affecting crops. A 2012-2014 outbreak of coffee rust disease hit smallholder farmers particularly hard.³⁹ The disease has a limited temperature range, but increases in nighttime temperatures throughout the Northern Triangle allow the disease to thrive at higher altitudes.⁴⁰

Governance, Security Conditions, and Violence

The Americas have the highest average intentional homicide rate in the world; In 2017, El Salvador had 61.8 homicides per 100,000 people, Honduras had 41.7, and Guatemala had 26.1, compared to the global average of 6.1 (Figure 7).⁴¹ El Salvador is by far the most violent of the three Northern Triangle countries, consistently leading the globe in highest homicide rates. Extortion, violence against women, and kidnapping are also common in the region. The primary driver of crime in Central America is gang activity and drug trafficking.⁴²

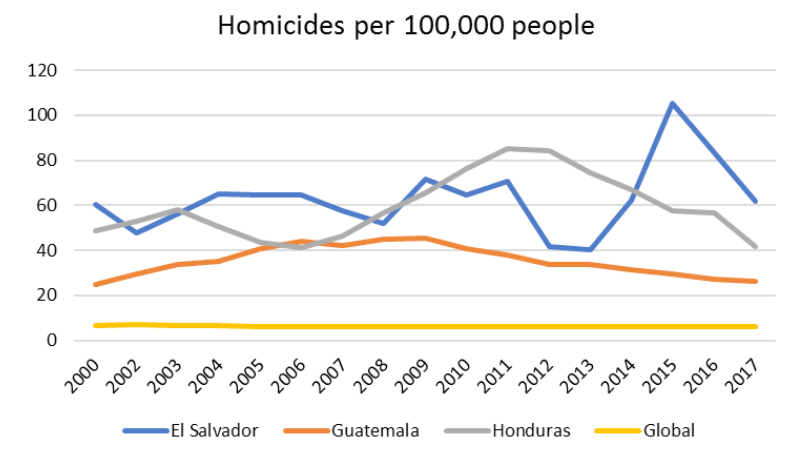


Figure 7. Northern Triangle homicides. Data from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

backslide into deeper corruption.⁴⁵ Weak national institutions have allowed the elites to capture state resources and prevent the implementation of social programs, legal reforms, and climate change adaptation.⁴⁶ The pervasive culture of impunity and democratic backsliding has led to hopelessness in communities⁴⁷ that are already dealing with high crime rates, poverty, and climate change.

Transnational criminal organizations use drug trafficking routes through Central America, often battling one another for control over territory.⁴⁸ Homicide rates rose in the 2000s as the region became the primary transit route for South American narcotics bound for the U.S.⁴⁹ The United States is the primary consumer of South American narcotics, but those affected are in the Northern Triangle.⁵⁰ Gangs also engage in neighborhood turf wars to control illicit markets like drug distribution and extortion. Poor economic prospects, high poverty, and large urban youth populations leave many young people vulnerable to recruitment by such organizations.⁵¹

Most residents change their daily routines out of fear of violence and crime, including: not leaving the house at night, not using public transport, and moving neighborhoods.⁴³ Over one-third of all residents in Honduras and El Salvador considered migrating due to insecurity, and 17% of Guatemalans considered doing the same.⁴⁴

The three countries in the Northern Triangle have a legacy of civil war since the 1980s, and legal, judicial, and correctional institutions have remained fragile since then. Public officials repeatedly fail to address entrenched inequality, and often

As climate change continues to decimate rural livelihoods, more youth may migrate to cities seeking work. If employment is unavailable, youth may turn to the informal sector and gang-related activities. Without robust formal economies, violence and high crime rates are likely to continue throughout the Northern Triangle. Pervasive insecurity is already a driver of mass migration: 40% of Northern Triangle asylum-seekers mentioned direct attacks on themselves or their families as a reason for migration.⁵² As more families are forced to leave rural areas for urban work opportunities, only to find pervasive violence and insecurity, the push factors for migration will grow.

Climate Change in the Northern Triangle

Climate change directly and indirectly influences the three main drivers of migration: socioeconomic conditions, food security, and violence. While climate change may often get wrapped up in explanations such as poverty, economic development, or low wages,⁵³ it is an important underlying influencer – and one that will worsen over time. Given that migrants are already fleeing dangerous conditions, understanding how climate change will affect these conditions is critical for understanding future migrant flows.

Climate change will have two primary effects in the Northern Triangle: decreased rainfall and increased temperature. Annual rainfall has already decreased about 1 mm per day per 50 years from 1950 to 2008.⁵⁴ Global climate models predict decreases between 10% to 50% by 2100.⁵⁵ Evaporation will likely increase⁵⁶ in conjunction with precipitation decreases, further stressing water resources. Rainfall has become increasingly erratic since 1950 and the onset of the rainy season has started later, a trend which is likely to continue. Decreases in precipitation will reduce water runoff, leading to an increased risk of water supply shortages. Such shortages will affect cities' water supply and agricultural production. Deforestation and land degradation have also reduced the resilience of ecosystems, increasing the probability of landslides and biodiversity loss.⁵⁷ These effects will combine to place incredible stress on critical water resources.



Maize in a traditional agriculture field in Guatemala's Western Highlands. USAID photo.

Climate change will also lead to increased warming in the region, a reality which has already been detected - about 0.7°C to 1°C per 40 years since the 1970s.⁵⁸ Central America will experience some of the strongest warming for hot extremes, resulting in increased dryness and reduction in soil moisture.⁵⁹ Temperatures are likely to increase by 1.6°C to 4°C by 2100.⁶⁰ In addition to placing stress on agriculture, increased heat is likely to have significant human health effects such as increased heat-related diseases and vector-borne diseases.

These two trends directly impact agricultural productivity and food security. Central America is currently food insecure, and decreases in rainfall and increases in temperature will likely decrease agricultural productivity in the short- and long- term, further threatening food security, especially for the rural poor.⁶¹ Warming has already reduced Central American wheat, maize, and barley production from 1981 to the present, although the impacts were offset by technological advancements during the same period.⁶² It is not safe to assume the same technological advancements will be made in the future. Food insecurity is a large driver of migration, and climate change will place enormous environmental stress on communities, particularly the rural poor, likely causing more people to migrate north in the future.

Maize, beans, and rice are the primary subsistence crops of the Northern Triangle – nearly 90% of production of those crops is destined for internal consumption.⁶³ All three primary subsistence crops are predicted to have drastic decreases in yield by 2100 (Table 1). Changes in rainfall variability are especially concerning, since untimely droughts or heavy rainfall can easily wipe out entire harvests.

Table 1: Changes in Crop Yield by Year

Crop	Time Period	% Change in Yield
Maize ⁶⁴	2030; 2050; 2070; 2100	0; 0; -10; -30
Beans ⁶¹	2030; 2050; 2070; 2100	-4; -19; -29; -87
Rice ⁶¹	2030; 2050; 2070; 2100	+3; -3; -14; -63
Wheat ⁶⁵	2020-2040	-1 to -9

Data from IPCC Assessment Report 5

Coffee is a significant export crop and source of employment. It is also highly susceptible to climate variations, particularly hot temperatures. Increased temperature will likely reduce coffee production and allow the spread of crop diseases such as coffee rust disease. Coffee rust disease is particularly concerning, and warming nighttime temperatures have enabled it to spread at higher altitudes than before. The 2012-2013 coffee rust disease in Central America affected nearly 600,000 hectares and reduced employment in the coffee sector by 30-40%.⁶⁶ This trend is likely to continue as Central America will warm under most climate scenarios.

Climate effects will also impact socioeconomic and security conditions. Water stress is likely to further entrench socioeconomic disparities, since wealthier elites will continue to have access to water resources while the poor will be unable to meet their basic needs. Vulnerable groups are especially exposed to climate effects, including indigenous peoples and women and children living in poverty.⁶⁷ Decreasing agricultural yields will reduce employment, causing the rural poor to seek other options like migrating to cities or directly to the United States to find work. Those migrating to cities will likely encounter deteriorating security conditions and lack of employment opportunities, leading them to migrate further or join the informal sector. Gangs and organized criminal groups may exploit the vulnerability of rural populations migrating into cities and recruit them into their organizations. In countries where one-third of the population are employed in agriculture, nearly 10.9 million people could lose their livelihoods due to climate change.

U.S. Policy

Over the past five years, the U.S. government has enacted a number of policy responses to address the surge in migration by families and unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border. The most recent policies have aimed to reduce the “pull factors” towards the United States, while earlier policies addressed the “push factors.” Since 2014, the U.S. and Northern Triangle governments have run public awareness campaigns to inform citizens about the dangers of irregular migration, but these campaigns have been unsuccessful⁶⁸ – knowing the dangers of migration and likelihood of deportation does not influence migrants facing existential threats in their home countries.

The U.S. government has traditionally provided foreign assistance to combat smuggling operations and development aid to build economic and government resiliency. Under former U.S. President Barack Obama, the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) provided more than \$1 billion in security assistance to help law enforcement, counternarcotics, and justice reform throughout the Northern Triangle.⁶⁹ Since U.S. FY2014, the Department of State has also allocated more than \$100 million to help Mexico control migration.⁷⁰ In response to the increase in unaccompanied minors in 2014, former President Obama developed a holistic interagency approach to Central America under the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, emphasizing prosperity and regional integration, strengthening governance, and improving security.⁷¹ This was designed to complement a similar approach by Northern Triangle governments and the Inter-American Development Bank.⁷²

The current Trump administration has largely left the strategy in place, albeit with some recent cuts. Since U.S. FY2016, Congress has appropriated nearly \$2.6 billion to promote economic prosperity, improve security, and strengthen governance in the Northern Triangle.⁷³ While there are numerous U.S.-sponsored assistance programs, some have been particularly successful when carefully and thoughtfully targeted. One example, a USAID-financed program called Climate, Nature, and Communities of Guatemala, was launched in 2014 and then cancelled by the Trump administration in 2017. During its implementation period, it showed promising results in helping rural Guatemalans respond to climate change through crop diversification, water conservation, and reforestation.⁷⁴

In 2014, the Obama administration expanded the detention of families awaiting asylum proceedings, building new facilities to house rising numbers of Central American migrants.⁷⁵ Near the end of his term, former President Obama ordered the deportation of recently arrived migrants whose asylum claims had been denied, hoping to deter potential migrants.⁷⁶

In response to the surge in migration, the Trump administration has enacted a policy of “zero-tolerance,” which charges all migrants with the federal crime of irregular entry. Additional actions include:

- Restricting the grounds for asylum claims⁷⁷
- Deploying U.S. troops to the U.S.-Mexico border⁷⁸
- Diverting billions of dollars appropriated for military preparedness towards a border wall⁷⁹
- Separating children from their families⁸⁰
- Revoking Temporary Protected Status for more than 250,000 Northern Triangle immigrants⁸¹
- Threatening tariffs against Mexico if it failed to curb migration⁸²
- Cutting millions of dollars of aid to Northern Triangle countries⁸³
- Standardizing metering at Ports of Entry⁸⁴
- Enacting Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or “remain in Mexico” policies, forcing migrants to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings⁸⁵
- Enacting “safe third country” agreements to force migrants to first apply for asylum in designated countries⁸⁶

- Attempting to modify U.S. asylum rules such that migrants could not apply in the U.S. if they had not first applied for asylum in a country through which they traveled and been rejected⁸⁷
- Attempting to block asylum for migrants crossing between ports of entry⁸⁸

Not only are many of these hardline measures unpalatable for U.S. residents,^{89,90,91} they have not had their intended effect: reducing the number of migrants attempting to enter the United States. Migration, especially by families and unaccompanied minors, continues to grow. Despite a slight decline in asylum claims between May and June 2019, the number of migrants entering the U.S. in FY2019 far exceeds the previous 16 years.⁹² The reason for the inefficacy of these policies is largely due to the type and motivations of migrants. Families and unaccompanied minors fleeing violence, poverty, and starvation are unlikely to be deterred by hardline measures, especially when conditions in their home countries are far worse.

Policy Recommendations

Migrants fleeing violence, poverty, deteriorating security conditions, and starvation in the Northern Triangle have not been deterred by the hardline policies enacted by the Trump administration.^{93,94} This trend is unlikely to change as climate change worsens the underlying conditions in the Northern Triangle. The U.S. asylum system and infrastructure need immediate and robust system-wide changes.

The hardline measures to date have been both ineffective and costly. A 2,000-mile border wall, a cornerstone in the Trump administration’s immigration policy pledges, would cost an estimated \$21.6-\$31.2 billion to build, in addition to the cost of maintaining the wall over time.⁹⁵ The U.S-Mexico border is a diverse region of rivers, remote deserts, rugged terrain, marshlands, and hill country – much of which is private land and would require eminent domain.



A group of 11 migrants, guided by 2 smugglers cross the Rio Grande. US Customs and Border Patrol photo.

Rather than reduce migration, “zero-tolerance” measures force migrants to seek smugglers to cross the border, wait in unsafe border towns, or both. The flow of migrants has not decreased in response to the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance policies.

Revamp and Revitalize Official Border Crossings

There is a clear need to invest in official border crossings and personnel. Restricting official border crossings only encourages irregular migration and forces migrants to rely on smuggling operations, putting money in the hands of organized crime organizations.

The waves of families and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum since 2014 have been presenting themselves at official border crossings or to border patrol agents.⁹⁶ The number of migrant apprehensions per Border Patrol Agent per year reached 23 in 2018, a 93% decrease from the 322 of 1992.⁹⁷



The pedestrian crossing at the Calexico Port of Entry in Southern California. US Customs and Border Protection photo.

There are currently 328 official ports of entry and 48 border crossings overseen by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO). The zero-tolerance policy early in the Trump administration sought to arrest and criminally prosecute every migrant that crossed the border “improperly,”⁹⁸ forcing asylum seekers to cross at official ports of entry. Yet migrant flows were deliberately restricted at ports of entry, preventing asylum-seekers from reaching U.S. soil. This practice is known as “metering” – CBP officers stationed at U.S. ports of entry accept limited numbers of asylum seekers a day.⁹⁹ By creating a structure where migrants are restricted at official ports of entry and spend months in perilous conditions awaiting processing, metering

practices push asylum-seekers towards smugglers and dangerous crossings.¹⁰⁰ In conjunction with the “remain in Mexico” policy, many migrants who have a right to request asylum in the United States are forced to spend significant amounts of time in unsafe and overcrowded Mexican border towns.^{101,102}

CBP OFO currently has a staffing shortage of nearly 4,000 Port of Entry Officers and \$5 billion of unmet infrastructure needs, creating long wait times at official ports of entry and vulnerability in border security systems.¹⁰³ About 81% of hard drugs intercepted along the U.S.-Mexico border between U.S. FY2012 and FY2016 were seized at official ports of entry¹⁰⁴ – investing in infrastructure and staffing at official ports of entry and border crossings would curtail drug trafficking and speed the flow of commerce, while managing intensified migrant flows.

Adapt the Asylum System

The U.S. asylum system is backlogged, convoluted, and lacking critical infrastructure. As of September 28, 2018, the Justice Department’s Executive Office for Immigration Review had 395 immigration judges and a backlog of nearly 2,000 cases per judge.¹⁰⁵ Even asylum cases that resulted in a removal order took more than 500 days to process due to the severe understaffing and backlog of cases. More judges are needed to reduce caseloads and wait times.

The U.S. should abandon “safe third country” requirements and the “remain in Mexico” policy (Migrant Protection Protocol) – both of which aim to prevent migrants from entering the U.S. at all. United States law states that anyone has the right to apply for asylum on U.S. soil even if they entered the country irregularly and not through an official port of entry – a policy which the Trump administration is attempting to undermine.

The U.S. should eliminate metering policies. Restricting the number of migrants able to request asylum at official Ports of Entry only encourages them to cross the border in dangerous, remote areas, often paying smugglers. This money strengthens the same organized criminal groups that traffic drugs into the U.S.¹⁰⁶ Restricting legal pathways to asylum also puts CBP at risk because they must find and escort migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border, including in dangerous regions.¹⁰⁷

Fund Humane Detention Infrastructure

The U.S. must adjust its asylum process for the types of migrants most frequently arriving today, including proper infrastructure for families and unaccompanied minors awaiting approval to seek asylum. The immigration infrastructure was built for single transient males and is not equipped to handle families and unaccompanied minors – as evident by a spate of deaths of children in custody.¹⁰⁸ Facilities lack basic necessities such as soap and are dangerously overcrowded. Facilities built decades ago are struggling to manage the medical and psychological needs of families and children fleeing violence and poverty.¹⁰⁹

The conditions in immigration facilities have sparked international outrage,¹¹⁰ and for good reason. Border detention facilities are overcrowded and unsanitary,¹¹¹ oftentimes keeping basic necessities from migrants. Migrants have said they were unable to shower or brush their teeth and were often packed into cells intended for far fewer people.¹¹² For children separated from their families, conditions are even worse. Several migrant children have died in U.S. custody,¹¹³ while others exhibit signs of malnutrition, dehydration, and psychological trauma.¹¹⁴ Investments in CBP should ensure that immigration infrastructure is appropriate, humane, and sanitary for the new types of migrants seeking refuge in the United States.

Increase Sustainable Development Aid

At a Senate hearing in March 2019,¹¹⁵ Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan stated that the U.S. government should use aid to support Central American governments' efforts to improve economic opportunities, address poverty and hunger, and improve governance. U.S. aid must also be climate-resilient and consider future climate adaptation needs in the Northern Triangle. Addressing the drivers of migration is truly the best sustainable long-term solution. Reducing development aid – a policy already enacted by the Trump administration¹¹⁶ – will exacerbate the underlying drivers of migration.

Migrants are fleeing physical, economic, and food insecurity in the Northern Triangle, and those issues are not homogenous across regions. Using aid to target microeconomic growth and small businesses, sustainable development in vulnerable rural areas, and urban security initiatives would be far more successful than large-scale uniform projects because they address the complex and varied underlying reasons why migrants flee. U.S. development aid must find ways to anchor potential migrants to their communities of origin in immediate and impactful ways.



A participant in a Nespresso agro-forestry programme in Guatemala. Photo courtesy Nestlé / Flickr.

Economic development programs should focus on building human capital and formalized assets in migrant-sending regions. Formalizing savings systems for remittances in the Northern Triangle could bring \$250 million into the financial system annually, creating jobs and economic stability.¹¹⁷ Additionally, development aid should work to reduce informality and implement jobs creation projects targeting small and medium enterprises.¹¹⁸ All initiatives should focus on incorporating youth and women into the workforces, especially with growing youth populations.

Development aid should also target climate-resilient agricultural production in order to reduce the push factors for impoverished rural residents. Such development projects must be rooted in the communities of origin and create sustainable livelihoods, rather than implementing catch-all solutions that are disconnected from their communities.¹¹⁹ One such example is a USAID Climate, Nature, and Communities of Guatemala project, which advanced sustainable forestry management, agroecology, and ecotourism to build climate-resilient livelihoods.¹²⁰

Conclusion

The face of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border is constantly changing: once a single Mexican male seeking temporary employment, now families and unaccompanied minors fleeing violence, poverty, and starvation in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. While the decision to migrate is complex, the lack of economic opportunity, persistent security concerns, and food insecurity are the largest drivers of Northern Triangle migration. Each of these push factors, particularly food insecurity, are likely to worsen in the face of climate change. Increased temperatures and decreased precipitation will further decimate rural livelihoods, leading people to migrate directly to the United States or seek work in insecure and impoverished cities. The situation at the U.S.-Mexico border will only worsen, unless the United States takes concrete action to address the push factors in Central America and the failures of the U.S. asylum system.

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