HOPELESSNESS & CORRUPTION

OVERLOOKED DRIVERS OF MIGRATION FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA

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"People who lack confidence in their governments are more likely to leave their countries in hope of finding better opportunities elsewhere."

Quote from the United States Southern Command Strategy
"Enduring Promise for the Americas"
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

This paper was developed in response to a request from Florida International University to analyze the drivers of migration from Central America. United States Southern Command's strategy *Enduring Promise for the Americas* finds that "[w]eak governance and corruption are among the most important challenges [in the region]."[1] Moreover, "People who lack confidence in their governments are more likely to leave their countries in hopes of finding better opportunities elsewhere."[2]

This work briefly reviews the complex web of factors traditionally considered migration drivers. The authors' interviews with migrants and their own work on anti-corruption efforts in Central America led them to hypothesize that something is missing from this traditional framework. Interviews with migrants in transit suggested that beyond any individual or combination of factors stood a profound lack of hope that the situation in their home country would improve.[3]

The authors hypothesize that persistent government failure driven in large part by corruption produces a sense of hopelessness among Central Americans that contributes to and propels their decision to migrate. The authors conclude that addressing weak governance and corruption helps create a national context in which individuals can see a future in their own country.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper analyzes the drivers of migration hypothesizing that persistent government failure driven in large part by corruption produces a sense of hopelessness among Central Americans that contributes to and propels their decision to migrate. Traditionally, corruption and its contribution to hopelessness have not been studied as drivers of migration. The authors conclude that addressing weak governance and corruption helps create a national context in which individuals can see a future in their own country.

Central Americans from the Northern Triangle countries have a complex set of motivations for migration. Traditionally studied push factors include poverty, violence and natural disasters. Pull factors include economic opportunity/upward mobility, protection, and family reunification.

The weight given to each factor is as varied as the number of people migrating. The intention to migrate is often based on one's calculation of personal challenges and opportunities. Decisions are also influenced by larger social, political, and economic factors. While it is an individual that migrates, it is their experience within their community and nation that informs their decision.

Contextual factors contributing to migration include respect for human rights, governance and corruption. The State Department's human rights reports paint a clear picture of the deplorable human rights situation in each Northern Triangle country and highlights the high level of impunity and, conversely, low expectations for justice that the majority can expect from their governments and justice systems.

According to surveys of both experts and individuals, government corruption and/or the perception of corruption is widespread and endemic across the Northern Triangle. Weak governance can be the result of poor planning, lack of resources, and limited workforce capacity, but in many instances, it is also the result of corruption. While more research is needed, the thrust of the studies cited suggest that corruption can be both a direct and indirect driver of migration.

The authors identify hopelessness as contributing to migration from the Northern Triangle. Since little research has been done in this area, proxies like Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) are considered. Hope, optimism, and SWB are concepts based not only on personal experience, but on one's interaction with and perceptions of broader society. One's experience with endemic corruption can contribute to a sense hopelessness.

The authors argue that endemic corruption in Central America, and the destruction of mechanisms to control corruption, undermine peoples' confidence in government and contribute to a lack of hope that their lives will improve.

While the work done to date is insufficient to establish direct correlations. If the citizens of Central America believe that good governance and anti-corruption measures can be successful and see the results of such efforts reflected in improved healthcare, education, access to education, and justice, it could improve their sense of hope for the future and improve feelings of SWB thus lessening an underlying push factor from Central America. More must be done to address government corruption in the region and to learn about the relationship of hopelessness to migration.

TABLE 1: INTENTION TO MIGRATE LAPOP

	El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
Those who intend to migrate	26%	38%	25%
Of that number, those thought it was very or somewhat likely to happen	68%	80%	67%

Source: LAPOP country studies[4]

TABLE 2: HAVE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED LIVING IN ANOTHER COUNTRY?

El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
37%	16%	37%

Source: Latinobarómetro[12]

INTENTION TO MIGRATE

Determining what factors contribute to an individual's decision to migrate has been a long-standing task for researchers and policymakers. Understanding who is likely to migrate and why suggests how policies can be structured to provide alternatives to migration. It is assumed that in most cases individuals would prefer to stay in their home countries and communities if their basic needs are met and they see a future there.

There are two principal surveys of Latin America that include questions relevant to determining intent to migrate: the Latinobarómetro, and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) based at Vanderbilt University. These surveys allow insight into what drives people to migrate. LAPOP's most recent surveys found the following: *See table 1*

LAPOP's most recent study on El Salvador covers 2018[5] and found that the "intention to migrate" decreased from 36% of those interviewed in 2016 to 26% in 2018. Within the 26% intending to migrate, 68% thought that they were very or somewhat likely to do so. LAPOP found that "Age, followed by the perception on insecurity, and food insecurity are the factors that most explain the intention to migrate." Insecurity and crime victimization had the greatest correlation with the intention to migrate.[6]

In Honduras, LAPOP has preliminary results from its study covering 2019.[7] It found that 44% of those surveyed had recently experienced food insecurity. Twenty percent had been victims of crime in the previous year. Almost 60% of those intending to migrate thought that their economic situation was worse than the year before. Thirty-eight percent intended to migrate in the next three years and 50% of that number thought that migration was very likely to happen. Of those looking to leave, almost 80% thought their migration was somewhat to very likely.

The LAPOP review of Guatemala[8] data from 2019 showed that 20% of those surveyed had been victims of crime in the previous year. While Guatemalans are often considered economic migrants, they rated crime as the country's most serious problem. Twenty-five percent of those interviewed intended to migrate. And, of that group, 39.2% thought it is very likely and 67% thought that it is somewhat to very likely to happen.[9] Interestingly, some scholars have found that being a victim of violence in the last 12 months is not the major driver in Guatemala. This, however, is not the case for Honduras. Scholars ran regressions utilizing the LAPOP 2014 data to determine the drivers of migration.[10] This same study also found that "individuals in El Salvador and Honduras who have experienced crime firsthand multiple times are particularly likely to express intentions to migrate."[11]

Latinobarómetro takes a slightly different approach, asking those surveyed in 2018: *See table 2*

High levels of migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States has been underway for decades. A review of the survey data since 2002 shows those seriously considering migrating from El Salvador to be consistently between 25% and the low 30s. Between 2016 and the most recent year for data 2018, the percentages were between 32-37%.[13]

The percentage of those considering leaving Guatemala was somewhat lower. A review of the data since 2002 shows the top year for intent to migrate was 2005 with 22%. In other years, percentages were consistently in the teens.[14]

Honduras recorded percentages similar to those in El Salvador for those considering migration. In the last three years percentages have ranged between 37 and 40.[15]

A third approach to understanding decisions to migrate is contained in a study titled, *Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk it All*.[16] This study conducted 2,400 in-

TABLE 3: INTENTION TO MIGRATE 2019

	El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
Percentage of surveyed who intend to migrate	24%	33%	18%
Percentage pf those who intend to migrate who cite victimization as a primary motivation	38%	18%	14%
Percentage of those who intend to migrate who cite economics as primary motivation	50%	67%	71%

Source: Creative Associates International[17]

person surveys in 60 of the highest migrant-sending communities in the Northern Triangle and found that in addition to general economic concerns such as unemployment, a pessimistic economic outlook influenced those considering migration. *See table 3*

TRADITIONAL DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

Migration from the Central America region is generally classified as "mixed migration." This means that migration has a variety of motivations and that individuals included in a singular migrant flow may fall under different legal protections (i.e., some may be considered refugees while others may not).[19]

Furthermore, drivers of migration are generally divided into two broad categories: push factors and pull factors. Common push factors include lack of employment, lack of economic opportunity, violence and threats of violence, and personal insecurity. Common pull factors include prospects for improved employment opportunities abroad, desire for family reunification, and greater security.

The 2020 World Migration Report found that, "Violence and insecurity, poverty and family reunification remain important drivers of migration from Central America."[20]

PUSH FACTORS

Poverty

High poverty rates in Central America have long been a leading push factor in the region. According to the World Bank's data set, poverty in the Northern Triangle is as follows (using the most recent year available): El Salvador

22.8% (2019); Honduras 48.3% (2018); Guatemala 59.3% (2014).[21] High poverty rates in these countries is endemic.

A more detailed analysis of Central American poverty indicators is provided below, which was compiled by the Seattle International Foundation. *See table 4*

Additionally, the *Saliendo Adelante* report found that economic factors where the principal reasons given for decisions to migrate by those surveyed.[23] Among the top economic reasons were unemployment, household earnings, and a pessimistic economic outlook. The report concluded that, "Believing that their household's economic situation is on the decline is an interestingly strong indicator of migration. This is particularly true in high migration municipalities in Honduras, where believing that the household is worse off than it was the previous year makes individuals 1.5 times more likely to consider migrating."[24]

Violence

El Salvador and Honduras have consistently reported some of the highest homicide rates in the world for countries not at war. While the number of murders in each country has been decreasing of late, they remain significantly above the regional average, and Honduras witnessed an uptick in 2019. With murder rates expressed per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador was at a worldwide high of 105 in 2015, decreasing to 52 in 2018, and 36 in 2019. Honduras was the global leader in 2011 at 83.8 per 100,000 inhabitants, dropped to 38.9 in 2018, then ticked up again in 2019 to over 40 per 100,000.[25] Guatemala has a comparably lower homicide rate problem, with a high of 45 in 2009 declining to 22.5 in 2018.[26] *See table 5*

Yet violence and victimization in this region go well beyond homicides. Violence against women and domestic violence are widespread and often are unreported or unpunished. In fact, the Northern Triangle Countries have some of highest incidence of *femicides* in the region. According to statistics gathered by a private marketing firm (Statista) El Salvador and Honduras had the highest femicide rates of 6.8/100,000 and 5.1/100,000 respectively with Guatemala coming in fifth with a rate of 2.[28] According to *UN Women*, 1 in 5 (21.2%) of Guatemalan women between the ages of 15 and 49 and in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. In Honduras, the rate is 27.8% and in El Salvador 14.3%.

The impact of gangs and organized crime are also profound. According to two separate estimates made by SOUTHCOM and the UN Office of Drugs and Crime there are roughly 60 to 70,000 youth gang members in the

TABLE 4: POVERTY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Multidimensional														
	Multidimensional Poverty Index		Population in Multidimensional Poverty							Contribution of Deprivation in Dimension to Overall Multidimensional Poverty			Population Living Below Income Poverty Line (%)	
	Year and Survey	Index	Headcount	Intensity of Deprivation	Number of Poor (Year of the Survey)	Number of Poor (2017)	Inequality Among the Poor	Population In Severe Multidimensional Poverty	Population Vulnerable to Multidimensional Poverty	Health	Education	Standard of Living	National Poverty Line	PPP $1.90 a Day
Country	2007–2018	Value	(%)	(%)	(Thousands)	(Thousands)	Value	(%)	(%)		(%)		2007–2018	2007–2017
El Salvador	2014	0.032	7.9	41.3	494	501	0.009	1.7	9.9	15.5	43.1	41.1	29.2	1.9
Guatemala	2014/2015	0.134	28.9	46.2	4,694	4,885	0.013	11.2	21.1	26.3	35.0	38.7	59.3	8.7
Honduras	2011/2012	0.090	19.3	46.4	1,642	1,788	0.013	6.5	22.3	18.5	33.0	48.5	61.9	17.2
Nicaragua	2011/2012	0.074	16.3	45.2	956	1,011	0.013	5.5	13.2	11.1	36.5	52.4	24.9	3.2

Source: World Bank[22]

Northern Triangle. These estimates are between 8 and 10 years old but a general sense of the extent of the problem. These gang members are subdivided into countless "cliques" or local groups rooted in communities and neighborhoods. Some claim membership in larger gang networks – such MS-13 or Calle 18, but many other groups develop their own identity and operate solely in their neighborhood or a particular part of a neighborhood.[30]

Regardless of the numbers, the gangs exercise enormous control at the local level. From recruitment of children as young as eight or nine, to extorsion of all economic activity in a community, the gang presence in a community can be pervasive. Furthermore, there are communities and areas where government does not provide security or effective public services, and criminal groups become a substitute for the state essentially exercising territorial control. In *MS-13: The Making of America's most Notorious Gang*, Steven Dudley describes the gang as, "a threat that trades on its reputation for brutal murders, which has helped make Central America one of the most violent regions in the world and has devastated many US communities... But the MS-13 is also greatly misunderstood....it is a hand-to-mouth organization whose criminal economy is based mostly on small-time extortion schemes and petty drug dealing, not international drug trafficking or sophisticated corruption."[31]

Saliendo Adelante also found that crime victimization was cited as a primary motivation for migration among 38% of those surveyed in El Salvador, 14% in Guatemala, and 18% in Honduras. Those citing victimization as a primary factor included "personal exposure to homicides," robbery, and extortion as primary factors. Of the high migration-sending communities, the study found that, "having been a victim of a crime or having a family member or someone close to you who has been makes an individual 1.5 times more likely to consider migrating."[32]
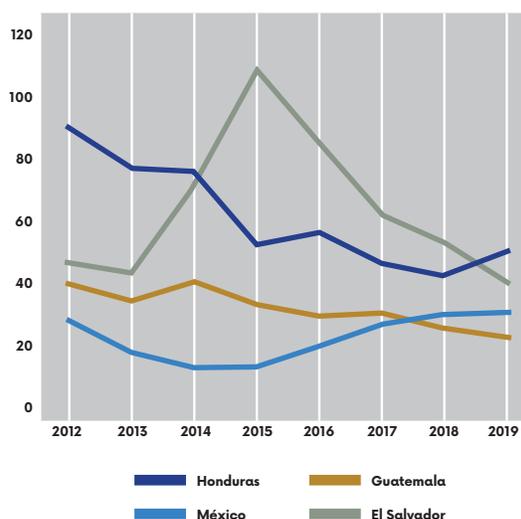
Natural Disasters

According to The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Latin America is the second most disaster-prone region in the world.[33] The Northern Triangle is subject to earthquakes, volcanic activity, hurricanes, and flooding.

The most recent natural disasters to hit the Northern Triangle were hurricanes Eta and Iota in early November 2020. Both category 4 storms at landfall, produced extensive rainfall, wind damage, flooding, and landslides. The storms impacted 7.3 million in Central America, according to OCHA.[34] At least, 183,000 homes were lost or damaged in Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The effect of these storms will likely impact outmigration in the coming months, especially in Honduras where flooding was widespread. In response to the storms' impact the U.S. extended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Hondurans in the United States until October 2021.[36]

In contrast, drought is the type of ongoing natural disaster that has impacted the most people in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years. In Central America, the area impacted by drought is known as the "dry corridor" which passed through the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua. OCHA found that the following number of people were impacted by drought in this region between 2000-2019. *See table 6*

Additionally, increased weather volatility is one aspect of climate change with a direct impact on migration. The *World Migration Report* found that "climate change may have played a role in recent migration dynamics in Central America, with a significant number of people who were part of the caravan, for example, engaged in activities such as agriculture, forestry, cattle raising and fishing prior to embarking on the journey northward."[38] Climate turbulence does not bode well for Central America, where extreme storms and drought likely already contribute to outmigration.

TABLE 5: HOMICIDE RATE – NORTHERN TRIANGLE AND MEXICO[27]

Source: World Bank and Insight Crime[27]

TABLE 6: PEOPLE IMPACTED BY DROUGHT BETWEEN 2000-2019 (IN MILLIONS)

	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras
Total Population	7.1	16.9	9.8
Impacted by drought	1.4	55.7	1.5

Source: UNOCHA[37]

Furthermore, it is widely believed that those practices contributing to climate change (e.g., deforestation and poor land use regulation) exacerbate the impact of natural disasters, further aggravating the environmental, economic, and human impacts that drive migration. For example, a post-hurricane Mitch assessment found that, "[w]hat turned Mitch from a natural hazard to a human disaster was a chain reaction of social vulnerabilities created by long-term climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, social inequality, population pressure, rapid urbanisation and international debt."[39]

PULL FACTORS

Economic Opportunity/Upward Mobility

While poverty in the Northern Triangle is a principal push factor from the region, the corresponding pull factor in the United States is economic opportunity.

The federal minimum wage in the U.S. in 2020 is $7.25 an hour, with many states now paying $15. The average wage for construction work, long a staple of immigrant employment, is nearly $15 an hour, even in many states without a $15 minimum wage.[40]

The minimum wage, for those with steady employment in Honduras is approximately $1 to $1.50 an hour.[41] While varying somewhat, El Salvador and Guatemala are in a similar range. Furthermore, according to the International Labor Organization (ILOSTAT) the share of informal

employment in Guatemala and Honduras is just over 80%, dropping to 68% in El Salvador.[42] Women are more heavily represented in the informal sector than are men so disruptions in the informal sector fall heaviest on women and children who are generally more dependent on a women's income than men's. In each case, however, informal sector workers are exceptionally vulnerable to natural and human disasters such as the pandemic and recent hurricanes. Furthermore, an inadequate social safety net, caused in part by systemic corruption, greatly exacerbates the impact of economic downturns.

In this context of economic and social vulnerability, remittances are a huge part of the Northern Triangle economies and provide a lifeline for many Central Americans. In 2018, 21.4% of El Salvador's GDP came from remittances, 20% of Honduras, and 12% in Guatemala.[43] Most of these remittances come from family in the United States. The steady flow of remittances is felt by those on the receiving end and seen by everyone in their communities. As those who receive remittances expand and/or improve their houses, or buy appliances, there is a constant reminder in the broader community that economic opportunity lay to the north.

Protection

Thousands of Central Americans flee to the U.S. seeking protection from violence and persecution in their home countries. Not all meet the criteria for asylum, but it is clear that many view the United States as place where they can be safe, thrive, and potentially reunited with family. As General John Kelly once said while Commander of U.S. Southern Command, " "In many ways [parents] are trying to save their children" from the violence in their own countries.[44] Even though the Trump Administration has made it almost impossible for Central Americans to cross the US/Mexico border and apply for, no less win political asylum, the dream of finding protection in the United States dies hard.

Failing U.S. Immigration System

The Trump Administration and its congressional allies have argued vociferously that a failing U.S. immigration system and a porous U.S.-Mexico border have been a principle pull factors in Central American migration. Rather than addressing conditions in Central America that are propelling migration, they have emphasized that Central American migration is propelled by lax border enforcement, loopholes in immigration laws, and a chaotic and uncontrolled border. In a May 2019 written statement issued by the White House, the President says, "The United States is a great country that can no longer be exploited due to its foolish and irresponsible immigration laws. For the sake of our people, and for the sake of our future, these horrendous laws must be changed now."[45] And in April 2018 the White House released a written statement stating, "Catch and release has allowed an influx of illegal aliens to enter and remain in the United States and only encourages more and more illegal immigration."[46]

While the authors recognize that the U.S. immigration system is very inefficient and in need of significant reform, we do believe these failings are a major cause, or pull factor for Central American irregular migration.

Family Reunification

Migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States has been so significant in recent years that 20% of households throughout the region receive remittances from family members.[47] Remittances most often come from first generation migrants. Two-thirds of the respondents in the survey by Creative Associates International, which focused on sending communities in the three countries, had family in the United States. However, only three percent of respondents cited family reunification as their primary reason for migrating.

Many things encourage people to consider leaving their homeland. Latinobarómetro concluded that "People who have been victimized previously, who believe the national economy is in poor shape, who have relatives living abroad, and who have weak ties to home are - much more likely to express a preference for going abroad. In conclusion, positive life experiences and perceptions matter. The simple truth is that, generally speaking, those who are not happy are more inclined to express a desire to "vote with their feet.""[48]

Academic surveys provide important data points, but they do not reflect the sense of cumulative despair that can be at play. The Social Action Commission of the Mennonite Church in Honduras interviewed migrant caravan participants in the fall of 2020 asking why they were leaving. The majority responded, "there is nothing in this country, I lost family to Covid-19, there isn't work, (and) the illegitimate government has overwhelmed us [literally - *el usurpador nos tiene agobiados*]."[49]

In summary, there are a variety of push and full factors driving migration. The weight given to each factor is as varied as the number of people migrating. Intentions to migrate is often based on an individual's calculation of the various challenges and opportunities someone experiences and can reflect very individual decisions influenced by larger social, political, and economic factors. While individuals migrate, it is their experience within their own community and nation that informs their decision making. This study points to other factors for consideration as drivers of migration - hopelessness which can be fed by the individuals' experience with government failure due to endemic government corruption.

BROADER CONTEXTUAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO MIGRATION

Beyond the traditional push and pull factors impacting individual decisions to migrate, there are several broader issues that can be missed or are obscured by traditional surveys of migrants, or those likely to migrate. These factors are the broader backdrop to individual considerations of migration and include such factors as political instability, general human rights conditions, trust in democratic institutions, and corruption.

Human Rights Context

Human rights violations, lack of public security, and inadequate justice systems are both direct and indirect contributors to migration, as many of those coming to the US apply for political asylum. Between 2017 and 2019 the Northern Triangle countries were among the top five nations to apply affirmatively and defensively for political asylum.[50] The following excerpts are taken from the Department of State's "2019 Country Report on Human Rights," documents frequently used in the defense of asylum claims by migrants in the U.S.

EL SALVADOR

Significant human rights issues included: allegations of unlawful killings of suspected gang members and others by security forces; forced disappearances by military personnel; torture by security forces; arbitrary arrest and detention by the PNC; harsh and

life-threatening prison conditions; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; widespread government corruption; violence against women and girls that was inconsistently addressed by authorities; security force violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals; and children engaged in the worst forms of child labor.

Impunity persisted despite government steps to dismiss and prosecute abusers in the security forces, executive branch, and justice system.

Organized criminal elements, including local and transnational gangs and narcotics traffickers, were significant perpetrators of violent crimes and committed acts of murder, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, intimidation, and other threats and violence directed against police, judicial authorities, the business community, journalists, women, and members of vulnerable populations. In some cases, authorities investigated and prosecuted persons accused of committing crimes and human rights abuses.[52]

HONDURAS

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; torture; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; killings of and threats to media members by criminal elements; criminalization of libel, although no cases were reported; widespread government corruption; and threats and violence against indigenous, Afro-descendent communities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons.

The government continued to prosecute and punish officials who committed abuses, but a weak judicial system and corruption were major obstacles to gaining convictions.

Organized criminal elements, including local and transnational gangs and narcotics traffickers, were significant perpetrators of violent crimes and committed acts of homicide, torture, kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, intimidation, and other threats and violence directed against human rights defenders, judicial authorities, lawyers, the business community, journalists, bloggers, women, and members of vulnerable populations. The government investigated and prosecuted many of these crimes, particularly through the HNP's Violent Crimes Task Force.[53]

GUATEMALA

Significant human rights issues included: harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; substantial problems with the independence of the judiciary, including malicious litigation and irregularities in the judicial selection process; widespread corruption; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats thereof targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons, persons with disabilities, and members of other minority groups; and use of forced or compulsory or child labor.

Corruption and inadequate investigations made prosecution difficult. The government was criticized by civil society for refusing to renew the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala's (CICIG) mandate, which expired on September 3. Impunity continued to be widespread for ongoing human rights abuses, endemic government corruption, and for mass atrocities committed during the 1960-1996 internal armed conflict.[54]

The excerpts above paint a clear picture of the deplorable human rights situation in each country of the Northern Triangle and highlight the high levels of impunity and, conversely, low expectations for justice the majority poor and powerless can expect from their governments and justice systems.

GOVERNANCE AND CORRUPTION

Weak and ineffective governance suggests that democratic institutions are not functioning as they should, and basic public needs are not being met. Weak governance means that countries like Honduras were grossly unprepared to evacuate, shelter, and meet the humanitarian needs of its people when two category four hurricanes struck the country within a few days of each other in November 2020 causing massive flooding, wind damage, and landslides and displacing an estimated 4.3 million Hondurans.

Weak governance can be the result of poor planning, lack of resources, and limited workforce capacity. There is also significant research that highlights the links between ineffective governance and a country's economic and political elite. Poor governance is not simply the lack of resources or a capable workforce but the byproduct of corruption at a grand or systemic scale that goes beyond the actions of one "rotten apple"

and involves intentional state capture by economic and political elite, using the state for their narrow self-interest. These relationships were extensively documented by Insight Crime in a 2016 series of studies entitled, "Elites and Organized Crime."[55]

Evidence of elite corruption are easily identifiable now as well. This is the case in Honduras where prosecutions underway in the United States have linked Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernandez to alleged conspiracies to traffic illicit drugs into the United States.[56] Additionally, audits performed by two separate Honduran civil society organizations uncovered significant corruption in the government's response to COVID. For example, the National Anticorruption Council (CNA) issued 14 reports during 2020 under the banner "Corruption in Times of Covid-19,"outlining both price-gauging and misuse or loss of government resources during the pandemic.[57] Among other things, CNA documented how the Honduran government paid for seven mobile hospitals that were overpriced, received late, and two have never been delivered.[58]

CNA´s reporting, along with other reports by the Asociación para una Sociedad Mas Justa (ASJ) in the departure of the directors of COPECO, the country's emergency preparedness agency, and INVEST-H, a semi-autonomous government contracting agency . As a result of the upheaval within COPECO the government moved to name as the new head of the agency a celebrity known for his *reggaeton* music and identified by his stage name *Killa*. He admitted from the start that he was unfamiliar with emergency preparedness and response, and COPECO was roundly criticized for mishandling their early response to the hurricanes.

Whether or not an individual is personally impacted by weak governance and corruption, the existence of widespread corruption creates a general lack of confidence in government and depresses expectations for the future.

Corruption and perceptions of corruption are manifest and measured in multiple ways. Transparency International (TI) defines corruption as, "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain."[59] For this paper we focus on corruption as employed by public officials, or state corruption. The Northern Triangle countries have a serious and sustained corruption problem based both on perception and victimization data.

TI ranks the nations of the world based on "how corrupt a country's public sector is perceived to be by experts and business executives."[60] Rankings for the most recent year are from 2018. On a scale of 1-100, 100 being no corruption,

Guatemala receives a score of 27; Honduras 29, and El Salvador 35. In recent years each of these countries have consistently scored near or below the bottom third of countries in the corruption perception index.

Additional well-respected efforts to measure corruption by country are found in the work of the *World Justice Project with their Rule of Law Index*, and their measure of the "Absence of Corruption." The World Bank has also developed a series of measures it includes in its World Governance Indicators for "Rule of Law," and "Control of Corruption." *Table 7* summarizes some of their findings for Central America and links to their studies.

The LAPOP survey takes a different approach to corruption measurement, asking the individuals surveyed about their experience with victimization and how they perceive a variety of institutions in relation to corruption. *See table 8*

Latinobarómetro asks how much trust people have in their government. Their survey from 2018 found an almost total lack of faith in government. *See table 9*

Examining the Latinobarómetro survey for these countries since 2002, one finds that people's overall rating of the trustworthiness of their national government was almost never above 50%. In other words, the problem of government corruption and/or its perception is widespread and endemic across the Northern Triangle.

CORRUPTION AND MIGRATION

If experiences of abuse and perceptions of corruption cast doubt on the legitimacy of government, what are the connections between corruption and intentions to migrate? While this question has not been extensively researched, especially in the Northern Triangle, there are several studies conducted in other parts of the world that begin to suggest a link.

A 2013 study published by the Center for International Economics, entitled, *The Effect of Corruption on Migration, 1985-2000*, compiled data relevant to 111 countries. It found, "Robust evidence indicates that corruption is among the push factors of migration, especially fueling skilled migration."[64]

TABLE 7: PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Country	Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index Score (Rank)	World Justice Project Rule of Law Index Score (Rank)	World Justice Project Rule of Law Index – Absence of Corruption Score (Rank)	Worldwide Governance Indicators – Rule of Law Percentile Rank	Worldwide Governance Indicators – Control of Corruption Percentile Rank
Honduras	26/100 (146/198)	0.40 (116/128)	0.32 (114/128)	15.38	23.08
Guatemala	26/100 (146/198)	0.45 (101/128)	0.34 (108/128)	13.94	18.75
Nicaragua	22/100 (161/198)	0.39 (118/128)	0.34 (105/128)	9.62	12.5
El Salvador	34/100 (113/198)	0.49 (84/128)	0.38 (98/128)	23.56	32.69
Source	Transparency International	World Justice Project	World Justice Project	World Bank	World Bank

Source: National Disasters and Reconstruction, Seattle International Foundation[61]

A 2017 study published by Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)[65], attempts to establish a theoretical framework to explain the link between corruption and migration. The study is based on two case studies, both in Africa, although the findings are presumed to be more generally relevant. They found that the indirect influence of corruption on migration was much stronger than the direct links. Indirectly, corruption had an impact many aspects of human security (e.g., health, food, environmental, economic, etc.) and therefore can underlie many reasons for migration.

In 2015, a study published by the Migration Policy Institute, found:

> The desire to move abroad is often driven by a lack of faith in local opportunities. If corruption and nepotism are perceived to undermine meritocracy, it is a plausible reaction to turn towards opportunities elsewhere, especially among the highly skilled. This direct effect on individual migration decisions comes in addition to the negative *indirect* impacts of corruption on the economy or on security. Widespread corruption can hamper economic development and undermine the rule of law. The resulting poverty and insecurity can in turn stimulate the wish to leave.

More specific to Central America, the Center for American Progress published a paper in 2019 that found:

> A combination of democratic backsliding, deepening corruption and state capture, and weak institutions has meant that national and regional elites in Central America and Mexico are uninterested in and unwilling to invest in social

programs, undertake much-needed law and justice reforms, and help communities battered by climate change manage erratic weather patterns and crop failure. This pervasive impunity and indifference has sown hopelessness in societies already struggling with staggering violence and high unemployment. The resulting desperation and pessimism have contributed to high migration levels even in countries where levels of violence have improved in recent years—for example, Honduras, where migrant flows have increased even though homicides have dropped significantly since 2016.[67]

While more research must be conducted in Central America to draw strong conclusions, the thrust of the studies cited suggest that corruption can be both a direct and indirect driver of migration. Given the elevated perceptions of corruption in the Northern Triangle, serious investigations into networks of corruption embedded in many government institutions including legislatures in Guatemala and Honduras, and even among Heads of State in all three countries, it is not surprising that public trust in government is low. As a Honduran mother told one of the authors in a migrant shelter in Southern Mexico, "I have no faith that the government will resolve any of our problems. Every day we hear of corruption at the highest levels in our government. The politicians are not going to make things better. They just want to steal from us."[68]

TABLE 8: VICTIMIZATION AND PERCEPTION OF CORRUPTION

	El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
Have been victims of corruption in the last 12 months	12%	25%	19%
Believe that all politicians are corrupt	32%	42%	N/A
Believe that corruption of government functionaries is very generalized	48%	40%	61%

Source: LAPOP[62]

TABLE 9: HOW MUCH CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE (IN THE GOVERNMENT)?

	El Salvador	Honduras	Guatemala
Little to none	80%	78%	79%

Source: Latinobarómetro[63]

HOPELESSNESS, SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING, AND MIGRATION

In recent years scholarly research attempting to measure happiness and Subjective Well-Being have expanded along with our understanding of how these difficult to measure concepts impact decision making and the effectiveness of public policy.

Hopelessness is the term that the authors have chosen to describe the sentiment they found reflected in personal individual interviews with migrants. Merriam-Webster defines hopelessness as, "having no expectation of good or success."[69] Furthermore, that hopelessness, "suggests despair and the cessation of effort or resistance, and often implies acceptance or resignation."

Since feelings of hopelessness have not been the focus of migration surveys, the authors have tried to find proxies for this concept in academic work. A few studies have assessed happiness and despair in relation to migration, but this research field is new. Much of the work already done measures happiness post-migration, attempting to learn if migration increases happiness.[70]

Research by Carol Graham and Julie Markowitz, entitled the *Aspirations and Happiness of Potential Latin American Immigrants*, was an early attempt [2011] to look at the issue of happiness and migration in Latin America. It is based on the Latinobarómetro survey questions about "intent to migrate" as a surrogate for actual migration. The study finds that, "The profile of Latin American emigrants provided suggests they are unhappy with their current situation prior to migrating, above and beyond considerations of wealth level, fears of unemployment, and feelings of insecurity (such as being a crime victim)."[71] This is relevant because it supports "the hypothesis that unhappiness drives migration"[72] and

suggest that happiness or hopefulness is likely based on factors beyond individual personal experience.

Graham and Julia Ruiz Pozuelos conducted a survey looking at hope in young adults in Peru.[73] They found that youth had a high level of optimism even though they had experienced negative shock, like being a victim of theft, a parent leaving the home or family illness. The young adults' optimism seemed based on more than their personal experience with difficulty but with broader societal factors or interaction, in this case positive factors.

Another concept relevant to the intersection of migration, governance, and corruption is Subjective Well-Being (SWB), generally considered a measure of happiness. SWB tries to assess how people feel about their lives. It is based on self-reported happiness or life satisfaction. This field has taken on policy relevance "among researchers, politicians, national statistical offices, the media, and the public. The value of this information lies in its potential contribution to monitoring the economic, social, and health conditions of populations and in potentially informing policy decisions across these domains."[74] It is one way to analyze and measure the intersection between individual and society level experience.

A 2014 study on international migration and SWB that was not Latin America specific found that "individuals with higher SWB have lower international migration desires. At the individual level, the SWB-migration relationship appears to be more robust than the income-migration relationship."[75] This would be an interesting area for further investigation in the Americas.

Factors that are traditionally considered drivers of migration, personal experience with crime, violence and lack of work, are only part of the complex interplay of factors that lead to migration. Hope, optimism, and SWB are concepts that are formed based not only on

personal experience, but on one's interaction with and perceptions of broader society. While the work done to date is insufficient to establish direct correlations, it does show possible links between corruption and migration. It strongly suggests that more can be learned about these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors that contribute to migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States. While this paper reviews the established pull and push factors effecting Central American migration, the authors have hypothesized that the profound sense of hopelessness they found when interviewing migrants likely reflected their sense of diminished Subjective Well-Being, influenced by personal experience and their interaction with the broader society.

Generalized human rights abuses and impunity along with weak and ineffective governance contribute to feelings of pessimism about the future. Additionally, serious problems of systemic corruption, including at the highest levels of government, is an especially important factor influencing trust in government, regime legitimacy, and depressing feelings of SWB. The authors argue that endemic corruption in Central America, and the destruction of mechanisms to control corruption, undermined peoples' confidence in government and contributed to a lack of hope that their lives will improve.

These negative conclusions suggest several positive steps that should be taken. If the citizens of Central America believe that good governance and anti-corruption measures can be successful and see the results of such efforts reflected in improved healthcare, education, access to education, and justice, it could improve their sense of hope for the future and improve feelings of SWB thus lessening an underlying push factor from Central America. More must be done to address government corruption in the region.

Furthermore, because SWB is an increasingly valuable tool for understanding social problems and their solutions, more should be done to understand the relationship between SWB and the drivers of migration.

The good news is, as Dr. Carol Graham, leader of much of the relevant research about happiness, has said, "You can change people's perceptions of hope."[76]

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