

WHY ARE PEOPLE FLEEING NOW?

Voices in Congress and the media have attempted to discredit the idea that violence in Central America is the key factor pushing hundreds of thousands of Central Americans from their homes. While it is true that Central America has struggled with endemic violence over the last decade, falsely conflating U.S. immigration policies with the current humanitarian crisis in Central America demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding about how displacement happens and evolves.

Violence

1. Community leaders in both Honduras and El Salvador report gangs have grown more aggressive in recent months, instituting “join or die” policies <http://tpr.org/post/streets-honduras-look-what-driving-thousands-children-us> in some neighborhoods.
2. While 2011 was reported to be the peak year for the homicide rate in Honduras (a country that continues to hold the dubious distinction of having the highest murder rate in the world for four straight years) the rate of forced disappearances increased in 2013 (reported disappearances of women and girls increased by 281% in 2013 when compared to data from 2008: <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582>), leading analysts to conclude that the homicide rate may not have actually gone down but rather that victims’ bodies are being disposed of more discretely or that government data was being manipulated.
3. In El Salvador there was a 93% increase in forced disappearances <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/el-salvador-travel-warning.html> in 2013 according to U.S. State Department.
4. In Honduras the youth murder rate has surged over the first 5 months of 2014, rising from an average of 70 children and youth killed per a month in 2010-2013 to an average of 90 children <http://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/policiales/647527-96/reportan-muerte-violenta-de-270-hondure%C3%B1os-menores-de-23-a%C3%B1os> and youth killed per a month in 2014. May 2014 saw the heaviest death toll for children and youth with 102 murdered that month <http://hoy.com.do/mas-de-100-menores-de-23-anos-fueron-asesinados-en-honduras-en-mayo/> .
5. In Honduras from 2005 to 2012, murders of women and girls increased 346%. Murders of men and boys increased by 292% over the same time period.¹ http://www.observatoriodeseguridadciudadanadelasmujeres.org/materiales/INFORME_VCM_C.A..pdf
6. “Although Salvadoran police statistics show a decrease in annual homicides during 2012 and 2013, the homicide rate has been rising steadily since August 2013,” U.S. State Department.

¹ It bears mentioning that the murder rate according to uncorroborated government statistic dropped in 2013, so a recent analysis found the murder rate for women and girls rose 263% between 2005 and 2013. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48241#.U9bCFvldXnJ> This perceived drop in the murder rate however may be attributable to the dramatic 281% increase <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582> in forced disappearances of women and girls over the last five years in Honduras.

<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/el-salvador-travel-warning.html>

7. 130,000 people were displaced one or more times in El Salvador in 2012 alone in a country of roughly 6 million people <http://rsq.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/06/10/rsq.hdu008.full.pdf+html>

Impunity

1. Impunity also appears to be on the rise in the region. Over the past three years, 48,947 people were murdered in the Northern Triangle, the most violent region of the world. Countries achieved convictions in 2,295 of those homicide cases, representing a regional impunity rate of 95 percent for homicides over that three year period. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-dead>
2. Only 20 of every 100 murders are ever investigated in Honduras according to official data of the Honduran Public Ministry. <https://news.vice.com/article/honduras-is-combating-its-homicide-epidemic-with-militarization>

Complicity and Corruption within the Government

1. In September 2013, a new law gave the military full policing powers in Honduras, despite objections from the nation's Human Rights Ombudsman who called the move clearly unconstitutional <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/09/military-given-full-powers-to-fight-crime-in-honduras/> . Women's groups in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa where the police were illegally militarized a year before have reported soaring levels of sexual assault and violence against women after the military police take over. <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582>
2. Since July 2011 the government of Honduras has refused to share its homicide <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-dead> data with the independent analysts at the Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University of Honduras or any other independent group, leading to allegations that the government may be manipulating crime data.
3. In Honduras the police are deeply penetrated by organized crime. A Feb. 2014 report by the leading newspaper "El Heraldo" found that over 200 national police were implicated in killings for hire, drug theft, and corruption. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-dead>
4. In Honduras, there are substantiated reports <http://www.elheraldo.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/ElHeraldo/Sucesos/story.csp?cid=621908&sid=293&fid=219> of police forming and participating in death squads and committing extra-judicial executions in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

Why are people fleeing "now"?

- Although 2011 may have been the peak year for reported homicides in Honduras, the number of disappearances has risen significantly, suggesting that the homicide rate may not have actually gone down but rather that some victims' bodies are being hidden rather than displayed. El Salvador has similarly seen a rise in disappearances.

- While murder rates for adults have decreased slightly in the region, murder rates for children and youths has risen significantly. In Honduras the youth murder rate has surged over the first 5 months of 2014, rising from an average of 70 children and youth killed per a month in 2010-2013 to an average of 90 per month in 2014.
- There are no effective witness protection systems in these countries. Those who witness or are victims of a crime are often left no choice but to relocate or risk being targeted long before the case gets to trial, if it is even investigated at all.
- In Honduras, there are substantiated reports of police forming and participating in death squads and committing extra-judicial executions in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa; a recent investigation found that over 200 national police in Honduras were implicated in killings for hire, drug theft, and corruption.
- Impunity is widespread in the region. The conviction rate for murders in all three countries hovers at about 5%.

What are the push factors? What about pull factors in the U.S.?

- Even if violence was not continuing to worsen, a lag between the spike in violence and the largest numbers of children, families and asylum-seekers fleeing is a typical pattern for displacement in conflict zones.
- People often try to relocate in-country when they're first threatened. But eventually people discover that no matter how many times they move within the country—to a new neighborhood or a new city—they aren't safe, and so many of them flee outside the region. This is very similar to patterns of internal and then external displacement that we see in other conflict zones around the world.
- Similarly, people may not flee at the first horrific act of violence in their neighborhood, but after they've seen a classmate and a family member and a neighbor all murdered, and have seen the police fail to investigate all three—or worse, recognized the police as being in active collusion with the perpetrators—they come to understand that their government has been compromised and that it cannot or will not protect them.
- UNHCR reports that other stable countries in the region, such as Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica and Belize have reported that asylum requests from Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadorian nationals have risen 712% since 2008. These countries do not have the TVPRA of 2008 or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or other policies that some in the U.S. have incorrectly identified as “magnets” for Central American migration
- If this migration were based solely in “pull factors,” more Nicaraguan children, living in the poorest country in the region, would be fleeing to the United States in numbers similar to Honduran, Salvadorian, and Guatemalan children. Instead, over 75% of children fleeing to the United States are fleeing Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala

How should the U.S. respond?

- This is an emergency situation that requires an emergency response. A clean supplemental is the appropriate means to address the emergency funding
- Protections for children are in place because providing safety for children is a recognized national priority and humanitarian imperative. We cannot turn our backs on vulnerable children and our American ideals simply because a large number of children need protection

- Extremely vulnerable children must receive child appropriate services and care when they arrive at our borders seeking refuge, but that care should not come at the expense of other vulnerable populations of concern to whom the United States has pledged protection and support.
- Cuts to refugee services hurt refugees already here and the communities that welcome them, impeding their ability to obtain education, employment, and stability. Cuts to refugee funding hurt refugees abroad living in camp or other displacement situations who have already been approved for resettlement, passed security and medical checks, and are waiting to depart to begin their lives anew in the United States.
- We cannot enforce our way out of this crisis, and rolling back protections for vulnerable people will do nothing to address the violence that compels them to flee
- Due process is imperative and those eligible for refugee protections, or a related status, must be afforded their chance to have their case heard through an individualized assessment.
- We should not respond to this crisis by increasing the detention of children and families seeking protection or decreasing due process protections for migrants. Denying refugee and trafficked children fair and meaningful access to protection is in direct contradiction to our responsibility and global leadership for protecting the most vulnerable.
- The world is watching our response to this crisis. How can we ask partners in Turkey, Jordan and elsewhere to continue to accept increasing numbers of vulnerable people while we restrict access to protection at ours? Other nations in Central America are receiving increasing numbers of asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and will follow our example.
- This problem will not be fixed with more boots on our border or drones in our sky. It is a humanitarian crisis that must be addressed at the source. By partnering with governments and civil society in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to build safe and resilient communities, address impunity and corruption, strengthen the independence of judicial systems, and investing in violence prevention and interruption programs we can help to solve this crisis.

For more in-depth and comprehensive recommendations, see: <http://bit.ly/1pB8PwN>

Holding an event or preparing for an advocacy action? Brush up on the evolution of the crisis in Central America by watching this short video: http://youtu.be/v_sa0-6uEiU