



United States Senate Committee on
**HOMELAND SECURITY
& GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**
RANKING MEMBER THOMAS R. CARPER
MINORITY STAFF REPORT

Stronger Neighbors - Stronger Borders:

*Addressing the Root Causes of the
Migration Surge from Central America*

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Stronger Neighbors – Stronger Borders:

Addressing the Root Causes of the Migration Surge from Central America

A Message from Senator Tom Carper

Given the increasingly dangerous world in which we live today, there is broad agreement among Americans that secure borders are more important than ever. In response to those concerns, our country has spent nearly \$250 billion over the past decade to make our southern border with Mexico more secure. We've built over 600 miles of fencing. We've doubled the number of Border Patrol agents to more than 21,000. And we've deployed technology such as drones, helicopters, sophisticated surveillance systems, and ground sensors.

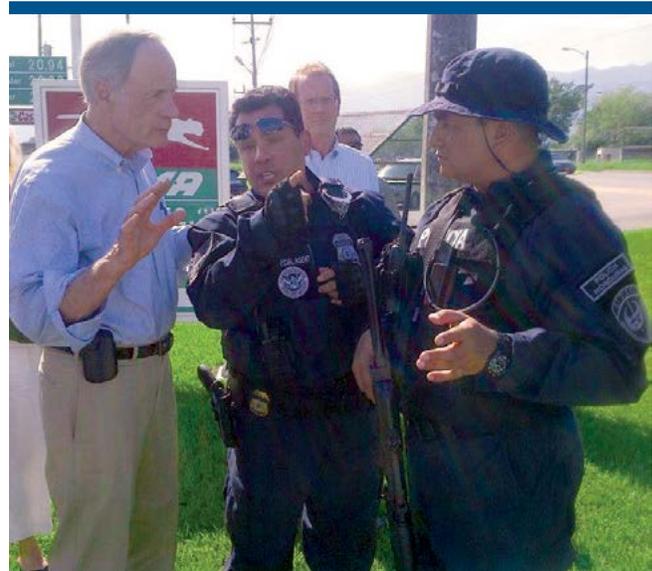
But all of these security enhancements along our borders could not hold back the waves of tens of thousands of unaccompanied children and families who arrived at our southern border in 2014, mostly into Texas. Significant flows continue even today.

The overwhelming majority of these migrants are coming — not from Mexico — but from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, three Central American countries collectively known as the Northern Triangle. For the most part, the children and families aren't evading Border Patrol agents. They are surrendering and asking for help.

As a senior member of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, I visited all three Northern Triangle countries in 2014, and recently returned from another trip to Guatemala and Honduras. All are beautiful countries with fertile farmland and imposing mountains, as well as attractive coastlines and friendly people.

But behind the beauty lies great distress. During my time in the Northern Triangle, I have seen firsthand how the violence and lack of security, economic opportunity, and hope for the future there has led so many parents to do the unthinkable — to put their children in the hands of smugglers to undertake a dangerous 1,500-mile journey to the United States.

Over the past half century, our country's insatiable appetite for drugs has helped transform large parts of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras into places where drug cartels and gangs have undermined the



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agent Richard "Rico" Rodriguez (center) speaks with Senator Tom Carper (left) about the operations of the vetted Honduran transnational crime units conducting mobile check point operations in and around San Pedro Sula, Honduras, November 23, 2014. The Senator witnessed the collaborative work of the U.S. federal law enforcement advisors and the local police as they checked buses for unaccompanied minors and vehicles for human smuggling and trafficking as well as contraband. On the right is Rodriguez' Honduran counterpart.

fabric of society. Gangs, in particular, use violence and the threat of violence to recruit teenagers and even young children. Children who don't cooperate have been brutally murdered, spreading fear throughout communities.

Corruption and extortion of businesses large and small is commonplace. Government institutions are weak and all too often fail to deliver the basic services Americans take for granted.

Poverty is widespread. Jobs are scarce and too many people struggle to feed their families. Some are visibly stunted by malnutrition.

Human trafficking thrives in these countries, too, as criminals prey on those who are desperate to leave. Women and girls especially are often brutalized and have little recourse. While in Guatemala in October, I visited a place called El Refugio – “The Refuge” – where victims of human trafficking and abuse are offered sanctuary from their assailants. My colleagues and I met several dozen girls between the ages of 11 and 16, some of them with their own babies.

It is not surprising that many vulnerable people are fleeing from these countries right now. If any of us lived there, there is a good chance we'd want to get our families out too.

But I have also visited youth centers and vocational programs and met energetic and ambitious children and young adults who want to learn and contribute to their own countries. It's clear that El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have so much potential, but they need our help and that of others.

After last year's surge, our government took unprecedented steps to try to stem the flow of Central America migrants. Working in coordination with Mexico and the Central American governments themselves, we were able to slow the migration for a time. But we must recognize that we have only bandaged the wound. We haven't fully dealt with the underlying conditions that push desperate parents and children to leave their homes for a dangerous journey and an uncertain future.

Shamefully, we've focused more on ways to keep migrants out of our country rather than helping them address the misery in their homelands, misery we've unfortunately helped create through our appetite for illegal drugs. How is that consistent with the Golden Rule, which teaches us to treat people the way we would want to be treated? How is that consistent with Matthew 25, which asks us, “When I was a stranger in your land, did you take me in?”

At a Committee hearing in October, one of our witnesses, Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, argued that: “Our enforcement posture towards children and families fleeing the violence in Central America is akin to firemen arriving at a house fire and locking the doors. Instead of locking the doors, we must put out the fire and rescue those inside.” Since the U.S. contributes directly to the misery in the Northern Triangle, we

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have a moral obligation to help our neighbors put out the fire engulfing their society.

As this report goes to print, we are seeing increasing numbers of unaccompanied Central American migrants at our southern border once more. While we must address the policies that unintentionally pull more people to our borders illegally, I am certain that if we don't address the root causes that drive parents to send their children here, we will continue to see the face of desperation at our borders.

Fortunately, there is cause for hope. The presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras— joined by Vice President Joe Biden – late last year announced a coordinated effort to take back their countries. The Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle lays out a thoughtful plan to foster economic growth by strengthening trade and infrastructure; to invest in education and workforce development; to promote the rule of law and tackle corruption; and to rebuild people's trust in the government by increasing transparency and improving the delivery of basic services.

With leadership, courage and hard work, and help from its neighbors and many others, the Northern Triangle can forge a better, safer, more hopeful future. They can do it. The United States and others should help.

One important way we can help is to support President Obama's \$1 billion aid package for Central America that would complement the region's own commitments under the Alliance for Prosperity. Addressing the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle is also the fiscally responsible approach for America's taxpayers. Of the nearly \$250 billion we have spent to strengthen our borders and enforce our immigration laws, less than 1 percent of that amount has been used to help proactively address the root causes that compel so many Central Americans to risk life and limb to come here. It is time to address these issues on both fronts, not just at our border.

The children and families arriving at our border truly are the neighbors we're reminded to love as we love ourselves in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. By tackling the root causes driving this surge in migration, and helping these countries help themselves, we will not only strengthen America, we will help create a stable, safe, and economically resilient region to our south, and help end the preventable humanitarian crisis at our border.

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Executive Summary

In the spring of 2014, tens of thousands of children and families from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – known as the Northern Triangle of Central America – arrived at the southwest border of the United States seeking protection and a safe place to live. Many of these migrants were fleeing conditions of severe violence, deprivation, and death. Some, after a treacherous 1,500-mile journey through Mexico, did not arrive at all.

The surge was also a costly logistical challenge, as the numbers and unique needs of the migrants overwhelmed Border Patrol agents, shelters, detention facilities and the immigration courts. The federal government struggled to find suitable shelter and legal support for the unaccompanied minors, in particular.

Since that spring, the Obama Administration (herein after “the Administration”) has put into place an array of measures to manage the heightened migration from the Northern Triangle. Those efforts – and those of the governments of Mexico and the Central America – initially served to reduce the flow at the U.S. southwest border. However, thousands of migrants continue to take the dangerous trip north and the numbers reaching the United States have been steadily rising again.



Senator Carper began studying the issue of Central American migration to the United States – with a special focus on the migration of children and families — shortly after becoming Chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in 2013. His focus on the issue intensified after the 2014 surge. This report is the result of a dozen hearings and briefings on the issue as well as multiple trips to the region over the past three years.

The unprecedented 2014 migration surge was a reflection of changes that had been in the making for some time, and which continue to challenge the United States, Mexico, and Central America alike. The rising number of asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle, not just at the U.S. border but around the region, suggests that the difficult conditions in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are the decisive factor driving the exodus.¹ As multiple experts have testified to the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (hereafter referred to as “the Committee”), the refugees and economic migrants will continue to come, unless the root causes of the reasons they are coming are addressed in a holistic, strategic manner.²

This report identifies and substantiates the following root causes as the primary “push” and “pull” factors driving migration from the Northern Triangle, particularly migration of women and children: **violence and insecurity, poverty and lack of opportunity, a desire for family reunification, and the increasing role of smugglers and their misinformation tactics.**

- **Violence and Insecurity** – Inhabitants of the Northern Triangle endure some of the highest murder rates in the world, as well as an epidemic of extortion and violent crimes. The U.S. demand for narcotics has made Central America a key transit zone, and in the process, helped boost the power of brutal local cartels that serve to transship drugs and link Colombian and Mexican cartels. Weak and sometimes corrupt governments have been no match for the cartels and the criminal street gangs that control many marginal neighborhoods.³ The inability of the governments of the Northern Triangle to provide security or guarantee rule of law for their own people – and especially the most vulnerable, the children – has prompted many parents to make the painful decision to send their children on a dangerous journey to the United States to avoid violence and insecurity at home. Migrants have reported fleeing brutal violence, death threats, the murder of family members and friends, extortion, and rape. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, at least 6 out of 10 children from the Northern Triangle fleeing violence to the U.S. border likely have valid asylum claims.⁴
- **Poverty and Lack of Opportunity** — Migrants also flee the Northern Triangle out of economic desperation. In Honduras, an estimated 69 percent of citizens live in poverty – of those 45 percent in extreme poverty, meaning they do not have enough to feed themselves. In Guatemala, 55 percent live in poverty, with 29 percent in extreme poverty. El Salvador fares a little better, with 41 percent of its population in poverty, and nearly 13 percent in extreme poverty. In Guatemala, many of the migrants come from the western highlands where indigenous communities scrape by on subsistence farming with high rates of malnutrition. Even where conditions are less desperate, young people struggle to obtain a good education and employment. The people and economies of the Northern Triangle are heavily dependent on money sent home by relatives working in the U.S., with remittances making up between 10 and 17 percent of GDP in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.⁵
- **Family Reunification** – Civil wars and instability in Central America during the 1980s sent waves of migrants to the United States. Those flows subsided in the late 1990s, but increased again in recent years. Now, as many as 1 out of every 5 Salvadorans resides in the United States.⁶ Parents that immigrated years ago may seek to reunite with family members. More than three-fourths of the unaccompanied minors arriving from Central America in 2014 had parents or other family members in the United States.⁷

- **The Role of Smugglers and Misinformation** – Administration officials estimate that as many as 80 percent of the Central Americans who come to the United States do so with the help of professional smugglers,⁸ or in some cases traffickers. By many accounts, these smugglers have become more ruthless and aggressive about recruiting customers. In particular, the smugglers recruit would-be migrants by informing them that they will get permission to stay in the United States legally once they reach the border. These smugglers help generate demand for migration and act as critical facilitators for some who might not otherwise attempt the dangerous trip.

The United States has taken important short-term steps to manage the flow of Central American migrants and deter new arrivals. These steps include increased capacity to handle Central American migrants at the southwest border, more investigations and prosecutions of smuggling rings, and coordination with the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to deter migration and return detainees who do not seek or qualify for asylum. These enforcement measures are indispensable and must continue.

Yet border protection alone is not a sufficient answer to the recent waves of children and families from Central America, many of whom are potentially eligible for protection under U.S. and international law. The United States must also address the root causes of the migration. Over the past decade, the United States has spent nearly \$250 billion to strengthen its borders and enforce immigration laws. Meanwhile, the United States has spent less than 1 percent of that amount to help address the root causes — fear, hopelessness, lack of economic opportunity and corruption — that compel so many Central Americans to risk life and limb to come here. By tackling the root causes driving migration and helping these countries help themselves, the United States will not only make a meaningful difference in the lives of millions of Central Americans and build stronger neighboring nations — but also will strengthen U.S. border security and ultimately save taxpayer money.

The report makes the following recommendations to address the root causes of migration:

- **The United States should increase its engagement with Central America. As part of this effort, Congress should support the President’s \$1 billion request to improve governance and security and generate prosperity in the Northern Triangle.** The proposed U.S. aid package for Central America, paired with new security and development initiatives by the Northern Triangle governments themselves, directly addresses the poverty and insecurity that drives migrants to the United States in the first place. While past U.S. investments in the region have focused on security and counternarcotics programs, the President’s new strategic proposal addresses the region’s broader issues by dedicating 80 percent of the package to reforming civil society and institutions and promoting economic growth.⁹ This investment will have a more meaningful and lasting impact on behalf of U.S. interests than the \$1.5 billion *spent in 2014 alone* to handle the migrant surge.¹⁰

Earlier this year, Senate appropriators under the leadership of Senators Thad Cochran, Barbara Mikulski, Lindsey Graham and Patrick Leahy, agreed on a bipartisan basis to a generous increase in the amount of U.S. aid to Central America.¹¹ It is critical that Congress fully fund the Administration’s request, and that the funding be available for holistic strategies to combat push factors in the region, and that we not simply fund security and counter-narcotics efforts. Additionally, there should be well-designed metrics and sufficient oversight for this aid to ensure it is spent effectively.

- **Federal agencies must continue and strengthen their crack down on the gangs, drug cartels and human traffickers that plague the Northern Triangle.** Transnational crime and increasingly brutal gang activity are playing a fundamental role in fueling violence in the region and both spurring and facilitating unlawful migration from the Northern Triangle. U.S. law enforcement entities must continue and expand initiatives to combat these criminals, including through vital partnerships and engagement with the Central American, South American and Mexican law enforcement. At the same time, the United States must help ensure that human rights protections remain in place for migrants fleeing dangerous conditions.
- **Congress must fully resource immigration courts.** Many of the recent Central American migrants – particularly the children – are seeking legal protection that requires consideration by an immigration judge. Unlike unaccompanied minors from Mexico or Canada, minors arriving from Central America or other non-contiguous countries are guaranteed a hearing under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act to review whether they qualify for legal protection. While the case burden of U.S. immigration courts has increased dramatically, the personnel and resources to address this caseload has not kept pace, with only 249 immigration judges in all of the United States. With the backlog of cases exceeding 450,000 and climbing, the Department of Justice reports that it would need 495 to 540 immigration judge teams to eliminate the backlog within 5 to 6 years and keep pace with new cases.¹² The backlog of cases ensures that migrants are in a holding pattern over several years, prolonging uncertainty and increasing the “pull” factor by giving them de facto permission to stay in the United States while they wait.
- **Congress must commit to common-sense comprehensive immigration reform.** Some of the recent migration from Central America is a result of outdated U.S. immigration policy, as well as the exploitation of a broken system.¹³ Undocumented immigrants from Central America who have lived and worked here for decades have no way to reunite with family, or even travel home for a visit. There are not adequate legal channels for needed workers who would be willing to come only for seasonal work, and then return home afterward. Many migrants decide to come to the United States, in part, because of rumors and lack of clarity about U.S. immigration law. Creating appropriate legal channels for immigration and allowing long-time, law-abiding undocumented immigrants to come out of the shadows would help rebalance the system and relieve pressure for unlawful immigration. It will also improve border security by “shrinking the haystack” of unlawful activity at the border and allowing border officials to focus on people and things that may pose a true security threat to the United States.

About this Report

Senator Tom Carper has spent three years investigating the root causes behind the tens of thousands of children and families arriving at the U.S. border from Central America and lending perspective to the national discussion. He began studying the issue of Central American migration to the United States shortly after becoming Chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in January 2013. During a trip to the Texas border early that year, Senator Carper learned of high numbers of Central American migrants – then primarily single males – in detention facilities. He continued to focus on the issue with increasing urgency as the numbers grew and began to include many children and families. This report represents information he and his staff gathered over three years to understand the causes of and solutions to the surge, including visits to Mexico and the Northern Triangle, hearings, round table discussions and numerous briefings from Administration officials, foreign dignitaries, and think-tank and regional experts. During his visits to the region and in his home state of Delaware, Senator Carper has also met personally with some of the affected families and children, including young female trafficking victims in Guatemala, and an undocumented Central American boy in Delaware who said he fled to the United States after being terrorized by a gang that demanded he join and rape his younger sister as part of his initiation. Those personal encounters have not only underscored the urgency of the region’s complex and troubling issues for Senator Carper, but have also shed light on the promise that lies in the energy and resilience of its people.

The following official trips taken by Senator Carper and his staff and hearings and roundtables held by the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee have addressed the root causes of illegal migration from Central America in the past several years.

Congressional and Staff Official Travel

October 29 - November 1, 2015: Senators Ron Johnson, Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, and Carper official travel to Guatemala and Honduras with Gen. John F. Kelly, Commander, U.S. Southern Command

May 24 - 30, 2015: Staff official travel to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (as part of U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations staff delegation)

February 20 - 22, 2015: Staff official travel to Arizona border region

February 6 - 8, 2015: Senators Johnson and Carper official travel to Rio Grande Valley, Texas

November 21 - 25, 2014: Senator Carper official travel to Mexico and Honduras

April 22 - 24, 2014: Senator Carper official travel to Mexico and Guatemala

February 22 - 23, 2014: Senator Carper official travel to El Salvador

April 30 - May 1, 2013: Senator Carper official travel to Rio Grande Valley, Texas

February 18 - 20, 2013: Senator Carper official travel to Arizona border

Border and Immigration Hearings held by the Committee

October 21, 2015: Ongoing Migration from Central America: An Examination of Fiscal Year 2015 Apprehensions

July 15, 2015: Securing the Border: Understanding Threats and Strategies for the Maritime Border

July 7, 2015: The 2014 Humanitarian Crisis at our Border: A Review of the Government's Response to Unaccompanied Minors One Year Later

May 13, 2015: Securing the Border: Fencing, Infrastructure, and Technology Force Multipliers

April 22, 2015: Securing the Border: Understanding Threats and Strategies for the Northern Border

March 26, 2015: Securing the Border: Defining the Current Population Living in the Shadows and Addressing Future Flows

March 25, 2015: Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Central American Migration to the United States

March 17, 2015: Securing the Southwest Border: Perspectives from Beyond the Beltway

July 16, 2014: Challenges at the Border: Examining and Addressing the Root Causes of the Recent Rise in Apprehensions at the Southern Border

July 9, 2014: Challenges at the Border: Examining the Cause, Consequences and Response to the Rise in Apprehensions at the Southern Border

April 10, 2013: Border Security: Frontline Perspectives on Progress and Remaining Challenges

March 13, 2013: Border Security: Measuring the Progress and Addressing the Challenges

Roundtable Discussions held by the Committee

March 24, 2015: Roundtable with U.S. Ambassadors to Central America

March 17, 2015: Roundtable with Foreign Ministers of the Northern Triangle

June 19, 2014: Roundtable with U.S. government officials and regional experts regarding the underlying causes of Central American migration to the United States

Migration from Central America to the U.S. Southwest Border

Although the United States and Central America have shared close ties for decades, the 2014 surge of unaccompanied children and families (usually consisting of women with one or more children) brought on a crisis directing new attention to a region that has become one of the world's most violent and impoverished. The Northern Triangle of Central America – comprised of the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – is home to more than 30 million people. Migration to the United States from the region has been an issue of concern for decades, but in the spring 2014, the United States recognized that it was experiencing extraordinary circumstances.

Migrants, including unaccompanied children and families, were arriving by the hundreds every day in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas after traveling the shortest land route across Mexico from the Northern Triangle. Upon arriving at the U.S. border, children and families typically surrendered to Border Patrol agents. In some cases, children were simply left along the banks of the Rio Grande River on the United States side.¹⁴

Border Patrol stations along the border – many of them small and aging structures – were overwhelmed. Agents scrambled to provide food, clothing and diapers for the arrivals until they could be transferred to shelters or community sponsors.

This was a very different picture of the southwest border than Border Patrol agents had seen over the years. As recently as 2006, 90 percent of those apprehended along the southwest border were Mexican males of working age.¹⁵ Yet over the past decade, there has been a major evolution of who is arriving at the border and the method of arrival.

Four critical changes stand out:

- reduced migration by Mexican nationals;
- increased migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America;
- large increases in the percentage of migrants who are unaccompanied children and families; and
- increased role of professional smugglers.

Reduced Mexican Migration

Mexican apprehensions today on the U.S. southwest border have decreased dramatically.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were over a million apprehensions annually. In fiscal year 2000, the number of apprehensions peaked at more than 1.6 million. The typical border crosser was a Mexican male seeking employment. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the number of Mexican nationals attempting to illegally enter our borders has been cut nearly in half since fiscal year 2010, when there were almost 400,000 Mexican apprehensions on the southwest border. This number decreased steadily to nearly 229,178 in fiscal year 2014. Indeed, the number of Mexican immigrants leaving the United

States to return home is now greater than the number trying to enter.¹⁶ The decline reflects changed economic conditions in the United States and Mexico, Mexico's falling birthrate, as well as increased border enforcement measures.¹⁷

Increased Northern Triangle Emigration

The number of nationals from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala apprehended at the border has increased considerably. This trend began first with single adults, mostly males, and then began to include children and families as well.

The second dynamic: While Border Patrol apprehensions of Mexicans continued to decline in fiscal year 2014, apprehensions of individuals from countries other than Mexico – predominately individuals from Central America – increased by a startling 68 percent. In fiscal year 2014, CBP apprehended 66,638 migrants from El Salvador, 81,116 from Guatemala, 91,475 from Honduras – bringing the total of Northern Triangle migrants apprehended to 239,229.¹⁸

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) has documented an increased number of asylum seekers – children and adults — from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras since 2009.¹⁹ The larger increases came in 2011, when migration from the Northern Triangle jumped significantly in all categories according to apprehensions at the U.S. border.

Increased Unaccompanied Child Migrant and Family Emigration

Unaccompanied children and families are a growing share of those apprehended. They are not evading the agents patrolling the border; they surrender, often asking for asylum.

The third new dynamic is the increasing numbers of unaccompanied child migrants and families with young children.

CBP recorded double and triple-digit percent yearly increases in unaccompanied minor apprehensions since fiscal year 2011.²⁰ The Migration Policy Institute reports that between 2013 and 2014, the number of unaccompanied children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border increased 90 percent.²¹ According to data provided by CBP, the number of unaccompanied children apprehended at the southern border climbed from more than 24,000 in fiscal year 2012 to nearly 69,000 two years later. The number of family units crossing the border also rose substantially. In fiscal year 2013, there were just over 15,000 family units. The following year, that number spiked to almost 69,000. The number of apprehended adults from the Northern Triangle also grew, but at a much lower rate. In 2013, there were nearly 110,000 apprehensions; in 2014, there were nearly 125,000.²²

Additionally, prior to fiscal year 2013, the majority of unaccompanied children apprehended at the border were Mexican nationals. However more than half of the unaccompanied children apprehended in fiscal year 2013 – and 75 percent of those apprehended in 2014 — were from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.²³ Typically, most of the unaccompanied minors encountered at the southern border are teenage boys. That is still true, but in recent years there have been a growing percentage of girls and very young children making the journey to the United States. The Pew Research Center reported that there was a 117

percent annual increase in unaccompanied children 12 and younger apprehended at the southern border in 2014, in contrast to a 12 percent increase for older teens.²⁴ Pew analysis also shows that the number of unaccompanied girls jumped by 77 percent that year, with the largest increase coming from girls under age 12.²⁵

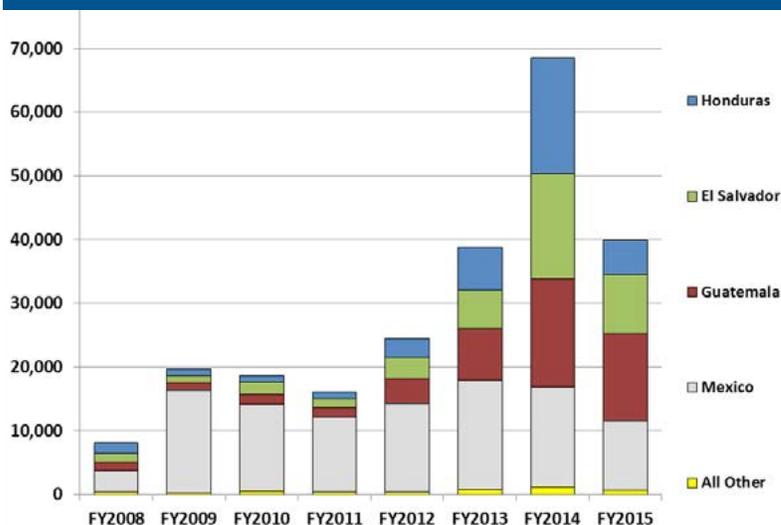
The overall number of Central American children and families apprehended at the border this year has decreased significantly from 2014. But apprehensions of both groups this year remained higher than 2013, and the pace of arrivals also climbed throughout the summer and has continued to climb into the fall — in contrast to typical seasonal patterns. For instance, in October 2015, the Border Patrol apprehended 4,973 unaccompanied minors at the southwest border, compared to 2,519 during October 2014.²⁶ About 4,000 of those minors were from the Northern Triangle.

Pervasive Use of Smuggling Networks

Illegal immigration has become big business: by many accounts, smugglers transport almost all illegal immigrants across Mexico to the U.S. border. Moreover these smugglers are increasingly tied into ruthless criminal networks rather than the more humane and informal “mom and pop” guides who helped previous generations of migrants find ways to enter the United States.

The fourth critical change in the illegal immigration landscape is the pervasive use of smugglers, known as “coyotes,” who actively recruit to expand their lucrative business. The strength and persistence of cartels throughout Latin America are one key reason for this trend. In order to navigate the migratory routes ruled by the cartels, migrants have learned that their chances of success and safety are better using smugglers to navigate the dangerous journey northward. Human smuggling is a \$6.6 billion industry in Latin America.²⁷ The Administration estimates that 75 to 80 percent of unaccompanied children that came into the United States in 2014 relied on smuggling networks.²⁸

Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Children - Fiscal Years 2008 to 2015



Sources: U.S. Border Patrol, “Unaccompanied Children (Age 0-17) Apprehensions, Fiscal Year 2008 through Fiscal Year 2012,” February 4, 2013; Recent CBP data released to the Committee October 20, 2015. Congressional Research Service-assisted graphic.

Coyotes have developed door-to-door services, with reassuring marketing tactics, such as money-back guarantees that children arrive safely in the United States, as well as three-chances-for-the-price-of-one agreements.²⁹ According to accounts and news reports, these promises are frequently not honored, and repeated extortion for more money is common.³⁰ A recent survey of Central American migrants in seven migrant shelters in Mexico found that 52 percent of the migrants were robbed during their journey to the United States, and 33 percent were extorted by criminal groups and cartels.³¹ Nonetheless, Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez has said that given the degree of violence in their home countries, Central American parents reasonably perceive smugglers as the better of two evils.³²

The Root Causes of the Migration Surge from Central America

For each immigrant that arrives at border of the United States, the weight of “push” and “pull” factors bringing them to the southwest border is different. In some cases, migrants are forced or “pushed” out of their countries because of war, violence, persecution, and extreme poverty. In other cases, migrants are lured away or “pulled” from their homes by the desire to reunite with family members, the promise of a job, or by immigration policies or the misperception of such policies.

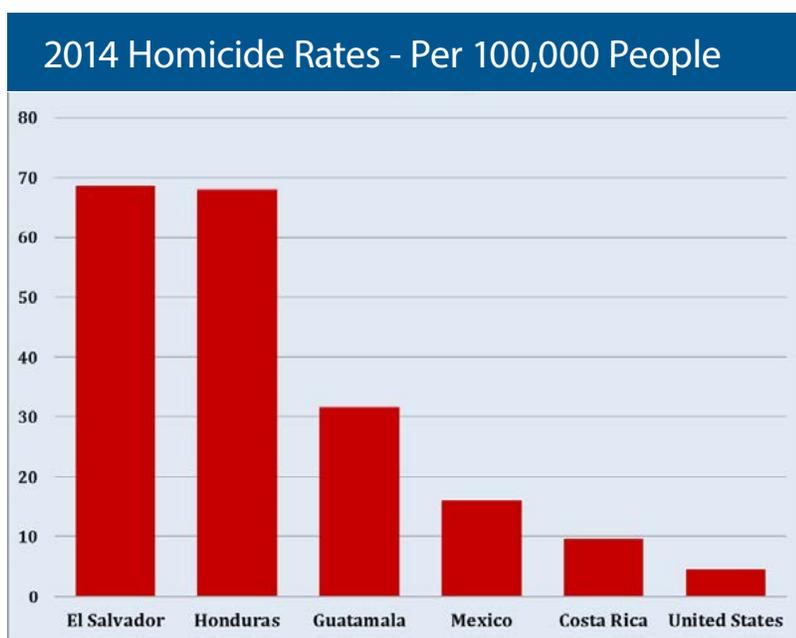
The recent migration surge from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras reflects four central motivations that combine push and pull elements: violence, lack of opportunity, family reunification, and the heightened role of smugglers.

Violence

The disturbing levels of violence in the Northern Triangle developed over decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, civil wars enveloped the region. The violence and ruthlessness bred during this time period still plagues the Northern Triangle today. The deportation of tens of thousands of Central American men who joined gangs while in the United States has also contributed to the violence.³³ In addition, the U.S. demand for illegal drugs continues to feed the size and power of the local cartels. All of these factors contribute to the instability of the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, which until now have been

unwilling or unable to make serious inroads against this violence.³⁴ Furthermore, the weakness and frequent corruption of police forces and criminal justice institutions make it difficult for governments to develop and implement effective strategies to investigate and prosecute perpetrators and deter violence.³⁵

During Committee hearings and round tables, numerous experts sought to illustrate the severity of violence in the Northern Triangle and why it motivates so many Central Americans to flee their homes. Among them, Kevin Casas-Zamora of the Inter-American Dialogue explained that the brutality in the Northern Triangle is “unprecedented and unparalleled”... . “It is unprecedented because the homicide rates that we are seeing in



Sources: (El Salvador) Institute of Legal Medicine, El Salvador’s forensics organization; (Honduras) Instituto Universitario en Democracia, Paz y Seguridad; (Guatemala) Central America Business Intelligence, CABI; (Mexico) Mexico’s National Statistics Institute; (Costa Rica) Judicial Investigative Unit; (United States) FBI Crime In The United States 2014, Table 16

[these] countries ... are of a level that has not been seen even in Colombia in its darkest days.”³⁶ Reverend Mark J. Seitz, Bishop of El Paso Texas, agreed: “Often the life-threatening journey north is seen as a family strategy to protect a child, as Central American governments are unable to fully protect their citizens.”³⁷

“In many instances children (and families) in high crime neighborhoods are forced to choose between fleeing their communities, joining criminal networks, or dying,” Eric Olson, Associate Director of the Wilson Center’s Latin America Program, explained. “Not surprisingly many decide fleeing is the best option – and with family in the United States, their choice is pretty logical.”³⁸ The Migration Policy Institute reported that, “violence is a push factor for women and children in particular: The region’s criminal gangs often recruit children to serve as foot soldiers in their turf wars.”³⁹

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are among the top five countries with the highest murder rates and the world. To put this in perspective, the Center for American Progress reported in 2014 that Guatemala and El Salvador have a “murder rate more than 800 percent higher than that of the United States. Meanwhile, Honduras’ murder rate is close to 1,900 percent higher than that of the United States.”⁴⁰

Honduras has recently seen a decrease in its murder rate, reportedly due to ongoing police and security initiatives by the government. Unfortunately, conditions are deteriorating in El Salvador where, according to the Washington Office on Latin America, the murder rate is expected to exceed the threshold of 90 murders for every 100,000 residents

A report from the three Northern Triangle countries indicated that 90 percent of the migrants came from the most violent municipalities in the region.⁴¹ In fact, families and children in the Northern Triangle also seek safety within their own countries, as evidenced by the rising numbers of internally displaced persons. According to one report, in El Salvador alone “an estimated

Stories from Central American Children Fleeing Violence

Each of whom arrived in the United States between May and October 2015

Manuel, a 17-year-old Honduran boy indicated that through the years he made friends with individuals who he knew were part of the MS-13 gang but was never asked to join until he was 14-years-old. Due to his refusal to join the gang, he was severely beaten and was forced to participate in gang activities, particularly carrying and selling drugs. At one point when he expressed a desire to leave the gang, he was threatened with death. He eventually escaped to the United States. While in the custody of Office of Refugee Resettlement he was granted a trafficking eligibility letter and was placed in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors program.

Ana is 16-year old girl from Honduras who had been abandoned by her father and suffered physical abuse by an uncle while she was living with her grandparents. She was pregnant as a result of a rape in her home country, and soon after she fled the country seeking safety in the United States. During her journey, she was kidnapped by the Zetas in Mexico, during which time she was forced into prostitution and also forced to witness the decapitation of 10 children. She is currently living with her mother in Houston and working with an attorney to apply for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.

Graci, a 14-year old girl from El Salvador, was raped and impregnated by a gang member. The gang member threatened to kill her and her son if she did not stay with him. She fled to the United States, is living with an aunt in Maryland and is pursuing asylum.

Source: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, submitted for the record by Bishop Mark J. Seitz for the hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Ongoing Migration from Central America: An Examination of FY2015 Apprehensions,” October 21, 2015.

130,000 Salvadorans have been forced to relocate internally as street gangs seize their homes to use as safe houses.”⁴²

The violence is pushing vulnerable populations in the Northern Triangle into other countries in the region as well as to the United States.⁴³ According to UNHCR, asylum applications from the Northern Triangle are up by 1,185 percent in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize.⁴⁴

In all three countries, citizens are terrorized by a vicious gang culture.⁴⁵ The consequences of crossing the unwritten rules of gang behavior in the major cities of the Northern Triangle (like refusing to join a gang, talking to a rival gang or helping the police) can be “swift and brutal,” according to experts from the Center For Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Indeed, an “an offender can face beatings, stabbings and almost certain death. If the person manages to escape the neighborhood, the local gang will often seek retribution by kidnapping a family member or close friend until the person returns to be punished. If that is unsuccessful, the person’s entire family can be killed.”⁴⁶

The UNHCR’s report, “Women on the Run,” released in October enumerated numerous accounts by women with asylum claims pending in the United States about the violence they and their children faced on a near-daily basis. “They described being raped, extorted and threatened by members of criminal armed groups, including gangs and drug cartels.” Eighty-five percent described living in neighborhoods under the control of criminal groups. Sixty-four percent said they had been targets of attack and direct threats by these groups. Sixty-two percent reported they were confronted with dead bodies in their neighborhoods; some of them reported that they and their children saw dead bodies weekly.⁴⁷

Minority committee staff heard repeated accounts of this trend during visits to the region. Experts describe a “join or die” policy of some gangs, applied to ever younger children. For girls, the threat is often to become a gang member’s girlfriend or face dire punishment. Threats that had been reserved for teenagers reportedly are now being applied to children much younger.⁴⁸

During Senator Carper’s official visit to Honduras in November 2014, he heard from members of the American Chamber of Commerce about its concern for the violence in country. From a Honduran point of view, they said the migration wave earlier that year began with the shooting of ten children in February.⁵⁰ In fact, from January 2013 to June 2014, 409 youth under the age of 18 were murdered.⁵¹

Compounding the tragedy of such violence is the impunity of those who commit murder. According to InSight Crime, a foundation dedicated to the study of organized crime in Latin America, 95 percent of homicides in the Northern Triangle are never punished.⁵²

My grandmother is the one who told me to leave. She said: “If you don’t join, the gang will shoot you. If you do, the rival gang or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you.”⁴⁹
—Kevin, Honduras, Age 17

Poverty and Lack of Opportunity

The Northern Triangle's extreme violence fuels and helps perpetuate economic distress, which constitutes another key push factor for many migrants from the Northern Triangle.

According to recent statistics, 69 percent of Hondurans live in poverty; in Guatemala, 55 percent; and in El Salvador 41 percent.⁵³ For about half of all Guatemalans and Hondurans and more than a third of Salvadorans, that translates into living on less than \$4 per day.⁵⁴ Furthermore, income inequality is stark. In Guatemala, for instance, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population receives almost half of all income, while the top 20 percent receives two-thirds.⁵⁵

The number of youth in the Northern Triangle is exceptionally high; 50 percent of the inhabitants are under age 25.⁵⁶ Prospects are bleak for this young population; one in four neither work nor study.⁵⁷ Over the next decade, six million Central American youths will seek to enter the work force and fail, unless the current trajectory is changed.⁵⁸

Guatemala has the highest incidence of chronic malnutrition in all of Latin America (50 percent), and the situation is even worse in regions of high poverty in the western highlands, where seven of every 10 children are malnourished.⁵⁹ Many children in this region are stunted from malnutrition and face extremely limited opportunities. Boys in particular, may be expected to migrate to Mexico or the United States for agricultural or other work.⁶⁰

Consequently, education and workforce development is a huge challenge. During Senator Carper's November 2014 fact-finding trip to Honduras, he learned that living in an impoverished community meant that most children did not stay in school beyond 6th grade, severely limiting their future opportunities.⁶¹ The workforce in Guatemala and El Salvador fare little better, with an average of seven and eight years of schooling, respectively.⁶² Almost three quarters of the workforce in the Northern Triangle lack a secondary education; almost one third do not complete primary education.⁶³

There are signs of progress on education, however. During a return trip to Honduras in late October 2015, Senator Carper learned that Hondurans have doubled the effective number of school days, dramatically improved teacher attendance, and begun to climb in educational rankings for Latin America.⁶⁴ Clearly, though, huge improvements in education are still needed in all three Northern Triangle countries.

Those who do manage to obtain an education still may not find jobs. Investment and job growth is severely hampered by the insecurity and lack of rule of law in these countries. Small businesses are particularly vulnerable to rampant extortion. In Guatemala, for instance, 900 bus drivers reportedly risked their lives because they did not comply with extortion demands.⁶⁵ In Honduras, the Carper delegation learned that 15,000 small businesses had been forced to close due to extortion threats.⁶⁶ These extortion campaigns

These extortion campaigns may continue even when perpetrators are jailed; in its visits to Guatemala and El Salvador in 2014, the Carper delegation heard repeatedly that gang members can often obtain cell phones in jail and continue to direct their criminal networks from there.⁶⁷

may continue even when perpetrators are jailed; in its visits to Guatemala and El Salvador in 2014, the Carper delegation heard repeatedly that gang members can often obtain cell phones in jail and continue to direct their criminal networks from there.⁶⁷

The Northern Triangle economies are hampered by huge gaps in infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Basic roads are lacking in areas such as the impoverished western highlands of Guatemala. Similarly, Honduras has yet to rebuild some of the many roads destroyed by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.⁶⁸ Energy costs in the Northern Triangle are the highest in Latin America, due to reliance on fossil fuels to generate electricity.⁶⁹ The level of expensive energy imports puts a huge burden on the national budgets, further restricting public funding available to invest in the grid infrastructure.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the region's expensive and unreliable energy make it difficult to attract investment.

Nature has also played a role in driving poverty, and with it, migration. Government officials in the region as well as experts from U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have said that drought conditions and coffee rust – a fungus that harms coffee plants – have damaged livelihoods in some poor, rural areas where many live in subsistence conditions in the best of times.⁷¹

Tax revenue as a percentage of GDP in Northern Triangle is low – particularly in Guatemala – in part due to a vicious cycle of allegations of corruption and tax waste that feeds private sector resistance to more taxation.⁷² Moreover, much of the economic activity that does take place does so outside of the formal economy. As a result, the governments have traditionally had limited resources with which to attack social and development challenges.⁷³

Family unification

The population of Central American immigrants in the United States was very low through the 1950s and 1960s. The migrant population increase occurred starting in late 1970s, when civil wars broke out in the region.⁷⁴ According to Eric Olson, “several hundred thousand people died during this period, and over a million fled across international borders including to Mexico and the United States. So there is a history of flight from the region that has resulted in an ongoing pull to family reunification....”⁷⁵ Historically, Latin American men would travel to the United States for seasonal work then return home in winter. As U.S. border enforcement tightened, however, many became afraid to try to return home for fear they would not be able to return to their seasonal jobs in the United States. The result has been less “circular” migration, and more migrants instead settling in the United States permanently, and then sending for their families to join them.⁷⁶

According to the Migration Policy Institute, about one in five of all Salvadorans already live in the United States. For the Guatemalan and Honduran populations the number is one in 15 – smaller but still notable.⁷⁷ Those populations include a mix of those with and without legal status. Department of Homeland Security data reports that an estimated 55 percent of Salvadorans, 64 percent of Guatemalans, and 67 percent of Hondurans residing in the United States are in the country illegally.⁷⁸ The Department of Health and Human Services reports that at least 85 percent of Central American minors arriving at the U.S. borders have parents or other close family members in the United States.⁷⁹

The money or “remittances” these migrants send home constitute a critical economic lifeline for many family members in the Northern Triangle, as well as for the regional economies as a whole. Yet without avenues

for legal family reunification, or an ability to visit children in home countries, parents are increasingly desperate to reunite with their children by any means possible. For their part, the children may take matters into their own hands to reunite with parents as some news accounts indicated during the surge.⁸⁰

As one Guatemalan official explained to a Carper delegation visit, of the more than 800,000 undocumented Guatemalans estimated to be living in the United States, many are parents who left to find work, leaving very young children at home. Now those children are teenagers desperate for safety and to know their parents.⁸¹

In some cases, violence and family reunification may work in tandem to prompt and guide migration. One expert researcher interviewed unaccompanied minors in 2014 about why they were leaving and concluded: “The children and their families had decided they must leave and choose to go where they had family, rather than choose to leave because they had family elsewhere. Essentially, they would be going to ... Belize or Costa Rica if their family was there instead of in the United States.”⁸²

Comprehensive immigration reform could help ease some of these pressures by allowing for more legal reunification, as well as enabling Central American adults in the United States to come out of the shadows and travel home to visit their children or aging parents.

Smugglers and Misinformation Tactics

Migrants seeking entrance to the United States almost always rely on smugglers to navigate the journey. This appears to reflect the increased difficulty of crossing the border, due to heightened U.S. border security, as well as the dangers of the route through Mexico due to drug cartels and other criminal actors.

The smuggling business pays handsomely. Since the increase in enforcement over the past year, the cost for the journey has reportedly increased substantially (up to \$12,000 or more), because navigating Mexican and U.S. borders and finding less-monitored corridors through Mexico has become more challenging. The smugglers now upsell desperate parents the promise of “door to door” services and “money-back guarantees” if children do not arrive safely to family in the United States.⁸³ All too often, the human smuggling business also crosses into other lucrative criminal ventures, such as human trafficking – forcing women migrants into prostitution.⁸⁴



Hannah Smith/Washington Office on Latin America

Inner-tube rafts transport travelers across an unofficial border crossing on the Suchiate River between Tecún Umán, Guatemala, and Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico in July 2015. Raft operators reportedly charge about \$1.35 for the three-minute trip across the river, including in plain sight of the official crossing point. The unofficial crossings are used by locals for daily trips as well as migrants or traffickers seeking to go further north.

Smugglers build demand for their services by taking advantage of confusion about U.S. immigration policies and aggressively pitching a now-or-never opportunity to migrate to the United States.⁸⁵ Their sales pitch also includes misinformation about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program or DACA, which offers deportation relief to some young immigrants already in the United States but not to any new arrivals, or claims that simply asking for asylum will give children or families permission to live permanently in the United States.

The smugglers had seen a downturn in their profits since the 2008 recession and had been looking to increase their business, according to regional expert Douglas Farah. As violence increased in the region, coyotes spread the word that families and children coming to the United States would be allowed to remain indefinitely. The “crucial element” of the crisis at the border, said Farah, “was the ability of coyotes . . . to orchestrate a campaign of rumors that intersected with increasing violence and hopelessness in Central America.”⁸⁶ The Government Accountability Office reported that these “savvy marketing campaigns” capitalize on vague rumors ostensibly about asylum or “permisos” provided to immigrants when they arrive in the United States.⁸⁷ Specifically, Chris Cabrera of the National Border Patrol Council testified that smugglers have convinced migrants that they must arrive in the United States before a certain ambiguous deadline.⁸⁸

The massive backlogs in our immigration court system have also contributed to the perception that immigrants are granted “permisos” to remain in the country. While most adults can be deported or detained; unaccompanied children from Central America are entitled – under U.S. law – to a hearing

Protections for Vulnerable Migrants

Undocumented migrants are usually subject to apprehension and deportation to their home countries. But the law also provides protection for individuals who demonstrate that they have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of future persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Such migrants may be eligible for asylum and allowed to stay in the United States in accordance with national and international law. In addition, children under the age of 21 who have been trafficked, abused, abandoned or neglected by a parent also may be eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) visas.

These protections potentially apply to all unaccompanied minors, but there are differences in how their cases are screened depending on their country of origin. Under the 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), unaccompanied children from countries other than Mexico and Canada cannot be deported directly by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and are guaranteed an opportunity to go before an immigration judge to seek legal protection, such as asylum, allowing them to stay in the United States.

TVPRA also requires that unaccompanied minors apprehended by DHS be transferred within 72 hours to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which arranges for the children to live with family, foster parents or in shelters while their cases are resolved. According to U.S. law, children in HHS custody must be held “in the least restrictive setting that is in the best interest of the child.” As a result, most of these minors live with a family member in the United States for the duration of their court proceedings. Those who cannot be placed with relatives or foster families live in special shelters, not the adult or family detention facilities run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Migrating family units are also normally permitted to appear before an immigration judge prior to potential deportation.

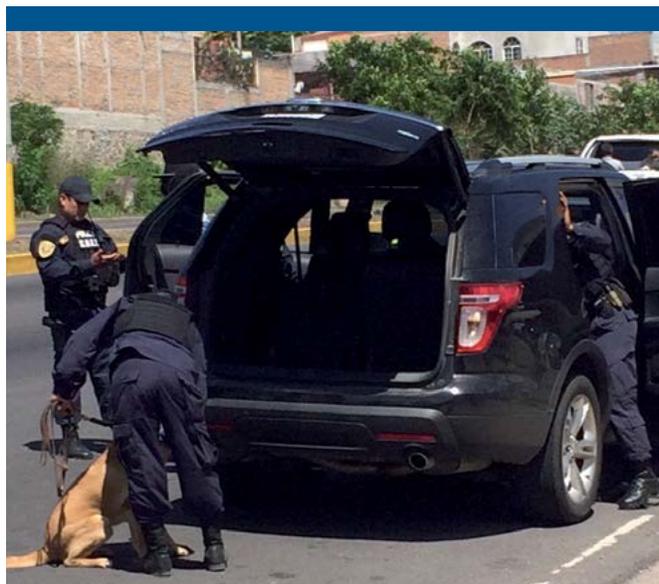
Source: See generally, Marc R. Rosenblum, 2015, “Unaccompanied Child Migration to the United States: The Tension between Protection and Prevention.” Washington, DC, Migration Policy Institute

before an immigration judge to ensure they are properly protected.⁸⁹ As of Sept. 30, 2015, the immigration judicial system across the country had a reported backlog of 456,510 cases.⁹⁰ This is a 47,000 case increase in the number of cases from the year before and an 111,000 case increase from fiscal year 2013. Furthermore, over the past four years, the number of pending asylum requests has increased by more than 800 percent, making the wait extend up to four years.⁹¹ During that time, the majority of family units and unaccompanied minors will live with family members or other sponsors, pending court dates. This serves as an incentive for some migrants to travel to the United States and perpetuates misperceptions about the U.S immigration law spread by coyotes. This is particularly true for unaccompanied minors from the Northern Triangle who, unlike their counterparts from Mexico or Canada, cannot be directly deported by DHS and are guaranteed a hearing before an immigration judge due to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act or TVPRA.

In addition to the advantages of a booming and lucrative business in human smuggling, Agent Cabrera told the Committee that cartels use arriving families and children to distract Border Patrol agents in order to facilitate drug smuggling.⁹²

America's Appetite for Illegal Drugs

U.S. demand for illegal drugs fuels the cartels, drug transporters, and gangs that destabilize and terrorize the Northern Triangle, “pushing” many Central Americans to seek safety elsewhere. The State Department’s latest International Narcotics Control Strategy Report estimates that approximately 83 percent of cocaine trafficked to the United States in the first half of 2014 first transited the Mexico–Central America corridor.⁹⁹ According General John F. Kelly, Commander of U.S. Southern Command, criminal organizations in Central America “tear at the social, economic, and security fabric of our Central American neighbors. They threaten the very underpinnings of democracy itself: citizen safety, rule of law, and economic prosperity. And they pose a direct threat to the stability of our partners and an insidious risk to the security of our nation.”¹⁰⁰



A vetted unit of Honduran police officers, working collaboratively with DHS officers, checks a vehicle for drugs or other contraband at a mobile checkpoint site outside of Tegucigalpa on October 31, 2015. Officials vary the placement of the checkpoints to surprise traffickers. They also check for unaccompanied minors seeking to leave the country.

Reporting to Congress on the root causes of the increase in Northern Triangle emigration, Ambassador Roger Noriega, a former U.S. representative to the Organization of American States, discussed the Northern Triangle’s key position in the drug trade and its impact on violence and insecurity:

The three countries most responsible for the surge of immigrants attempting to enter the United States—El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—are all designated as major

transit countries....Local governments, plagued by weak institutions and poorly trained law enforcement, have proven no match for these well-financed international criminal organizations, which are aided and abetted by local gangs. As a result of this insecurity and its impact on economic opportunity, the number of Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans attempting to cross the U.S. southwest border more than doubled in each of the last two years and may continue to grow.¹⁰¹

The damaging and pervasive influence of the drug trade in the Northern Triangle generates and perpetuates many of the push factors bringing migrants to the United States and it poses significant security concerns to the United States.

Violence – not Deferred Action – A Primary Driver for the Surge

The coyotes' tactics of promised "permisos" for a vulnerable population seeking safety brought allegations that President Obama's 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) proclamation — granting eligible unauthorized young immigrants already in the United States a two-year reprieve from deportation and a work permit— was responsible for the flood of young migrants in 2014. While it is clearly the case that smuggling organizations used misinformation about U.S. immigration law to attract more business, several facts undercut the contention that DACA was the primary cause for the surge.⁹³

- DACA would not apply to any recent arrivals to the United States, even many of those already within U.S. borders.⁹⁴
- The marked increase in unaccompanied children began in 2011, the year before DACA was announced. Overall immigration from Central America rose sharply around this time, suggesting that worsening conditions were pushing out migrants of all ages. (See Appendix I)
- In interviews with 404 migrant children (while in the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services), UNHCR reports that it found that no less than 58 percent of them were forcibly displaced because they suffered or faced harms that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection (up from 13 percent in 2006). None of children spoke of immigration reform or a new program or policy as the basis for coming to the United States. Out of the 404 children, there were only four who expressed a reason for coming that related to some knowledge of the U.S. immigration system.⁹⁵ While there are many reports that affirm this result,⁹⁶ there is at least one report known to the Committee that cites perceived immigration policy as a key driver of migration. That report was based on a smaller number of children, however, and based on interviews conducted by Border Patrol agents who have limited training on interviewing children for credible fear.⁹⁷
- There has been a dramatic increase in migration and requests for asylum to other countries in the region by people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. According to UNHCR, asylum applications from children are up by 1,185 percent in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize since 2009.⁹⁸
- During the same period, there was a decrease in Mexican immigration and no real change in apprehensions for other Central Americans.

Managing the Surge

The dramatic spike in Central American migration in the spring and summer of 2014 was a humanitarian crisis that posed costly and daunting challenges to frontline government agencies. The Office of Management and Budget estimates that the federal response to address the 2014 surge of unaccompanied minors from Central America cost taxpayers about \$1.5 billion.¹⁰²

During fiscal year 2014, almost 69,000 unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle had entered the United States. Of these, DHS referred 57,496 to the Department of Health and Human Services, the agency that has oversight over the care of unaccompanied children apprehended at the border. The vast majority of these children were first placed in a shelter but subsequently released to a parent, relative or sponsor while awaiting their court hearings. While more than 2,000 of these minors have been returned to Central America, most are awaiting court hearings to determine if they are eligible for asylum or other legal status.

Temporary Shelters and Family Detention

Unaccompanied minors who arrive at the border are transferred from Customs and Border Protection to Health and Human Services (HHS) custody within 72 hours. HHS typically holds minors in special shelters while arranging placements with family members or foster homes where possible. Understandably, HHS shelter capacity was overwhelmed by the surge of unaccompanied minors during the summer of 2014, and these children were often held for days in border patrol stations ill-equipped to care for them.

In response, the Administration set up temporary shelters at several military bases. Those shelters were phased out relatively quickly, however, as HHS found sponsors for many of the minors and was then able to accommodate new arrivals in its customary network of shelters.

The Administration also moved to create detention space for families. Family detention has been a controversial issue, with many human rights advocates saying it is never appropriate to detain families with small children.¹⁰³ Prior to last summer's surge, DHS had very limited detention space for families. Faced with thousands of families arriving from the Northern Triangle, the Administration first deployed stop-gap measures to detain them, then developed permanent family detention space, converting a facility in Karnes City, Texas, and ultimately building a new family detention center in Dilley, Texas for \$290 million.¹⁰⁴

This new family detention policy has come under fire, however, with a federal judge ruling in July 2015 that the Administration was violating a 1997 settlement requiring that undocumented migrant children be held in the least restrictive setting possible.¹⁰⁵ Due to the court's ruling, fewer undocumented family units are detained, and those who are held are detained for shorter intervals.¹⁰⁶ Some analysts say this judicial decision is adding fuel to this year's wave of migration, as families who previously feared detention now perceive they can live freely if they make it to the United States, pending their immigration hearings.¹⁰⁷

Information Campaigns

Between 2013 and 2015, DHS and the State Department carried out several public information campaigns to dissuade would-be migrants from attempting the journey to the United States.¹⁰⁸

On August 25, 2014, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson sent a personal message through media outlets throughout the Northern Triangle outlining the dangers of the journey with smugglers and illegal entry. It stated, in part: “My message to Central American families in the United States and in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala: Know the facts before you gamble with your child’s life.”¹⁰⁹

To keep pressing forward on this effort, DHS launched two awareness campaigns in 2015. For example, in June 2015, the Department of State partnered with DHS to promote a truth campaign to counter the smugglers’ systematic misinformation operations, called the “Dangers Awareness Campaign.”¹¹⁰ In response to the uptick in apprehensions in late summer of this year, the campaign has been extended to run through at least November 2015.¹¹¹

The governments of the Northern Triangle have carried out their own warning campaigns in response to the surge.¹¹² While visiting Honduras in November 2014, the Carper Delegation viewed a demonstration of the country’s own television media campaign to keep its children home. The first-lady of Honduras, Ana Garcia de Hernandez, who leads a commission to solve the unaccompanied children crisis, explained: “Our children are our future. We don’t want our future to leave our country.”¹¹³

Anti-Smuggling Efforts

The Administration also quickly mobilized to punish smuggling networks and repatriate returning immigrants. Ambassador Noriega testified that “in El Salvador, U.S. agencies helped bolster border inspection programs. In Honduras, the embassy supported training for prosecutors and judges in a bid to crackdown on smuggling networks.”¹¹⁴ GAO testified that in all three countries, DHS immediately shifted the investigative priorities of its Transnational Criminal Investigative Units – which include host government police, customs officers and prosecutors, among others – to target child-smuggling operations.¹¹⁵ Senator Carper and his staff were briefed on many of these operations during their trips to the region. In Honduras, the delegations also saw mobile checkpoints designed to intercept smugglers and unaccompanied minors, in particular.¹¹⁶



DHS Photo/Barry Babler

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson meets with Customs and Border Protection officers and agents in Douglas, Arizona January 27, 2015. The Department had recently announced the formation of its Department-wide Southern Border and Approaches Campaign plan to achieve a more unified border security effort across the southern border and maritime approaches.

The Department of Justice and DHS also launched domestic operations aimed at smugglers. For instance, in June 2014 the two departments launched Operation Coyote in Texas' Rio Grande Valley. Less than a month later, DHS made 192 criminal arrests of smugglers and their associates in the possession of \$625,000 in illicit profits.¹¹⁷

More recently, on Sept. 1, 2015, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced the arrest of 36 human smugglers in a multi-national (United States, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico) sting. Operation Lucero targeted transnational criminal organizations suspected of smuggling hundreds of people every week.¹¹⁸

Accelerated Judicial Processes and Removals

The Administration accelerated the screening and judicial processes for migrants from the Northern Triangle by making them a priority over other immigration cases. To begin to address the shortage of immigration judges and the increasing immigration court backlog, Congress approved funding for 35 additional judges and related staff in fiscal year 2015 – about half of which have been hired thus far. The Administration has requested another 55 new judge teams for fiscal year 2016, to build out the current corps of 249 judges. The recruiting and hiring process will take about a year for new judges, so the effects of the new funding will not be felt until the mid-2017.

Statistics show that immigration cases move more quickly, and immigrants are more likely to appear in court, when they have a lawyer. Yet undocumented immigrants – even unaccompanied minors – are not guaranteed legal representation in civil immigration court. During the surge and since, a network of pro bono attorneys has struggled to keep pace with the caseload from Central America. Despite their efforts, many of the unaccompanied minors and families did not have lawyers to help guide them through the court process.¹¹⁹

Notwithstanding court delays, DHS has removed tens of thousands of Central Americans – primarily single adults, but also some families and minors.¹²⁰

The United States' Under-Resourced Immigration Court System

The United States has systematically under-resourced the immigration courts. Between 2002 and 2015, funding for frontline immigration enforcement operations increased 300 percent (from \$4.5 billion to \$8 billion), while funding for immigration adjudications increased just 70 percent (from \$175 million to \$304 million), resulting in growing court backlogs as cases flow into the system faster than they can be accommodated. Furthermore, immigrants in removal proceedings have no right to legal counsel, which further delays proceedings as judges are often forced to issue continuances and extend hearing dates to give unrepresented immigrants time to seek an attorney. Thus, the average processing time for noncitizen to move through the system more than doubled between 2002 and 2013 – from 250 days to more than 511 days.

Source: Marc R. Rosenblum, "Unaccompanied Child Migration to the United States: Then Tension between Protection and Prevention," Migration Policy Institute 2015.

Creation of Legal Pathway for At-Risk Minors

In November of 2014, the Administration moved to provide a pathway for some children facing violence in the Northern Triangle to apply for refugee status in the United States, without risking the dangerous journey through Mexico. The program, called the Central American Minors (CAM) Refugee Program, is available to certain endangered minors in the Northern Triangle with parents lawfully present in the United States. This program is only open to a small share of Central American children, however, and has been slow to get going. In early November 2015, the New York Times reported that while 5,400 children had applied for the program, only 85 have been tentatively approved for immigration relief and none of these had yet made it to the United States.¹²¹

Increased Immigration Enforcement in Mexico

Mexico has taken significant steps to shore up its southern border with Guatemala, the Northern Triangle's conduit northward. While in Mexico City in November 2014, the Carper Delegation was briefed on the country's "Southern Strategy" to increase the security of its own southern border. The program includes increased patrolling of highways leading up to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (the natural chokepoint for travelers headed north), known to carry migrant buses. The United States has provided technical assistance and aid for equipment to improve Mexico's inspection technologies, roadblocks, and checkpoints.¹²²

Perhaps most significantly, Mexican authorities are now monitoring and patrolling train yards to keep migrants from riding on top of the now-infamous cargo trains known as "The Beast." By many accounts, some migrants had died or lost limbs by falling from the train or being pushed from it by criminal gang members. Sadly, during a visit to a Mexico City shelter for migrants, the Carper delegation met a young Central American man who explained he had lost his foot falling from The Beast.¹²³

Mexico's new policies are having an impact. In the first four months of 2015, Mexico deported 79 percent more people from the Northern Triangle than during the same period in the prior year.¹²⁴

In fact, between October and April 2015, Mexico apprehended more than 92,000 Central American migrants, compared to 49,893 in the same period in 2014. In contrast, the United States apprehended approximately 70,000 Central American migrants, far less than the 159,103 in 2014.¹²⁵



Senator Carper visits an official border crossing between Guatemala and Mexico. Here, he speaks with a Mexican border official at the bridge joining Guatemala's Tecun Uman and Mexico's Ciudad Hidalgo on October 30, 2015. With U.S. assistance, Mexico is strengthening security operations along the border it shares with Guatemala and Belize.

Unaccompanied children and families continue to face dangers as smugglers increasingly have to use different routes through more hazardous territory in order to circumvent checkpoints on major highways.¹²⁶ There are also concerns that Mexico does not have adequate safeguards to identify migrants with valid humanitarian claims who should not be returned home. For example, in testimony to the Committee, regional expert Duncan Wood said that, during a visit to a small migrant processing center in Mexico, his research team noticed registration forms were “pre-filled before being given to migrants, including the section of the form that asks whether the individual is requesting refugee status.”¹²⁷ Wood said that where the form asked migrants if they were afraid to return home, the forms had already been checked “no.”

Northern Triangle Enforcement and Repatriation Efforts

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras also took immediate measures to stem the tide of migrants leaving their countries, and to accept those returned from the United States.

As mentioned above, in partnership with the Department of State and DHS, the Northern Triangle countries have increased ICE Transnational Criminal Investigative Units. Comprised of vetted host-country law enforcement personnel working with DHS employees, the units facilitate information exchange, conduct bilateral investigations and strengthen the host country’s ability to investigate and prosecute crimes such as human smuggling and trafficking.¹²⁸

These governments also took a number of steps to expedite the processing of migrants who reached the United States, and to expand their capacity to accept return flights of deported migrants.¹²⁹ Repatriation services have been expanded somewhat for the returning migrants, although they remain limited.



Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) runs air operations to return deported migrants to their homes in the Northern Triangle. Here, a plane of adult deportees disembarks at the Guatemala City airport. Inside the airport, they are given food, a small stipend, and access to temporary shelter if needed.

Addressing the Root Causes of Migration from the Northern Triangle

“What is needed at this point is a fundamental overhaul of the Administration’s approach to Central American security. The problem is not that U.S. agencies are doing something wrong in the region; it is that they are not doing enough.”¹³⁰

—Ambassador Roger F. Noriega

As evidenced by the number of apprehensions made by Mexico, as well as the uptick in apprehensions along the U.S. southwest border in late summer and fall of 2015, the desire and underlying conditions pushing so many Northern Triangle migrants to make the journey to the United States has not dissipated. Indeed, mass migration from the Northern Triangle is a symptom of the tremendous ongoing difficulties in the region. While U.S. and Mexican border control efforts have helped slow the migration, there are limits to what the United States or Mexico can achieve with ever-tighter border controls. Such measures are also not an adequate response to international law requiring protection for those fleeing persecution, and the overall strategic and humanitarian imperatives to help this region.

The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have banded together to produce a regional strategy to collectively and comprehensively improve the conditions in their countries. The Administration, for its part, has put forth a strategy, complete with a proposed \$1 billion comprehensive aid package to complement the Northern Triangle plan. Together, these efforts provide the critical next step to address the root causes of migration.

Alliance for Prosperity

As daunting as the challenges of the Northern Triangle are, the opportunity is ripe for serious, sustained engagement by the United States – including the investments proposed by the Administration. Both the Administration and the governments of the Northern Triangle are taking some cues from the experience of Colombia.

Thirty years ago, Colombia was struggling with runaway violence and impunity. In 1985, Colombian leftist rebels took the country’s Supreme Court hostage, leading to the deaths of 11 justices and almost 100 others.¹³¹ Brutal paramilitary groups controlled much of the countryside, and powerful drug cartels operated with a free hand.



An employment tax funds this vocational training center in El Salvador. Students attend for free to learn vocational skills identified by the private sector – here, plastics manufacturing. A specialized English program is also available to help students gain fluency needed for certain jobs, and is supported by the Partnership for Growth – a joint U.S.-Salvadoran development initiative. Minority staff visited this center in May 2015.

Colombian leaders and citizens fought back. In 1999, with the help of the United States and others, Colombians initiated “Plan Colombia,” a bilateral strategy to bring order, foster economic growth, and take down the left-wing guerrillas and drug cartels. Over the next decade, Colombians pulled their country back from the control of guerrillas, gangs and corrupt military and political figures. The successes of Colombia’s efforts were fundamentally built, not on a narrow military or security strategy, but on a comprehensive approach that included security, governance and human rights.¹³²

In November 2014, the presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — joined by Vice President Biden — announced a coordinated effort to take back their countries. Their plan, called the “Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle,” was drafted with the help of the Inter-American Development Bank and seeks to draw on some of the lessons learned from Plan Colombia.¹³³ Like Plan Colombia, it relies heavily on resources of the Northern Triangle governments themselves and only limited support from outside entities. It is an unprecedented regional effort by three governments that in the past were more likely to view the others as rivals than partners.

The plan has four pillars: increasing economic opportunity; strengthening human capital; improving citizen security and the judicial system; and strengthening government institutions.

Ambassador Noriega stated that the Alliance for Prosperity Plan is “well-conceived, comprehensive, and extraordinarily ambitious.”¹³⁴ Casas-Zamora said that the “Alliance” is the strategic approach needed to

Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle

The Plan is geared to attack root-cause issues that are the foundation of regional instability in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The plan concentrates efforts that create the economic and social conditions that will help increase employment and improve life prospects, especially for youth. The plan directs action in four key areas:

- **Creating economic opportunity and driving growth** by attracting private investment, promoting sectors with development potential while targeting strategic geographic areas of need. This objective also includes reducing energy costs, improving infrastructure and trade facilitation.
- **Developing job opportunities through training and education.** Achieving this objective means tightly linking labor supply and business demand and effective vocational training and providing secondary education for youth.
- **Improving public safety and strengthening the judicial system.** This objective demands that the governments do more to prevent violence, protect at-risk youth, and strengthen the ability to combat crime.
- **Strengthening institutions, federal financial management and earning public trust.** The tax systems must be modernized to bring in more revenue across the Northern Triangle. Public spending must be transparent, efficient and effective.
- The plan is largely financed by the three countries themselves (Guatemala has pledged \$7.6 billion, El Salvador \$6.2 billion, and Honduras \$5.4 billion.¹³⁵) but also depends on the partnerships with the Inter-American Development Bank, private investment, as well as investment from other neighboring countries willing to companion their efforts.

Source: The Plan for the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle retrieved at <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=39224238>

create true change in the Northern Triangle, which has the potential to contain the need to migrate to the United States.

U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America



An elite Honduran counter-narcotics team called the Tigres, or Tigers, demonstrates skills at their training camp. U.S. and Colombian officers help train the Honduran officers to effectively combat drug traffickers and other criminals. The Johnson-Carper delegation visited the training camp on October 31, 2015.

Paralleling the announcement of the Alliance Plan, the Administration announced the “U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America,” which offers a balanced strategy to address Central America’s most critical challenges.¹³⁶ The plan focuses on Central America as a whole, but emphasizes its most troubled area – the Northern Triangle. The President’s fiscal year 2016 budget request seeks \$1 billion for the Central America initiative. The funding would address the root causes of violence by helping to combat gangs and organized crime, strengthening government institutions and increasing economic opportunity. The key goals of the U.S. strategy are: prosperity and regional integration, enhanced security, and improved governance.¹³⁷

In recent years, U.S. aid to the region has been heavily focused on counter-narcotics and other security efforts, such as through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). CARSI provides assistance to disrupt and interdict criminal networks, including equipment, training and other collaborative activities. The initiative

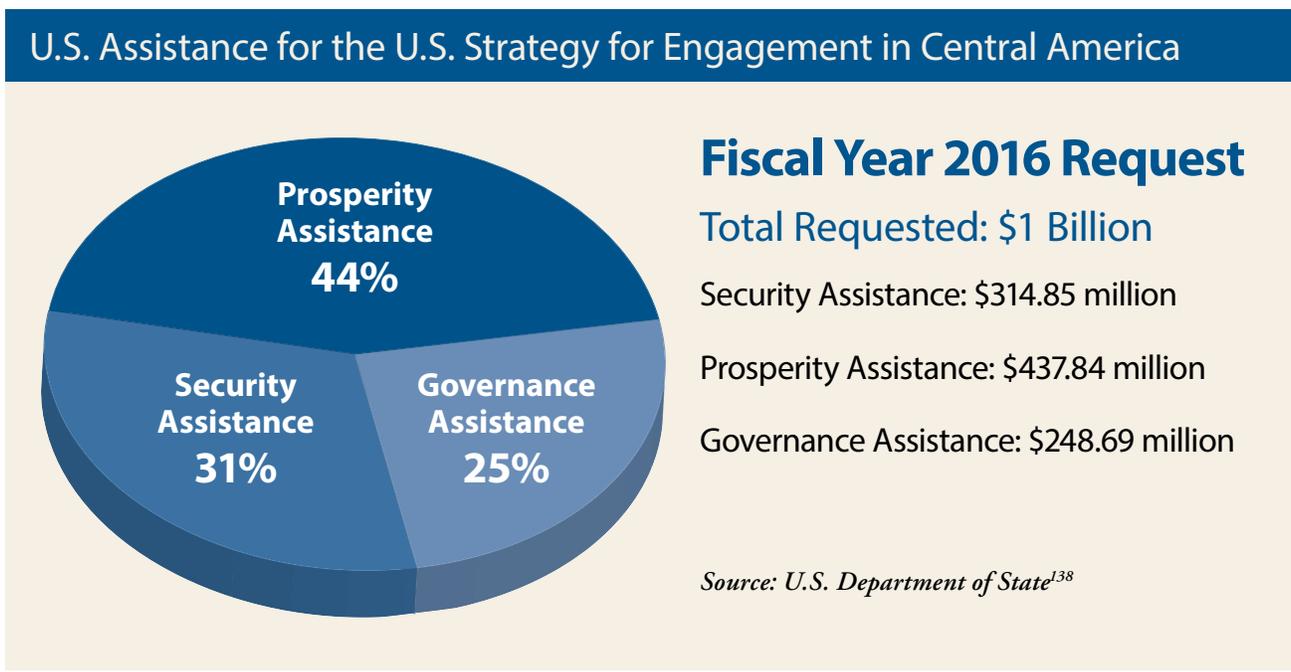
also seeks to strengthen judicial systems, policing, and violence prevention.

The new Central America Engagement Strategy would continue that work, but also place greater emphasis on promoting prosperity. For instance, it would seek to expand assistance to rural farmers to move out of bare subsistence farming and provide greater opportunities for vocational training. Other programs would help the Northern Triangle governments build their capacity for effective tax collection, build confidence in the government through rule of law initiatives, and create conditions for economic growth.

These investments would seek to complement the work of the host governments under the Alliance for Prosperity, but are distinct from them. The programs would not provide funds to the Central American governments, rather funding would be provided to USAID, faith-based organizations, and other non-government organizations to carry out projects such as supporting vocational training, youth shelters and governance oversight. The United States has supported some good work to date in these areas, but much more is needed.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Homeland Security and Secretary of State jointly urged support for the Administration’s request in letters to members of the House and Senate Appropriations

Committees. The letters stated: “It is more cost effective – and sustainable – to invest now in Central America’s future rather than respond to future crises. ... Irregular migration taxes the ability of U.S. domestic institutions and, if left unaddressed, presages greater social and political instability in the region that will have even larger ramifications. ... We have an historic opportunity to help the region combat these criminal networks and change its current trajectory. ... There is an urgency to act now, and to get it right.”¹³⁹



Under the leadership of Senators Thad Cochran, Barbara Mikulski, Lindsey Graham and Patrick Leahy, Senate appropriators were successful in winning bipartisan support for a large portion of the aid request — \$675 million. House and Senate appropriators will need to resolve a final amount as part of overall funding negotiations in December 2015. If a budget is not passed, a continuing resolution could delay progress in this critical arena.

Leadership and Oversight

The key ingredient to Colombia’s success, according to those involved with the transformation, was political will.¹⁴⁰ In the words of Vice President and then-senator Joe Biden, one of the architects of Plan Colombia: “Colombia benefited from leaders who had the courage to make significant changes regarding security, governance and human rights. Elites agreed to pay higher taxes. The Colombian government cleaned up its courts, vetted its police force and reformed its rules of commerce to open up its economy.”¹⁴¹

There are signs that the people and leaders of the Northern Triangle feel a sense of urgency and are committed to making the difficult changes that are necessary to improve the conditions in their countries. Since summer 2014, the nations of the Northern Triangle have taken important steps toward creating regional stability through ambitious reforms. For example, all three countries have committed to specific steps and investments to implement the Alliance for Prosperity. First, the Alliance depends primarily on funding from the Northern Triangle governments themselves. For 2016 to 2020, Guatemala has

pledged \$7.6 billion, El Salvador \$6.2 billion, and Honduras \$5.4 billion.¹⁴² This tracks the Plan Colombia model, which was designed for 80/20 domestic to foreign investment. The governments have committed to raising more revenue to make these investments and U.S. officials are already offering technical assistance to help boost tax compliance.¹⁴³ Second, the governments have committed to specific reforms or implementing steps as part of the plan.

Some promising developments in the region include the following:

- A new asset forfeiture law is in place in El Salvador, and Guatemalan officials are making increased use of a similar law to collect assets from drug traffickers and use them to help fund law enforcement.
- In December 2014, El Salvador passed an Investment Stability Law, giving investors assurances that tax and customs regulations will not change over the course of an investment.¹⁴⁴
- All three governments have also agreed to work with civil society to develop national action plans that will be externally assessed and monitored.¹⁴⁵
- Honduras has already implemented a security tax to help combat violence, and is undertaking significant police reforms to create a more professional and accountable force.

A key measure of political will, according to Casas-Zamora, is the governments' willingness to be transparent.¹⁴⁶ The Administration has made clear that U.S. assistance is only possible if Central America continues to make progress on tackling corruption.¹⁴⁷ As Casas-Zamora and Wood emphasized during the October 2015 hearing: Oversight and the ability to meet specific criteria should be mandatory for any foreign aid.¹⁴⁸

There are significant signs of progress in the region with respect to accountability. In Guatemala, for example, the former President Otto Perez Molina was indicted and jailed this summer in connection with a high-level corruption scandal. President-elect Jimmy Morales was recently elected on an anti-corruption platform after months of unprecedented peaceful public protests demanding reforms. Regional experts were particularly impressed by the breadth and depth of the public protests, which grew from students and activists to include members of the middle class and business community.



Senator Tom Carper (right) meets with Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez (left) and the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras James Nealon in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, November 25, 2014.

Much of the successful anti-corruption effort was due to the work of a group of U.N.-backed prosecutors and investigators – the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (known as CICIG) as well as the work of the Guatemalan Attorney General.¹⁴⁹ President Perez Molina extended the charter for CICIG earlier this year, and it is authorized to continue its work until at least 2017.¹⁵⁰

Under pressure to create an entity like CICIG for Honduras, President Hernandez resisted on the grounds that he wanted to empower Honduran law enforcement officials rather than depend on outside entities. Instead, he has moved to create the Mission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). Although not as powerful as CICIG with respect to independent investigative capabilities, the proposed new oversight body does include significant participation from the Organization of American States and could represent significant progress toward greater accountability.¹⁵¹

Even before this announcement, in the fall 2014, Honduras signed an unprecedented agreement with the non-profit Transparency International that included plans to tackle corruption by making publicly available personnel and government procurement information.

These developments show some encouraging movement by the governments to make their own spending more transparent and accountable to the public.

Clearly, any U.S. aid to the region should also be subject to careful oversight and metrics to gauge success, as well as clear commitment from the host government. These accountability measures must be pragmatic, however, and not so severe or rigid as to effectively block engagement.

Clearly, any U.S. aid to the region should also be subject to careful oversight and metrics to gauge success, as well as clear commitment from the host government.

The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have been moving forward on the Alliance for Prosperity on their own. They clearly want and need U.S. support, however, to have the strongest chance to succeed.

“For Washington, paying more attention to the Northern Triangle of Central America is not a favor or an act of charity,” Casa-Zamora stated in testimony to the Committee. “In the case of a region that is showing disturbing signs of instability, that is a stone’s throw away from the United States and that has already sent three million of its people to the shores of this country, it could only be considered enlightened self-interest.”

Finally, a new engagement and investment in Central America must go hand in hand with continued enforcement efforts and an overdue reform of immigration policy. The United States has made great strides toward strengthening the ports of entry and areas between the ports. This is critical to stem undocumented migration and the illicit drug flow that fuels misery in both the United States and Northern Triangle.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The recent exodus of tens of thousands of Central Americans to the United States is a complex challenge that cannot be solved by any one measure. It comes at a time when the southwest border of the United States is more secure than it has been in years. The federal government has made huge investments toward securing the southwest border and must keep up its guard.

But those defenses were primarily designed for a different challenge – hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrants coming to the United States in search of jobs. That is not the picture at the border today. Undocumented Mexican migration has dropped from an estimated 1.6 million in 2000, to less than 230,000 annually in recent years. There are now more Mexicans leaving the United States to return home than Mexicans trying to enter.

In their place are increasing numbers of Central American migrants. Although the numbers are not as large as Mexican migration at its peak, there are dramatic increases in the percentage seeking to enter from the Northern Triangle – a 69 percent increase in fiscal year 2014. And unlike the historic stream of young male laborers, the current influx is nearly half unaccompanied minors and families with young children. Some are economic migrants in search of work. But many – particularly the unaccompanied children and families – are fleeing violence and lack of hope, or trying to reunify with close family members already in the United States. Most come with the help of smugglers, who have built a thriving business from their desperation.

In particular, many are fleeing shocking levels of violence in their home countries. Murder rates in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are among the highest in the world. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to this violence. When they arrive in the United States, most do not try to evade Border Patrol but seek them out and ask for protection.

In short, the current wave of migration is in many ways more a humanitarian crisis than a border security issue.

It will require a multi-faceted response that does not simply look to build more barriers along the southwest border. The United States has responded at the border with appropriate tools, and also reached out to



Senator Tom Carper (upper left) observes the activities at the children's museum in San Pedro Sula, Honduras November 24, 2014. The museum seeks to build a bridge of understanding between local children and the police that serve the community.

Mexico and the governments of the Northern Triangle to deter and manage the migrant flows. But these short-term responses largely address only the symptoms of the migration and will not resolve it. In addition to these short-term measures, Congress and the Administration should invest in solutions to address the root causes of the surge. Specifically:

- **Support engagement with Central America, particularly the pending funding request.** Senator Carper has heard from an array of governmental officials and regional experts urging a more active partnership between the United States and Central America, including support for the Alliance for Prosperity. The Administration's pending \$1 billion aid request is a vital step to invigorate this partnership and help the Northern Triangle governments make meaningful change in increased governance, development and economic opportunity for their citizens. While the investments are not guaranteed to succeed, failure to make the effort could squander a potential moment of opportunity for the region and guarantee an ongoing exodus of young people from the region.
- **Attack the smuggling rings that exploit migrants.** Criminal smuggling rings have increased the migration from the Northern Triangle, as well as the brutality of the journey north. The U.S. government should continue and expand its efforts to break up these rings. This includes investigations and prosecutions within the United States, and work with trusted partners in the region through vetted police, investigative and prosecution teams and extraditions.
- **Strengthen immigration courts.** The understaffed and underfinanced immigration courts simply cannot keep up with the caseloads presented by the Central American children and families, in addition to an already large backlog of cases. Despite efforts to prioritize cases of unaccompanied minors and families from Central America, these migrants still face lengthy delays due to limited access to attorneys and the overall delays of the immigration courts. Months or years of legal uncertainty is not healthy or fair to these families or to our efforts to deter migration. It is also not fair to other immigrants who must wait even longer to have their own cases resolved.
- **Enact comprehensive immigration reform.** The push and pull factors that draw Central Americans should be inextricably linked to our response, and the U.S. immigration policy should be updated to reflect current needs. Legal channels to address the pent up demand of labor markets and for family reunification are critical to resolving economic demand and the venerable pull of family ties.¹⁵² The change would help employers and families both. It would also help put to rest the uncertainty and rumors currently exploited by smugglers. There should also be an effective in-country processing program for minors in the Northern Triangle so that children who are truly in danger do not need to make the dangerous trip through Mexico to seek safety.

Border agents and others responded heroically to the surge of 2014, employing extraordinary measures and often great personal generosity to care for the unprecedented numbers of children and others arriving at the southwest border. It is not an experience anyone wishes to repeat, however. As this report goes to press, the number of women and children from the Northern Triangle arriving at the southwest border is again on the rise. There is no quick or simple solution but taking concrete steps to address the root causes of the migration is the best hope for avoiding ongoing humanitarian crises at the southwest border.

Appendices

Appendix I

U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Total Apprehensions, Unaccompanied Alien Children, and Family Unit Subjects, Fiscal Years 2009-2015

DEMOGRAPHIC	CITIZENSHIP	Fiscal Year 2009	Fiscal Year 2010	Fiscal Year 2011	Fiscal Year 2012	Fiscal Year 2013	Fiscal Year 2014	Fiscal Year 2015
TOTAL APPREHENSIONS	EL SALVADOR	11,181	13,123	10,368	21,903	36,957	66,419	43,392
	GUATEMALA	14,125	16,831	17,582	34,453	54,143	80,473	56,691
	HONDURAS	13,344	12,231	11,270	30,349	46,448	90,968	33,445
	MEXICO	495,582	396,819	280,580	262,341	265,409	226,771	186,017
	OTHER	6,633	8,727	7,777	7,827	11,440	14,740	11,788
	TOTAL	540,865	447,731	327,577	356,873	414,397	479,371	331,333
UNACCOMPANIED ALIEN CHILDREN	EL SALVADOR	1,212	1,894	1,389	3,310	5,987	16,404	9,389
	GUATEMALA	1,092	1,477	1,550	3,825	8,058	17,057	13,589
	HONDURAS	951	1,000	973	2,991	6,740	18,244	5,409
	MEXICO	15,990	13,615	11,713	13,943	17,219	15,634	11,012
	OTHER	220	425	324	334	755	1,202	571
	TOTAL	19,465	18,411	15,949	24,403	38,759	68,541	39,970
FAMILY UNIT SUBJECTS*	EL SALVADOR	-	-	-	636	1,883	14,833	10,872
	GUATEMALA	-	-	-	340	996	12,006	12,820
	HONDURAS	-	-	-	513	3,902	34,495	10,671
	MEXICO	-	-	-	8,851	7,356	5,639	4,276
	OTHER	-	-	-	776	718	1,472	1,199
	TOTAL	N/A	N/A	N/A	11,116	14,855	68,445	39,838

* U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not capture family unit apprehension data until fiscal year 2012.

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection provided this unofficial data to the Committee on October 20, 2015. As of press time, comprehensive CBP data was unavailable, which would include apprehensions at U.S. ports of entry, as well as between the ports (by the Border Patrol). See also Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children Statistics FY 2016," retrieved at <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>.

Appendix II

Proposed Distribution of the Administration's \$1 Billion Request for Central America Engagement Strategy

\$ thousands	TOTALS	Development Assistance	Economic Support Funds	Food for Peace - Title II	Foreign Military Financing	Global Health Programs-USAID	International Narcotics Control & Law Enforcement	International Military Education & Training	Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs	Overseas Private Investment Corporation
TOTAL - CENTRAL AMERICA STRATEGY	1,001,372	540,972	208,550	5,000	22,665	13,000	205,000	3,685	500	2,000
Belize	1,250	-	-	-	1,000	-	-	250	-	-
Costa Rica	1,825	-	-	-	1,400	-	-	425	-	-
El Salvador	119,222	116,522	-	-	1,900	-	-	800	-	-
Guatemala	225,600	205,100	-	5,000	1,740	13,000	-	760	-	-
Honduras	162,950	157,700	-	-	4,500	-	-	750	-	-
Nicaragua	18,150	18,150	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Panama	3,325	-	-	-	2,125	-	-	700	500	-
State WHA Regional	[423,550]	-	[208,550]	-	[10,000]	-	[205,000]	-	-	-
<i>Of which, Central America Regional Security Initiative</i>	286,500	-	81,500	-	-	-	205,000	-	-	-
<i>Of which, Economic Policy</i>	17,000	-	17,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Of which, Other Prosperity/Governance</i>	120,050	-	110,050	-	10,000	-	-	-	-	-
<i>USAID Central America Regional</i>	43,500	43,500	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Overseas Private Investment Corporation</i>	2,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,000

Source: U.S. Department of State

Appendix III

Letter from Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Homeland Security and Secretary of State to Chairman, Senate Appropriations Committee — June 22, 2015



The Honorable
Thad Cochran, Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We urge your support for the President's FY 2016 budget request of \$1 billion in support of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Investing in the prosperity, governance, and security of our neighbors in Central America will advance our national security interests, save U.S. taxpayer money, and create an environment in which Central Americans are more likely to choose to remain and thrive in their home communities. Investments in good governance and economic opportunity are essential to sustaining security gains over the long term.

It is more cost effective – and sustainable – to invest now in Central America's future rather than respond to future crises. The Office of Management and Budget estimates that it cost approximately \$1.5 billion to address the 2014 surge in migration of families and unaccompanied children, not including costs to state and local governments. The thoughtful use of foreign assistance dollars can shift pressure off U.S. domestic agencies and reduce the undocumented migrant flow by addressing the underlying factors that compel many Central Americans to migrate.

Central America's challenges are growing. The Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face major threats from gangs and organized criminal actors, including narcotics and human trafficking networks. In many cases, these organizations act with impunity, committing widespread violence, corrupting already weak institutions, co-opting porous financial systems, and suppressing economic growth. Unless addressed in a comprehensive, sustained manner these conditions will almost certainly lead to continued migration to the United States and foster regional instability. We have an historic opportunity to help the region combat these criminal networks and change its current trajectory.

Dire security, economic, and governance indicators define today's reality in the Northern Triangle. Each country's homicide rate is among the top five in the world. Over half the population in Guatemala and Honduras lives below the poverty line. In El Salvador, less than 45 percent of youth enroll in secondary school. All three countries collect among the world's lowest tax revenue as a percentage of gross domestic product. As a result of these conditions Central America's youth bulge threatens even greater turmoil: 1.7 million youth in the Northern Triangle today neither work nor study. The six million people who will seek to enter the Central American work force over the next decade cannot be absorbed and will exacerbate this tenuous situation. If other opportunities are not provided, disenfranchised youth may either bolster the ranks of gangs and other groups engaged in illicit activities or elect to migrate elsewhere in order

to flee violence or seek economic opportunity. We must help these governments ensure they have other choices.

The national security consequences for the United States are obvious. Gangs and organized crime are transnational in nature and threaten the security of the United States and American citizens, and possibly other countries in the region. Irregular migration taxes the ability of U.S. domestic institutions and, if left unaddressed, presages greater social and political instability in the region that will have even larger ramifications for the United States. While the number of unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border is currently less than last summer it is still above historic trend lines. The risk of another surge in migration will only increase unless we act.

We envision a Central America that is secure, democratic, and prosperous. U.S. assistance and diplomatic engagement will improve the outcomes of the Northern Triangle's own plan, the Alliance for Prosperity, developed with the Inter-American Development Bank.

U.S. support has the potential to enable Central American states to secure their territory and provide safety for their citizens. At the same time, we will make a difference using proven community-based interventions to reduce homicides, extortions, robberies, and the perception of insecurity. These are programs based on ones we know work in the United States. While both economic growth and good governance underpin security, our government has provided little to no funding for these types of interventions over the past decade. That is why our FY 2016 budget request supports a balanced approach with \$1 billion divided into funding for the three primary objectives: security (31 percent), prosperity (44 percent), and governance (25 percent).

The FY 2016 request includes \$314.85 million to improve security. This amount represents a commitment to support a spectrum of efforts to promote community security, police reform, attacking organized crime, and improved defense cooperation. Our focus on security targets "top down" and "bottom up" interventions, supporting both community security efforts, interdiction operations, and national-level reforms and operations. Security sector assistance is a key element of the Strategy and constitutes approximately a third of the FY 2016 request. This funding will complement over five years of prior U.S. security sector assistance in Central America. Security investments build off proven successes and lessons we have learned.

Central America is more likely to achieve prosperity if it is economically integrated, and our assistance is targeted to make this happen. The request includes \$437.836 million to advance prosperity and regional integration objectives. By working alongside potential investors to promote a single window for economic investment, we will assist the Central American countries to work together for their common interests. By providing educational and workforce development opportunities, we will bring previously marginalized populations, such as women and youth, into the region's economic success. Prosperity funding will address two primary objectives: (1) increase the rate of economic growth; and (2) ensure that growth is equitable. The first objective – increasing the rate of economic growth – will be achieved through regional integration in the areas of transport, energy, customs and border management, trade facilitation, and improvements to the investment climate. The second objective – equitable growth – is

addressed with programs designed to reduce poverty, enhance education and workforce development, and help small businesses develop and create jobs.

Our engagement leverages action from governments throughout Central America that will empower civil society to demand accountability from public institutions. Leaders in these countries have begun to act on their commitments and confront long-term problems. In Guatemala, for example, U.S.-funded efforts and programs are the very tools that are being used to fight corruption in the wake of scandals that forced the vice president and multiple ministers from office. In the FY 2016 request, \$248.686 million will address governance and improve the accountability, transparency, and independence of government institutions. Governance assistance is largely technical in nature and consists of supporting governments as they make necessary reforms to their own institutions, as well as supporting civil society to exercise a stronger oversight role to ensure government accountability. If we do not help these governments create clean institutions that can deliver services and security, other funding cannot be effective.

The governments of the Northern Triangle are committing their resources to advance the objectives of security, prosperity, and governance. For 2016-2020, Guatemala will contribute an estimated \$7.6 billion, Honduras an estimated \$5.4 billion, and El Salvador an estimated \$6.2 billion to implement the Alliance for Prosperity plan. Our FY 2016 budget request, and the economic and political support it represents, will also be vital to achieving the plan's objectives.

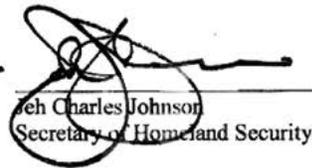
We recognize members of Congress have legitimate concerns about funding the United States has already spent in the region, as well as about the commitment of our partners in Central America to solve their own problems. But we are just as determined to see these countries make their own commitments to depart from business as usual and embark on a serious new effort to deliver opportunity and security to their long-suffering people. We also believe our holistic approaches to assistance for Colombia and Mexico offer successes and lessons to both the United States and Central America. Colombia, in particular, took steps to reform not only its security policies but also the underlying economic and governance issues that helped drive the high levels of violence. We believe the Central American governments' Alliance for Prosperity plan marks an important step forward and now needs our support to succeed.

The United States has a plan, and we are united in our view that our approach – prioritizing three interdependent objectives of prosperity, governance, and security – is the right one. There is an urgency to act now, and to get it right. We are committed to do so in partnership with you.

Sincerely,



Ashton B. Carter
Secretary of Defense
JUN 22 2015



Jeh Charles Johnson
Secretary of Homeland Security



John F. Kerry
Secretary of State

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- 120 For instance, in fiscal year 2015 ICE deported more than 72,000 migrants from the Northern Triangle, including nearly 1,100 unaccompanied minors and 337 family units.
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- 124 Rodrigo Dominguez Villegas, Victoria Rietig, “Migrants Deported from the United States and Mexico to the Northern Triangle,” Migration Policy Institute, September 2015.
- 125 Public Radio International, June 23, 2015, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-06-23/mexico-doing-us-s-dirty-work-deporting-central-american-migrants>.
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- 127 Written testimony of Duncan Wood, hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Ongoing Migration from Central America: An Examination of FY2015 Apprehensions,” October 21, 2015.
- 128 Written testimony of Alan Bersin, hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Central American Migration to the United States,” March 25, 2015.
- 129 Carper official visit to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, November 24, 2014.
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- 134 Written testimony of Ambassador Roger F. Noriega, hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Central American Migration to the United States,” March 25, 2015.
- 135 Letter from Ashton Carter, Jeh Johnson and John Kerry to Senator Thad Cochran, Chairman, Appropriations Committee of the U.S. Senate, June 22, 2015. See appendix 3.

- 136 Oral and written testimony of Francisco Palmieri, hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Central American Migration to the United States,” March 25, 2015.
- 137 The White House, U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (undated). Retrieved at https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/central_america_strategy.pdf
- 138 Breakdown of the funding request in Appendix II. While the focus of the Administration’s \$1 billion request is generally on the Northern Triangle, complementary programs for other Central American countries are included.
- 139 Letter from Ashton Carter, Jeh Johnson and John Kerry to Senator Thad Cochran, Chairman, Appropriations Committee of the U.S. Senate, June 22, 2015. See Appendix III.
- 140 Letter from Ashton Carter, Jeh Johnson and John Kerry to Senator Thad Cochran, Chairman, Appropriations Committee of the U.S. Senate, June 22, 2015. See Appendix 3. See also oral testimony of Kevin Casas-Zamora, hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Ongoing Migration from Central America: An Examination of FY2015 Apprehensions,” October 21, 2015.
- 141 Joseph Biden, “A Plan for Central America” January 29, 2015. Retrieved at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/opinion/joe-biden-a-plan-for-central-america.htm>
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United States Senate Committee on
**HOMELAND SECURITY
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**RANKING MEMBER THOMAS R. CARPER
MINORITY STAFF REPORT**