

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE



Decreasing Migration from Central America to the United States through  
Addressing Violence against Women and Children

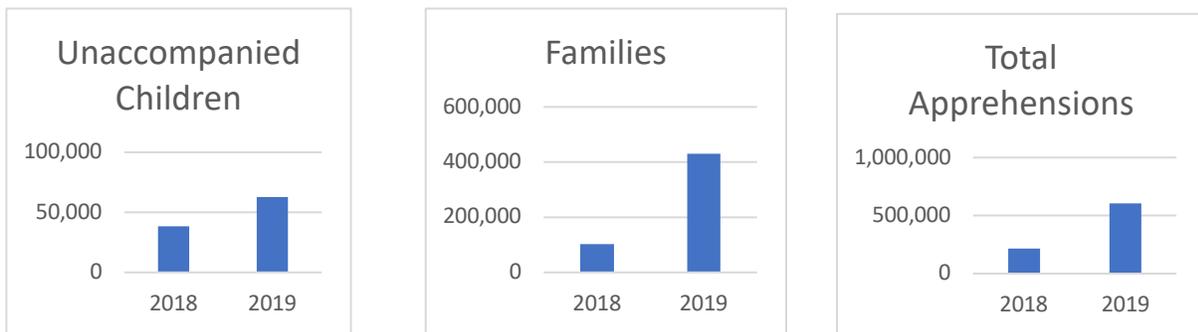
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## Executive Summary

Reducing illegal immigration to the United States at the southern border is a means to preserving the U.S. national interests of security, prosperity, and our way of life. Unfortunately, illegal immigration is increasing and changing in its very nature. The ten-year annual average (FY 2009 – FY 2018) of migrants at the U.S. southern border remained steady at 401,000<sup>1</sup>, but increased dramatically in 2019 with a large increase in those apprehended from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The changing demographics of these migrants can be seen in the tables below that represent illegal migrants only from these three countries apprehended at the U.S. – Mexico border in 2018 and 2019.<sup>2,3</sup>



Children and families represent almost 82 percent of the total 605,000 people from these countries apprehended at the border in FY 2019. While published data does not disaggregate single adult apprehensions by sex, a conservative estimate is one-third, or 57,000, are female.<sup>4</sup> Added to children and families, these three groups equal over 90 percent of the total migrants.

<sup>1</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Recent Migration to the United States from Central America: Frequently Asked Questions* (Updated January 29, 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov>. [FY = U.S. government fiscal year]

<sup>2</sup> Allison O'Connor, Jeanne Batalova, and Jessica Bolter, "Central American Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Information Source Newsletter Spotlight* (August 15, 2019; Migration Policy Institute), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states>. [38,198 unaccompanied children, 103,509 families from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras apprehended at the U.S. southwest border, 2018]

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions by Sector Fiscal Year 2020" (November 14, 2019), <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>. [62,743 unaccompanied children, 430,546 families apprehended at the U.S. southwest border, 2019]

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Southwest Border Migration FY 2020" (October 29, 2019 and November 18, 2019), <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration>.

While apprehensions have decreased slightly in early 2020, the drivers behind illegal immigration from these countries have not changed. Therefore, any decrease is likely to be short in duration until the underlying causes of migration are addressed.

To date, much of the U.S. effort has focused on deterrence for migrants. The 2019 vast change in migration from Central America presents opportunities to target the key migration driver of violence and reverse the trend of unaccompanied children, families, and women arriving at the border. In fact, violence against women and children is so brutal and widespread that targeting this one root cause will decrease the need for these women and children to leave home decreasing overall illegal migration at the U.S. Southwest border by up to one-third. To do this three mutually reinforcing pillars are necessary. First, the United States government must restart bilateral assistance to these countries emphasizing community-based programs to prevent violence, protect women and children victims and those under threat, and enforce laws at the local level. This work will build upon successful results that decreased the intention to migrate by reducing violence and add a component targeting gang-violence starting in the communities most vulnerable to migration. Second, a U.S. bilateral process will be established to measure, share, and compare country-level performance in the protection of women and children holding countries accountable bilaterally for poor performance through sanctions and widely shared information campaigns. Third, most important for sustainability and, therefore, undergirding all efforts will be the establishment of a new body of international law to protect women and children from violence to hold these countries accountable multilaterally. Combined, these three pillars aim to decrease overall illegal migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the U.S. Southwest border by up to one-third within five years, and sustain that reduction, through decreasing violence against women and children.

## How Did We Get Here?

“Tens of thousands of women – traveling alone or together with their children or other family members – are fleeing a surging tide of violence in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and parts of Mexico.” - - Antonio Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees<sup>5</sup>

The 2016/2017 Americas Barometer found that,

“in the Northern Triangle [El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras] specifically, intentions to migrate<sup>6</sup>, are robustly linked to factors related to insecurity...security concerns play a central role in motivation to migrate...with 29.8 percent of [all] adults considering migration in the last 12 months specifically due to insecurity. This is highest in El Salvador at 37.1 percent and Honduras at 35.1 percent. This rate is comparable to the 34.7 percent of adults in the Northern Triangle that intend to live or work in another country in the future regardless of motivation, which suggests that many potential migrants are driven by security, not just a search for economic opportunities or other factors such as family unification.”<sup>7</sup>

These percentages are higher for women and children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as “with no protection at home, women flee to protect themselves and their children from murder, extortion, and rape.”<sup>8</sup>

These three countries account for three of the five Latin American countries with the highest rate of femicide, or murders of women and girls.<sup>9</sup> “In Honduras, one woman dies violently on average every 17 hours and there is a 95 percent impunity rate for crimes against women.”<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> *Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico* (New York: United Nations, October 2015), Forward.

<sup>6</sup> Note: “Though clearly not a measure of actual emigration, an increasing number of scholars have found that an individual’s emigration intentions can offer a meaningful proxy for actual migration, particularly in traditional sending countries. Further, in standard models of emigration intentions, many of the most influential variables are highly consistent with those factors typically used to explain emigration itself, suggesting that while intentions do not always translate into action, the pool of potential emigrants likely includes most actual emigrants.” Jonathan T. Hiskey, et al., “Leaving the Devil You Know: Crime Victimization, US Deterrence Policy, and the Emigration Decision in Central America,” *Latin American Research Review* (2018), 434.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Raderstorf, et al., “Beneath the Violence: How Insecurity Shapes Daily Life and Emigration in Central America,” *A Report of the Latin American Public Opinion Project and the Inter-American Dialogue* (Oct. 2017), 8.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR (website), <https://www.unhcr.org/56fc31864.html>

<sup>9</sup> UN (website), <https://oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/femicide-or-femicinicide> [6.8 El Salvador, 5.1 Honduras, 2 Guatemala/100,000]

<sup>10</sup> OAS (website), <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/multimedia/2016/honduras-en.html> [map page 28]

El Salvador, in late 2019 and 2020, femicide rates have declined. In a not-for-attribution interview with a Department of Defense official, it is clear that violence, short of murder, by gangs is increasing against women and children, especially girls. Concerning children, “of the top countries in the world with the highest child homicide rates, in 2015, the last year available, all are in Latin America, and Honduras is number one [in the world], El Salvador number three.”<sup>11</sup> In El Salvador, disappearances have increased recently implying that the bodies of those killed are no longer being dumped on the street, but murders continue.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, while multiple studies have shown that sexual assaults are vastly under-reported crimes, records from Honduras show that of those reported, “the majority of sexual assaults are targeted at girls in the 0-14 [age] range at an average of 48.4 percent of all sexual assaults...with 84.7 percent of all sexual assaults targeted at women and girls aged 29 and under.”<sup>13</sup>

The causes of this violence are multi-dimensional including cultural norms and a “machismo” culture that are closely tied to expectations of the role and value of women and girls, ineffective institutions that allow violence to thrive, and corruption. Types of violence against women and children are domestic violence<sup>14</sup>, gang-related violence, and criminal activity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hauggard, Lisa, *Public Security in Honduras: Who Can Citizens Trust?*, Latin American Working Group Education Fund, 2018, ([https://www.lawg.org/wpcontent/uploads/storage/documents/Between\\_Dangers\\_Part\\_3.pdf](https://www.lawg.org/wpcontent/uploads/storage/documents/Between_Dangers_Part_3.pdf))

<sup>12</sup> Non-attribution lecture, Arnold Auditorium, National War College, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Non-attribution lecture, Arnold Auditorium, National War College, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Note: “Domestic violence is prevalent and widely tolerated [in Central America]. Although rates are difficult to discern due to rampant underreporting and the failure of governments to collect data, there is no doubt the numbers are high. In Honduras, for example, three-quarters of over 16,000 violence against women complaints filed were based on intimate partner and familial violence. The United Nations, moreover, has estimated that around 50 percent of femicides/feminicides are the result of escalating intimate partner violence. While all three countries have enacted laws to prevent and punish violence against women, implementation and enforcement of these laws has been limited, and they have yet to bring down the prevalence of violence or the impunity enjoyed by its perpetrators.” Karen Musalo, Eunice Lee, “Seeking a Rational Approach to a Regional Refugee Crisis: Lessons from the Summer 2014 ‘Surge’ of Central American Women and Children at the US-Mexico Border,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2017), 159-160.

<sup>15</sup> Note: “Violence and criminal activity: Violence has lingered from the aftermath of unresolved violence in the 1960s and 1970s and outright civil war in the 1980s and has persisted due to weak governance and corruption. El Salvador and Honduras have some of the highest homicide rates in the world for countries not at war. In El Salvador, recent policies have combined comprehensive and targeted violence reduction programs along with more

Migration ends up being the only option to escape this violence as internal relocation is not an answer for these women and children. Recent research found that:

“due to the small size of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, as well as the powerful, transnational reach of criminal gangs in the region, internal relocation is often not enough to guarantee the protection of individuals fleeing persecution...and domestic violence and gender-based harms [show] the unwillingness and/or inability of Northern Triangle governments to protect these groups from persecution.”<sup>16</sup>

This finding was confirmed in an interview with a regional gang expert who also offered that once an individual is recruited by or of interest to a gang, their only option to avoid succumbing to or remaining with the gang or being murdered is to join the evangelical church sincerely attending daily services and meetings for the long-term.<sup>17</sup>

In defining the link between violence and migration, “UNHCR found that 48 percent of children and 60 percent of women cited societal violence as a principal reason for fleeing their home countries. The data for Honduras and Guatemala shows the highest rates of migration are from the departments with the most elevated homicide rates.”<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, for unaccompanied children reaching the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, in a UNHCR survey of 400 of these children in 2013, the vast

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effective policing. This represents a change in tactics after “mano dura”—hardline policies for crime and violence—had produced only limited impact. Consequently, the homicide rate in El Salvador decreased from 105 to 51 per 100,000 people from 2015 to 2018, but criminal activity remains rampant and forced migration high. In Guatemala alone, criminal extortion leads to an annual loss of \$60 to \$400 million, more than 3 percent of GDP. Drug trafficking through Honduras and Guatemala has continued to endanger lives there and ultimately in the United States as well. Gender-based violence is another important driver of migration. El Salvador has the highest femicide rate in Latin America, at 10.2 per 100,000 women as of 2017. In 2017, 46 percent of Latinobarometro respondents agreed that violence against women is one of the most damaging types of violence in the NTCA.” Runde, Daniel F. and Michael Schneider, *A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2019, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Washington Office on Latin America, Press Release, *Why Internal Relocation is not Feasible for Most Central American Asylum Seekers*, February 13, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview March 30, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Karen Musalo, Eunice Lee, “Seeking a Rational Approach to a Regional Refugee Crisis: Lessons from the Summer 2014 ‘Surge’ of Central American Women and Children at the US-Mexico Border,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2017), 158.

majority cited the push factors of societal violence and domestic abuse<sup>19,20</sup> (69 percent) together with the pull factor of family and opportunities in the United States (81 percent) as their key reasons for coming to the United States.<sup>21</sup> So, unaccompanied children leave home largely because of violence and go to the United States due to having a family member, often their mother, already in the United States. Once apprehended at the border, these children require increased resources in money, personnel, and time while in custody: approximately \$775 per day for children separated from their families, \$319 per day per family if the parent can care for their children, and \$134 per day for older children traveling alone and single adults.<sup>22</sup>

Several key assumptions underlie or are driven from this information. First and foremost, an assumption is made that the information detailed above and in notes is generally accurate. To support this, information is sourced from multiple credible and reliable organizations.

A second assumption is that the reduction in violence exhibited by MS-13 in Honduras can and will be replicated in other communities under its control and by other gangs through community-based programming without the need to directly negotiate with the gangs

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<sup>19</sup> Note: “Children are also victims of violence within the home. Corporal punishment is accepted, and often takes the form of brutal physical abuse. Incest is also extremely common and generally underreported; among other ills, it has contributed to high levels of adolescent pregnancies. Children are also subjected to forced labor or trafficked for sexual exploitation. Many are abandoned by parents or extended families that do not have the means to care for them. All three Northern Triangle Countries have enacted extensive child protection laws. However, as is the situation with laws addressing violence against women, there is a wide breach between what the laws provide for, and what they have actually accomplished in terms of protecting children from harm or punishing those who violate the rights of children.” Ibid., 160-161.

<sup>20</sup> Note: “Surveys in 2013 indicate that almost half of all unaccompanied children experienced serious harm or threats by organized criminal groups or state actors, and one-fifth experienced domestic abuse. Many children must also contend with violence at home. Although domestic abuse – including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse – often goes unreported and undocumented, it is believed to be widespread in the region. According to scholars, Central American cultural norms legitimize the use of violence in interpersonal relationships, including physical discipline of children and violence against women. Studies have found that children who are left behind as a result of one or both parents migrating abroad are more vulnerable to abuse. This is especially true of children whose mothers have migrated.” William A. Kandel, et al., “Unaccompanied Alien Children: Potential Factors Contributing to Recent Immigration,” *Congressional Research Service Report* (July 3, 2014), summary, 9.

<sup>21</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*, (March 12, 2014)

<sup>22</sup> CNBC (website), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/20/cost-us-immigrant-detention-trump-zero-tolerance-tents-cages.html>

themselves. “MS-13 is now the most influential gang in the region and is better categorized as a community-embedded non-state armed actor.”<sup>23</sup> Their self-styled social contract with the people in their communities has decreased violence and helped to legitimize them within these communities. This enables them to gain business and profits in more lucrative drug trafficking operations while maintaining control of the communities in their geography of influence.<sup>24</sup> A related assumption is that this community-based approach can build upon successful work to reduce gender-based and family violence and be restarted easily after a gap in funding. This community focus was identified by a regional expert as a very promising path forward.<sup>25</sup>

A third assumption is that violence against women and children can be reduced in these countries by holding governments accountable through a series of U.S. actions and that the United Nations, as the leading international body through which states can be held accountable for their actions, not only is concerned about the issues surrounding the security of women and children but is willing to further law in this area. This commitment to the protection of women and children can be seen in the UN documents cited in this paper and decades of action starting with the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women through to the 2013 Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>26</sup> For the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, Guatemala and El Salvador both adopted National Action Plans for implementation of UNSCR 1325.<sup>27</sup> Both countries’ inability to effectively prevent violence and

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<sup>23</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> UN Women (website), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/global-norms-and-standards> [Note: the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, the 2006 Secretary-General’s In-Depth Study on All Forms of Violence against Women, two resolutions in 2012 to intensify and accelerate efforts to eliminate violence against women, and the 2013 Commission on the Status of Women].

<sup>27</sup> Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (website), <https://www.peacewomen.org/member-states>

prosecute existing state-level laws to end violence against women and girls makes these actions hollow and mean the issue must rise to the international level. The United Nations, with U.S. leadership, can establish a new body of international law to hold countries accountable, with consequences for inaction, to protect their women and children.

A fourth assumption is that the migration situation at the southwestern U.S. border with Mexico is of concern to the American people and that they have the will to solve this problem. The U.S. domestic context on migration at the southern border is complex. The population has become very polarized with large numbers worried about potential negative economic and criminal implications of migration and seeking greater deterrence policies. Large numbers also hold the opposite perspective, welcoming immigrants, seeing work opportunities in professions undesired by U.S. citizens, and horrified by the U.S. policy of separating minor children from their parents at the border. The issue of Central American immigration is a very divisive one in U.S. society. By focusing on helping El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to be accountable for protecting their women and children, decreasing the need to migrate, there is a positive narrative that the American people are likely to support that is aligned with American values.

#### U.S. Interest

While not rising to the level of a vital interest, the United States Government views the increase in illegal immigration from Central America as a threat. The levels of violence in El Salvador and Honduras, and to a slightly lesser degree Guatemala, are existential threats to those governments. The destabilization or collapse of any of those states so close to the United States would significantly increase the threat to U.S. interests. Therefore, it is to the benefit of the United States to decrease violence in those countries in order to reduce the flow of illegal migrants to the U.S. border as one means to aid in protecting U.S. national interests. The

alignment of protecting women and children from violence with American values strengthens this approach to decreasing overall illegal migration. This supports the National Security Strategy pillar to Advance American Interests, which acknowledges that, “there can be no moral equivalency between nations that uphold the rule of law, empower women, and respect individual rights and those that brutalize and suppress their people.”<sup>28</sup>

### The Problem

To date, the underlying problem has been primarily identified as one related to the pull factors of the United States for migrants, notably economic opportunity, educational opportunity, and reunification with family already in the United States. Estimating from the data above, approximately 60 percent of all women and 50 to 70 percent of all children migrating from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States are migrating due to violence in their home country totaling about one-third of all migrants from these countries.<sup>29</sup>

The problem as it relates to these migrants, therefore, needs to be re-defined to understand that the threat from violence these women and children face at home is greater than the threat from U.S. deterrence at the border and the violence encountered by women and girls during travel to the United States.<sup>30</sup> This makes migrating to the United States the rational decision for

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<sup>28</sup> Trump, Donald J., *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington, DC:December 2017), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Note: based on 2019 USCBP apprehension data of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran illegal migrants at U.S. – Mexico border, est. 60 percent of families equal women and children totaling 258,327 people added to 62,743 unaccompanied children, added to 57,000 adults (one-third of total apprehended adults assuming a minimum of one-third of these are women) equals 326,770 people as the total estimated number women and children apprehended in 2019 x 60 percent (amount data say violence is the primary driver) equals 196,062 people, which equals 32.4 percent of total illegal migrants from these three countries apprehended at the border in 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Note: “Female migrants face a myriad of dangers on their journeys, including extortion, rape, and abuse by coyotes and government officials. As of 2010, an estimated 60 percent of women suffered rape during their journey through Mexico; while some current reports [2016] estimate that this statistic has increased to 80 percent of migrant women. According to Amnesty International, many smugglers view sex as part of their fee for transporting women, and some even ‘require women to have a contraceptive injection prior to the journey as a precaution against pregnancy resulting from rape.’” Esmerelda Lopez and Melissa Hastings, “Overlooked and Unprotected: Central American Indigenous Migrant Women in Mexico,” *New York University Journal of International Law & Politics* (July 1, 2016), 12.

these women, parents, and children. Until violence against women and children is addressed at home, the migration threat to the United States will persist and continue to grow at an alarming rate.

Currently, the United States has negotiated asylum agreements with Guatemala and Mexico to house U.S.-asylum-seekers from Central America, and the number of migrants reaching the U.S. border has decreased.<sup>31</sup> With violence against women and children continuing to rise, however, the migration crisis will quickly grow beyond the capacity of these mid-stream asylum countries. Additionally, new policies to not allow asylum to migrants attempting to cross the border between legal border posts and to hold migrants in Mexico, lowering apprehension numbers, was ruled illegal by a U.S. federal appeals court on February 28, 2020, signaling changing border dynamics. Approximately 60,000 migrants are waiting under the “remain-in-Mexico” policy.<sup>32</sup> This strategy will decrease the level of violence against women and children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras so that they no longer need to emigrate from their home countries.

### The Way Forward

The political aim of this strategy is illegal immigration to the United States from Central America decreased by up to one-third in five years, by reducing the number of women and children who flee their countries due to violence and the threat of violence, thereby decreasing total illegal immigration.

There are three strategic approaches to consider when seeking to reduce the number of women and children victims of violence illegally migrating to the United States. The first

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<sup>31</sup> *U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions FY 2020 (to date January 2020)*, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (website), <https://www.cbp.gov> [130,976 total apprehensions from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the first four months of FY 2020]

<sup>32</sup> Silva, Daniella, *Federal Appeals Court Rules against Trump in Two Major Immigration Cases*, (February 28, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/federal-appeals-court-rules-against-trump-two-major-immigration-cases-n1145141>

approach focuses on U.S. actions to prevent entrance, raise costs associated with immigration, and decrease the attractiveness of the United States as a destination. While these strategies have worked with respect to some categories of migrants, for example, the decreased apprehension levels of Mexican migrants, they have not affected the migration decisions of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran women and children victims of violence. The problem as it relates to these migrants, therefore, needs to be re-defined to understand that the threat from violence these women and children face at home is greater than the deterrent threat of U.S. policy at the border and the violence encountered by women and girls during travel to the United States.

The second approach focuses on actions the United States can take to act bilaterally with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, respectively, to make change to their internal systems to decrease violence, making migration unnecessary. At the national level, programs to strengthen institutions, decrease impunity and corruption, while showing some success have generally been shut down by those in power.<sup>33</sup> Tying the bilateral relationship to measured improvement in the protection of women and children building on success at the community-level can lead to decreased violence against women and children.

The third approach asserts that change can be facilitated by acting multilaterally to compel these countries to reduce levels of violence against women and children within their borders. This will be done via a new international law to end violence against women and children.

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<sup>33</sup> Note: Work to decrease corruption through the United Nations International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) was halted at the direction of the respective country presidents. While the United Nations and the Organization of American States are multilateral institutions, these commissions were invited in bilaterally by Guatemala and Honduras, and only held a mandate for their work as long as the host government welcomed their presence. Additionally, according to informal discussions with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, the sophistication of transnational criminal organizations and the impunity of gangs have increased. The reinforcing relationships between criminal activity, corruption, and weak institutions cannot be changed from the outside.

The strategic leaders of these countries will be pinched between the stakeholders of the status quo and the pressure of the international community. The importance, however, of being a part of the broader community of nations for these countries is manifest in several ways. From Salvadoran President Bukele's request for the United Nations General Assembly to "hold on a second" while he took a selfie before his speech,<sup>34</sup> to a World Trade Organization safeguards investigation Guatemala asked be opened,<sup>35</sup> to Honduras' growing trade within the region and with countries like Australia,<sup>36</sup> the leader of these countries seek strong, cooperative international ties and the prestige that accompanies being part of the community of nations. These leaders and governments "hate to be humiliated in public, and there is benefit in naming and shaming to make change."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, this low cost, opportunity approach works because these countries and their leaders need to be seen as legitimate and respected on the international stage.

This strategy addresses the push factor of violence through three pillars so that illegal migration can be decreased by up to one-third at the southern border. These pillars address violence against women and children at the community, national, and international levels. It is this balancing between local level change and international pressure that will make lasting change and decrease the need for these women and children to leave home.

Additionally, this strategy will support and recognize important work being done in the prevention of trafficking in persons (TIP). Trafficking is one form of illegal immigration from

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<sup>34</sup> Cohen, Luc. *'Just a second, please': El Salvador president's U.N. selfie eclipses speech*. Reuters: September 26, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> World Trade Organization (website), [https://www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/news19\\_e/safe\\_gtm\\_04sep19\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news19_e/safe_gtm_04sep19_e.htm).

<sup>36</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia (website), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/honduras/Pages/honduras-country-brief.aspx>.

<sup>37</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

Central America that utilizes violence against its women and children victims. This strategy will support and link to existing anti-TIP international law, programs, and strategies.<sup>38</sup>

This strategy also links closely with and supports the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security, and results must be coordinated with and contribute to that initiative.

#### Pillar One: Community-based Change

To date, USAID and Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) wielding the economic instrument through foreign assistance programs in geographically targeted communities have realized a reduction in the intention to migrate by women and children engaged in those programs due to a reduction in violence improving their quality of life.<sup>39</sup> This objective will build upon that success at the community-level in reducing violence starting in the geographic areas most prone to migration. These programs were cut by the Administration and most have closed. Some funding is trickling back in, but a concentrated effort to increase this funding and make it predictable for the next eight to ten years will let these programs to expand through the region. The exact length of time needed for this consistent funding will depend upon results in the field and the timing of completion of Pillar Three, a body of international law to underpin sustainability beyond U.S. foreign assistance.

To make change, these community-level programs must do several things. First, they must bring together police, social workers, medical workers, churches, and community support services to provide protection and shelter for women and children who are victims or under

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<sup>38</sup> Note: In a not-for-attribution interview with a senior Department of Homeland Security official, (February 6, 2020) the concern of trafficking was addressed. When CBP officials are concerned that minors at the border are traveling with adult(s) who are not clearly biological parents, they do have access to rapid DNA testing to ensure that these children are protected appropriately.

<sup>39</sup> Non-attribution interview with USAID senior officials, March 12, 2020.

threat of violence. This work must incorporate the voices of women and children within the communities and should include women at all steps in a meaningful way if these issues of protection, peace, and security can be fully addressed. Second, they must address enforcement of existing laws at the local level ending impunity and improve tax collection and accountability for revenue to effectively support law enforcement at the local level. Success has been seen in this area at the local level by working directly with local authorities, local courts, and local police in El Salvador.<sup>40</sup> This work showed great promise and must be restarted and expanded. Third, working with civil society organizations, churches, and other respected community organizations, violence prevention work must restart and expand. Using the informational and economic instruments, this will provide mechanisms and establish best practices to reduce the acceptability of domestic and non-gang criminal violence throughout these countries. Through these mechanisms, the community will be informed of the impacts of domestic, gender-based, and criminal violence on women and children, and economic assistance will support the establishment of best practices, training, and other interventions for action within these communities. The community-based organizations and local governments doing this work are the guarantors of sustainability in their locality. Their work provides the combination of increased knowledge of the violence facing women and children and the consequences of that violence or threat of violence to the broader community. When joined with improved enforcement of laws, this approach has been proven in various environments to change attitudes and practices. While cultural and behavioral change generally takes a generation, attitudes and practices can change more quickly with knowledge and the removal of impunity.

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<sup>40</sup> Non-attribution interview with USAID senior officials, March 12, 2020.

Finally, daily life of seventy percent of people is impacted by gang violence in El Salvador and Honduras, and slightly less in Guatemala.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, approximately 60 percent of citizens view gangs as holding the role of local governance while only 12 percent view the legal local government as having power.<sup>42</sup> Community voices and legitimate government, therefore, must be strengthened through USAID and INL programming utilizing both the informational and economic instruments. Utilizing models from Honduras where MS-13 found it in their self-interest to change the social contract with the communities in which they exist, change can be encouraged through strengthening the voices of women and children. This will be done through local or international organizations for anonymity unless and until it is safe for them to speak out freely. Gang behaviors to be targeted are ones that were successfully changed by MS-13 in Honduras' San Pedro Sula region including increasing the age of child recruitment (typically 11 for boys and puberty for girls, now elevated to 14 years old), decreasing extortion rates so small businesses can remain in business, decreasing violence, increasing freedom of movement for residents, and providing behavior rules to gang members supporting their new social contract.<sup>43</sup> Through these changes local government can gain a greater foothold and obtain necessary revenue to improve service delivery in sectors where gangs lack legitimacy (i.e. education, health, etc.).

To implement this pillar, the Administration, through normal budget processes, must first gain an annual Congressional appropriation for this work for eight to ten years in the amount of at least \$30 million per country.<sup>44</sup> This can also be done with the re-alignment of existing funds.

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<sup>41</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Non-attribution Central American gang expert interview, March 30, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Note: This funding level is based upon USAID funding for projects including: Strengthening Local Organizations, Municipal Governance, Crime and Violence Prevention, Imagina: Pargua Cusatlan (safe, open spaces in communities), Rights and Dignity, regional data collection and analysis. While adjustments to and new scopes of

While results will be seen in the medium-term, for sustainability this is a longer-term strategy to ensure expansion of programming throughout these countries, prevent backsliding, and allow time for Pillar Three to be completed. This will involve several key strategic leadership challenges. To partner with local communities and have sustainable change involves relationship building and maintenance of those relationships over time, even as responsibilities are handed off to local actors. These relationships will be built through U.S. government staff and implementing partners on the ground. The strategic leader must ensure that work at the local level is shared and coordinated in the broader interagency at higher levels to effectively layer the many strategic approaches the United States adopts for Central America. For example, leadership must be aware of developments in anti-TIP work, drug trafficking mitigation, and U.S. immigration policy to inform and, as appropriate, adapt implementation of this strategy to ensure an overall coordinated approach. This will require regular NSC meetings at the PCC and DC level including information on Pillars Two and Three.

#### Pillar Two: Bilateral Pressure for Change

Bilaterally, there are several actions the United States can take to mitigate violence against women and children. Specifically, through Pillar Two, this strategy seeks to establish robust annual reporting through the Department of State to rank countries globally on the levels of violence women and children face within each country and the efforts of government to mitigate this violence. These rankings will be published and widely shared. They will allow countries to be compared. The report will also provide tiers of ranking, similar to the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report) and tied to consequences for inaction based on that country's ranking and

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work and partnerships to implement community-based activities and monitoring and evaluation will need to be (re-) established, cost estimates are based upon these prior/current activities. The estimate is for \$20 million for USAID and \$10 million for INL annually in each country for ten years. USAID and INL will need to be included in planning to ensure resources are appropriate.

tier. To complete this objective, the Department of State, using the diplomatic and informational instruments, will develop the Violence Against Women and Children Report in 2020 and collect the first data globally in 2021. Selecting the data to track and report must be done with women, government, and civil society from different regions of the world, including Central America, to ensure the best possible metrics are selected. This data should be shared widely and in direct diplomatic meetings with host country leadership, scholars, and civil society. Annual reporting should be continued in 2022 allowing for comparisons of rankings between the two years of data. In 2022, countries should be made more fully aware of the consequences of backsliding or stagnation at the lowest tiers of performance, and these consequences should be enacted based on 2023 data. These consequences should use the information instrument to call country leadership out publicly for non-improvement, contrast those countries with ones showing marked improvement, and more clearly define what success looks like in each country situation. Continued poor performance should be met by the Department of State naming and shaming of political leaders in global fora and bilateral events, and the Department of Treasury using the economic instrument to impose economic sanctions, to induce change, specifically targeted at items and processes that benefit the leadership and elites of these countries. It is important that these sanctions be designed to avoid harm to vulnerable populations and those targeted for assistance under this strategy.

To improve their progress as reported in the annual Violence Against Women and Children Report, U.S. agencies providing assistance through training programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras or with their citizens abroad will include courses aimed at reducing violence against women and children beginning in late 2020. The voices of women from these countries should be included in these training materials, and women should be involved at all levels of

curriculum development. For example, the Department of Defense will include modules on the protection of women and children and the importance of ending violence against women and children in the joint military training programs they already have with the military forces of each country. U.S. government educational institutions hosting international fellows should include new curriculum in their programs to address the importance and state of the art approaches to protecting women and children in their respective sectors. Similar programs will be initiated with the Drug Enforcement Administration, Departments of Homeland Security, State, Commerce, other divisions of Justice, Treasury, USAID, and others. Due to the diversity of the interagency partners providing training, these courses will include participants from the community to the national level, and frequently target current and future leaders. These training programs will need to be reviewed for content annually taking into consideration the findings of State's Violence Against Women and Children Report and updated as appropriate for continued delivery with monitoring and evaluation to document trainee understanding and acceptance.

Under this pillar, the strategic leader must build partnerships with the leaders of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This will strengthen the implementation of the strategy and ensure country buy-in, especially when tied into the partnerships developed at the community and local government levels under Pillar One. These relationships will be strengthened through the work of the U.S. country-specific interagency teams under the direction of the Ambassador and reported back to higher levels for overall coordination. Additionally, the strategic leader must expend political capital and build partnerships with states that also have influence over El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to work constructively with the United States to push for change to decrease violence against women and children in these three countries.

### Pillar Three: International Pressure for Change

This strategy recognizes that these countries have mixed records, at best, in making change themselves in reducing violence against women and children. To sustain the advances made under the first two pillars an international approach is needed. All three of these countries have protection laws on the books, but weak institutions and impunity have meant that no one expects protection and no offender expects to be held accountable for acts of violence. All three leaders of these countries do value their international reputation. Therefore, using the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments to establish a body of international law to protect women and children against violence, the State Department working through the United Nations will compel these governments to act due to the accountability with consequences under a multilateral convention. The specific consequences will be negotiated through the establishment of the law but are expected to include actions through the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments, rather than through the military instrument, to persuade, enable, and induce change to work toward ending violence against women and children. This pillar will take years to establish, so short- and medium-term results will be met through the other two pillars, which will overlap with and then be sustained over time through this multilateral effort. For this pillar to succeed, stakeholders must be brought into the development of this body of law. These stakeholders need to represent Congressional interests in the United States building on broad Congressional support and action as seen through the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 calling on the United States to be “a global leader in promoting the participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution,” and expressing concern for the “physical safety of women.”<sup>45</sup> Additional stakeholders must include partners of U.S. agencies in host

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<sup>45</sup> Congress.gov (website), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1141>

countries around the world led by the Ambassador at post, multilateral development organizations including UNICEF, UN Women, and others, and representatives of like-minded countries within the United Nations and Organization of American States. Within the United Nations system, this work can build upon the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and actions mentioned above, and give teeth to the many important United Nations initiatives protecting women and children. While the Organization of American States may have more influence and speed within the Central American region, the United Nations is the preferred body to pursue this law building on its prior and continued work and to allow for a larger number of actors to support consequences for inaction on the international stage. Secondly, a United Nations convention would aim to end violence against women and children globally, benefitting billions more people.

Establishing a new body of international law to protect women and children from violence puts the United States on the right side of a very important issue. This will be a lengthy pursuit. Therefore, the strategic leader must not only ensure that champions within this Administration and Congress are truly committed but recognize that this effort will likely continue into the next Administration meaning new champions will need to be engaged. These champions must be stakeholders and, therefore, be informed of progress under all pillars to demonstrate advances are being made in the short- and medium-term. Persistence and patience will be the mantra for this strategy and specifically Pillar Three to reach successful completion.

### Orchestration

Pillars One and Two of this strategy will need to be implemented to make progress in the short- and medium-term, two to five years, and maintain momentum while the establishment of the international body of law process unfolds. USAID and INL community-based assistance

programs must be restarted as outlined in Pillar One. This will require new or modifications to existing awards starting in early 2021, and full program implementation beginning in late 2021. In the short-term, the Department of State must initiate the Violence Against Women and Children Report in 2021 and the process for a new international law in 2020. Simultaneously, U.S. government training programs must develop curricula to be fully integrated into their international training courses as outlined in Pillar Two and implement those training programs beginning in late 2020. The results of the Violence Against Women and Children Report should feed into both U.S. government training programs and USAID and INL program planning to ensure a full understanding of the scope of violence and efforts to mitigate that violence. Additionally, USAID and INL should make their robust monitoring and evaluation materials available to State and the interagency as a source of information on what programming is showing success and where course corrections are needed and being implemented. This information will assist the Department of State in their bilateral relationships with these Central American states in pressuring for continuous improvement in the reduction of levels and types of violence in these countries. To maintain Congressional support, State and USAID should jointly brief Congress on progress and course corrections at least twice per year.

This strategy must be implemented with consideration given to the U.S. strategies related to ending TIP. Layering of this strategy with anti-TIP initiatives must be done in a supportive manner, ensuring not to hinder the implementation of anti-TIP measures.<sup>46</sup>

This strategy must also be coordinated with prosperity-based strategies for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. As violence decreases, opportunities for economic growth, especially

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<sup>46</sup> Note: For example, in a non-attribution interview (March 5, 2020), a senior level DHS official explained work DHS is doing with border protection agencies in each of the three countries to strengthen their borders and required use of government identification for travelers to decreasing the ability of traffickers to leave the country with their victims.

small business and foreign direct investment will increase. Those prosperity-based strategies should track progress under this strategy and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

### Tests of Strategy

This is a low-cost, opportunity strategy to decrease illegal migration to the United States through decreasing violence against women and children in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The objectives can be met with the personnel already in place. Slight additional funding will be needed for travel, meetings, and negotiations amounting to less than \$1 million per year. As stated in Pillar One, a means-creation sub-objective must be completed first to ensure the effective implementation of community-based programs through INL and USAID.<sup>47</sup>

There are several risks to this strategy. First, according to one not-for-attribution briefing at the Department of Defense, the TIP reporting process has not always been viewed seriously in these Central American countries as at least one is frequently given waivers due to the importance of bilateral military relationships. Waivers signal unimportance. To mitigate this risk, clear protocols must be established up front for the Violence Against Women and Children Report to ensure that the consequences for inaction or backsliding are enacted.

Second, in establishing a new body of international law, not only must it be a priority within the Executive Branch for the United States to lead this work through the United Nations, but

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<sup>47</sup> Note: From joint State-USAID-DHS-MCC brief, “DHS estimates it costs a minimum of \$28,000 to detain and repatriate one unaccompanied child. With \$28,000, the U.S. government can also: 1) help 30 vulnerable youth in high crime municipalities who have dropped out of school to complete a high school equivalent degree through USAID support; 2) help 33 vulnerable youth gain employment after completing job and life skills training through USAID support; 3) help 8 Salvadoran medium-sized companies secure new financing that will generate \$1.65 million in incremental sales and 80 new jobs through USAID support; 4) fund 560 children for a year in Police Athletic Leagues with INL support; 5) train 40 School Resources Officers as a crime prevention strategy to improve security in public schools and communities through INL support; 6) help 650 vulnerable kids with Gang Resistance Education and Training with INL support; 7) provide 325 tablets to schools to facilitate students English language learning process; and 8) build one new school classroom with MCC support.” Decreasing violence against women and children will decrease illegal migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States saving resources in terms of personnel, time, and funds that can be used to implement these programs in Central America.”

there must be at least one respected champion able to work across party lines in the Congress. As seen from the decades long attempt to ratify and establish national laws to the Genocide Convention, persistence and patience will be required. To mitigate the risk of non-ratification or a lengthy ratification process by the United States, the Department of State should identify and engage key members of Congress from both houses and political parties early in the process building on the broad support within Congress for the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017.

A risk from this strategy includes the inability to expand community-based programming if the gangs feel threatened by the results. To mitigate this risk, models from the region and the changes in approach now being seen by MS-13 in Honduras need to be studied for lessons learned. The lessons together with those from previous USAID and INL programs must be utilized in the planning, design, and implementation of activities. Robust monitoring and evaluation of activities must be undertaken to make course corrections rapidly when data shows concerning trends. Additionally, all relevant data should be shared between projects to aid quick identification of potential concerns and effective decision making.

Overall, this is a viable strategy. The data highlighted, including discussions with experts both inside and outside of government show that it is possible to reduce illegal migration to the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras by decreasing violence against women and children through the pillars proposed. Additionally, progress made prior to the Administration's cut in foreign assistance to these three countries show that success was being achieved in reducing the number of illegal immigrants by targeting violence prevention at the community-level in those geographic areas with the greatest number of people apprehended at the U.S. border.<sup>48</sup> Limited means creation and sustainment of those means is needed throughout

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<sup>48</sup> Non-attribution interview with senior USAID officials, March 12, 2020.

implementation. Maintaining focus and funding over time will require political capital to keep this work prioritized through to completion, but the low-cost involved to reduce overall illegal migration by up to one-third, and the need for a bipartisan-supported approach to migration policy makes this approach – protecting women and children – an attractive one.

Ending violence against women and children as a way to tackle and reduce illegal migration is in line with American values and furthers the U.S. image as a protector of human rights and dignity. Therefore, this low-cost, opportunity approach to decreasing illegal migration to the United States by up to one-third is worth the limited investment required for success.

### Conclusion

Violence against women and children is the cause of up to one-third of illegal migrant apprehensions at the U.S. southern border. This strategy aims for illegal immigration to the United States from Central America to be decreased by up to one-third within five years by reducing the number of women and children who flee their countries due to violence and the threat of violence, thereby decreasing total illegal immigration. This is accomplished through three low-cost, opportunity-based pillars. Working at the community-level to decrease violence against women and children starting in those communities that are home to the greatest percentage of illegal migrants to the United States will decrease the need to migrate.

Simultaneously, at the national level, these three countries will be measured and compared with nations globally to implement change and be held accountable by the United States for improving the situation faced by women and children. Finally, to ensure continued, international pressure to end violence against women and children, a new body of international law will be established holding these, and other, states accountable in global fora to ensure and sustain continuous improvement.

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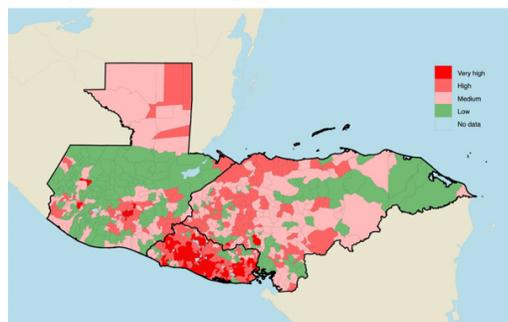
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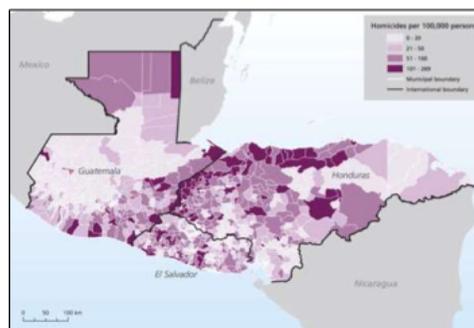
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Where in the NT a reduction in homicides would reduce unaccompanied children pressure most (red: greatest effect, green: least effect)<sup>50</sup>



Internal homicide rates by (all homicides) 2011<sup>49</sup>



<sup>49</sup> Williams, Rebecca J., *Youth Violence and Citizen Security in Central America's Northern Triangle* (USAID/BFS/ARP-Funded Project: August 2016), 4.

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