

Understanding the Juvenile Migrant Surge from Central America

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IDA's findings are different from the dominant narrative, which argues that crime and violence were the main drivers of the Central American juvenile migrant surge.

The Problem

One of the greatest migration challenges facing the United States and Europe today is the surge of people seeking asylum. For the United States, mass arrival of asylum seekers is a fairly new phenomenon. Traditionally, migration control at the southwest border focused on Mexican adults who were attempting to enter the United States illegally to earn higher incomes. Only a small percentage of those apprehended for illegal entry would claim asylum.¹ This situation changed dramatically in 2011 when a surge of juvenile Central American asylum seekers began to arrive at the U.S. border.

Overview

Figure 1 shows deseasonalized monthly levels of juvenile migrants apprehended on the U.S.-Mexico border from October 1999 to March 2017.² These apprehensions were stable at low levels through 2011, grew steadily from 2012 to 2013, and then grew explosively in the first half of 2014 and have fluctuated dramatically since that time.

Surges of asylum seekers are generally believed to be sparked by wars, civil conflict, or natural disasters. The dominant narrative explaining the surge in Central American juvenile asylum seekers argues that it was sparked by the exposure of children to high rates of crime and violence. Others have challenged this narrative, arguing that actual and perceived U.S. policies explain the surge, with immigration liberalization and reform measures that encourage migrant flow and new enforcement measures that discourage it.

Although many media articles and issue papers have been written on the surge, few rigorous studies have been carried out. Findings from the studies that do exist include the following:

- A higher murder rate is significantly correlated with annual apprehensions of unaccompanied children—a component of

¹ In the late 1970s and 1980s, the United States absorbed a wave of 1 million asylum seekers from Vietnam. These migrants, however, did not enter the United States illegally but were processed as refugees in other countries.

² Apprehensions on the U.S.-Mexico border are marked by significant seasonal patterns. We used a standard deseasonalization program of the U.S. Government (Census X-12) to remove regular monthly movements in apprehension series.

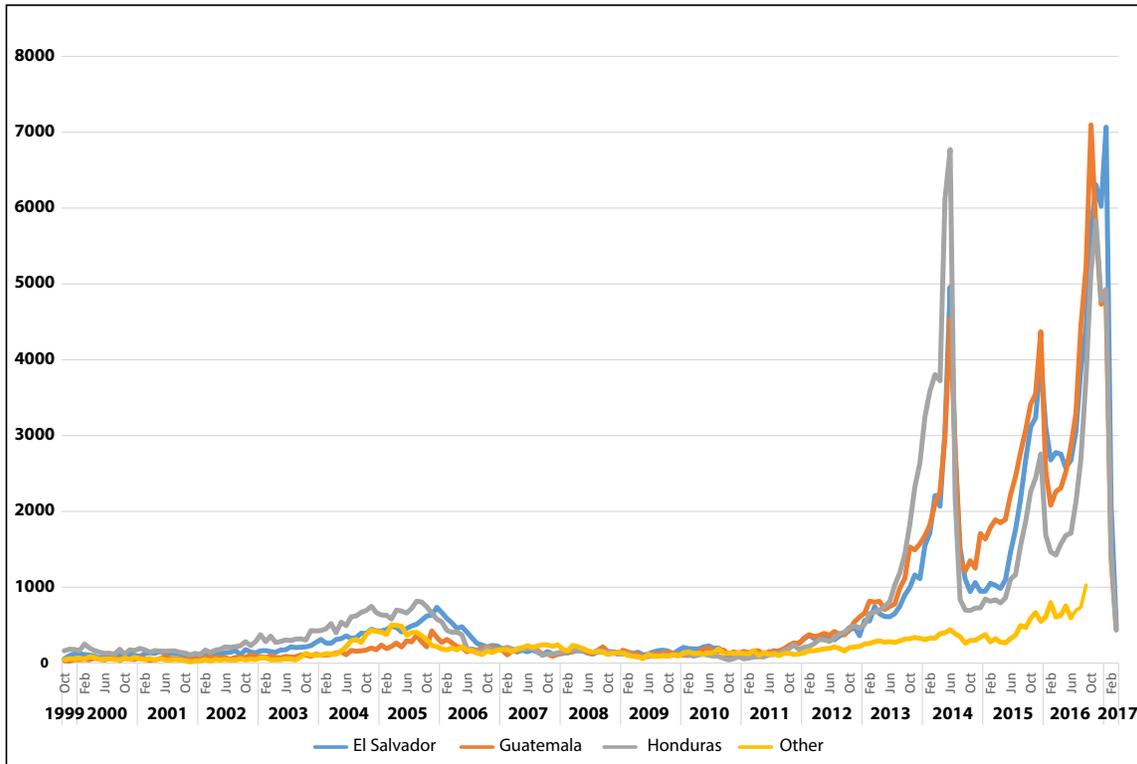


Figure 1. Deseasonalized Monthly Juvenile Apprehensions (at and between ports; excluding Mexico)

juvenile migrants—from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanun 2016; Clemens 2017).

- Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua are more likely to migrate to the United States with a parent or after a parent has migrated, emphasizing the importance of family reunification in juvenile migration (Donato and Sisk 2015).
- In El Salvador and Honduras, those people who had been a victim of crime in the past year stated intentions to migrate at a higher rate

than those people who had not been a victim (Hiskey et al. 2018).

What Root Causes Correlate with Juvenile Migrant Flows?

IDA used data on juvenile migrant apprehensions on the U.S.-Mexico border to evaluate the degree to which crime and violence, family reunification, and economic motives are correlated with this flow.³ Although most juvenile migrants come from the three Central American countries and Mexico, small flows of juvenile migrants also come from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. We analyzed the

³ Juvenile migrant apprehensions aggregate apprehensions at and between ports of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border of children aged 17 and younger who were designated as unaccompanied or accompanied by a family member or who were not given either designation.

relationship between annual flows from 17 countries and “root cause” explanatory factors.⁴

The dependent variable used in this analysis is an annual juvenile emigration rate, which reflects the likelihood that a child from a given country will be apprehended on the border. It is constructed as the number of juveniles apprehended from a given country in relation to that country’s total juvenile population. Figure 2 shows that this rate is substantially higher for El Salvador and Honduras than for Guatemala.⁵

The independent variables that proxy for the three proposed root causes are described as follows:

- **Crime and violence.** We use three proxies for crime and violence: murders per 100,000 population, an overall neighborhood safety variable, and a neighborhood gang presence variable. The neighborhood variables are derived from the Latin American Public Opinion Poll (LAPOP) that has been carried out biannually since the early 2000s.

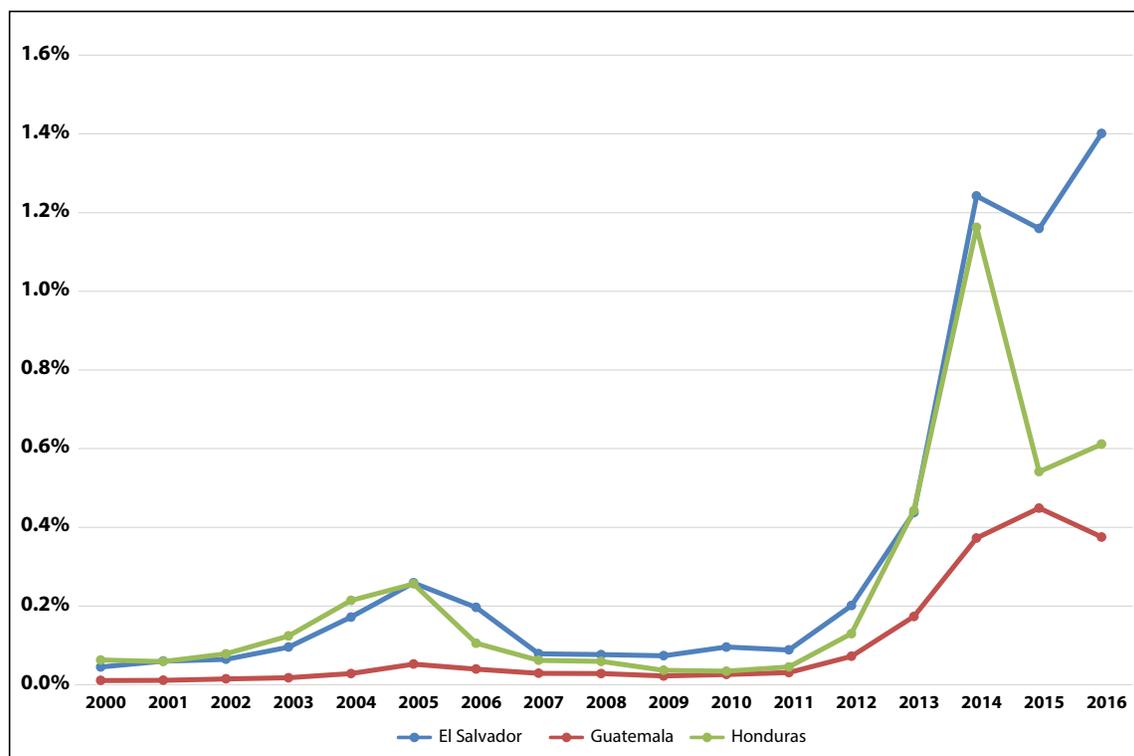


Figure 2. Juvenile Migrant Apprehensions/Total Juvenile Population: Juvenile Emigration Rate Proxy

⁴ The countries include Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela.

⁵ Rates for other countries are not shown in Figure 2 because they are much smaller and very close to zero.

- **Family reunification.** An ideal variable to capture family reunification would be the ratio of U.S. families with children still in origin country to these families plus families with children in origin country. This variable would capture the chance that a child observed in the origin-country juvenile population could potentially have a family wanting to reunify with her/him and that this family must bring the child into the United States illegally. No data are currently available to measure this ratio, so we use as a proxy the ratio of the unauthorized population from a particular origin country to the sum of that population and the total population of the origin country.
- **Economic motives.** Per capita income is used to capture economic motivations for migration.⁶

Table 1 shows that when we relate migration rate levels to explanatory variable levels, the unauthorized population ratio, per capita income, and the homicide rate significantly impact the level of the juvenile migration rate and in the directions anticipated. However, the unauthorized population ratio explains more variance in the migration rate than per capita income and the homicide rate. When we limit the panel to only the three Central American countries rather than all 17 countries, the only significant explanatory variable is the unauthorized population ratio. Table 1 also shows that when we relate change in the migration rate to change in the explanatory variables, no explanatory variable is significant. This result suggests that the juvenile migrant surge as reflected in rising annual numbers of migrants cannot

Table 1. Panel Regression Results

| | Full Panel of 17 Countries | | | | Three Central American Countries Only | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| | Levels | | | | First Differences | Levels | |
| Unauthorized population ratio | | 0.44*** (6.40) | | | 0.40*** (5.73) | 0.31 (1.45) | 0.35* (1.90) |
| Per-capita income | | | -0.005** (-2.46) | | -0.005* (-1.93) | -0.0003 (-0.06) | 0.09 (0.75) |
| Homicide rate | | | | 0.47** (2.47) | 0.28* (1.66) | 0.02 (0.13) | 0.45 (1.57) |
| Constant | 0.0002 (0.51) | -0.008*** (-6.07) | 0.006** (2.51) | -0.001* (-1.77) | -0.004 (-1.24) | -0.0001 (-0.43) | -0.07 (-0.95) |
| R ² adjusted | 0.37 | 0.54 | 0.40 | 0.41 | 0.57 | 0.05 | 0.82 |

Note: Country and year fixed effects are included in all regressions. Estimation technique is ordinary least squares (OLS). ***, **, and * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

⁶ Real per capita income (gross domestic product) in purchasing power parity prices.

be explained by change in crime or poverty in the Central American countries.

IDA's findings are different from the dominant narrative, which argues that crime and violence were the main drivers of the Central American juvenile migrant surge. They suggest instead that the surge may be better explained by the unauthorized population ratio, which is our proxy for the presence of many separated families with unauthorized adult members living in the United States. Much of the juvenile migrant flow is, by definition, family reunification since roughly half of the unaccompanied children processed by the U.S. government from 2011 to 2015 were reunited with a parent and most of the other unaccompanied children were reunited with a sibling, grandparent, or other family member.⁷ Exposure to crime and violence may have caused some reunification to happen earlier than it otherwise would have, but a juvenile migrant surge from Central America may have been inevitable even if this exposure had been at significantly lower levels. Also worth noting is that the emigration of parents and other adult family members in the 2000s made children left behind more vulnerable to victimization due to lack of parental support and supervision, thus increasing pressure to reunify.⁸

Are U.S. Policies Correlated with Juvenile Migrant Flows?

Another fundamental question we analyzed is whether actual and perceived changes in U.S. policies are correlated with change in juvenile migrant apprehensions. Several policies may have had an impact on the incentives of juvenile migrants to come to the United States. Among these policies were the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) (December 2008), the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive action (June 2012), passage of the Senate Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) bill (June 2013), a range of enforcement actions carried out in the United States and Mexico from June to August 2014, the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) executive action (November 2014), the announcement by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that general deterrence is no longer being invoked as a factor in custody determination (June 2015), Operation Border Guardian (January 2016), and the election of President Donald Trump (November 2016).

Because we have not identified a statistical technique that is appropriate for estimating whether a policy change caused a turning point in apprehensions, we rely on a qualitative analysis of visual

⁷ Calculated from data given in annual reports of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Department of Health and Human Services.

⁸ Berk-Seligson et al. (2014) carried out a large-scale interview project in Central America in 2014 and found that "there is near universal agreement in the stakeholder interviews that the major factor associated with youths dropping out of school and joining violent gangs is the 'broken home' ('la familia desintegrada')." Emigration of parents, by definition, creates a "broken home." World Bank (2011) also notes that many families in Central America became separated due to emigration of parents, and that children in families with weak parenting are more likely to become victims and perpetrators of criminal acts.

evidence. Figure 3 graphs juvenile apprehensions on a logarithmic scale for the period January 2011–March 2017.

Apprehensions of juvenile migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have fluctuated dramatically from 2011 to 2017 and these fluctuations have been highly correlated across the three countries. This correlation suggests that migrant flows are responding more to actual or perceived U.S. policy changes rather than the root cause variables (e.g., violence and economic conditions), which change slowly over time and whose trends tend to vary across countries.

Visual evidence suggests that most policy changes are correlated

with subsequent acceleration or deceleration in juvenile migrant apprehensions. Figure 3 provides evidence that pro-immigrant reforms (such as DACA and the CIR bill) were followed by apprehension surges while perceived anti-immigration reforms/events (law enforcement operations and the 2016 election of President Trump) were followed by apprehension declines. While this qualitative analysis could not be considered causal, it does suggest that flows of juvenile migrants from Central America to the United States are responsive to U.S. policy changes.

Recommendations

- Analysis should be developed to help project the potential flow of juvenile migrants from Central

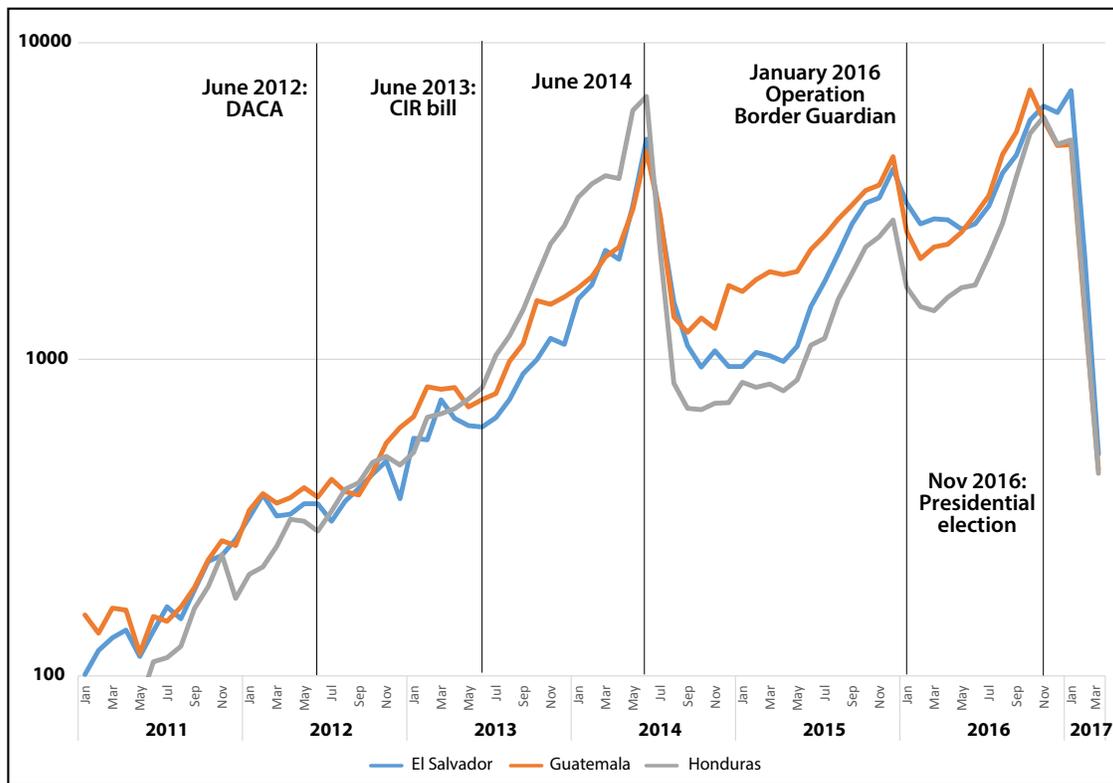


Figure 3. Deseasonalized Juvenile Migrant Apprehensions: Logarithmic Scale

American countries. The juvenile migrant surge seems to have come as a surprise to analysts, even though the problem of crime and violence in the region was well understood (e.g., see World Bank 2011) and estimates showing large unauthorized populations for these countries were available. Systematic review of quantitative and qualitative information should be

included as part of this effort, which should also include an attempt to quantify the total potential flow of juvenile migrants from Central America using U.S. and origin-country census and household survey data.

- The impacts of policies on migration flows should be anticipated and incorporated into planning.

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