

Understanding Migration: Corruption, Poor Governance, and their Effects on Migration in Central America

Part of an occasional series

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Institutional neglect and corruption in Central America

On February 2, the Biden Administration announced an [Executive Order](#) to address the root causes of migration from Latin America. The Executive Order directed a small collective of officials to develop a plan

“to address the root causes of migration, including by (A) combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law; (B) promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press; (C) countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other organized criminal organizations; (D) combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence; and (E) addressing economic insecurity and inequality.”

While all these actions are laudable as part of U.S. foreign policy, the Executive Order did not make clear how corruption and governance issues are related to migration. Nor have subsequent actions by the Administration. The links were taken as obvious, or taken for granted. Yet the relationship between poor governance, corruption and migration is complex and multiple factors exist, sometimes intensifying each other and at other times neutralizing each other.

Latin America has suffered from decades of neglect in building strong institutions and pervasive poor governance, including the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Throughout the region, political systems that benefit political and economic elites are entrenched, and [corrupt governance is pervasive](#). One consequence is that the state is unable or unwilling to provide basic services to the citizenry—education, public safety, response to natural disasters, consistent legal institutions, and core public-health services like universal vaccination. A second consequence is that individuals have [very low institutional trust in government](#), even when they do not report personal experience with corruption. Yet services do exist in these countries that approximate services delivered in the Global North in quality—but only available to local elites.

This situation has dependable outcomes. People believe, correctly, that they are getting the short end of the stick. People believe that things are not going to change. For many, then, the solution is migration. Migration becomes the way to change one’s life, to rise up socially, gain access to needed services, enable a better life for one’s children, or buy the goods that individuals dream of owning.

Corruption and Migration

Several relationships between corruption and migration are clear in Latin America, although not all of these are analogous in relationship or equivalent in strength. For the purposes of this brief, “corruption” should be understood via a common advocacy definition: the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain. This definition incorporates a wealth of behaviors, at various scales from unelected community leader to local official to national lawmaker.

Relationships identified by experts and academics include the following:

- **Corruption can prompt migration, whether licit or illicit.** Corrupt political systems inhibit social mobility, and migration events are driven by the confluence of poor life prospects and chance economic stresses. However, [corruption is a much stronger driver of migration for those with some resources](#) than the very poor.
- Alternatively, **migration can entrench corruption.** Migration may lead to corrupt leaders [spending less on locals](#) and keeping more for themselves, because the effect of remittances can [substitute](#) for the goods and services that leaders would need to distribute to remain in socially powerful positions.
- **Corruption can ease smuggling**, by decreasing costs and lowering hurdles. However, [smuggling is a reaction to border controls and not a cause of migration](#).
- **Corruption can increase migration aspirations**, defined as a desire to migrate whether or not migration occurs. Research shows [a stronger correlation](#) between dissatisfaction with one’s standard of living and migration than between an absolute economic standard and migration. Inequality—both economic and of opportunity—makes a large difference, and corrupt areas are deeply unequal.
- In some circumstances, [mass migrations can reduce corruption in home countries](#), particularly when the receiving country is less corrupt than the sending country. The mechanism here is probably that migrants stay

in contact with their home country, and begin to expect political norms closer to that of their country of residence.

- [Corruption may also deter return migration](#), likely by the same mechanism as above—migrants come to perceive their home countries as corrupt, and they prefer to live longer periods in less corrupt political environments.
- **Corruption can exacerbate individuals’ vulnerability to climate change, both impeding the development effects of migration and increasing migration aspirations.**

The links between corruption and migration exist and can be powerful. However, even if anti-corruption efforts are successful, migration from Latin America will continue, including illicit migration. Reducing corruption will fail if it is approached as a deterrence strategy for migration. Instead, anti-corruption efforts in Latin America must be understood as part of a strategy to break the cycle of border crises.

Improving Conditions Can Make People More Likely to Migrate

As many of the above bullets suggest, individuals commonly have multiple reasons to leave their homes in search of better lives. Poverty can be an important factor, but lack of social mobility can be more important. Stemming violence can reduce migration when that violence occurs in areas that lack a history of sending migrants to the United States. But due to network effects—essentially, ties that connect migrants in destination countries to individuals in origin countries, and which foster more migration—reducing violence in areas with a history of out-migration may not reduce future out-migration. Violence can prompt migration, but networks sustain it.

One of the most important [findings](#) in migration studies is the “[migration hump](#).” As a country or region increases its economic development, emigration from the country increases first only to decrease later. The mechanism? It costs money to migrate, so the poorest of the poor tend to be unable to leave. As the poor gain resources, they can use their newfound capital to invest in better lives—often in other places. In short, development aid gives

people the resources to migrate before it makes their lives adequately better to reduce their aspirations to migrate.

U.S. aid to Central American can and should continue. That aid, however, cannot be expected to cut migration. It is important to note that the current system of migration management, focused on harsh penalties, leads to higher costs paid by migrants and to deferred migration journeys but not less migration. When migrants defer migration journeys, the end of deferrals tends to all come at once, overwhelming national reception systems. Instead, anti-corruption aid can serve as a management tool that lessens dangers of individual migrations, increases skills of those who do come (and will come anyway), and that forestalls the worst of migration surges.

Goals for a Combined Anti-Corruption and Migration Policy

Historically, U.S. foreign policy and aid has focused on the region in moments of crisis, whether the political crises of the 1980s and then the Honduran coup of 2009, ecological disasters like Hurricane Mitch in 1998, or U.S. domestic crises of migration such as 2014 and 2021. Advancing structural reforms requires a consistent, purposeful, and long-term approach with both aid and political support, especially for anti-corruption and democratic bodies in the region, such as the now-disbanded [CICIG in Guatemala](#).

Changes in Central America will ultimately be made by Central Americans. A strength of the region is its wealth

of committed and capable individuals, both inside and outside of government. These individuals face real threats, including participants in CICIG who have now fled the country. But corrupt networks operate in the open, as their power is often based in overt corrupt acts and publicly known indicators of impunity, such as [Mexico's Javier Duarte, who openly stole over \\$120 million USD](#). The lesson is that many needed reforms are less a question of technical capacity than political will.

Migration has no magic bullets. U.S. policymakers should not count on increased border enforcement, border militarization (including Mexican border militarization), and increased development to reduce migration. Instead, policymakers should think about migration over the medium and long terms. In the medium term, it is possible to reduce the proximate drivers of spikes in migration—the Biden Executive Order's focus on countering general and gang-related violence, preventing gender-based violence, and reducing economic inequality can smooth migration rates, if done effectively. Long term, the U.S. should have a vision for what Central American societies should be with its aid. One vision might be that, with time, Central American countries qualify for the same visa regime and opportunities as Europeans—a goal that is measurable, has a clear incentive, one in which multiple national interests align, and a clear relationship between migration and ending corruption.

To learn about USCRI's Livelihoods Program in El Salvador, go to: <https://refugees.org/uscri-el-salvador/>