



POLICY & ADVOCACY REPORT

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

Part of an occasional series

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 America can and should continue. However, U.S. aid 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.

4. Policy Goals for 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/>

United States Issue Updates

- **DHS Redesignates TPS for Haitians**

On Saturday, May 22, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that the United States would grant Haitian nationals and “individuals without nationality who last resided in Haiti” the ability to apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). TPS allows individuals to reside and work legally in the United States if they are unable to safely return to and live in their home country. Advocates estimate that over 100,000 Haitians will be eligible for temporary status because of the move, both through extension of current TPS or through new eligibility. DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas cited “serious security concerns, social unrest, an increase in human rights abuses, crippling poverty, and [a] lack of basic resources” as a basis for the grant. To read more, [click here](#).

- **DHS Reverses Course, Continues International Entrepreneur Parole Program**

On Monday, May 10, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced the withdrawal of a proposed 2018 notice of rulemaking that would have discontinued the International Entrepreneur Parole Program. The International Entrepreneur Parole Program allows DHS to grant relief from deportation and “a period of authorized stay, on a case-by-case basis, to foreign entrepreneurs who demonstrate that their stay in the United States would provide a significant public benefit through the potential for rapid business growth and job creation.” To read the Federal Register notice, [click here](#).

- **Department of Education Includes Undocumented Higher-Education Students in Emergency Aid**

On Tuesday, May 11, the Department of Education announced \$36 billion in total grants for use in higher education, using funds from the American Rescue Plan passed earlier this year. In announcing the package, the Department clarified that institutions distributing the aid may provide it to all students, regardless of immigration status, as long as the students meet enrollment and other academic requirements. To read the press release, [click here](#), and to read the new rule, [click here](#).

- **Administration Revokes Healthcare Requirement for Green Card Applicants**

On Friday, May 14, the Biden Administration rescinded Presidential Proclamation 9945, issued in October 2019, requiring applicants for Lawful Permanent Residence (a green card) to show they had or could pay for health insurance from a list of approved plans. President Biden’s new Proclamation orders relevant federal agencies to review any actions developed pursuant to Proclamation 9945 and to issue revised guidance. To read the new Presidential Proclamation, [click here](#).

United States Issue Updates (Cont'd)

- **Biden Administration Announces Proclamation to Expand Access to Legal Counsel, Including for Unaccompanied Children**

On Tuesday, May 18, the Biden Administration announced that it would issue a Presidential Proclamation to re-establish the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable and expand access to legal counsel. The coming Proclamation will also require the U.S. Attorney General to submit a report for expanding the access-to-justice work via the Department of Justice. The Administration's statement noted a specific need for "helping an unaccompanied child seek asylum." To read the Biden Administration's statement, [click here](#). Unaccompanied children are far more likely to receive immigration status when they are represented by an attorney.

- **Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Calls to End Use of Title 42**

On Thursday, May 20, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, called for "the government of the United States to swiftly lift the public health-related asylum restrictions that remain in effect at the border and to restore access to asylum for the people whose lives depend on it, in line with international legal and human rights obligations." Grandi singled out the "Title 42" rule, stating that its usage has "resulted in the expulsions of hundreds of thousands of people to Mexico or their countries of origin, denying their access to asylum procedures." Grandi's statement comes at a time of increasing pressure on the Biden Administration to lift the Title 42 rule, a holdover from the previous Trump Administration. To read the UN High Commissioner's statement, [click here](#).

Around the World in International Migration

• Spain Pushes Back Migrants from Morocco

Over 8,000 migrants swam from Morocco to Ceuta, Spain last week. The influx comes as tensions between Morocco and Spain are high due to Spain's decision to allow medical assistance for the leader of the Western Sahara's independence movement. The Western Sahara is currently part of Morocco's internationally recognized territory, and Spain's assistance to its leader has been portrayed by some as a betrayal of Morocco's interests. Spanish leaders have claimed the migrant influx is a result of Morocco loosening its border controls in retaliation. The two countries have a long-standing agreement that asylum-seekers crossing from Morocco into Spain are sent back.

• UNHCR Say UK's Immigration Plan Will Decimate Asylum

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has released a statement raising concerns about the United Kingdom's proposal to overhaul its asylum system. The proposal seeks to treat asylum-seekers differently based on whether they enter the country legally at a border entry point or through irregular channels. Those who enter irregularly would be denied the automatic right to seek asylum. The UK has been attempting to create bilateral agreements with European Union countries to return asylum-seekers who have passed through those countries on their way to the UK. So far, no EU country has agreed to this plan. UNHCR reminds the UK that the "right to seek asylum is universal and does not depend on the mode of arrival; asylum-seekers are often forced to arrive unauthorized."

• Ethiopia Convicts Three Troops of Rape During Tigray Conflict

Ethiopia's military prosecutors have obtained convictions against at least three soldiers for rape, and have pressed charges against 28 more for civilian murders and 25 for sexual violence in Tigray. A report from the attorney general also confirmed the massacres of 229 civilians in Mai Kadra and 110 in Axum last November. While a previous report on the killings claimed that most of the perpetrators were from the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the most recent report states only that "some of these individuals might have been irregular combatants." After reports that Eritrean soldiers were disguising themselves as Ethiopian troops, committing atrocities, and blocking essential aid to the region, the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution to demand the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray.

• Myanmar Military Leader Denies Myanmar Will Accept Rohingya Back

Myanmar's military junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, has announced that allowing Rohingya refugees to return to Myanmar "doesn't comply with Myanmar's laws," stating that even the term "Rohingya" is not a word Myanmar recognizes to define a distinct group of its people. He claims that "Rohingya" was a term that only came into existence after Myanmar's independence from Britain, and is thus not accepted as an identifier for any of Myanmar's people. Min Aung Hlaing also pointed to the failure of multiple international appeals to resettle Rohingya refugees, claiming that no country in the world will accept them.



Policy & Advocacy Wins

- On Saturday, May 22, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, [redesignated](#) Haiti for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). USCRI worked closely with the TPS working group coalition to advocate for TPS for Haiti. See our Haiti TPS chart [here](#) for more information about the country.
- On Monday, May 24, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra [told reporters](#) that the Administration was no longer considering a plan to house unaccompanied children of “tender age”—those 12 years old and younger—at the Fort Bliss Emergency Intake Site near El Paso. USCRI communicated directly with ORR leadership and with the White House that Ft. Bliss is not an appropriate site for younger children.

Upcoming Meetings & Events

Facebook Live Series on Unaccompanied Children- May 27

On Thursday, May 27 at 2:00 PM EST, USCRI will host its third in a five-part series documenting the journey of unaccompanied children through the U.S. immigration system. This session will be a discussion with USCRI's Managing Attorney, Hila Moss. To tune in, [click here](#).

Barriers Beyond Borders: Realities for Asylum Seekers From the Sea to Athens- June 2

On Wednesday, June 2 at 1:00 PM EST, join refugee experts for a panel on the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, and learn what it is like to come to Athens as an asylum-seeker. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Immigrant and Refugee Workforce Summit- May 26

On Wednesday, May 26 at 12:00 PM EST, the Immigrant and Refugee Workforce Summit will focus on creating workforce equity for immigrants and refugees in the United States. The summit is intended for staff of organizations that help immigrants. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

[Click here to donate today!](#)

If you have any questions or comments, please contact the Policy and Advocacy Division at policy@uscrimail.org.