

Migration from Central America

SUMMARY

Although not a new phenomenon, migration flows from Central America, in particular from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (also called the Northern Triangle of Central America, NTCA), have grown exponentially since 2014, with a considerable increase in the number of adults and a huge one in the number of unaccompanied minors crossing the borders. And the 'caravan' of Central American migrants that has recently reached Mexico on its way to the US border has again turned public and media attention towards this silent exodus.

The push factors that have been fuelling migration from these countries include poverty, unemployment and under-employment, rampant crime and violence – in particular gang violence – but also institutional weakness and corruption. The pull factors include family re-unification, migrants' perceptions of more permissive immigration laws in destination countries, and the existence of well-organised smuggling networks.

Their main destination countries are the United States and Mexico, but other neighbouring countries such as Belize and Costa Rica are receiving growing numbers of NTCA migrants, as are some European countries, including Spain, Italy and France.

Countries of origin, transit and destination have set up new instruments for alleviating the problem, such as Mexico's Southern Border Programme, and the regional Alliance for Prosperity, which have produced mixed results. International organisations, such as the EU and the United Nations, have been providing help, and the European Parliament has also expressed its concern on the situation of these migrants and their human rights.



In this Briefing

- A not so new phenomenon
- Main migration drivers
- Who is migrating?
- Country-specific data
- Strategies of main transit and destination countries
- Joint regional initiatives to curb migration
- Role of the EU and other international organisations
- Outlook

A not so new phenomenon

Although it made the headlines in 2013 and 2014, when a massive flow of around 63 000 [unaccompanied minors](#) entered the United States across the Mexican border, migration originating in Central America is not new. Having flared up in the [1970s and 1980s](#) as a result of the armed conflicts in the area, it has diminished since their end in the 1990s but has never really died down. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), at the end of 2017 there were [over 294 000](#) asylum-seekers and refugees from the Northern Triangle of Central America registered globally, representing an increase of 58 % from 2016 and 16 times more than at the end of 2011. In 2017 there were nearly 42 000 deportations to the region.

The Northern Triangle of Central America

Most Central American migrants come from the [Northern Triangle](#) (NTCA), an area covering El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. These countries all suffered civil wars in the 1980s, which left a legacy of violence and weak institutions that still persists. Around 3 million [Northern Triangle](#) residents (10 % of the total population) are estimated to have migrated, mainly to the United States (between 2000 and 2013, the number of people born in these three countries and residing in the USA rose by 1.2 million, and the number of migrants from the region rose by [25 %](#) from [2007 to 2015](#)). In the 2009-2013 period, around 70 % of the asylum-seekers at the southern US border came from the

Figure 1: Northern Triangle map



Northern Triangle, and they accounted for [37 %](#) of all US asylum applications between 2015 and 2017. They are also increasingly present in Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico, and to a lesser extent in Nicaragua and Panama, with growing numbers of women and unaccompanied children, who are especially vulnerable. More than 230 000 [NTCA migrants](#) were apprehended by authorities and returned to their home countries in 2015, and [225 000 in 2016](#), mainly from the USA and Mexico, with a constant upward trend in the previous five years, and a two-fold increase from 2011. Not only have NTCA countries much higher [homicide rates](#) than Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama, but they also face rampant [extortion](#) and massive internal displacement ([296 000](#) newly displaced by conflict and violence in El Salvador just in 2017, and an accumulated 242 000 in Guatemala and 190 000 in Honduras in December 2017).

Main migration drivers

Most experts seem to agree that the main factors leading to the high levels of migration in the region have been the surge in [violence](#) and chronic [poverty and hunger](#) in the countries of origin. Other factors include reunification with family members living abroad, increased human smuggling and the pull effect of some migration laws adopted under the previous US administration.

Violence and crime

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ([IACHR](#)) has long been reporting that Latin America has the highest levels of youth violence in the world and that some of the region's most violent countries are in [Central America](#). According to [InSight Crime](#), in 2017 El Salvador had the second highest homicide rate in the world, with 60 murders per 100 000 inhabitants; Honduras was fourth, with 42.8 per 100 000; and Guatemala ranked sixth, with 26.1 per 100 000. Between 2010 and 2017, [120 952 homicides](#) were recorded in the NTCA. This trend dates back to the 1980s conflicts that tore through the region (for example, some weapon-transporting networks that emerged during El Salvador's internal armed conflict [later evolved](#) into criminal entities). According to experts, its recent peak has been facilitated by increased [fragility](#) of the institutions and law

enforcement, as well as by the rise in gang activity. In Honduras, this problem was further aggravated by the 2009 military coup. Experts argue that the easy availability of [firearms](#)¹ in the region and the USA's practice of [deporting criminals](#) have also contributed to this phenomenon.

Gang violence

A considerable proportion of violent crime in the region is attributed to [youth gangs](#), mainly composed of men aged 12-24. Although such gangs have existed in the region for decades, the problem has been aggravated by the large-scale deportation of young Central American criminals by the United States in the years following 1996. Two main rival [transnational gangs](#) with ties to the USA are currently active in Central America: [Barrio 18](#) (the 18th Street Gang), and [MS-13](#) (Mara Salvatrucha).

Barrio 18 was created around 1959 by Mexican immigrants living in Los Angeles, and was the first Hispanic gang to accept members from all races and US states. Composed of Salvadorian youths who had fled the civil war, MS-13 emerged in the 1980s, once again in Los Angeles, and has since been officially designated by the [US Treasury](#) as a transnational criminal organisation. The gangs' main activities in the Northern Triangle involve kidnappings, extortion rackets (for instance, of public transport systems) and control over the illegal drug market in their patch. Different [strategies](#) have been applied by Central American governments to address the problem.

In 2012, El Salvador's government agreed a 'truce', with the mediation of the Catholic Church and local NGOs, which led to a considerable fall in the number of murders in the following months; however, the truce broke down in 2014. Honduras was equally unsuccessful in applying its '[mano dura](#)' (iron fist) strategy, which involved a harsh state response inspired by zero tolerance and advocating the [immediate imprisonment](#) of gang members, even purely on the grounds of physical appearance. As a result, gang members flooded the prisons, pushing violence up; once inside, they were able to successfully reorganise themselves. A third, more inclusive, [strategy](#) is currently being tried in El Salvador (the integral plan 'El Salvador Seguro'), more prevention-oriented and with more [promising results](#) so far, as illegal migration from that country to the USA has fallen by nearly 50 % compared to 2017.

Drug trafficking

According to US government [estimates](#), 45 % of the illicit drugs entering the USA pass through Central America. Some experts do not [consider](#) drug trafficking as a primary cause of violence, as drug cartels are mainly interested in getting the drugs quickly to their destination without any violence, which could cause costly delays. They believe that drug-related violence is the indirect effect of territorial disputes among different cartels. [Others](#), on the contrary, believe it to be the main cause for the dramatic increase in violence in the region, noting that crime rates are more than 100 % higher in drug trafficking 'hot spots' than in other areas.

Economic and social problems

Poverty and the informal economy

The Northern Triangle countries are among the poorest in Latin America. Some [31 %](#) of the population in El Salvador and around half of the population in Guatemala ([48.8 %](#)) and Honduras ([50.4 %](#)) live on less than US\$5.5 a day. While poverty is undoubtedly an important migration driver, [experts](#) claim it is not the primary one, citing the example of Nicaragua: despite being similarly poor ([34.8 %](#) of the population live below the US\$5.5 threshold), it has been receiving migrants from the Northern Triangle (it is only as a result of the current political situation that [Nicaraguan migration](#) has started to rise exponentially in the past few months of 2018). High levels of unemployment and population growth also add to the problem.

The Northern Triangle economies are characterised by a high level of [informality](#). Thus, while the Latin American average for employment in the informal sector is around [47 %](#), it reaches [63 %](#) in El

Salvador, [73.5 %](#) in Guatemala and [74 %](#) in Honduras. Informality is also linked to poverty in the region.

Population growth and youth unemployment

Constantly on the rise since the 1970s, the number of people of working age in the Northern Triangle of Central America reached almost [60 %](#) of the population in 2013. As this trend has not been matched by the creation of quality jobs, it has resulted in high unemployment levels, in particular among youths. Thus, youth unemployment accounts for more than 50 % of total unemployment in Guatemala and Honduras, and for over 40 % in El Salvador. The percentage of young people that neither study nor work is around 30 %, the highest in Latin America. The lack of formal, stable and well-paid jobs has generated high rates of under-employment (visible under-employment² reached nearly 30 % in El Salvador, 15 % in Guatemala and 12 % in Honduras in 2013).

Institutional weakness and corruption

[Weak institutions](#) and strong elites have also been suggested as a reason for the region's problems. Favoured by the lengthy civil conflicts of the 1980s, this phenomenon has led to considerable levels of [public corruption](#), rendering the fight against organised crime increasingly difficult. According to Transparency International's 2017 [corruption perception index](#), out of a total of 180 countries, El Salvador ranks 112th with a score of 33 (out of 100), Guatemala 143rd with a score of 28, and Honduras 135th with a score of 29 (scores range from 0 'highly corrupt' to 100 'very clean').

Table 1: Poverty, (un)employment, corruption perception in Central American countries

Country	Poverty (national standards), 2016*	Non-agricultural informal employment, 2016	Unemployment, 2017	Corruption perception, 2017**
Costa Rica	20.5 %	35.8 %	8.5 %	38
El Salvador	38.2 %	63.1 %	4.5 %	112
Guatemala	59.3 %	73.5 %	2.7 %	143
Honduras	60.9 %	73.8 %	4.5 %	135
Nicaragua	24.9 %	No data available	4.4 %	151
Panama	22.1 %	40 %	5.6 %	96

*national poverty lines reflect the line below which a person's minimum nutritional, clothing, and shelter needs cannot be met in that country. Richer countries tend to have higher poverty lines, while poorer countries have lower poverty ones.

** place occupied by the country in the corruption perception index, out of a total of 180 countries, from least to most corrupt.

Sources: [World Bank](#), and [Transparency International](#).

Other factors

Other factors considered as contributing to migration are the high number of Northern Triangle citizens living abroad, especially in the United States, the perception of some immigration laws as more favourable (e.g. in the USA under the Obama administration), the increased activity of human-smuggling networks, and natural factors such as drought – that have affected the region recently.

Who is migrating?

Socio-demographic profile of migrants

Of the almost 1 million Northern Triangle migrants apprehended by the United States and Mexico between [2010 and 2014](#), around 130 000 were minors, which made up 5 % of deportations (40 000 out of 800 000 deported NTCA migrants). In that period, the total number apprehended more than tripled, from 110 000 in 2010 to more than 340 000 in 2014, while the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended rose much faster, from almost 9 000 in 2010 to more than

72 000 in 2014. Among deportees, most of those over 15 years of age were young males with low education and skills levels: more than 60 % were younger than 29, over 80 % were male and more than 53 % had only primary or lower level education. Just 2 % held a university diploma. Most deportees did not have a criminal background (61 % of adults and 95 % of minors), and most of those with a criminal record (63 %, only 25 % of the total number) had only been convicted for minor offences.

Minors

[Minors](#), in particular unaccompanied ones, are an especially [vulnerable category](#) of migrants. In 2014, the [illegal crossing](#) into the United States of more than 100 000 [minors](#) – 68 000 of them unaccompanied – mainly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, raised the alarm about migration flows from the region. Around 80 % had family members in the USA, and at least half of them had parents already based there. Although [most minors](#) deported to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador from the USA and Mexico between 2010 and 2014 were males aged 12-17, there has been a sharp increase in the proportion of children under the age of 12 – [often sent](#) with older siblings or smugglers – and girls. After reaching a peak in the summer of 2014 but decreasing considerably by the end of the year, probably due to [intensified US efforts](#) and cooperation from Mexico and Central America, the number of minor migrants at the US-Mexico border started surging again in 2015 and 2016, only to fall again in 2017.

Women

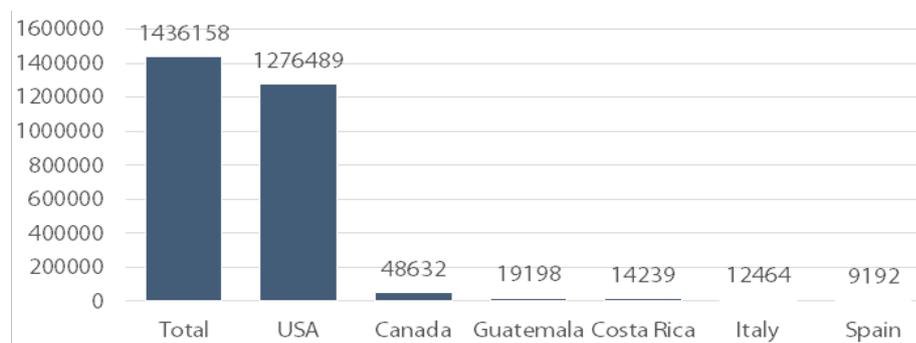
The [number of women](#) migrants apprehended by US and Mexican authorities has been constantly rising. In Mexico it rose from 13 % in fiscal year 2012 to 25 % in 2017, most of them from the NTCA. And on the US border it also increased steadily from 14 % to 27 % of total migrants apprehended in the same period. Although women account for only [20 %](#) of deportees from the USA and Mexico, the 2013 US Current Population Survey ([CPS](#)) revealed that out of the 2.7 million people from the Northern Triangle countries residing in the USA, 1.3 million were women. NTCA [women-migrants](#) are considered very vulnerable, due to the higher risks they encounter. According to some [experts](#), they are usually young, many of them mothers, and migrate mainly for family reasons. They tend to invest more money in migration plans and are more likely to hire a smuggler ('coyote'), to avoid the checkpoints and dangers involved in travelling across Mexico and getting into the USA.

Country-specific data

El Salvador

[In 2017](#), 1.6 million Salvadorians (around one quarter of the population) were living outside their country, mainly in the USA, Canada, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Italy and Spain. [Remittance inflows](#) reached US\$5.1 billion in 2017, representing 18.4 % of the country's GDP.

Figure 2: Number of Salvadorian citizens living abroad, by host country (2015)

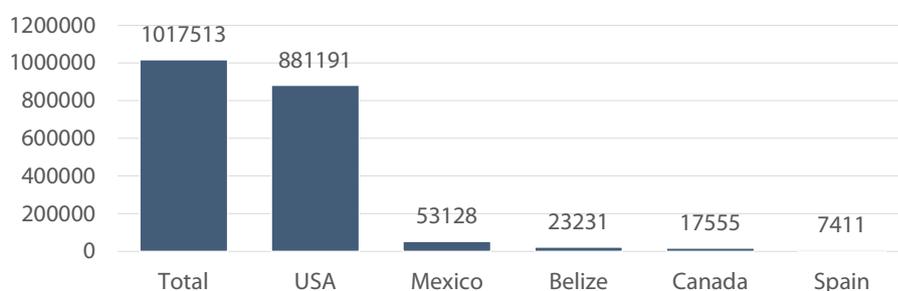


Source: International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) and [UN Population Division](#).

Guatemala

In 2017, 1.1 million or 6.5 % of Guatemalans were living in another country, mainly in the USA, Mexico, Belize, Canada and Spain. [Remittance inflows](#) reached US\$8.5 billion in 2017, representing 12.1 % of the country's GDP.

Figure 3: Number of Guatemalan citizens living abroad, by host country (2015)

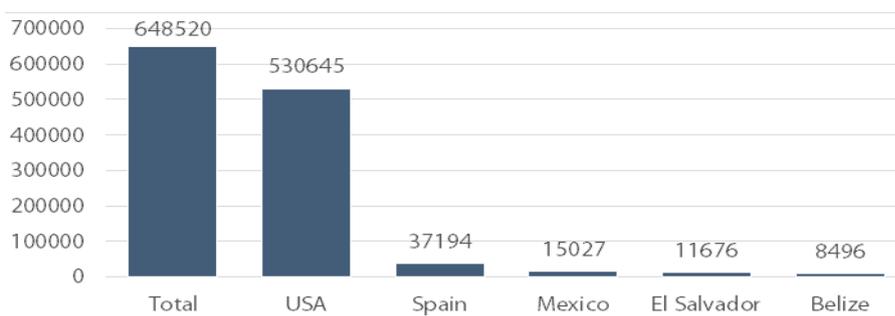


Source: International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) and [UN Population Division](#).

Honduras

In 2017, 722 400 Hondurans (7.8 % of the total population) were living outside their country, mainly in the USA, Spain, Mexico, El Salvador and Belize. [Remittance inflows](#) reached US\$4.3 billion in 2017, representing 19.1 % of the country's GDP.

Figure 4 - Number of Honduran citizens living abroad, by host country (2015)



Source: International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) and [UN Population Division](#).

Strategies of main transit and destination countries

The United States of America

The USA is the main destination country of Central American migration, and data from 2015 show that it remains the [main receptor](#) of [asylum](#) applications from the Northern Triangle – a 250 % increase over 2013 and nearly 100 % over 2014. While the total US immigrant population rose by 10 % from 2007 to 2015 and that of Mexican immigrants even decreased by 6 %, the number of migrants from the Northern Triangle saw a 25 % rise. And according to Pew Research Center estimates, 55 % of the 3 million NTCA immigrants living in the USA in 2015 were unauthorised, while the percentage for the total US immigrant population was just 24 %.

Despite having stepped up border controls and deported over 5 million immigrants, the former [Obama administration](#) also welcomed legal migrants and extended support to refugees. They recognised the humanitarian crisis that affected the Northern Triangle and introduced a series of programmes, such as the Central American Minors ([CAM](#)) [Refugee/Parole programme](#), designed to provide a safe legal alternative to the dangerous journey by allowing certain qualified children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as some of their family members, an opportunity to

apply for refugee status and possible resettlement in the USA; the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ([DACA](#), which protected '[Dreamers](#)', who arrived in the USA as children) and the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents ([DAPA](#), blocked by the [Courts](#) since 2015), aimed at protecting up to 4 million of the estimated 11 million unauthorised immigrants in the USA from deportation and making them eligible for work authorisation. The Obama administration continued to allow migrants to benefit from Temporary Protected Status ([TPS](#)), established by Congress [in 1990](#), which lets nationals of certain countries who are already in the United States (in the case of Central America, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) to temporarily reside there due to conditions in the country of origin that temporarily prevent them from returning safely. More than 250 000 NTCA unauthorised migrants obtained [temporary protection](#) under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ([DACA](#)) and Temporary Protected Status ([TPS](#)).

The current Trump administration has started to adopt a harsher policy to tackle illegal immigration.

- In his first year in office, President Donald Trump signed a total of [seven executive orders](#) related to immigration. On 25 January 2017, he signed an [executive order](#) on 'border security and immigration enforcement improvements', asking, among other measures, to 'take all appropriate steps to ... construct a physical wall along the southern border' and '... to ensure the detention of aliens apprehended for violations of immigration law'. But he has not yet got the necessary support in the Senate to get the funds needed to build the wall. Another executive order on '[enhancing public safety](#) in the Interior of the United States' was signed on 27 January 2017, and aimed to 'ensure the faithful execution' of US immigration laws 'against all removable aliens'.

- He terminated the part of the [Central American Minors programme](#) which allows only temporary stays in August 2017, and in November 2017 stopped accepting new applications for the part of the programme that allows the granting of refugee status.

- On [5 September 2017](#), he also announced the phasing out of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ([DACA](#)) programme, with no new requests granted. A 5 March 2018 [deadline](#) was initially set, but a lower court required the administration to go on accepting renewal applications, and the [Supreme Court](#) has so far rejected calls to intervene.

- In January 2018, Trump suspended the [Temporary Protected Status \(TPS\)](#) for 200 000 [Salvadorians](#) residing in the USA, and in May 2018 it was also cancelled for 57 000 Hondurans. In November 2017 it had been suspended for 2 500 Nicaraguans. If they do not acquire another legal status allowing them to reside in the USA in the following 18 months, these migrants will be subject to deportation.

- On 7 May 2018, the [US Attorney General](#) announced the tightening of migratory policy, which had, among other consequences, the [separation](#) of children from their irregular migrant parents. This affected over 2 000 children and was rectified in June after numerous protests. In addition, [new changes](#) to [asylum adjudication](#) were introduced in summer 2018, which, according to [critics](#), will make it nearly impossible for migrants fleeing domestic and gang violence to get protection in the USA.

Some experts consider that all these measures will come at a [huge cost](#) to the US taxpayer and [economy](#) as a whole, as they will reduce private sector employment and industry output.

The United States has also held discussions with Mexico and Central American countries about the need to confront human-smuggling networks through coordinated efforts. It promoted the Central American Regional Security Initiative ([CARSI](#)), aimed at increasing security and preventing violence in all of the region's countries, and backed it with [US\\$1.15 billion](#) from 2008 to 2015. And it also developed a US [Strategy for Engagement](#) in Central America, designed to promote prosperity, security and good governance in this sub-region. The strategy obtained [US\\$750 million](#) from Congress for fiscal years 2016 and 2017, most of which was for the Northern Triangle countries, but this allocation has been reduced to [US\\$615 million](#) for 2018.

Figure 6: Number apprehended on the south-west US border, between ports of entry, 2013-2018

Category	FY *2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018 **
Unaccompanied children	38 759	68 541	39 970	59 692	41 435	37 450
Family units	14 855	68 445	39 838	77 674	75 622	68 560
Individuals	360 783	342 385	251 525	271 504	186 859	180 280
Total	414 397	479 371	331 333	408 870	303 916	286 290

Figure 7: Unaccompanied alien children (uc) and family units (fu) – number apprehended by country of origin, 2013-2018

Country	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018**
El Salvador	5 990 uc	16 404 uc	9 389 uc	17 512 uc 27 114 fu	9 143 uc 24 122 fu	3 279 uc 8 462 fu
Guatemala	8 068 uc	17 057 uc	13 589 uc	18 913 uc 23 067 fu	14 827 uc 24 657 fu	17 649 uc 33 389 fu
Honduras	6 747 uc	18 244 uc	5 409 uc	10 468 uc 20 226 fu	7 784 uc 22 336 fu	7 780 uc 24 451 fu
Mexico	17 240 uc	15 634 uc	11 012 uc	11 926 uc 3 481 fu	8 877 uc 2 217 fu	7 682 uc 1 565 fu

*Financial Year (FY) runs from 1 October to 30 September. ** 1 October 2017 to 30 June 2018.

*** Number of individuals (either a child under 18 years old, parent or legal guardian) apprehended with a family member.

Source: [United States Border Patrol](#).

Mexico

Apart from being the main transit country for Central American migrants heading for the USA, Mexico is also an important destination, with [over 80 000](#) NTCA residents in 2017. According to the [UNHCR](#), in 2015 a total of 3 424 people – mainly from El Salvador and Honduras – sought asylum there, and in 2013-2016, asylum requests by unaccompanied NTCA minors in Mexico rose by [416 %](#). The number of NTCA asylum-seekers in Mexico [in 2017](#) rose to 8 656 out of a total of 14 596.

On 7 July 2014, the Mexican President, Enrique Peña Nieto, launched the [Programa Frontera Sur \(southern border programme\)](#), with two declared objectives: a) to protect migrants entering Mexico, and b) to manage the ports of entry so as to promote the security and prosperity of the region. It includes five key components:

- **regular and ordered migration:** new regional Visitor Card and Border Worker Visitor Card for Guatemalan and Belizean citizens living in the border region, with a simplified application procedure;
- **infrastructure improvements for border security and migration:** improvement of border crossings and mobile checkpoints, establishment of five Comprehensive Border Crossing Attention Centres, with medical care for migrants and special facilities for unaccompanied minors, better technology and material resources;

- **migrant protection:** new medical units for migrants, improvement of migrant shelters, care for unaccompanied minors;
- **regional shared responsibility:** enhanced coordination mechanisms among the region's countries;
- **inter-agency coordination:** creation of a Coordinating Mechanism for Comprehensive Attention to Migration headed by a general coordinator, who would work with relevant ministries and state governments to implement the strategy.

While Mexican authorities argued that the new programme is designed to retake control of the traditionally porous southern border and to protect migrants from transnational criminal groups, its measures have been widely [criticised](#) and the usefulness of the new structures [questioned](#). An [analysis](#) of recent data by different [experts](#) suggests that, rather than being solved, the problem has shifted to [Mexico's southern border](#). Thus, between October 2014 and April 2015, the US Customs and Border Patrol service detained 70 448 'other than Mexican' citizens at its border, while Mexican authorities detained 92 889 Central Americans. And the number of [repatriations](#) from Mexico to the Northern Triangle grew from 62 788 in 2010 to 117 990 in 2016. [Others](#) even complain that the programme has led to an increase in violence against migrants. President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador (who takes office on 1 December 2018) has proposed to the US administration to explore a [comprehensive agreement](#) on development projects to generate employment in Mexico so as to reduce migration and improve security, as well as a [plan](#) to promote development in Central America.

Other destination countries

The number of migrants from the Northern Triangle to other countries in the region has also risen considerably. For example, in 2015, [Costa Rica](#) received 2 203 asylum claims, mainly from El Salvador (46%) – a 176 % increase over 2013 and a 16 % rise over 2014 – and hosts over 3 600 refugees and around 21 000 NTCA migrants; [Belize](#) is also a favourite regional destination, with over 45 000 residents from the Northern Triangle. In Europe, Spain is the main host of Northern Triangle migrants (over 58 000 in 2017), followed by Italy and France (with over 17 000 and 4 700, respectively).

The brain drain. Although migration flows from the Northern Triangle help to ease the pressures exerted on countries of origin and to bring much-needed foreign-currency remittances, the mass exodus of young people also deprives them of many of their most able and dynamic citizens. Although the percentage of migrants with higher education is relatively small, they make up a significant proportion of the total number of university graduates in those countries, which is already quite low. Thus, the negative consequences of the [brain drain](#) are greater than they may appear.

Joint regional initiatives to curb migration

The Alliance for Prosperity

The [Alliance for Prosperity](#) plan emerged from a [joint proposal](#) by the three Northern Triangle countries and the United States, to address the structural issues that have led to mass migration. It contains four strategic [lines of action](#):

- stimulating the productive sector to create economic opportunities;
- developing growth opportunities;
- improving public safety and enhancing access to legal systems;
- strengthening institutions to increase people's trust in the state.

The objective is 'to revitalise the economy and foster prosperity in the region by creating a good climate for business development'. The United States plays a key role in financing this plan (the US Congress approved US\$750 million in assistance funds for 2016), and the receiving countries have

to prove that they are working to reduce migration, human trafficking and poverty, and to fight corruption.

Critics [argue](#) that the Alliance for Prosperity lays an emphasis on neoliberal policies, such as facilitating entry for foreign investment, and lacks social programmes. They stress that, to produce sustainable effects over the long term, it needs a different focus and a horizon of at least 15-20 years. They are also worried by the fact that, even though development initiatives get the most aid, around 46 % of total US funding will still go to the widely criticised Central America Regional Security Initiative ([CARSI](#)). Weak democratic accountability in the three recipient countries is seen as yet another reason for concern.

Northern Triangle countries and Mexico have also agreed to launch an [information campaign](#), from August 2018, to dissuade potential illegal migrants by informing them of the dangers they face.

Role of the EU and other international organisations

European Union

The [EU](#) has helped to address the root causes of this problem with different instruments. For instance, it has contributed to solving the armed conflicts in Central America through the San José Dialogue (launched in 1984) and by supporting peace, democratisation, socio-economic development and regional integration. In 2012, the EU concluded its first region-to-region association agreement with Central America, and although ratification is still pending, its trade pillar has been provisionally applied since 2013. The EU believes that the agreement will be instrumental in consolidating democracy and improving the security situation in Central America. The [2015 EU-CELAC Action Plan](#) includes migration among its action points.

As regards development cooperation, in the relevant 2014-2020 [programme](#) for Latin America, the three Northern Triangle countries are eligible both for Component 1 (continental activities with Latin America) and Component 2 (sub-regional cooperation with Central America). Among the stated objectives that could contribute to countering migration are security improvement to promote development, with special emphasis on the fight against organised crime and drugs; poverty reduction, through more inclusive and sustainable economic growth and environmentally sustainable development; and, specifically for Central America, promotion of security and the rule of law to reduce violent crime and impunity (with prevention, reinsertion and rehabilitation and law enforcement as main lines of action). The 2009 Lima Summit [launched](#) a structured and comprehensive EU-LAC [dialogue](#) on migration. Furthermore, among the EU-Latin America regional cooperation programmes for 2007-2013, there was a [EU-CELAC project](#) on migration. For 2016 and 2017, [the EU](#) allocated €1.8 million through its Education Emergency programme to provide education, protection, healthcare and psychological support to children and their families in the NTCA, and will provide €2.5 million for urgent humanitarian needs related to organised violence. Overall, it has allocated €223 million in humanitarian aid to Central America and Mexico since 1994. The EU also contributes through its Migration EU eXpertise facility ([MIEUX](#)), currently helping the Mexican authorities on [international protection](#), asylum, integration and [unaccompanied minors](#).

European Parliament

On 14 April 2016, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the situation of human rights defenders in Honduras, condemning the assassinations of Berta Cáceres and other human rights defenders, and expressing its deep concern at the extreme violence and the human rights situation in Honduras. On 25 October 2016, it adopted a [resolution](#) on human rights and migration in third countries, expressing its solidarity with 'persons ... forced to leave their countries on account of conflicts, persecution, violations of human rights and extreme poverty', as well as its 'deep concern at the grave human rights violations faced by many migrants in ... countries of transit or destination', emphasising that their dignity and human rights 'must be respected'; pointing out that

'separation from family members, including while in detention, exposes women and children to higher risks', and that migrant children, especially unaccompanied ones, are particularly vulnerable.

The EuroLat Parliamentary Assembly has also discussed the issue. It set up a Working Group on Migration and Relations EU-LAC, which, in June 2015, presented a [proposal](#) on migration, development and responding to the economic crisis. EuroLat adopted a [recommendation](#) in September 2016, calling on the EU and the CELAC countries to respect the human rights of migrants and to tailor the measures taken to protect vulnerable groups, in particular migrant children and women. In the September 2017 [San Salvador Declaration](#), its co-presidents deplored the policies adopted by the American administration, in particular its determination to build walls, remove the Temporary Protected Status and end the DACA programme. In their September 2018 Vienna Declaration, the [Latin American component](#) of EuroLat also expressed their concern for the measures adopted by the Trump administration regarding Central American minors.

United Nations

Deeply concerned about this exodus, in April 2016 the [UNHCR](#) called for urgent action to provide help to people fleeing NTCA countries. In its view, the current situation in Central America constitutes a protection crisis. In concertation with the Organization of American States (OAS), the UNHCR convened a '[Call to Action](#)' high-level roundtable on protection needs in the Northern Triangle of Central America on 6-7 June 2016 in San José (Costa Rica), with representatives from nine countries of North and Central America, four South American observer countries, the UN system, regional organisations, multilateral development banks, civil society and academia. The result was the [San José Action Statement](#), which sets out a series of commitments to tackle the different dimensions of the protection situation in the Northern Triangle, as well as specific commitments to strengthen regional responsibility sharing. The [UN special rapporteur](#) on the human rights of migrants has recently called on the Mexican and US governments to respect the human rights of the caravan of migrants heading from Central America to the USA. The UN has promoted a [Global Compact for Migration](#), which is expected to be adopted in December 2018.

Regional organisations

Considering migration as one of the top issues on its agenda since the 1990s, the OAS has established a continuous reporting system on international migration in the Americas ([SICREMI](#)). On 23 July 2014, it adopted a [declaration](#) on Central American unaccompanied child migrants, requesting that receiving countries, including countries of transit, 'consider the wellbeing and full respect of the human rights of children and adolescent migrants as a central humanitarian principle in their migration policies' and supporting the efforts made by countries of origin, transit and destination 'to combat organized transnational crime, human smuggling'. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ([IACHR](#)) has also studied the issue, as has the Regional Conference on Migration ([RCM](#)), established in 1996 as a regional intergovernmental forum to support the dialogue on migratory issues (gathering together all Central American countries, plus the United States, Canada, Mexico and the Dominican Republic).

Outlook

The considerable migration flows originating in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are expected to continue as long as the [root causes](#) of the problem are not properly addressed and remedied. It is worth noting that poverty does not seem to be the main driving factor of migration: for instance, Nicaragua is the poorest country in the area, yet it does not have comparable migration outflows – although they [have increased](#) with the [recent socio-political crisis](#). Violence and crime are generally considered to be the most decisive factors and the most difficult to address, as the Northern Triangle's weakened governments and law enforcement institutions are finding it difficult to cope with the increasing power of organised gangs and drug-trafficking cartels present in the area. While the various initiatives set up by the United States, Mexico and the affected countries themselves are

no doubt valuable, some experts agree that a more long-term approach is needed to address the causes. The 'mano dura' approach to gang violence taken by some countries seems to have backfired; other initiatives, almost exclusively focused on the law-enforcement approach, have not been much more successful; and the temporary truces with and among gangs brokered by some governments has not worked either, despite its initial success. What seems evident is that a durable solution requires cooperation among all actors concerned, help from international actors, such as the EU and the United Nations, and addressing all of the problem's root causes within a long-term approach. The issue of child migration needs particularly urgent attention, as the situation of minors is very fragile. Experience gained elsewhere in Latin America in solving similar problems, as in the context of the [Plan Colombia](#) – a US cooperation action to combat drugs, violence and institutional and social problems in that country – could prove very useful.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Facilitated by the massive export of US weapons to the region during the civil wars; by the illegal trafficking of weapons from the USA, other countries, and local military and police arsenals; and by the lack of regional cooperation.
- ² Persons who work less than 35 hours per week in their main job for non-voluntary reasons, who wish to work more hours and are available to do so, but do not get higher salaries or independent work.

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