

Narratives of Migration and Integration of Central American Migrants in the US and Canada

Research Paper

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Initiated by the World Refugee & Migration Council with the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, El Colegio de México, the Migration Policy Institute and the Inter-American Dialogue, the task force will issue concrete recommendations for collective, regional action based on evidentiary research to promote responsibility sharing across North and Central America.

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Introduction

Migration should be a human right. Safe transit across borders should be guaranteed. All people should have the option to remain and thrive in their homeland. These conditions are entirely absent for poor and racialized Central Americans throughout the isthmus and the hemisphere. Insecurities – caused in their most immediate form by a wide spectrum of events from petty theft to high rates of murder and femicide – are normal and predictable outcomes of a neoliberal capitalist system that prioritizes the accumulation and preservation of wealth for a few through the dispossession of many (Abrego and Cárcamo 2021; Abrego and Villalpando 2021; Osuna 2020; Robinson 2003). Rather than recognize this macrostructural problem, US and Canadian governments have persistently developed narratives that portray Central American migrants as various forms of decontextualized “crisis” (Abrego 2018), requiring myopic, partial “solutions” that often only exacerbate problems domestically and abroad.

In this paper, I discuss the complex reasons for migration from parts of northern Central America – specifically, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – to the United States, and to a lesser extent to Canada, alongside the incomplete and often erroneous narratives about these migration streams. These narratives about why Central Americans migrate directly inform narratives about Central American integration in these countries. US and Canadian foreign policies and immigration laws, fueled by self-serving narratives, constitute what sociologist, Cecilia Menjívar and I term, “legal violence,” against Central American immigrants, preventing large segments of them from thriving in the US and Canada (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). The paper ends with a few suggestions about how to more effectively slow the ongoing exodus from the region and better welcome and support these migrants in their new homes.

Migration of Central Americans to the United States and Canada

In the United States, Central Americans first migrated in the early 1900s in small numbers to cities like San Francisco and New Orleans, “headquarters of the United Fruit Company that treated the isthmus as an enclave economy” (Arias and Milian 2013: 134). Despite early migration (Rodríguez 2017; Segura 2010), the vast expansion of state terror and genocide in the 1980s in Guatemala and El Salvador is what initially prompted tens of thousands to seek survival in neighboring countries, but especially in the United States. By the mid-1980s, over 400,000 Salvadorans had made their way to the US and over 17,000 entered Canada. They started to arrive in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s and the population grew in the 1990s and 2000s when those already settled petitioned and helped their relatives join them (Ginieniewicz and McKenzie 2014).

Although the wars officially ended in the 1990s, migration from Guatemala and El Salvador continues, with increasing numbers of Hondurans joining them, especially after the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the 2009 coup d’état (Portillo Villeda 2011). In the 2020s, as state terror in Honduras parallels the conditions experienced in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s, Hondurans now constitute the largest group of migrants from the region, but again, the United States refuses to accept most migrants as refugees, denying them asylum and limiting

pathways to legalization. Canada, too, has drastically reduced the number of refugees it accepts from the region.

Natural devastation, in the form of droughts, hurricanes, and earthquakes has also prompted migration from Central America over the past two decades. These, along with government corruption, widespread gang violence, high homicide rates, limited job opportunities, and generalized insecurity have expelled hundreds of thousands of Central Americans in recent years (Abrego and Menjívar Forthcoming). In fiscal year 2021, for example, the U.S. Border Patrol came into contact with 684,000 Central Americans from these three countries, including 309,000 Hondurans, 279,000 Guatemalans, and 96,000 Salvadorans (Meyer 2021: 1). Notably, most have been denied entry in the United States, or have been placed for various lengths of time in immigrant detention while they adjudicate their cases.

It is estimated that today, over 3.8 million Central Americans reside in the United States – most of them from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Babich and Batalova 2021). In Canada, there are fewer than 10,000 immigrants from Honduras, and between 10,000 and 50,000 immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador, respectively.¹

Narratives and Truths of North American Interests in Central America

The contemporary public narrative in North America regarding Central American migration underscores “insecurities” and “root causes of migration” when explaining why the exodus from the region continues. Without context, these narratives erase the role of US and Canadian governments in destabilizing the region on multiple occasions to protect their own national and business interests there. Rather than recognizing their long-established and continuing forms of intervention, these governments contribute to notions of Central Americans as “crisis” making its way into their national territory.

In his Address to the Nation from the Oval Office on May 9, 1984, for example, US President, Ronald Reagan requested that the US public prioritize and approve costly funding of war in El Salvador. He stated, “What we see in El Salvador is an attempt to destabilize the entire region and eventually move chaos and anarchy toward the American border.”² Reagan successfully secured the budget to support the Salvadoran military with not only cash and equipment, but also military training in scorched earth and torture tactics that government and paramilitary forces used indiscriminately against guerrillas and civilians throughout El Salvador and in next door Guatemala. The violence of the war constituted a generalized state terror that the US government then used to misrepresent Salvadorans as violent, mentally unstable, and undesirable migrants. Notably, unlike other Latin American immigrant groups who represent inexpensive and exploitable labor, Central Americans have represented threats to the core capitalist values of the US (Abrego and Villalpando 2021). After the civil war, however, a United Nations-mandated Truth Commission found that the Salvadoran military and paramilitary forces committed 85 percent of the atrocities of war – including extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture. In Guatemala, the Truth Commission found that

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017028-eng.htm>

² <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-united-states-policy-central-america>

genocide had been committed, as 83 percent of 200,000 murdered were Mayan (McAllister and Nelson 2013). There, too, the US-backed state forces and paramilitary groups were found to be responsible for a full 93 percent of the violations.

More recently, with the purported goal of battling the international Drug War, and in the context of post-9/11 securitization at home and abroad (Osuna 2020), the United States continued to closely monitor the region to protect conditions for profitable free trade ventures by targeting funding largely for law enforcement efforts through its Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) (Abrego 2018). These truths continue to be excluded from the official political discourse on Central Americans in the US (Oliva Alvarado et al. 2017).

Canadian leaders sometimes disagreed with U.S. foreign policy perspectives in the region, but did little to act upon these disagreements with their more powerful neighbor. Therefore, despite its official commitment to human rights, Canada has tacitly and sometimes explicitly supported U.S. foreign policy in the region, or looked the other way to ignore U.S.-supported atrocities since the 1980s (Baranyi 1985).

While Canada has not intervened militarily, it has had trade relationships with Central American countries since the late 1800s (Lemco 1986). Its mining, manufacturing, tourism, and other forms of foreign direct investments have similarly disregarded the constitutional, human, and environmental rights of the people of the region with equally devastating consequences for some of the most vulnerable and marginalized communities (Batz 2020; González et al. 2014; Loperena 2017; Pedersen 2014). Its mining operations increased dramatically in Central America since the early 1970s (Baranyi 1985).

Despite being a lesser superpower than the United States, the Canadian government has used its relative strength to promote and protect its business investments in Central America at the cost of Central Americans' wellbeing. In post-coup Honduras, for example, while initially denouncing the coup and then claiming to act benignly in an effort to meet purportedly humanitarian needs, the Canadian government in fact intervened politically to protect its economic investments in the country (Gordon and Webber 2014). In these processes, they fought to preserve the mining practices that displace entire communities, divert natural waterways, and pollute local water systems with dangerous levels of heavy metals. In El Salvador, when then President Mauricio Funes moved to ban mining in the country in 2009, the Canadian mining transnational, Pacific Rim, sued the Salvadoran government for \$77 million under the DR-CAFTA alleging that its investor's rights had been violated when the mining block prevented them from earning the money they expected (Achtenberg 2011). Pacific Rim sustained this case over a seven-year period (Bebbington et al. 2019: 91), further financially debilitating the Salvadoran government. Indeed, it took powerful alliances across a number of sectors in Salvadoran society to pass an anti-mining law—one that was unprecedented around the world (Bebbington et al. 2019).

Narratives of and Policies Toward Central Americans in North America

The false narratives of US and Canadian support and well-meaning intervention in Central America, in turn, shape domestic policies that too often serve to exacerbate unstable conditions for Central

American migrants. In the 1980s, Salvadorans and Guatemalans suffered well-documented human rights atrocities, but because the Reagan administration spent billions of dollars to fund, train, and arm military and paramilitary groups in the region as part of its Cold War efforts to uphold capitalism at any cost, the US government denied refugee status or asylum to those fleeing the very terror the US had sponsored. Instead, the Immigration and Naturalization Service—the agency that implemented the US immigration regime at the time—categorized these Central Americans as economic migrants, effectively blocking their access to lawful status or resettlement assistance of any kind. In fact, US refugee policy was so clearly politically-fueled that the only group of Central Americans who benefited from generous asylum policies in late 1970s and early 1980s were elite Nicaraguans fleeing after the victory of the Sandinista Revolution (García 2006). These tactics, however, did not deter migration.

On the world stage, Canada has been known as a generous receiver of refugees. Canada's immigration and refugee policies have, in fact, often been closely informed by and interconnected with those of the United States (García 2006). In response to an overwhelming refusal to accept asylum claims from Guatemalans and Salvadorans in the United States in the 1980s, Sanctuary Movement leaders including thousands of US citizens of various religious backgrounds, practiced civil disobedience by housing and protecting Central Americans, and in some cases transporting them to Canada where refugee policies were comparatively more generous (García 2006). Because public opinion in Canada opposed U.S. foreign policy in the region, and its refugee policy domestically, Canada's government initially took in tens of thousands of Latin Americans in the 1970s and 1980s. From 1980 to 1990, El Salvador was the third largest group of refugees admitted to Canada, with 17,645 arrivals.³ However, by the mid-1990s, Canadian policies closed off opportunities for Central Americans to enter lawfully and since signing the "Safe Third Country Agreement" with the United States after 9/11, Canada no longer accepts asylum seekers who first applied to the United States (García 2006). Under the US Trump administration, Guatemala and Mexico also signed "safe third party" agreements, making it even more difficult for Central Americans to qualify for asylum in Canada. Despite the continuing exodus from the region and despite Canada's global recognition as a generous receiver of refugees, no Central American country has been in Canada's list of top five countries of birth of refugees since the 1980s.⁴

Although the Canadian government has given the relatively small number of Central American immigrants access to education and social services, the exposure they experienced to political and military violence in their home countries continues to be a source of stress and long-term instability (Ginieniewicz and McKenzie 2014; Leslie 1993). Much like in the US, moreover, structural barriers, racism, marginalization, and exclusion block access to resources for physical and mental health (Ginieniewicz and McKenzie 2014: 267). In many cases, they must rely on diverse resources in Canada to manage their high stress levels. These include social, personal, and familial resources to protect against mental disorders (Ginieniewicz and McKenzie 2014: 266).

In the United States, where most Central American migrants settled, not only have they been denied pathways to legalization, but they have also been denied the truth of their history of state trauma

³ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017029-eng.htm>

⁴ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2017029-eng.htm>

(Abrego 2017; Cornejo 2019; Trujillo 2021). In the face of legal violence that normalized harm against them (Menjívar and Abrego 2012), they have had to organize collectively for every bit of limited legal protection (Abrego and Cárcamo 2021; Coutin 2000; Zimmerman 2015) and social acceptance (Hernández 2017) they have received.

The Contemporary Context and Possible Solutions

Most recently, as regional neoliberal policies imposed by the US and Canada have opened the door to an increasing array of extractivist industries, Central Americans are once again being displaced in high numbers. Mining, the construction of hydroelectric dams, eco-tourism, and other megaprojects violently displace poor, Black, and Indigenous populations in the region (Batz 2020; Loperena 2017). The associated environmental degradation of these megaprojects, moreover, also displaces the most vulnerable (Wrathall et al. 2014; Méndez 2020). Of special concern is that environmental activists—many Indigenous and Black—are being targeted and killed for resisting and defending their lands (Loperena 2017; Méndez 2018; Miranda 2021). In effect, vulnerable Central Americans are precluded from a life of dignity and basic needs in their home countries, as well as in their desired countries of destination.

Meanwhile, in June 2021, US Vice President, Kamala Harris, visited Guatemala to express to Central Americans:

I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border, do not come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border. There are legal methods by which migration can and should occur, but we, as one of our priorities, will discourage illegal migration. And I believe if you come to our border, you will be turned back.⁵

Her words were similar to those of Vice President, Mike Pence, who just three years earlier had stated to a gathering of Central American presidents, “This exodus must end. It is a threat to the security of the United States. And just as we respect your borders and your sovereignty, we insist that you respect ours.”⁶ Across political party lines, the official narratives of the US government places all of the blame and responsibility for migration on individuals who seek survival. In their speeches, they locate the real problem of this human crisis on the US-Mexico border, when in fact, they have benefited politically and economically from many of the various forces that have and continue to displace Central Americans—and that is what produces true crisis.

Focusing on the most obvious, shortsighted “root causes” will always lead to incomplete and useless “solutions,” that too often only exacerbate harmful conditions for the most vulnerable Central

⁵ “Kamala Harris & Guatemala President Alejandro Giammattei Press Conference Transcript June 7.”

<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/kamala-harris-guatemala-president-alejandro-giammattei-press-conference-transcript-june-7>

⁶ “Remarks by the Vice President, President Jimmy Morales of the Republic of Guatemala, President Salvador Sanchez Ceren of the Republic of El Salvador, and President Juan Orlando Hernandez of the Republic of Honduras in Joint Press Statements in Guatemala City, Guatemala.” June 28, 2018. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-vice-president-president-jimmy-morales-the-republic-guatemala-president>

Americans. Instead, Canada and the US need to stop thinking of Central America as its backyard, only useful for their own economic gains. Narratives must account for their moral responsibility for past and present interventionist harms. This would allow the public in each country to begin to consider migration not as an individual-level move to take advantage of the wealth of their nations, but as acts of human survival in response to dire and violent conditions that their own tax dollars have sponsored. This, more truthful understanding of the reasons for migration is more likely to move people to push their governments to invest in the region's social, economic, educational, and labor development (at least to the same extent that they invested to destabilize these same countries in the past and in the present).

The current Biden administration in the US has continued to scale up assistance programs in the region that focus almost exclusively on "security" and law enforcement (Meyer 2021). Such a narrow conception of security precludes more broad-based development projects and continues to put money into the hands of corrupt leaders. Decades of history prove that this approach does not improve conditions. The US government needs to stop military and police funding in the region immediately.

The Canadian government must stop protecting mining and other Canadian capital interests in Central America. These have proven to be catastrophic to the people and the environment. As climate change continues to bring destruction to the region, these megaprojects carried out by Canadian companies and protected by the Canadian government are only worsening the life chances of the most marginalized communities.

When people are displaced and they make their way to the United States and to Canada, these governments' policies need to account for their participation in Central Americans' displacement. This requires a guarantee of safe passage across borders and no longer further harming refugees by caging them in detention for any length of time. Importantly, refugees should be given access to resources for smooth resettlement. These include housing assistance in the first year, free language courses, and access to steady employment.

Vice President Harris stated recently, "I strongly believe that most people don't want to leave home. And when they do, it is because either they are fleeing some harm or because to stay means that they cannot provide for the basic necessities of their family."⁷ US and Canadian policies can effectively make it possible for people to stay home, where most want to be. They can reduce the harm they create in the region and if people must leave, they can reduce the harm of migration for those in transit and those who enter their borders.

⁷ "Remarks by Vice President Harris, Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas, Chairman Durbin, and Representative Escobar in Press Conference," El Paso International Airport, El Paso, Texas. June 25, 2021.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/25/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-secretary-of-homeland-security-mayorkas-chairman-durbin-and-representative-escobar-in-press-conference/>

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