

# U.S. Must Help Attack the Root Causes of Border Crisis



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Cristian Omar Reyes, an 11-year-old from Honduras, lost his father in March after he was robbed and murdered by gangs while working as a security guard protecting a pastry truck. Three others he knows were killed this year. “I’m going [to the U.S.] this year no matter what,” he told The New York Times in early July. If he follows through, Cristian would join the 57,000 children fleeing the “Northern Triangle” of Central America — Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras — making the perilous journey to the U.S. that sparked the crisis on our Southern border last month.

So far, the U.S. response has focused on securing the border with Mexico and urging the three countries to do more at home. This approach falls short two ways: it doesn’t do nearly enough to change the conditions in the region and thus the minds of those like Cristian who want to flee their countries, and it’s shortsighted. The response ignores the fact that, left unchecked, the Northern Triangle countries risk becoming failed states, further endangering regional stability, and driving an even greater number of migrants to the United States.

Our response must get at the root causes of this crisis: unprecedented levels of violence in the countries coupled with dire poverty and lack of economic opportunity there.

Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras form the most violent region in the world — surpassing crime rates in even the most war-torn countries. Honduras is now the murder capital of the world, with a homicide rate of 90 per 100,000 persons annually. This compares to 21 per 100,000 in Mexico and 10 per 100,000 in Afghanistan. Ineffective police, inadequate judiciaries and government corruption have allowed violent gangs, such as the 18th Street Gang and MS-13, to flourish. Criminals enjoy a state of near total impunity — 98 percent of

all crime in Guatemala goes unprosecuted. For Honduras, those estimates run as high as 95 percent.

If the horrific security situation wasn't enough, their weak economies offer youth little prospect of employment and families little chance to provide even the most basic needs. Paltry growth has done little to improve conditions for 63 percent of rural Hondurans living in poverty, considerably worse than in neighboring Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Conditions are similar in Guatemala, where a substantial number remain impoverished and a large number of children are chronically undernourished.

All this makes migration, with all its dangers, more appealing than staying at home. Without hope and opportunity, youth see the dangerous journey to the U.S. as their best option.

The U.S. can help children like Cristian choose to stay in Honduras — but we need a clear strategy that markedly improves the security situation and gives life to the three economies.

Our strategy should build on the parts of the State Department's Central American Regional Security Initiative that have focused on building effective community policing, vetted investigative units and prosecutorial capacity. Such programs should be paired with anti-corruption efforts modeled on the United Nations' successful Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, which produced solid gains in Guatemala's prosecutorial effectiveness along with the work of its recently departed attorney general, Claudia Paz y Paz.

Together, these efforts will enable the Central American governments to reduce the crime that creates fear and incentive to flee.

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