


OUR COMMUNITIES IN CRISIS



A faithful look at the root causes of Central American forced displacement and the repatriation of children and families after the Summer of 2014.

ELCA Advocacy

May 2015



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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ELCA urges the United States Government to:

- Prioritize children, families, and threatened adults;
- Focus on security, not militarization;
- Invest in safe repatriation efforts and follow up;
- Involve local civil society; and
- Include clear and achievable goals.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, 68,551 unaccompanied children and 68,445 families crossed the southern border of the United States, most from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, a region also known as the Northern Triangle. While these numbers have decreased in this fiscal year, this decline in arrivals to the U.S. does not equate to a decrease in the number of people fleeing the Northern Triangle.

Leaders in The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) traveled to the Northern Triangle in February, 2015 to meet with key leaders of civil society organizations, ELCA partner organizations, Lutheran church leaders, 21 migrants and/or families of people who had migrated, and to visit two main repatriation centers in El Salvador and Honduras. **The goal of this trip was to gain a firsthand perspective of the reasons behind the forced displacement of some of our Central American brothers and sisters, to understand the repatriation process of children and families, and to see the impact of current U.S. policy on migration in the region.**

The reasons that citizens of the Northern Triangle countries continue to flee their communities of origin are varied and interconnected. **The ELCA delegation found that extreme violence and insecurity, poverty, lack of opportunities and environmental issues drive many people to see migration as the only path to prosperity.** These factors are coupled with a lack of faith in existing governmental institutions to ensure safety, and result in community members experiencing unrelenting fear every day; fear of letting children play outside, of having to pay fees to criminal organizations in order to continue living in a neighborhood or, for Lutheran Churches in the region, fear of being unable to keep their communities together. This instability also results in increased internal displacement.

Today, the vast majority of children and families being repatriated to the Northern Triangle arrive from Mexico. Government investment in safe and supportive repatriation programs varies widely between countries in the Northern Triangle. In Honduras, civil society organizations provide critical services in the repatriation of children and families with no financial help from the government, while in El Salvador the repatriation process is carried out mostly by the government. **Although both governments acknowledge that high levels of violence exist, neither has a process in place for those targeted and in need of immediate protection.** Organizations involved in the repatriation of children and families, and those working with communities deeply affected by migration, have a unique and important perspective in addressing the root causes of migration. However, only the Salvadorian government engages them in finding solutions, and they had no input in the creation of any multilateral plans to address the root causes of this migration.

The United States must create a new approach to engagement with Northern Triangle governments to efficiently and responsibly address migration from Central America. This approach must rethink investment in the region to ensure prosperity at the individual, family and community levels. Investment only in border security measures, such as pressuring Mexico to detain and deport children and families from the Northern Triangle, disregards international agreements protecting those fleeing persecution and creates further destabilization in the region that that will continue to affect the United States.



INTRODUCTION

Background

In fiscal year 2014, 68,551 unaccompanied children and 68,445 families crossed the southern border of the United States, most from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, a region also known as the Northern Triangle.¹ These numbers constituted nearly 30 percent of all U.S. Customs and Border Protection apprehensions in the fiscal year.² National and international media outlets began reporting the increase of child arrivals in the summer of 2014 and President Barack Obama’s declaration of the phenomenon as an “urgent humanitarian situation” triggered a special response from the U.S. government.³ Although media coverage put a spotlight on the phenomenon last summer, the number of children traveling alone to the United States actually began to increase two years prior, in fiscal year 2012, when numbers climbed by 52 percent (from 16,056 in fiscal year 2011 to 24,481 in fiscal year 2012).⁴ In contrast to the more gradual increase of children traveling alone, the rate of migration by family units increased sharply, by 362 percent, from fiscal year 2013 to 2014. So far in fiscal year 2015 the numbers of families and children arriving to the United States from the Northern Triangle has declined significantly from the same time period the prior fiscal year to only 13,911 individuals in family units and 15,647 children.⁵ If this trend continues, the number of Central American child and family arrivals to the United States will be significantly lower than the year prior. This decrease in numbers has been attributed by the secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to the aggressive U.S. border enforcement response and successful campaigns to stop children and families from leaving their countries of origin.⁶ **However, nongovernmental organizations and reporters have pointed to the increase in border security in the region and apprehensions in Mexico as the reason for the dip in numbers, signaling that a decrease in arrivals to the U.S. does not equate to a decrease in the number of people fleeing the Northern Triangle.**⁷ (See Figure 1 and 2⁸)

The U.S. government’s response to the increased migration flow has been multifaceted but has been mostly concentrated on enforcement and deterrence. The increase in family arrivals triggered the rebirth and expansion of family detention in the last two years. This enforcement mechanism keeps mothers and

¹ (U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, 2015)

² Ibid.

³ (The White House, 2014)

⁴ (U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, 2015)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ (Muskal, 2014)

⁷ (Isacson, 2015)

⁸ (U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, 2015)

Fig. 1: Unaccompanied Children Apprehended in the U.S. by Country of Origin

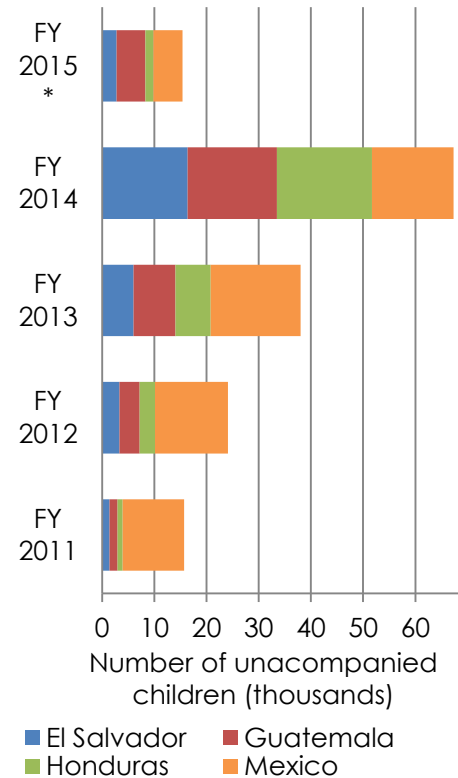
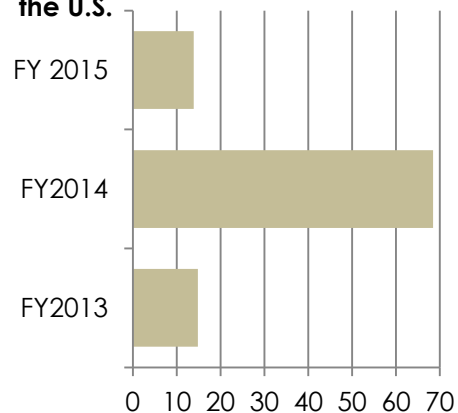


Fig. 2: Number of Individuals in Family Units Apprehended in the U.S.



children in detention facilities for extended periods of time, despite the practice being previously stopped because of humanitarian concerns.⁹

In addition to expanding the practice of family detention in the United States, the government also launched a media campaign in the Northern Triangle warning future migrants and their families of the dangers of the trip and the lack of legal means to stay if they indeed make it to the United States.

These enforcement mechanisms are part of a strategy that seeks to coordinate efforts with sending and transit countries to “address our shared border security interests” and to develop a comprehensive plan to attempt to address the root causes of migration.¹⁰ This regional collaboration to address border security has translated into a significant crackdown on migrants in transit and increased barriers to safety for people fleeing their home country. For example, Mexico launched its Southern Border Plan in July 2014, which included increasing enforcement at its borders by speeding up the trains migrants ride through Mexico and increasing patrolling around train routes.¹¹ In early 2015, the Washington Office on Latin America analyzed new data on deportations from Mexico and found that overall deportations had increased by 95 percent, and deportations of migrant children had increased by 105 percent when compared with last year’s rates.¹² As a result of the greater effort to stop children and families in Mexico, many have been forced to use alternative routes.¹³

In response to the violence targeted at young people from the Northern Triangle, the U.S. government also established an in-country refugee/parole program. This program allows in-country processing for Northern Triangle children who have a U.S.-based parent lawfully present in the United States for the Refugee Admissions Program. Although the program seems good in theory, refugee advocates are rightfully concerned about the ways in which this program could keep children in harm’s way. By processing requests in-country rather than in a safe location elsewhere, the program does not provide for the immediate protection needs of some children, as outlined by international law.¹⁴ The process, which can take months or years for final approval, demands that children remain in a country where they could be harmed to continue the processing of their case. In addition, the restriction that a lawfully present parent in the United States petition for the child leaves many children disqualified from applying to the program.

⁹ (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Women's Refugee Commission, 2014)

¹⁰ (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2014)

¹¹ (Diego, 2014)

¹² (Washington Office on Latin America, 2015)

¹³ (Najar, 2015)

¹⁴ (Acer, 2014)

Regional collaboration to address border security has translated into a significant crackdown on migrants in transit and increased barriers to safety for people fleeing their home country.



Context and methods

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has a presence in Central America through nine synods with companion relationships with the Christian Lutheran Church in Honduras, Augustinian Lutheran Church in Guatemala and the Salvadorian Lutheran Church as well as through partnerships with organizations to serve migrant children. These relationships are rooted in accompaniment and involve mutual exchange of visitors, communication, sharing of resources and prayer. The ELCA has additional relationships with partner organizations that received grants to provide services to migrant children in the region.¹⁵

Through its partnership in the United States with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), leaders of the ELCA traveled to New Mexico to visit the family detention facility in Artesia in late 2014. During the visit, denominational church leaders spoke to mothers who had endured harrowing journeys through Mexico while fleeing violence and poverty in their home countries. Their stories stood in contrast to the narrative of some legislators and reporters that, while tacitly recognizing the existence of violence in countries of origin, reported that the main reasons for the children's and families' flight to the United States were for economic reasons, family reunification or because they believed they would be able to permanently remain in the United States legally.¹⁶ During the Judiciary Committee hearing, "An Administration-Made Disaster: The South Texas Border Surge Of Unaccompanied Alien Minors," U.S. Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, cited a report that found that 95 percent of unaccompanied migrant children surveyed had indicated they traveled to the United States to take advantage of a new law that could allow them to stay in the country legally.¹⁷ This assessment has not been corroborated by several studies, including those by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees,¹⁸ the American Immigration Council,¹⁹ and American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies.²⁰

To gain a firsthand perspective of the reasons behind the forced displacement of some of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters, to understand the repatriation process, and to see the impact of current U.S. policy on migration in the region, the Rev. Stephen Bouman, executive director of ELCA Congregational and Synodical Mission, and the Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla, executive director of ELCA Global Mission, led an exploratory commission²¹ to

¹⁵ This includes the Comisión de Acción Social Menonita in Honduras. Future partners will include: the Lutheran Church of El Salvador and The Lutheran World Federation.

¹⁶ (La Jeunesse, 2014)

¹⁷ (Robert Goodlatte, 2014)

¹⁸ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014)

¹⁹ (Kennedy, 2014)

²⁰ (Stinchcomb & Hershberg, 2014)

²¹ The delegation included the Rev. Raquel Rodriguez, director for the Latin America and Caribbean desk in ELCA Global Mission; the Rev. Michael Stadie, director for Lutheran Disaster Response-U.S.; Stephen Deal, ELCA regional representative in Central America; the Rev. Stacy

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Honduras and El Salvador. Additional ELCA leaders also visited Guatemala with these same goals. The delegation traveled to Central America in February 2015, shortly after the White House announced its \$2 billion plan for Central America to address the root causes of migration.²²

In each country visited, the ELCA delegation met with key leaders of civil society organizations²³, many of whom have worked with migrant populations for decades, as well as ELCA partner organizations, Lutheran church leaders, and 21 migrants and/or families of people who had migrated. In El Salvador and Honduras, members of the delegation also spoke to government officials responsible for migration and child protection²⁴ and visited the principal repatriation centers in each country for unaccompanied and accompanied migrant children returned by land.²⁵

Findings

Migration is a symptom of the conditions lived every day by citizens of Northern Triangle countries. These symptoms include extreme violence, poverty, lack of access to educational and employment opportunities, and environmental displacement, all of which are exacerbated by the failure of governments to address these issues. Although there are clear trends for the region, which this report will highlight, contexts in each country vary. For example, when compared to other countries visited, in El Salvador there exists a higher level of confidence in the government and an obvious effort to address some of the causes of migration. In Honduras, neither confidence in the government nor a concrete evaluation to improve the conditions exists. In Guatemala, 40 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous,²⁶ a population that has been and continues to be marginalized and has less access to services, in addition to a complicated relationship with government institutions.²⁷

To discern what drives children and families to make the increasingly dangerous journey through Mexico to the United States, it is critical to understand that all of the factors outlined below exist in a context where there is little confidence in the efficacy of public institutions. This is coupled with an acute awareness of

L. Martin, director for advocacy ELCA Washington Office; Alaide Vilchis Ibarra, assistant director for migration policy and advocacy; in addition to the Rev. Stephen Bouman and the Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla.

²² (Biden, 2015)

²³ We have omitted the names of civil society organizations that met with the delegation who do not have a direct connection to the ELCA (for their protection, due to human rights concerns).

²⁴ In Honduras: Dirección Nacional de la Niñez Adolescencia y Familia and Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería. In El Salvador: Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería and El Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia

²⁵ In Honduras the repatriation center visited, Centro El Eden, only repatriates children and families transported by ground. In El Salvador the repatriation center in La Chacra, serves children, families and migrants deported via ground transportation. These deportations are from Mexico, not the United States.

²⁶ (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala, 2014)

²⁷ (Hall & Patrinos, 2005)



corruption in the system, most especially in the case of Honduras. All three countries rank under 40 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, a reflection of the level of corruption within each country's public sector.²⁸ Confirming what the ELCA observed during the trip, El Salvador is perceived as the least corrupt, followed by Guatemala and then Honduras. The corruption index has been widely used by researchers, advocates and scholars to compare corruption perceptions in each country. Paralleling the official numbers, those who met with the ELCA delegation repeatedly reported feeling that their governments were unwilling and unable to help them live with dignity and security. In El Salvador, there is a palpable optimism and hope that the government can make good on its promises, but it is also clear that some of the same problems of corruption and lack of access so evident in Honduras and Guatemala also exist in the country.

ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION

The reasons that citizens of the Northern Triangle countries flee their communities are varied and interconnected. Statistics that fail to reflect the complexity of these factors miss a crucial step toward understanding and addressing the needs of those who must flee. Additionally, while these composite factors cause many to flee their country, it became evident during interviews of migrants by the ELCA that these factors are also resulting in increased internal displacement.²⁹

Extreme violence and insecurity

The protracted insecurity in the Northern Triangle goes beyond widely reported gang violence and seeps into all facets of community life. Although homicide statistics and other numbers clearly show alarming rates of violence, its effect is only understood by hearing first-hand accounts of how violence filters into every aspect of an individual's life. This small region is home to four of the most violent cities in the world,³⁰ and San Pedro Sula in Honduras has the unfortunate standing as the world's homicide capital.³¹ The aggressive tactics of those perpetrating violence are manifested in schools, for example, as violence and abuse directed to students and teachers. According to its own statistics, 158 teachers asked the Department of Education in El Salvador for a school transfer due to targeted violence between January and October of 2013.³² Those interviewed by ELCA staff in all three countries generally pointed to the toll that omnipresent and unpredictable violence takes on their daily lives.

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²⁸ (Transparency International)

²⁹ (ACAPS, 2014)

³⁰ (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Publica y Justicia Penal A.C., 2014)

³¹ (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013)

³² (Flores, 2013)



The different actors feeding and creating the astonishing level of violence are known and categorized differently in each country. Generally, people in the region are faced with violence from organized crime groups (including gangs, narcotraffickers and non-affiliated criminal groups or individuals); individuals contracted to kill, extort and/or mug; family members; and the police and military. The sources of violent acts are often indistinguishable and membership is not mutually exclusive.

"Era menor de edad, y aquí, He was a child and here, they

prefieren a los menores de prefer children because they

edad porque pueden hacer can do their bidding and they

ellos hagan sus cosas y have the possibility of not

tengan la posibilidad de salir going to jail.

de la cárcel."

Yo prefiero tenerlo en un lugar I would rather have him in a

donde va a estar seguro, a place where he is going to be

tenerlo aquí donde un safe than to have him here,

delincuente va lo hubiera where a criminal would

matado." already have killed him."

**All names of migrants have been changed for the interviewee's protection.*

ANGELICA'S STORY: Angelica's* son migrated to the United States unaccompanied a few years ago after gang members wanted to recruit him. He had to stop attending school because he was being followed by gang members. She believes he was targeted because he did not have a criminal record and was young.

Because of her son's situation, Angelica made the difficult decision to support her child's escape from the country.

Organized criminal groups have significant influence on the level of violence in the region. While the degree of cooperation between narcotraffickers and gangs is unknown, it is generally believed that gangs do not participate in formal transnational drug trafficking but do distribute drugs in local communities.³³ Approximately 80 percent of the individuals who shared their stories with ELCA personnel reported being victimized, directly or tacitly, by these groups.³⁴ Some young people interviewed live on the border between rival gang territories and must make the arduous trip from one territory to the next going to school every day. If these young people are wrongly identified as members of the opposing gang or if they refuse to be recruited, they become targets of brutal violence, as was the case for Angelica's son. The stories heard by the ELCA delegation are not isolated cases; similar stories have been reported by various media organizations.^{35 36 37} Professors from the Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador reported that quantitative studies to investigate how widely young people are targeted by criminal groups have been deterred for fear that researchers would be threatened or killed.³⁸



³³ (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2015)

³⁴ (Personal communication, 2015)

³⁵ (Lopez, 2011)

³⁶ (Rodriguez, 2014)

³⁷ (ABC.es, 2014)

³⁸ (Personal communication, 2015)

MARCOS' STORY: Marcos'* family owned a small woodworking business for 35 years, until a gang began asking for a fee to operate. After refusing to pay, his father was shot and killed in the entrance to his house. Marcos and his brother attempted to continue the business but simply could not afford to pay the 1,000 lempiras (about \$45) that was demanded. The brothers had to move to support their families.

Gangs now occupy the building that housed Marcos' family business. Now that the family business is gone, he has attempted to migrate three times in order to provide food for his three children and wife.

Extortion like that experienced by Marcos is another manifestation of the violence and fear experienced in communities throughout the Northern Triangle. The majority of interviewees, including those from governmental organizations, acknowledged the wide-spread practice by some criminal groups of collecting fees from individuals or small businesses that need to travel between, or attempt to serve in, gang territories. These fees are so common that media openly reports on how it affects the population. The Honduran newspaper La Prensa reported that the "war tax," the term used in the country to describe these fees, weighs heavily on taxi and bus drivers who must budget for them as they would for new tires or gas.³⁹ In El Salvador, La Prensa Grafica reported that municipal authorities permanently closed a market after criminal groups told municipal authorities to collect the group's "rent," the name commonly used for extortions, and they refused.⁴⁰ Many individuals and businesses are forced to pay this fee as soon as a criminal organization assesses that the community member or owner has an "excess" of money.

Interviewees repeatedly reported that any sign of economic success triggers extortion. The amount wrested from each person varies; however, the consequence of not paying results uniformly in targeting and killings. The interviewees who refused to comply with extortions were given less than 24 hours after their refusal to leave their communities.

As pervasive as targeted gang violence is, many women reported that their decision to flee with their children was based on additional victimization at the hands of spouses or partners. A rash of domestic and gender-based violence in the region is another contributing factor to migration.⁴¹ Women and their children are especially vulnerable to multiple layers of violence in their communities, and gender-based violence is one layer that goes severely under-reported.⁴² The U.S. State Department highlights that gender-based violence is widespread and normalized in all three countries.^{43 44 45} In fact, Guatemala, El

³⁹ (La Prensa, 2013)

⁴⁰ (Avalos, 2013)

⁴¹ (Women's Refugee Commission, 2012)

⁴² (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2013)

⁴³ (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2015)

⁴⁴ (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2014)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

"We have always been a unified family but today believe me when I say that we are separated..."

It is painful to see someone

Es doloroso ver a que alguno get killed in your family. We built that business not in days, in years, and it is gone from one day to another."

de la familia lo maten. Se construyó una empresa no en días, en años, y deshacerla de la noche a la mañana"

**All names of migrants have been changed for the interviewee's protection.*



**All names of migrants have been changed for the interviewee's protection.*

In Honduras there are no possibilities of being able to build a house. Even working as much as possible, even if you kill yourself working, you are never going to achieve that.
"En Honduras no hay posibilidades de que usted pueda hacerse de una casa. Así trabaje el tiempo que trabaje, así se mate trabajando, nunca lo va a lograr.

I have explained everything to my daughter. I have told her where we really live... Unfortunately, [young girls] living in our community can't play outside because there are always eyes looking at them, influencing them."
Yo a mi hija le he explicado todo. Le he dicho a ella donde realmente vivimos... Lastimosamente donde habitamos [niñas] no pueden recrearse porque siempre hay ojos viéndolas, influyendo en ellas."



Salvador and Honduras have some of the highest rates of femicide in the world.⁴⁶ The U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that 33 percent and 38 percent of adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in El Salvador and Guatemala, respectively, have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from a husband or partner.⁴⁷ In Honduras, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women noted that between 2005 and 2013 the number of violent deaths of women rose by 263.4 percent.⁴⁸ Although laws that prohibit domestic violence exist in all three countries, they are not well enforced, if at all, nor are cases effectively prosecuted.^{49 50} In Honduras, for example, a study by local civil society showed that 96 percent of femicides committed between 2005 and 2010 had not been prosecuted.⁵¹

TERESA'S STORY: Teresa's* husband migrated to the United States years ago, after looking for a job for a year. After years of working undocumented in the United States, the family was able to afford to build a proper home, and he came back to his family.

Teresa continues to mourn the lost father-daughter relationship between her husband and her daughter caused by years of absence. Though they now have a house, she worries even more about her daughter's future in an incredibly dangerous environment.

Crime in general is severely under-reported in the region due to a well-founded lack of confidence in police and judicial institutions. Criminal organizations in the region operate with a high degree of impunity in all three countries due to lack of resources and persistent government corruption.⁵² Multiple reports assert that members of the national police and military in the Northern Triangle have ties to criminal organizations.^{53 54 55 56} In Honduras, the special prosecutor for human rights routinely chooses not to adjudicate cases. In 2012 alone, the special prosecutor opened only 28 of the 521 official complaints filed. Such an abysmal rate deters citizens from exercising their rights and generates despondency in the pursuit of justice.⁵⁷ In El Salvador, from 2009 to 2013, about 500 police and superiors of the national police were apprehended for criminal activity.⁵⁸ While these apprehensions deserve praise, the frequency of criminal activity within government institutions does little to bolster confidence or accomplish justice for the general citizenry. When criminal groups kill a

⁴⁶ (The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, 2011)

⁴⁷ (U.N. Children's Fund, 2014)

⁴⁸ (U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014)

⁴⁹ (Center for Gender and Refugee Studies)

⁵⁰ (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2015)

⁵¹ (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2012)

⁵² (U.S. Department of State, 2015)

⁵³ (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2015)

⁵⁴ (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2014)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ (Human Rights Watch)

⁵⁷ (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2014)

⁵⁸ (Marroquin, 2013)

family member, target a person, push someone out of his or her home, interviewees repeatedly stated that they have no place to turn.

PATRICIA'S STORY: Patricia* became a target after members of her family fled their newly built cement home. Gangs began extorting her family, believing the home was a sign of wealth. They reported the crime to the anti-extortion unit. Eventually, Patricia was forced to leave her home in the middle of the night after she was attacked while leaving her job.

Northern Triangle countries are attempting to combat the high levels of crime, but this is often done by relying on the over-militarization of police and government forces.⁵⁹ The understandable, yet regrettable, focus on short-term restraint over longer-term prevention means that root causes of crime and violence remain untouched. The Honduran government's response is perhaps the most short-sighted. It has opted to increase its military strength at an alarming rate without tending to or resourcing any other sector or without shoring up civil society to help reduce poverty and improve educational opportunities. The Honduran president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, instituted a Military Police of Public Order in 2013 to act as law enforcement.⁶⁰ In addition, as a response to the targeting of children by criminal organizations, Honduras began a militarized educational program called Guardianes de la Patria (Guardians of the Homeland) run by the Honduran Department of Homeland Security, in which children are taught moral, spiritual, ethical and civil principles by the military.⁶¹ This program illustrates how instead of holistic solutions that engage governmental and civil society actors to address the root causes of violence; the Honduran government has turned to their military to provide safety at all levels.

The imprudence of Honduras' over-reliance on an iron fist (the "mano dura" approach), in which the government threatens to conduct violence on violent actors, only perpetuates the systemic societal issues that lead to additional brutal violence.⁶² In fact, this approach raises serious concerns about how these forces are linked to criminal groups and further corruption and leaves children vulnerable to attacks by government officials.⁶³ The homicide rate today in Honduras is higher than it was in 2009 before the militarization program's inception.⁶⁴ Research cited by the government that shows a decrease in violence has been questioned by independent organizations.^{65 66} Evidence suggests that this cycle of reliance upon enforcement-only policies and practices as the response to violence creates a permanent situation of insecurity in these countries.

⁵⁹ (Washington Office on Latin America; Society of Jesus, 2014)

⁶⁰ (La Gaceta, 2013)

⁶¹ (Secretaria de Defensa Nacional, 2014)

⁶² (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2014)

⁶³ (Women's Refugee Commission, 2012)

⁶⁴ (Instituto Universitario en Democracia, Paz, y Seguridad)

⁶⁵ (Bumpus, et al.)

⁶⁶ (Southwick, 2013)

We never had the chance to
"Nunca nos tocó hablar con
talk to someone with
alguien que tuviera
knowledge on extorcions or
conocimiento de extorciones
an interest in the issue. Every
o que tuviera interés en el
time we got there not even
tema. Siempre llegábamos y
the guy who was helping us
ni siquiera el hombre con el
would look at us in the eye.
que nos tocaba hablar nos

miraba.

They beat me up and I
Me golpearon y perdi el
became unconscious, I don't
conocimiento, no se que mas
know what happened. All I
paso. Solo se que si no
know is the only reason they
mataron fue porque ninguno
didn't kill me is because
de los dos tuvieron el valor de
neither of them had the
hacerlo. Uno le decía al otro
scruples. One was saying to
'mátala voz' y el otro 'no,
the other 'You kill her' and the
mátala voz.'
other said 'no, you kill her.'"

**All names of migrants have been changed for the interviewee's protection.*



Poverty and lack of opportunities

Northern Triangle countries have significant rates of poverty and little access to services. Official statistics in Honduras from 2013 reveal that 64.5 percent of the population earns less than the cost of the basic food basket annually and approximately 1.5 million Hondurans suffer from severe hunger.⁶⁷ This number increases to 68.5 percent in rural areas.⁶⁸ In El Salvador, 29.65 percent of the population lives in abject poverty.⁶⁹ Over half of Guatemalans live with acute poverty and an alarming 49.8 percent suffer from chronic malnutrition.⁷⁰ It is not surprising, then, that income inequality and access to government programs is reported by U.S. officials as a principal cause for migration.⁷¹ While the ELCA delegation did not visit rural communities, interviewees from these communities cited poverty and lack of opportunities as a significant reason why they migrate. Although programs exist in theory for people who are unemployed or underemployed in these areas, such programs either suffer from woeful underfunding or have not succeeded in moving past the implementation phase.

"I left and my mother stayed sick and, well, I didn't make it. I traveled on the trains suffering, standing hunger, standing the cold, ice, and they deported me."
"Me fui y mi mama quedo enferma y pues, no lo logre. Me fui en tren sufriendo, aguantando hambre, aguantado frio, hilo y me deportaron."

**All names of migrants have been changed for the interviewee's protection.*

CARLOS' STORY: Carlos* and his brother have both attempted to migrate more than once to the United States. Carlos left after his mother was diagnosed with cancer and the family took out loans to care for her. They had no access to health care or any other program that might help.

During his most recent trip, he made it as far as Mexico. His mother died three months after he went back home, but he still hopes someday to be able to make it to the United States.

The effects of dire poverty were communicated routinely by those interviewed during the ELCA fact-finding trip. One family reported that they had fled Honduras in May of 2014 after a member of the family was targeted by gangs. Although violence was the triggering factor of their migration, the single mother in this family said she had also been unemployed for over a year and felt that she could no longer provide for her family. After traveling as far as Mexico with her children and being kidnapped by narcotraffickers in the country, she was deported back to Honduras.⁷² Lack of access to education and job opportunities contribute to the enduring hopelessness of the people in the region. People consistently reported that they held little or no hope for a future for them or their families in their own countries.

In Honduras, roughly half of all unemployed people in the country are less than 24 years old.⁷³ Even with a job, the average salary is 1,790 lempira per month (slightly less than \$85 dollars) if the worker has primary school level education.

⁶⁷ (U.N. World Food Programme)

⁶⁸ (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013)

⁶⁹ (U.N. World Food Programme)

⁷⁰ (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015)

⁷¹ (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015)

⁷² (Personal communication, 2015)

⁷³ (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013)



Workers with a college degree earn between 3,560 and 13,051 lempira per month (\$168 to \$615 dollars) on average.⁷⁴

Environmental issues

Drought and coffee rust, an aggressive fungal disease that kills coffee leaves, have contributed to additional internal displacement and migration of rural populations in parts of Central America. The drought has affected over 2 million people in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, while the coffee rust has affected another 2 million.⁷⁵ Although the ELCA delegation did not visit the region affected by drought or coffee rust, government officials and regional experts cited these environmental issues as factors for forced displacement of families in many agricultural regions. In addition, the World Food Programme of the United Nations found that 5 to 12 percent of people affected by drought had at least one family member who migrated in search for job opportunities.⁷⁶ According to the International Coffee Organization, coffee rust has left almost 200,000 people without employment in the three Northern Triangle countries.⁷⁷ Both environmental catastrophes have caused severe food insecurity, which, in turn, forces people to migrate. In addition to these causes, environmental degradation due to logging and mining by multinational corporations also factors into the displacement of rural populations.⁷⁸⁷⁹

Family links

Family reunification is often cited by U.S. legislators and governments in the Northern Triangle as the main reason for forced displacement of unaccompanied children. Official figures from the sending countries are obtained during an interview completed in the repatriation processing centers where children and families arrive immediately after being deported. Due to the limited amount of time migrants spend in repatriation centers and the little to no time they have with psycho-social providers who understand the different forms of trauma migrants must endure, these surveys tend to be a better measurement for family links in the United States than for discovering the primary reasons individuals decide to leave their countries of origin. A recent study of Salvadoran children found that 90 percent of repatriated children interviewed had family links in the United States, while only 35 percent of these children cited family reunification as their reason for leaving their communities.⁸⁰ These figures have been used to inappropriately and inaccurately depict the reason for fleeing countries of origin. ELCA delegation members were consistently told by interviewees that violence and poverty were the reasons they migrated; the fact that they had family members in the United States simply informed their decisions about which country to flee to.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ (World Food Programme, 2014)

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ (International Coffee Organization, 2013)

⁷⁸ (Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales; IBIS, 2013)

⁷⁹ (McSweeney, et al., 2014)

⁸⁰ (Kennedy, 2014)

A recent study of Salvadoran children found that 90 percent of repatriated children interviewed had family links in the U.S., while only 35 percent of these children cited family reunification as their reason for leaving their communities. These figures have been used to inappropriately and inaccurately depict the reason for fleeing countries of origin.



The ELCA delegation witnessed these government sponsored interviews in the repatriation center in San Salvador. The interviews are completed via a survey that requests the biographical information of the person and asks where the person traveled, whether they traveled alone, and whether they met with a representative from the Salvadoran consulate. This interview is done by either a volunteer or an immigration official in a room where four other migrants are being processed. Repatriated migrants are asked why they decided to migrate. These migrants, who are tired and uncomfortable in the setting, generally respond that they have family in the United States. If children or families have suffered violence or abuse, it is unlikely that such a public setting would encourage them to reveal the reasons they decided to leave. When children are interviewed at more length and in safer settings, they disclose that violence was a primary factor in their family's decision to have them leave. Such disclosure points to a need for international protection. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees found that 58 percent of children, when interviewed in settings that meet best-practice standards, have a potential or actual need for international protection.⁸¹ Although family reunification does play a role in the migration of children and families, violence, poverty and lack of opportunity are the most consistently cited reasons for making the arduous trek north.

The decision to migrate is a complex and interconnected one. It is crucial to understand these complexities to ensure adequate services and protection for these groups.

THE INTERSECTION OF ROOT CAUSES AND FAITH COMMUNITIES



Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala

The Christian Lutheran Church in Honduras, the Salvadoran Lutheran Church, and Augustinian Lutheran Church in Guatemala are in a number of the communities from which children and families continue to flee. As a result, these churches must live through the effects of migration and the violence that shakes the region.

The Christian Lutheran Church in Honduras

(La Iglesia Cristiana Luterana de Honduras)

The Lutheran church in Honduras has lost a significant amount of its youth leadership due to violence that causes them to either flee their communities or avoid leaving their houses in order to remain safe. On many occasions, congregations have had to change their time of worship due to shootouts breaking out on the streets leading to the church or over concerns for the safety of parishioners if worship ends after nightfall.



⁸¹ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014)

The Salvadoran Lutheran Church

(La Iglesia Luterana Salvadoreña)

The Salvadoran Lutheran Church has seen dramatic levels of violence in the communities it serves. Young leaders reported having to miss worship due to a fear of crossing gang territory to attend church. These young people also struggle with keeping other youth engaged in their congregations because many of their peers have been forcibly displaced. The church has had cases of young people turning to it for help after they were told they needed to leave their communities within 24 hours or they would be killed. Since the ELCA delegation visit in February, 30 families, in a rural community of 100 families, have been forced to flee their homes after being targeted by criminal organizations. Many of these families were Lutheran.

Although all churches have first-hand experiences with migration, the Salvadoran Lutheran Church, along with other civil society organizations, continues to be a part of an inter-institutional response coordinated by the government.

Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala

(Iglesia Luterana Agustina de Guatemala – ILAG)

The Augustinian Lutheran Church of Guatemala is present in indigenous communities and is often one of the few safe places for young people. Members have had family who migrated to the United States. Because of a historical cyclical migration, the church also has connections to individuals and families that migrate to Mexico.

BERNARDO'S STORY: Bernardo*, a pastor for a Lutheran congregation in the region, travels to different areas to lead worship services. The congregation feels the impact of the factors driving people to be forcefully displaced and the results of the mass migration of young people in the country.

The congregation runs several programs aimed at increasing opportunities for young people, including a youth leadership and scholarship program. However, he and the congregation see the need for bigger changes.

**All names of migrants have been changed for the interviewee's protection.*



Salvadoran Lutheran Church

"In general, the only congregations that are saved from gang members being close are in rural areas.

There are other types of violence but it's not like congregations in the city, where one leaves church and you can find gang members very close by... We are trying to open spaces for young people to stay busy, for young people to have the opportunity to develop, but [the issues causing migration] are structural issues, country-wide issues. As long as we are not looking to solve them, it is going to be very difficult to find that young people don't have the necessity to want to migrate."

THE REPATRIATION PROCESS

The ELCA delegation visited repatriation centers in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and Colonia La Chacra in San Salvador, El Salvador. Both centers receive unaccompanied children deported by land via buses from Mexico. The vast majority of children and families who are repatriated have been stopped in Mexico and do not make it to the United States. Although the steps children and families must go through in the repatriation centers in both countries are similar, governmental investment and support differs in each country. While the Salvadoran Department of Homeland Security officials interviewed often verbalized best interest of the children principles and its facilities are generally



Evangelical
Lutheran
Church in America



Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have all signed more than 23 international agreements that outline the protection of unaccompanied children, and all have signed bilateral or multilateral agreements outlining safe repatriation practices. Ideally, these agreements would shape the interactions of unaccompanied children and vulnerable migrants with government officials at all points during apprehension and repatriation processes.

well-equipped, the repatriation center in Honduras is in a formerly abandoned government building. As repatriations increased in the summer of 2014, civil society organizations in both countries stepped in to provide needed services. Today, governmental coordination on repatriations has increased in El Salvador; and the Salvadoran government has taken over most of the tasks that civil society previously performed. In contrast, the Honduran government remains involved only in specific activities in the repatriation centers. Both governments have had assistance from international governments or organizations to improve their repatriation facilities. However, the investments made by each government is mirrored in the infrastructure of the repatriation centers.

Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have all signed more than 23 international agreements that outline the protection of unaccompanied children, and all have signed bilateral or multilateral agreements outlining safe repatriation practices.⁸² Ideally, these agreements would shape the interactions of unaccompanied children and vulnerable migrants with government officials at all points during apprehension and repatriation processes.

Honduras

Civil society organizations play a critical role in the repatriation of children in Honduras. The Honduran government contributes little program support and no financial support to these efforts. Multiple organizations, including Casa Alianza, Comisión de Acción Social Menonita and Operación Bendición, have stepped in to fill the significant gaps in government capacity to guide the repatriation of children and families. International organizations, including the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, World Vision and UNICEF, have also stepped in to improve the infrastructure of the repatriation center and provide guidance with safe repatriation practices. The Red Cross station in El Corinto, a municipality bordering Honduras and Guatemala, is the first to receive buses of repatriating migrants.

Nongovernmental organizations have been crucial to the repatriation of children and families for years. UNICEF provided funding in 2008 to create a reception center for unaccompanied children in El Corinto, the drop-off point at the time for all migrants being repatriated from Mexico.⁸³ Today, buses carrying children and families stop at the Red Cross station in El Corinto but continue on to El Eden, a new repatriation facility in San Pedro Sula. The Red Cross informs El Eden that a bus has arrived in El Corinto and the number of children and families in the bus so the center can prepare for their arrival. While buses repatriating children arrived only on Wednesdays in 2008,⁸⁴ today buses arrive Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

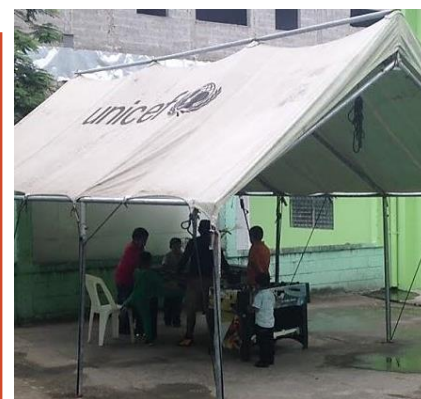
El Eden was an abandoned government building that reopened in 2014 after the repatriations of children and families increased. The mandate to repatriate



⁸² (Catholic Relief Services , 2009)
⁸³ (Catholic Relief Services , 2009)
⁸⁴ Ibid.

children falls to the national child protection agency, the Dirección Nacional de la Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia, an agency created in 2014 after widespread corruption was revealed in the previous child protection agency.⁸⁵ The new agency is grossly underfunded and understaffed, which results in a lack of appropriate repatriation services and follow-up for children.⁸⁶ The Honduran government attempted coordination for repatriated children's services through the Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta del Niño Migrante, a roundtable that included different agencies interacting with migrant children, but this roundtable existed only until media attention to the issue began to wane.⁸⁷ Despite an announcement by Honduras' first lady⁸⁸ that the issue of child migration was being properly addressed, Honduras still cannot guarantee the safety of children being repatriated.⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ In cases where children express fear of leaving the center, there is no governmental process to ensure their protection.⁹¹ Children who leave El Eden receive no governmental follow-up to ensure their safety. One psychiatrist at El Eden said they have witnessed children and mothers cry desperately while letting staff know that they fear being killed or abused once they leave the center, but there are no viable options for protection.⁹²

According to interviewees, there is a large gap between protections in written laws or agreements and actual protections in practice. Civil society organizations involved in repatriation services point out that the protocol they must follow for safe repatriations, passed in 2006, was written by the government and is theoretically enforced in Honduras' capital, Tegucigalpa, with no input by organizations present at the repatriation centers.⁹³ Although the protocol still lacks necessary human rights principles,⁹⁴ organizations struggle to meet even the existing requirements in the protocol due to limited capacity and no resources or coordination from the government. For example, although the protocol for proper psychological evaluations of returned children and families rightly calls for a private and comfortable setting, psychologists must perform these evaluations at El Eden in an open room while two other individuals' cases are being evaluated just inches away, because private rooms have not been made



Children playing a game of foosball while waiting at El Eden

At El Eden, a repatriation facility in Honduras:
Many children and mothers cry desperately while letting staff know that they fear being killed or abused once they leave the center, but there are no viable options for protection.

⁸⁵ (La Prensa, 2013)

⁸⁶ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; Casa Alianza; Asociación Pop No'j; Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana; Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova; Programa de Defensa e Incidencia Binacio, 2015)

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ The announcement by Ana García de Hernández was made during the ELCA delegation's trip to Central America.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ (La Tribuna, 2015)

⁹¹ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; Casa Alianza; Asociación Pop No'j; Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana; Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova; Programa de Defensa e Incidencia Binacio; Women's Refugee Commission, 2015)

⁹² (Personal communication, 2015)

⁹³ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; Casa Alianza; Asociación Pop No'j; Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana; Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova; Programa de Defensa e Incidencia Binacio, 2015)

⁹⁴ Ibid.





Women and children deported from Mexico via bus enter the repatriation facility at El Eden

available. Despite the lack of privacy, staff at El Eden report multiple mothers have shared their trauma after being kidnapped for days in Mexico with their children.⁹⁵

Interviewees pointed to similar gaps between laws and their implementation in the international coordination between the Honduran and Mexican governments. Although international laws and agreements call for close coordination between the governments when transporting migrants back to Honduras, organizations in El Eden are often not notified of when the buses will arrive. This lack of coordination is particularly concerning because figures published in March 2015 show that 78 percent of children that are deported to Honduras are returned from Mexico.⁹⁶ According to government and nongovernmental organizations, migrants are often repatriated outside times agreed upon in multilateral agreements, and children are not given appropriate breaks or food during their trip.⁹⁷

The repatriation process in Honduras:

The repatriation process outlined below lasts approximately an hour. Overnight accommodations at El Eden exist for children whose guardian cannot pick them up on their arrival date, but children are transferred to a more permanent accommodation if they stay for more than 24 hours. As highlighted above, children will first be welcomed by Red Cross volunteers at a station at the border between Guatemala and Honduras and continue on by bus to El Eden in San Pedro Sula. The process at El Eden is outlined below.

1. **General orientation** – Children get off the bus and are given a brief overview of the process.
2. **Formal return to parents/Interview** – Unaccompanied children are returned to their parents and there is a brief interview in which the parents have to present proof of parenthood. The interview aims to ensure parental relationship and gather other data.
3. **Health and psychological screening** – The health screening is performed by a doctor from the Ministry of Health while psychiatrists are brought in from civil society organizations.
4. **Institutional fair** – During this process, different governmental institutions screen deported migrants to determine their potential eligibility for governmental programs. **(During the ELCA visit, the delegation did not see many government institutions that were supposed to be present at the facility.)**
5. **Solidarity bag** – Because many families take out loans to pay for children and families to migrate, families are given a bag of food and necessities that will last a week and a small back pack for children. These are given by a civil society organization.



⁹⁵ (González, 2014)

⁹⁶ (Centro Nacional de Información del Sector Social, 2015)

⁹⁷ (Personal communication, 2015)

El Salvador

In El Salvador, the Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería is the agency tasked with the repatriation of all migrants, including children and families. This agency serves a similar purpose as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The Instituto Salvadoreño para El Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia, the child protection agency in El Salvador, and the Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y Adolescencia, a national council to protect the rights of children, work together with the Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería to ensure the well-being of repatriated and other children in the country. There also exists an interagency, the Comprehensive Protection System for Children and Adolescents, to ease agency coordination. Although practices and systems are far from ideal, individuals working for these agencies often verbalized the best interest of the children principle widely used by child protection agencies.⁹⁸ Additionally, a national law passed in 2009 strengthens this child protection system and outlines children's rights to access the services they need. However, its implementation has been slow, partly due to lack of funds.⁹⁹

A 2011 law to protect Salvadoran migrants established principles for the conduct of government officials interacting with migrants and created a nationwide institutional coordinating body, CONMIGRANTES, which brings together government agencies and civil society organizations.¹⁰⁰ The results of this law are visible in the treatment and articulation of migrant's rights by government officials in the repatriation center. However, children released from repatriation centers receive little to no follow-up, even when they express a need for protection. During a meeting with the ELCA delegation, the child protection agency outlined a comprehensive follow up plan for repatriated children that seeks to partner with existing civil society organizations to provide services for children. This plan did not include a protection protocol. However, when Instituto Salvadoreño para El Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia representatives were asked about barriers to the implementation of such a plan, violence was recognized as a principal factor.¹⁰¹ Similar to accounts from the Honduras repatriation center, official statistics in El Salvador that describe family reunification as the main reason children and families leave are deceiving. These figures come from a general initial interview performed in a room with four other migrants are going through the same process. An immigration official interviewed agreed that if children are in need of protection, this information is usually revealed when children play while waiting for their guardian to be interviewed and not in the initial interview.

⁹⁸ To learn more about the application of this principle, please refer to UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child. Visit <http://www.unhcr.org/4566b16b2.pdf>

⁹⁹ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; Casa Alianza; Asociación Pop No'j; Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana; Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova; Programa de Defensa e Incidencia Binacio, 2015)

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ (Personal communication, 2015)



Entrance to the Repatriation center in San Salvador. Repatriated children, families and adults will encounter this facility after traveling for hours from Mexico via bus.



Sign outside the repatriation center in San Salvador.



The repatriation process in El Salvador:

The repatriation process in El Salvador lasts about an hour. Adults who cannot prove a family relationship with a child, or children whose guardian cannot pick them up, are transferred to a separate facility. Buses with repatriated children are received on Tuesdays and Fridays. The process at the repatriation center in La Chacra is outlined below:

1. **Welcome and brief orientation** – Migrants are given a snack and something to drink and receive a brief orientation.
2. **Interview** – All migrants, including children and families, are given a brief interview with questions that include how they were treated by Mexican authorities, the reason they left, whether they saw the Salvadoran consulate in the detention center in Mexico, whether they plan to leave again, etc.
3. **Health screening** – Children and other migrants can opt to receive vaccinations.
4. **Group care/comprehensive interview** – Children play and have time in a group while parents are interviewed by police about the parental relationship with child. There is a comprehensive interview with the guardian performed by a government agency.

TREATMENT OF MIGRANTS IN-TRANSIT

In all three Northern Triangle countries, the treatment of migrants in-transit and the lack of enforcement of policies that ensure children's best interests was a concern of the ELCA leaders after conversations with government officials, civil society organizations and migrants. The ELCA delegation verified media accounts¹⁰² that unaccompanied children are sent in buses from Mexico with adult men and families, with only the bus driver present and no personnel designated to ensure the children's safety. This continues to occur despite the existence of regional agreements and international guidelines that call for the contrary, including the 2009 Regional Agreement for the Attention of Unaccompanied Migrant Children and Adolescents in Case of Repatriation.¹⁰³ The 2009 repatriation agreement includes a mandate to return children without requiring a long and tiring trip, in order to ensure their wellbeing. However, the ELCA delegation found several instances in which this agreement has not been honored by the Mexican government. Repatriation centers in Honduras and El Salvador reported children traveling for up to 11 hours without a break. Governmental institutions and civil society organizations both articulated instances in which they have attempted to improve coordination with Mexican government officials but were met with little interest.¹⁰⁴

Because of the disturbing trends in the treatment, screening and repatriation of children and families in Mexico, the ELCA delegation plans to travel to Mexico in June 2015.

¹⁰² (Martínes, 2014)

¹⁰³ (Conferencia Regional sobre Migración, 2009)

¹⁰⁴ (Personal communication, 2015)

The ELCA delegation found several instances in which [the 2009 international repatriation] agreement has not been honored by the Mexican government. Repatriation centers in Honduras and El Salvador reported children traveling for up to 11 hours without a break.



Conclusion

The U.S. has historically engaged with Central America through support and funding for security.¹⁰⁵ During the Cold War, the United States provided funding for governments that exercised a “mano dura” approach to their opposition, leading to thousands of killings and human rights violations.¹⁰⁶ As highlighted in the root causes section of this report, governments in the region today, especially in Honduras, tend to take a similar approach to violent actors. The increase in unaccompanied children and families fleeing this violence to the United States highlights the suffering of those caught between violent actors and a violent approach to peace. U.S. response in the Northern Triangle to this forced displacement has been purely security focused and includes training for enforcement agents that stop children from leaving their country – children who potentially need international protection. Denying this protection is prohibited by international law.¹⁰⁷ Migration of vulnerable children and families to the United States merits a new approach to engagement with the Northern Triangle governments. This approach should focus on addressing the root causes of migration and rethinking how the United States invests in security in the region.

The U.S. government must make a long-term investment in addressing the root causes of child and family migration responsibly. Investment only in border security measures, such as pressuring Mexico to detain and deport children and families from the Northern Triangle, disregards international agreements and national laws meant to protect those fleeing persecution. Violence, poverty, lack of opportunities, gender-based violence, and environmental issues cause migration to other countries, as well as a high level of internal displacement – all of which destabilizes the region. This destabilization is not in the best interest of the United States and, most importantly, fails to ensure the health and well-being of vulnerable children and families. A responsible yet extensive investment in the region can be made through strategic allocation of money and extensive oversight.

Migration of vulnerable children and families to the United States merits a new approach to engagement with the Northern Triangle governments. This approach should focus on addressing the root causes of migration and rethinking how the United States invests in security in the region.

¹⁰⁵ (Meyer, Ribando Seelke, Taft-Morales, & Margesson, 2015)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; Casa Alianza; Asociación Pop No’; Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana; Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova; Programa de Defensa e Incidencia Binacio, 2015)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prioritize children, families, and threatened adults

The U.S. must recognize the need for protection of children and families fleeing situations of violence. Any policies and investments in the region should ensure that those who fear for their safety can flee in a timely and safe manner, honoring international protection standards. It is critical that the U.S. stops supporting enforcement-only border measures in Mexico and instead requests that the Mexican government enforce its own robust protection laws. In addition, the U.S. should lead in ensuring that all children and families arriving at its borders have true access to due process. In accordance with existing U.S. and International law, the protection of children, families and other vulnerable migrants must be at the forefront of any investment in sending and transit countries.

Focus on security, not militarization

The U.S. government must address security concerns in the region in a new way. Historical support of the Mano Dura approach in the region has been ineffective in lowering crime rates and has created significant human rights issues. Supporting the same interdiction and anti-drug efforts only validates security forces that engage in corruption and perpetuates a national climate of generalized violence. Community-based alternatives to this approach exist and must be evaluated as a way to increase security. The human rights conditions for funding included in FY15 for Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico must remain in place to ensure that the U.S. does not invest in corrupt security forces.

Invest in safe repatriation efforts and follow up

There is currently little to no follow up for children and families repatriated in the region, including no effective emergency procedure if a child needs immediate protection. A long-term investment in community-based follow up will target the root causes of migration in the communities where children are fleeing. At the same time, there must be true and effective procedures for children in need of immediate protection, whether they have attempted to flee the country or have been internally displaced. U.S. investment on improving the factors that lead to forced displacements of migration of children and families, and creating an emergency system for those in need of international protection must happen simultaneously so as to truly address the long-term and short-term needs for children.

Involve local civil society

Money given to governments in the region for development and poverty reduction must ensure that civil society is engaged in the planning, implementation and oversight of programs. There should also be an investment in strengthening civil society in the region. Nonprofit and international organizations, as well as faith communities, have a critical presence in repatriation centers and years of experience working with at-risk children and



youth. No other actors have a bigger impact in addressing the factors that lead to forced displacement of children than civil society members who have worked in these communities for years.

Include clear and achievable goals

Investments in strengthening judicial and policing institutions and poverty reduction must have clear, achievable, and transparent goals. Indicators of violence reduction must focus on real impact to populations that leave their communities. The measurements for success in strengthening institutions must account for the reduction of corruption and impunity within them. Due to the significant contrast between the passage of laws and their actual implementation, the passing of legislation should not be a trusted measurable outcome.



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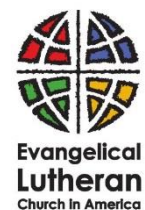
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