

Communities in Crisis

Policy Recommendations to Address the Humanitarian Crisis in Northern Central America

International Rescue Committee | June 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Northern Central America is facing an unprecedented and growing humanitarian crisis, compounded by pandemic lockdown-induced economic slowdowns, growing violence on the streets and in homes, and natural disasters.
- In confronting regional challenges, success will rely on a collaborative and integrated humanitarian and development response plan to address the causes, effects and impact of regional migration, while also developing and implementing solutions that increase protection capacity and pathways for individuals fleeing violence, persecution and life-threatening situations, whether they remain in their countries of origin or seek safety elsewhere.
- The Biden Administration has committed to investing in both humanitarian and development aid to Northern Central America and working closely with civil society, international organizations, and the governments in the region to address the multi-factorial causes of migration in the region; build, strengthen, and expand Central and North American countries' asylum systems and resettlement capacity; and increase opportunities for vulnerable populations to receive for protection closer to home.
- The International Rescue Committee recommends that durable solutions to address the root drivers of migration from origin of crisis to safety (whether in country of origin or country of asylum) depend on viewing the region through the lens of humanitarian crises, responding to humanitarian needs including providing for immediate safety and protection, access to information for decision making, and rethinking development programming to include wrap around support for recovery and reintegration for displaced populations.

The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises, helping to restore health, safety, education, economic well-being, and power to people devastated by conflict and disaster. Founded in 1933 at the call of Albert Einstein, the IRC is at work in over 40 countries and 26 U.S. cities helping people to survive, reclaim control of their future and strengthen their communities.

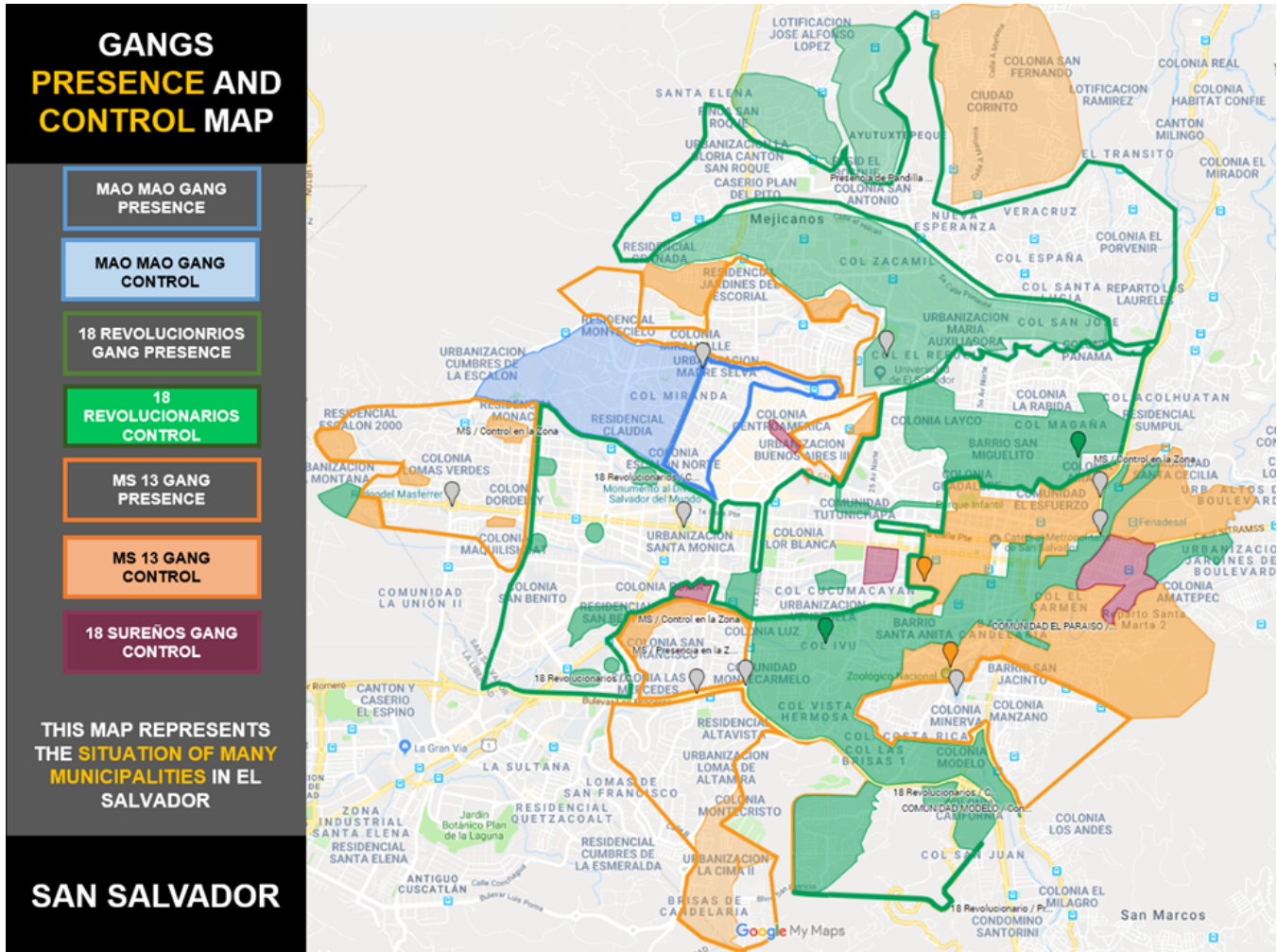


Introduction

Across Northern Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala & Honduras), the growing humanitarian crisis continues to force the displacement of thousands of people seeking safety and protection. During 2020, gang and gender-based violence, poverty, insecurity, and climate change were the cause for more than [1.4 million people](#) to be internally displaced in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, numbers that have been frequent in the last few years. However, lack of data is another great challenge in the region (numbers vary widely depending on sources) and externally displaced people are not contemplated, meaning that the total number of displaced people might be even higher.

The current perceived increase in migration in the region is largely due to the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the root drivers of migration have remained, and even worsened. While many vulnerable populations have been greatly impacted, women and girls are specific targets for violence which is leveraged as a method to control families with threats, kidnappings and extortion. During COVID where services stopped and public health measures restricted movement, the small protections against gender-based violence all but disappeared. In El Salvador, femicides increased 43 percent during the first quarter of 2021, from 28 to 40 (Interinstitutional Technical Table, 2021); in Honduras, 163 femicides were reported between January and August 2020, more than half perpetrated during the national curfew to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In Guatemala, reports of domestic and gender-based violence increased 18.7% during the first two months of 2021, with a total of 2,411. Northern Central America is also considered one of the most dangerous regions in the world for women and members of the LGBTQI+ community, with one woman murdered every 6 hours in 2019, and LGBTQI+ community regularly brutally targeted.

While there are many ongoing challenges in the region: climate change, drought, economic hardship, lack of economic opportunities, widespread violence and the presence of criminal gang-controlled areas within the region have continued to contribute to the decision for more families to flee. In addition to organized crime and drug trafficking, gang violence in the region thrives within government systems of impunity. Migration is ultimately driven by people seeking safety, protection and better living conditions.



In El Salvador, territorial gangs (maras) control neighborhoods in the city of San Salvador (as pictured) with impunity. The prevalence of violence, extortion, and death threats have forced individuals to flee their homes in search of safety and protection.

Governments in Northern Central America have lacked the ability to address regional challenges and institutions have failed to adequately provide solutions to pervasive violence and economic challenges, often due to lack of resources, corruption, or instability. Research suggests that the choice to leave the region is often supported with a desire to reunify with family members who have faced the same difficult decision in search of safety, protection and economic stability.¹ IRC's own needs assessments have shown that people are often not seeking to flee the country as their first recourse, rather first internally displace, then finding themselves unable to reestablish their lives or connect with appropriate services, displace again until ultimately fleeing their country of origin. As the living conditions worsen in the region, the migration flows risk further destabilization of the region and the lack of true safe options before reaching the United States, will continue to have a direct impact on the United States, its borders, and immigration and asylum systems.

Historically, migration issues in Northern Central America have been addressed by the United States government with policies focused primarily on the need for economic development in the region and immigration enforcement at the U.S. border. Immigration enforcement policies have included mass deportations, a reduction in allowed asylum-seekers, and inconsistent application of international law. On the ground in Central America, migration

¹ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

has been addressed by economic development programming, and more recently violence prevention and programming to address the prevalence of criminal activity within the region. Taken together, these measures have been insufficient in recognizing the humanitarian needs of those who are in need of safety and who are moving to seek it (whether internal to their country of origin or externally). Furthermore, efforts that solely address economic development fail in providing needed trauma-informed wrap-around services and protections for those who seek to benefit.

The Biden Administration has taken active steps to implement a protection-forward approach in the region.² Sustaining this approach and meaningfully addressing the humanitarian crisis in the region will require tailored policies and initiatives that seek to directly solve both the root causes of migration and the consequences of the continued regional crisis.³ It will also require the Administration to implement policies that protect the right to seek asylum while implementing a humanitarian based response that addresses the drivers of migration.

IRC's Work in Northern Central America

The IRC operates in the region across the arc of the migration crisis. Our presence and programs in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, as well as in Mexico, have allowed IRC to gain a deep understanding of the root causes of migration through a humanitarian and development lens by delivering services and humanitarian assistance to migrants on the move, refugees, asylum seekers and returnees:

- In Northern Central America, the IRC serves individuals and families experiencing violence and displacement. The IRC's programming includes multi-purpose cash transfers to meet basic needs; safe spaces for women, youth, children and the LGBTQ+ community who are survivors of gender-based violence; case management and psychosocial support to families, children and LGBTI+ people; and access to verified services and information through [CuéntaNos](#), a digital platform—part of the Global [Signpost](#) project—to provide people with critical, up-to-date information and two-way communication and support with trained moderators as well as direct engagement for returned migrants, families and others at risk of violence.
- In Mexico, the IRC is responding to the crisis in Mexican southern and northern border towns, as well as in Mexico City. The IRC's programs offer a timely and comprehensive response to the most urgent needs of people on the move, including: prevention and response to gender-based violence; access to critical information through [InfoDigna](#), a multi-channel information platform; prevention and mitigation of COVID-19; economic recovery and development; child protection services; as well as identifying needs and referring cases to local service providers. Additionally, the IRC is supporting local integration efforts by providing cultural orientation to individuals who have chosen to stay in Mexico.
- In the U.S., the IRC has served thousands of individuals, children and families seeking asylum and protection before, during and since the arrival of a large number of immigrants, including asylum-seekers, at the U.S.-Mexico border—the symptoms of the real crisis taking place in northern Central America.

²<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-creating-a-comprehensive-regional-framework-to-address-the-causes-of-migration-to-manage-migration-throughout-north-and-central-america-and-to-provide-safe-and-orderly-processing/>

³<https://www.state.gov/strengthening-democracy-in-central-america-and-addressing-root-causes-of-migration-at-central-american-integration-system-meeting/>

Understanding Migration Flows to Mexico and the United States

Violence, natural disasters, and political instability have served as the drivers of migration for an estimated 709,000 people fleeing the region in FY2019 followed by an estimated 139,000 people in FY2020. ⁴ These numbers are best guess estimates as many people cross in blind spots and are uncounted. Migrants motivated to travel north due to dangerous living conditions and past or future persecution often face similar risks to those they fled such as being kidnapped, trafficked, raped or killed en route to safety and protection.

Individuals who are forced to flee their homes often first look to neighboring municipalities, displacing internally in search of safety. With difficulties re-establishing themselves — given a lack of resources or persisting dangers — individuals, and sometimes their entire families, often displace multiple times internally before exhausting all options to stay close to home. They are then forced to flee across international borders.

Recent data from the IRC's CuéntaNos—a dynamic searchable information platform with WhatsApp chat line, part of the Global Signpost project for users in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala— signaled expected increases in migration flows from the region in advance of the eventual documented numbers at the Northern Mexico border. An increase in the demand for information on employment, identification documents, and women's services and protection have dramatically risen since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. ⁵

In 2021, the IRC conducted a needs assessment to better understand the needs of mixed migrants throughout Mexico. Mixed migration refers to the multiple possible destinations and decisions and includes those who are in movement through Mexico whether they plan to stay in Mexico, or plan to cross Mexico's southern land border and travel north in an attempt to gain entry into the United States. It is important to recognize in this population that there is not one set destination people hope to reach, rather they are making decisions while en route. At the beginning of March 2021, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) reported that, in just two months of 2021, [more than 9,000 people from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador had requested asylum](#), comprising 40% of the total of applications submitted in 2020.

Many migrants who do not desire or are unable, frequently for safety and protection concerns, to settle in Mexico opt to take the dangerous journey all the way to the U.S. border. Key findings of this assessment identified protection needs of migrants, highlighting the need for access to information for decision making and to receive services, healthcare, and shelter. With a large population of unaccompanied children, the assessment also identified the need to protect vulnerable populations like women and children from greater risks faced along their migration route.

⁴ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11151.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-migration-search-trends-point-growing-displacement-central-america-due-covid>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Broad based international cooperation and funding are necessary to ensure protections for vulnerable populations and all who are fleeing for their safety in eventual safe harbor, whether the U.S., Mexico or another country.

A comprehensive response requires distinct investments as follows:

- 1. Invest in humanitarian assistance in the region.** The first necessary investment is to provide resources to meet the specific needs of those who are internally displaced or migrants. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are positioned to partner with the government in addressing the needs as follows:
 - **Provide Humanitarian Cash Support:** Based on the top three needs people noted when they first displaced, which include money, food, and shelter, again consider cash-based programs to provide immediate needs, as well as work more closely with organizations that provide these services. Cash support should be given in concert with other supports to also ensure it is part of a pathway to a durable solution.
 - **Develop a Shelter System:** Northern Central American countries lack a robust shelter system. Few shelters exist outside of the emergency response system activated in the case of natural disasters when schools, community centers, and churches are used as shelters. The region suffers from a lack of specialized shelters as well as family shelters and lack of protection centered shelter guidelines and requirements.
 - **Improve Access to Information:** Collaboration should continue with trusted organizations to address concrete ways to communicate to the population of concern about available services and identify hidden populations of concern to empower them to make the safest possible decisions for themselves and their families.
 - **Fund Case Management:** Support services and access to resources is necessary both within countries of origin, regional countries and in the U.S. while an asylum seeker awaits the adjudication of their claim or makes plans for safety.
- 2. Support opportunities for people to find safety in their communities of first refuge.** The development of programs that address cash and protection needs for IDPs are necessary to provide life sustaining opportunities for IDPs seeking protection. Providing access to information that is reliable and timely assists IDPs in assessing protection options and in making the best decisions for themselves and their families. IDPs can be supported through community and integration services.
- 3. Support returnees (those who have been deported back to their country of origin) to reestablish their lives.** Where remittances represent a staggering 20% GDP of countries in the region, they also represent human capital. Those who return either voluntarily or involuntarily to their country of origin return with new skills, new perspectives, and with proven track record to be innovative and risk taking. Returnees represent a unique work force and unique population that can add and contribute to their country of origin, however they face many of the same challenges as new migrants face - lack of understanding of systems, lack of access to resources, and need for wrap-around protection and psychosocial support.
- 4. Build protection capacity and alternative pathways in the region.** The United States government should work with local partners and NGOs to strengthen protection capacity in the region and uphold the right to seek asylum in alignment with international law. With protection forward support from organizations, the government can work with NGOs to receive direct referrals for vulnerable populations, such as LGBTI+ asylum seekers.

Furthermore, significantly increasing in country resettlement and ensuring timely regional refugee processing will serve to provide protection from the existing risks of violence, trafficking, and life-threatening migration journeys. Programs like the Central American Minors program serve as a model for providing in-country resettlement protection to a vulnerable population; however, there is a need for more programs that also allow for people to relocate to safe communities within the region in addition to the United States.

5. Address the leading root causes of migration to improve regional challenges.

- **Assist in breaking the cycle of chronic violence.** Violence, in every expression, has been a leading driver of migration throughout Northern Central America. Weak judicial systems, repressive zero-tolerance criminal policies, and lagging police reform have contributed to perpetuating the cycle of impunity. Although some important strides have been made, particularly in creating specialized units that target gender-based violence, there is more to be done. These include:
 - Judicial and police reform to ensure due process and eliminate a culture of impunity
 - Early Childhood Development to address violence prevention as early as possible
 - Violence prevention as a behavioral change management process
 - Multi-dimensional community-based violence prevention programs that include prenatal and maternal health care interventions
- **Utilize a trauma informed approach and account for wrap-around services.** Survivors of violence, who have lived in gang-controlled communities will likely need additional support to obtain employment and be successful in a professional environment.
 - In addition, mental health and psychosocial support is necessary to assist in providing services to individuals who have experienced trauma. Trauma informed care must account for access to not only support services but also provide access to justice. Allowing an advocate to assist individuals navigate the legal processes is vital to addressing protection needs in court settings. Justice officials should also engage in Survivor Centers Training.
- **Support regional community leadership in addressing the impacts of climate change.** Climate change can serve as a contributing factor to the challenges faced by individuals in conflict and crisis environments. Coupled with a lack of power and resources, climate change can exacerbate already existing regional problems. To alleviate the effects of climate change, an investment must be made to assist local community leaders in committing to making societal and structural changes in their communities.

Please reach out to JC.Hendrickson@rescue.org for additional information on the recommendations above.