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# CENTRAL AMERICA/US: No quick fix for migration crisis

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## Abstract

On July 25, US President Barack Obama will meet his counterparts from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to address the child migration crisis.

The fact that child migrants are escaping poverty and violence in Central America -- particularly Northern Triangle countries -- in rising numbers has strained federal resources. The US Congress has been asked to provide 3.7 billion dollars in emergency funds to deal with the crisis.

## Full text

**EVENT:** On July 25, US President Barack Obama will meet his counterparts from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to address the child migration crisis.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** The fact that child migrants are escaping poverty and violence in Central America -- particularly Northern Triangle countries -- in rising numbers has strained federal resources. The US Congress has been asked to provide 3.7 billion dollars in emergency funds to deal with the crisis.

**ANALYSIS:** Impacts.

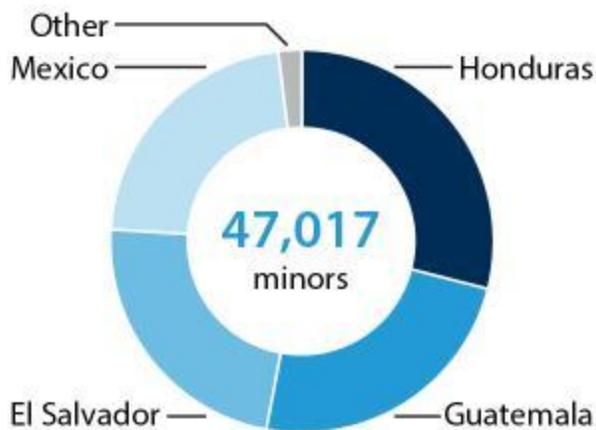
Enhanced security on the Mexico-Guatemala border may lead to increased flows through the less-used Mexico-Belize border routes.

Large numbers of child migrants provide a ready pool of potential recruits for criminal gangs operating the people-smuggling networks.

Gangs will also use them as kidnap victims as a means of extorting a ransom from their families in Central America or the United States.

Drug-related violence in Central America may reinvigorate discussions among regional governments about decriminalisation.

Although overall illegal migration to the United States is falling, the number of youth migrants (under 18 years) has risen sharply in the last year. The number of unaccompanied children caught crossing the border totalled 47,017 in the first six months of 2014. In fiscal year 2011, they were only 15,700.



**Countries of origin of minors detained by the US Border Patrol (Jan-Jun 2014)**  
Source: US Customs and Border Protection agency

There are two main reasons driving this increase in child migration:

**Legal loopholes.** There is a perception in Central America that child migrants are allowed to stay in the United States rather than being deported, especially if they have family members already living there. This is a misinterpretation of US policy, which prioritises deporting criminals over children, meaning that the process takes longer for children. Children from Central America are also subject to lengthier legal processes than Mexican children. What may cause confusion is the fact that children cannot legally be kept in a detention centre for a prolonged period so are often placed with family already living in the United States while their deportation processes are pending.

**Violence.** Central American countries, particularly in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) are among the most dangerous in the world. As well as

being a major incentive for parents to get their children away, evidence suggests that youths are receiving death or rape threats which lead them to attempt the arduous journey to the United States, with these threats often being linked to their refusal to join one of the gangs prevalent in the region. Notably, the US Customs and Border Protection agency found that 15,000 of the 52,000 child migrants in the last eight months came from Honduras, the country with the highest level of gang membership ( see CENTRAL AMERICA: Gangs are regional security challenge - July 2, 2014).

The surge in youth migration has negative implications:

**Child vulnerability.** The voyage of unaccompanied minors leaves them vulnerable to abuse, rape and violence en route, often from the trafficking networks paid to transport them. River or desert crossings in scorching temperatures are also particularly dangerous for children.

**Crowded detention facilities.** US border facilities are unable to cope with the influx, with children living in overcrowded conditions. NGOs have begun providing food, medicines and blankets to fill the gaps left by the overstretched US services.

**Refugee status.** More child migrants are claiming refugee status, often bringing evidence of death threats with them in preparation for a legal claim. This will extend legal processes in the United States and successful appeals for refugee status are likely to encourage further child migration. According to the UN Refugee Agency

(UNHCR), it is likely that more than 50% of the minors classify as refugees.

#### Regional responses.

At the summit of the Central American Integration System (SICA) on June 27, the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador issued a common declaration pledging to implement joint measures to improve border security and reduce the stream of migrants. This came only days after US Vice President Joe Biden visited Guatemala, during which he pledged to work more closely with Central American countries to stem the flow. Last week, representatives of the governments of the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, as well as the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS) among other entities, attended in Honduras an International Conference on Child and Family Migration. At the event, Honduras called on the United States to create a regional anti-drugs plan, similar to the major initiatives in Colombia.

#### Concrete measures include:

**Legal clarification.** Both Biden and Obama have emphasised that child migrants will be deported back home, meaning that they would have completed a dangerous crossing for nothing (see UNITED STATES: Immigration reform may boost wages - January 21, 2014).

**Extra funding.** The additional funding requested from Congress would finance new detention centres, increase aerial border surveillance and appoint more immigration judges to deal with the legal backlog. The United States has also allocated 9.6 million dollars to support repatriation efforts in Central America, allowing Northern Triangle countries to finance reception and rehabilitation facilities for returning children.

**Long-term funding.** The United States has separately approved programmes in the Northern Triangle countries. These include a five-year 40 million dollar USAID programme to improve citizen security in Guatemala, a 25 million dollar five-year USAID crime and violence prevention programme in El Salvador and 18.5 million dollars in community policing and law enforcement funding under the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) programme for Honduras. It is likely that the United States will prefer to channel counter-narcotics funding through programmes such as CARSI rather than committing to a large-scale anti-drugs plan involving various countries.

**Mexican border security.** Mexico has created a new Southern border security programme aiming to reduce the number of illegal migrants passing into Mexico from the Northern Triangle. Its chair, appointed by the president, will coordinate efforts of federal, state and local governments as well as civil society in the four states concerned (Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Tabasco). The government's southern border modernisation programme includes the transformation of twelve checkpoints into comprehensive care centres, new initiatives against organised crime, the exchange of intelligence with neighbouring countries, and international cooperation measures for migrant protection and repatriation.

#### Outlook.

There is no quick fix to the child migration crisis. Many of the measures so far proposed have been deterrent in nature, focused on preventing border crossings and expediting the legal procedures for deporting children back to Central America. Strategies to reduce the violence include preventive and rehabilitation measures, as well as enhanced law enforcement, but all are medium-term initiatives. The drivers for child migration remain in place, particularly Central America's extremely high levels of poverty and violence.

**CONCLUSION:** The United States and Central American countries are seeking to stem the flow while at the same time alleviating the dangerous situation the children face on their journeys. However, while the drivers remain in place for the children to leave their countries of origin, such efforts will experience only limited success. Massive deportation may only aggravate the crisis.

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## Details

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