



Charting a New Regional Course of Action

The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration

Ariel G. Ruiz Soto
Rossella Bottone
Jaret Waters
Sarah Williams
Ashley Louie
Yuehan Wang



Charting a New Regional Course of Action

The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration

Ariel G. Ruiz Soto
Rossella Bottone
Jaret Waters
Sarah Williams
Ashley Louie
Yuehan Wang

November 2021



Contents

- Executive Summary** 1

- 1 Introduction** 5

- 2 Migration Intentions and Behaviors** 9
 - A. In-Country Conditions 9
 - B. Intentions to Migrate 15
 - C. Migrant Profiles 22

- 3 The Economic Costs of Migration** 28
 - A. Regular and Irregular Migration Pathways 28
 - B. Estimating the Costs of Different Migration Pathways 30
 - C. Financial Preparations for Migration 32

- 4 The Economic Impacts of Migration** 35

- 5 Conclusions** 40

- Appendices** 43

- About the Authors** 47

- Acknowledgments** 49

Executive Summary

Influenced by an array of pull and push factors, the movement of Central Americans toward the United States has shaped the migration landscape in the region for decades. Yet, changes over the past five years in the volume and characteristics of those on the move have drawn an unprecedented level of attention from regional governments seeking to reduce irregular migration. The U.S. Border Patrol recorded approximately 1.8 million encounters of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras at the U.S.-Mexico border between fiscal years 2017 and 2021, and in four of the last five fiscal years encounters of migrants from these three countries surpassed those involving Mexican migrants. Since 2018, the region has also witnessed larger and more frequent mass movements, including those composed of significant shares of families and unaccompanied children, primarily bound for the United States and motivated by a mix of employment opportunities, family reunification, and humanitarian protection needs.

At the same time, there has been renewed political interest in countries stretching from Panama to Canada in collaboratively addressing the unabating root causes of migration and displacement. This has led to the advancement of regional frameworks that seek to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration with the goal of benefiting migrants and origin and destination communities alike, while contributing to sustainable development and making migration an option but not the only resort to escape adverse conditions. If this interest can be leveraged and translated into action, governments in the region have a unique and timely opportunity to shift from an enforcement-centered strategy to a more multifaceted migration management system rooted in cooperation.

Governments in the region have a unique and timely opportunity to shift from an enforcement-centered strategy to a more multifaceted migration management system rooted in cooperation.

To inform strategic discussions about how best to address root causes and manage Central American migration, this report—a collaboration between the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), UN World Food Programme (WFP), and Civic Data Design Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)—explores the factors that drive people in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to consider and decide to migrate irregularly or regularly, as well as the costs and economic implications of migration for households and communities throughout the region.

The report's findings draw from a unique, face-to-face survey of nearly 5,000 households in 12 departments across these three countries, complemented by a nationally representative online survey with more than 6,000 individual responses, to understand these factors and the emerging needs of migrant and nonmigrant communities in countries of origin. Conducted in Spring 2021 during a dynamic period of economic instability and changing migration policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these surveys capture a snapshot of migration decision-making processes in this period and make a compelling case for future research to document changes in migration desires and motivations.

Among the key findings of this study are:

- 1 **Central Americans' desire to migrate internationally is on the rise, but only a fraction of the surveyed population planned and prepared to do so.** Survey respondents in approximately four out of every ten households (43 percent) indicated in 2021 a desire to migrate permanently to another country within a year, compared to 8 percent in 2019. Still, less than one in ten households (6 percent) reported making plans to do so, and an even smaller 3 percent reported making concrete preparations. Notably, individuals experiencing food insecurity were more likely (23 percent) to make concrete preparations to migrate than those who were food secure (7 percent).
- 2 **Violence, insecurity, and natural disasters have been complex and longstanding triggers of migration, but economic factors were participants' primary motivation for desiring to emigrate.** Low wages, unemployment, and insufficient income to cover basic necessities directly affected people's livelihoods and contributed significantly to the desire to emigrate. At the same time, these conditions were the most-cited impediments preventing them for starting the migration journey.
- 3 **Family ties and positive perceptions of safety and belonging were key reasons why Central Americans decided not to migrate.** Households' top reason for not desiring to migrate was to avoid being separated from family in their country of origin. Other factors motivating people to stay were perceptions of safety in Guatemala and Honduras and a notable sense of belonging and rootedness (*arraigo*) in El Salvador.
- 4 **Households' likelihood to have had a member migrate within the last five years was similar across household income levels.** In contrast to prior studies, which have generally found that households with more resources are more likely to be able to migrate, respondents in this survey from households with the lowest income level were nearly as likely to report that a member had migrated as those from households with mid- to high income levels.
- 5 **Most but not all migrants relied on irregular channels to migrate, and one-third had returned voluntarily or involuntarily to their origin country.** In the households where survey respondents reported a member had migrated within the last five years, more than half (55 percent) of these migrants were said to have traveled irregularly and contracted a smuggler, nearly one-quarter (22 percent) traveled irregularly on their own or in a caravan, and about one-fifth (19 percent) used regular migration pathways. However, only 57 percent had reportedly reached and were residing in the destination country at the time of the survey, and 33 percent had returned either voluntarily or involuntarily to their origin country. The United States was cited as the intended destination for nine out of ten recent migrants.
- 6 **Although economic factors were the primary motivators for seeking to migrate, there were notable differences across departments in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** The top three departments of origin of reported migrants were: Usulután, El Salvador (15 percent of households that reported a member migrating recently); Huehuetenango, Guatemala (12 percent); and Yoro, Honduras (12 percent). Notably, respondents in Usulután were more likely to report insecurity and

family reunification as migration factors than was the case in other departments. In terms of migration desires, climate events and family reunification were notable drivers in Cortés, Honduras, and in Cabañas, El Salvador, respectively, though economic factors ranked higher in both departments.

- 7 Reported costs to contract smugglers were not only significantly higher than the costs of using regular mechanisms but also comprised the majority of total annual migration costs.** Based on the amounts survey respondents reported their household members had spent on different types of migration, this analysis estimates that migrants from these three countries spent USD 2.2 billion annually on the costs involved in migrating regularly and irregularly to the United States over the past five years. Because of the significant costs associated with contracting a smuggler, an estimated USD 1.7 billion of this total was spent annually by migrants traveling irregularly with a smuggler.
- 8 The volume of migrant remittances varied by country yet represented an important means of survival across households.** Nearly three out of every ten households (29 percent) reported regularly receiving remittances from abroad. On average, Guatemalan households received a monthly amount of USD 350, while Honduran and Salvadoran households received USD 170 and USD 150, respectively. The surveyed households reported that remittances were a lifeline primarily used to meet subsistence costs and immediate expenses, rather than a means to contribute to savings or invest in personal or community projects, though such uses are often discussed by policymakers and researchers as potential catalysts of development.

Based on these findings, and building on emerging regional collaboration efforts, policymakers may wish to consider the following strategies to address the drivers of irregular migration and lay the foundation for a sustainable migration management system that promotes safe, orderly, and regular movement:

- 1 Expand national social protection programs and stimulate investments to increase economic opportunities, eradicate hunger, and alleviate poverty for at-risk populations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** Despite small differences across each country, households reported that the lack of economic prosperity and difficulty meeting basic needs had significant and far-reaching impacts on decisions to migrate. Social protection programs that address unemployment and offer work training are pivotal to reaching vulnerable populations who may consider emigrating. Additionally, taking steps to address these conditions should go hand in hand with supporting programs that build resilience and address violence, insecurity, and climate change, prioritizing and expanding those programs that also create economic opportunities.
- 2 Tailor ongoing economic development and investment initiatives to municipal-level conditions with robust monitoring and evaluation metrics.** Even as the survey's results overwhelmingly underscored the effect economic factors have on migration desires, they also pointed to small but notable differences across municipalities. Internal and external development efforts and investments to address the root causes of migration—for instance, agricultural programs to build resilience to climate events or anti-gang programming for youth—will be most effective if tailored to these local circumstances, based on information gathered through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

3 Create incentives and opportunities for diasporas to invest in the development of local communities and to become agents of change in their countries of origin or ancestry.

Remittances are a lifeline that mitigates local economic instability for Central American households—in effect, buffering against economic migration pressures. But to amplify the impact of remittances beyond individual households, governments and international organizations should consider diasporas as potential agents of economic development and governance. Creating incentives for members of a diaspora to invest in public works can magnify the reach of government efforts while simultaneously enriching transnational partnerships to improve governance, for example by matching diaspora donations with transparent and accountable commitments from national, departmental, and municipal governments.

4 Incorporate programs and initiatives that underscore the positive conditions that give people the option to seek opportunities at home into broader migration management strategies.

Governments and civil-society leaders alike can influence how migration is portrayed publicly by investing in programs that build family unity, highlight existing perceptions of safety, and foster a sense of belonging to local communities. Highlighting these positive aspects of local life and targeting efforts to groups most likely to migrate irregularly (e.g., households with members who migrated recently) can foster hope and bolster socioeconomic investments, such as entrepreneurial and infrastructure projects. To improve their chances of shaping migration decision-making, such initiatives must be paired with efforts to address the concrete drivers of irregular migration, with the aim of giving people the possibility to choose.

5 Expand legal pathways for Central Americans interested in migrating to the United States and other destination countries to redirect migration from irregular to regular channels.

Coordinated efforts to increase access to temporary employment visas, for example, could help meet the overwhelming demand for employment opportunities abroad. Shifting even a fraction of irregular migration to regular channels would decrease the estimated USD 1.7 billion that Central Americans spend annually on irregular migration with a smuggler and instead increase state revenues—for instance, through reasonable application fees—which can then be invested in initiatives to address other drivers of irregular migration.

Facing unabating push factors and limited access to regular migration channels, many Central Americans resort to irregular migration to improve their livelihoods in the United States. By implementing the aforementioned recommendations with concrete and measurable commitments, however, regional governments, UN agencies, civil-society organizations, and the private sector have a unique opportunity to establish a new approach to addressing irregular migration's root causes and to promote safe, orderly, and lawful movement. While reconfiguring U.S. immigration policies is fundamental to pursuing the aim of creating legal alternatives to irregular migration, the ultimate success of this approach will depend on efforts and initiatives led by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The in-depth analyses of migration drivers and migrants' sociodemographic profiles in this report provide governments a blueprint to design tailored programs and initiatives for populations most likely to migrate irregularly, and to link these efforts to much-needed economic recovery measures. Charting this new regional course of action is undoubtedly a long-term strategy that must adapt to future changes, but one that even in the near term promises to encourage stronger local communities and ameliorate income inequality, hunger, and poverty as the key drivers of migration.

1 Introduction

Central American migration to the United States has shaped regional migration dynamics for decades,¹ but recent changes in the volume and characteristics of those on the move have drawn unprecedented attention from governments in the region and spurred renewed interest in cooperating to reduce irregular migration. Combined encounters of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras at the U.S.-Mexico border reached approximately 1.8 million between fiscal years 2017 and 2021, and the number of encounters involving nationals of these countries surpassed the number involving Mexicans in four of the last five fiscal years.² The region has also experienced larger and more frequent mass migration events since 2018, including significant shares of families and unaccompanied minors, primarily bound for the United States and motivated by an array of push and pull factors—from the prospect of better employment opportunities than existed in their origin countries to a desire for family reunification and humanitarian protection needs.

Though no single factor drives migration on its own, economic stagnation in Central America has been a persistent feature and one that has worsened because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each year, the number of young people entering the labor market surpasses the number of jobs available, and many who do not find jobs decide to migrate instead.³ In 2020, the economic pressures were even more extreme, as GDP contracted by 2 percent in Guatemala, 8 percent in El Salvador, and 9 percent in Honduras.⁴ That same year, projections from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean suggested that more than half of Guatemalans and Hondurans and nearly 40 percent of Salvadorans lived in poverty.⁵

Though no single factor drives migration on its own, economic stagnation in Central America has been a persistent feature and one that has worsened because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The effects of poverty and the pandemic have also magnified levels of food insecurity in the region. According to the UN World Food Programme, the number of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans affected by moderate or severe food insecurity nearly quadrupled from 4.8 million in 2019 to 17.3 million by Fall 2020. Over the same period, the share of households in the three countries who reported an intention to migrate increased from 8 percent to 15 percent.⁶

-
- 1 As of 2020, 86 percent of the nearly 4 million Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran immigrants worldwide resided in the United States. Authors' calculations based on international migrant stock data from UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination and Origin," accessed August 17, 2021. According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2019, 44 percent of Central American immigrants in the United States had entered the country before 2000. See Erin Babich and Jeanne Batalova, "Central American Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, August 11, 2021.
 - 2 Authors' calculations based on data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Southwest Land Border Encounters," updated July 16, 2021.
 - 3 Andrew Selee and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, "The Real Migration Crisis Is in Central America: To Stem the Flow, the United States Needs to Invest in the Region," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2021; UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), "Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL," updated May 20, 2019.
 - 4 World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) – Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador," accessed August 17, 2021.
 - 5 ECLAC, *Panorama Social de América Latina 2020* (Santiago, Chile: ECLAC, 2021).
 - 6 UN World Food Programme (WFP), "Evaluación Remota de la Seguridad Alimentaria – Antes y Durante COVID 19: América Central" (fact sheet, September 2020).

Violence, crime, and corruption are also key drivers of migration. Though homicide rates appear to be falling, those in El Salvador and Honduras remain among the highest in the world, and parts of Guatemala are equally violent.⁷ About one in five residents across these countries reports being the victim of a crime every year. And nearly one in ten Hondurans and Salvadorans report experiencing extortion annually, paying gangs and local criminal groups just so they can live in their homes or run small businesses.⁸ Additionally, high-level governmental corruption as well as lower-level corruption amongst security actors and public officials can undermine people's faith in institutions and drive them to consider emigration.

Less present in regional policy dialogues compared to other factors, though equally important, are the worsening impacts of climate-related shocks, both in terms of slow-onset and sudden-onset hazards. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have borne the brunt of intense storms such as Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020, and local agricultural markets were decimated in 2018 by one of the worst droughts in the last 40 years.⁹ Such events result in reduced agricultural production and employment declines, and compounded by environments of high vulnerability, violence, unemployment, and limited access to social protection schemes, they overwhelm community resilience.¹⁰

At the same time, there is renewed political interest in the region that stretches from Panama to Canada in collaboratively addressing the root causes of migration and displacement. This has followed the advancement of international frameworks that seek to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration, with the goal of benefiting migrants and origin and destination communities alike, while contributing to sustainable development. A fundamental example is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, which was adopted at the UN General Assembly in December 2018. The compact underscores the importance of addressing the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their

There is renewed political interest in the region that stretches from Panama to Canada in collaboratively addressing the root causes of migration and displacement.

countries of origin and calls for the establishment of pathways to safety for people affected by disasters, environmental degradation, and climate change—groups not covered in international refugee law. At a regional level, the Central American Integration System (SICA) adopted the Policy Proposal for Comprehensive Regional Migration in 2018 to ensure that intraregional migration is governed by the principles of human rights and security.

7 Andrew Selee and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, *Building a New Regional Migration System: Redefining U.S. Cooperation with Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020).

8 Selee and Ruiz Soto, "The Real Migration Crisis is in Central America."

9 Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and ECLAC, *Evaluación de los efectos e impactos de la tormenta tropical Eta y el huracán Iota en Honduras* (Washington, DC, and Santiago, Chile: IDB and ECLAC, 2021); United Nations, "Central America: Drought, Resulting Crop Losses Threaten Food Security of Two Million People, UN Warns," UN News, August 24, 2021.

10 Peter J. Meyer, "Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy" (In Focus brief, Congressional Review Service, Washington, DC, October 27, 2021).

Governments in the region thus have a unique and timely opportunity to shift from an enforcement-centered strategy to a comprehensive migration management system by leveraging this renewed interest in cooperation. The Biden administration’s July 2021 proposal to devise a “collaborative migration management strategy” in the region may be the most concrete and influential example of support for such efforts, but it is not the only one.¹¹ The governments of Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have called for the region to address migration based on a principle of co-responsibility.¹² Canada’s immigration ministry has expressed interest in increasing its capacity to resettle more Central American refugees.¹³ And Panama’s foreign minister has requested regional cooperation and responsibility-sharing to address large-scale emigration from Nicaragua.¹⁴ Moreover, responding to the large number of migrants moving through Central America in September and August 2021, many of them Haitian, the presidents of Panama, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic exhorted the region’s governments to collaborate on comprehensive and immediate steps to improve migration management.¹⁵

To inform strategic policy discussions about the management of Central American migration, this report explores the factors that drive migration intentions and decisions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as the costs and other implications of migration for the region. It is the result of a collaboration between the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), the UN World Food Programme (WFP), and the Civic Data Design Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The report draws its findings from unique, face-to-face interviews with a sample of approximately 5,000 households, complemented by a nationally representative sample of more than 6,000 individual responses to a web survey. Both surveys were conducted across the three countries as part of a joint initiative between WFP and international and civil-society partners¹⁶ to better understand these factors and the emerging needs of migrant and nonmigrant communities in countries of origin (see Box 1).

The report starts by identifying the underlying and intersecting motivations that drive Central Americans to migrate, as reported by surveyed households. It also examines the factors that encourage household members to either migrate or stay within their country. The next section explores how people finance their migration attempts and the implications for individuals and governments by disaggregating the economic costs of regular and irregular migration pathways. The report concludes with a forward-looking set of policy recommendations to chart a new course of action that promotes safe, orderly, and regular migration from Central America.

11 The White House, “Fact Sheet: The Collaborative Migration Management Strategy,” updated July 29, 2021.

12 Mexican Foreign Ministry, “Declaración Conjunta El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras y los Estados Unidos Mexicanos” (press release, January 11, 2021).

13 Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, “Canada Announces 3 New Initiatives to Welcome and Support More Refugees” (news release, June 18, 2021); Ana Mehler Paperny, “Canada Could Take in Some Central American Migrants to Help U.S. – Minister,” Reuters, June 9, 2021.

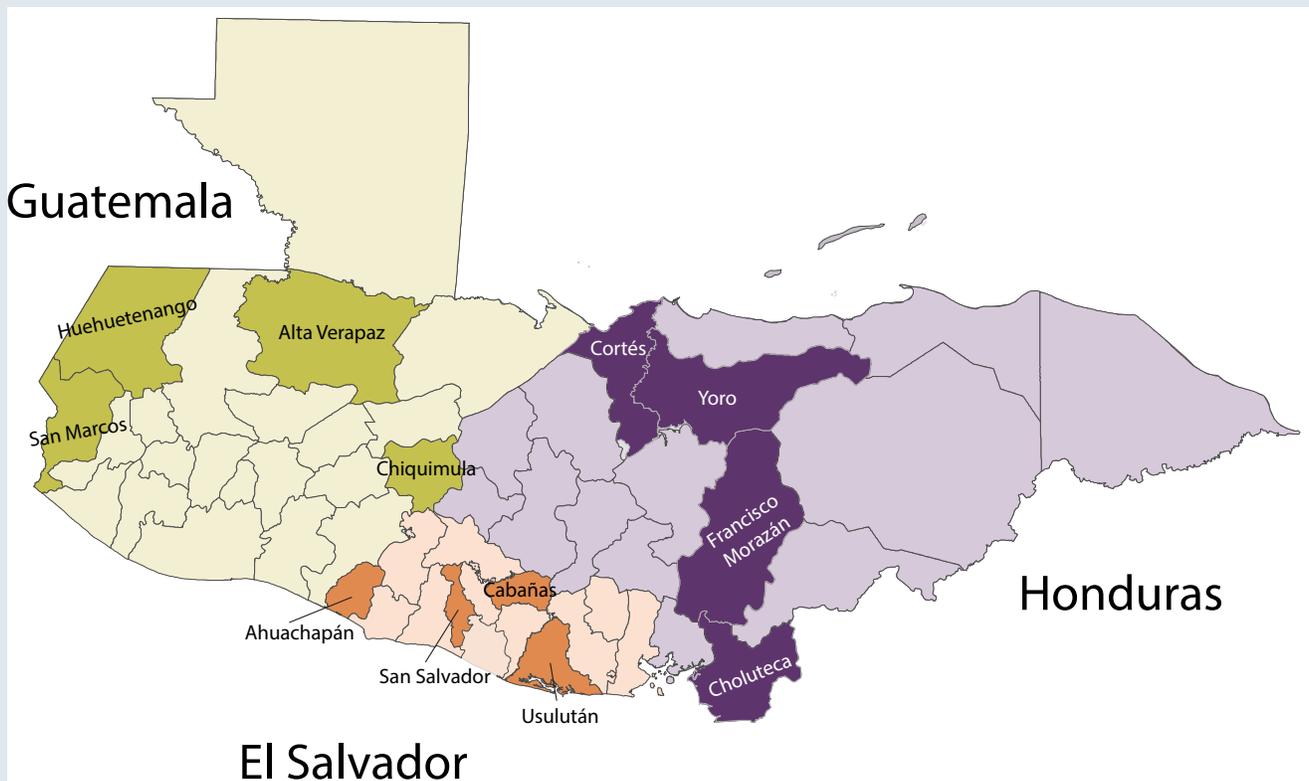
14 EFE, “Panamá pide una solución internacional conjunta a la situación de Nicaragua,” swissinfo.ch, June 24, 2021.

15 AP News, “Panamá, C. Rica y Dominicana piden apoyo a EEUU para Haití,” AP News, October, 21, 2021.

16 The broader WFP study conducted with international and civil-society partners explores trends and links between food security, climate variability, violence, and migration together with the impacts of migration dynamics. It focuses on the sociodemographic profiles of Central American migrants and their motivations and challenges to emigrate—including climate variability—and the impact of migration costs on regional governments and economies.

BOX 1 Study Methodology

Complemented by a thorough review of secondary data, this study relies primarily on household survey data collected by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and international and civil-society partners. Between April and May 2021, the research team conducted interviews with nearly 5,000 households in 300 communities across the following 12 departments: Ahuachapán, Cabañas, San Salvador, and Usulután in El Salvador; Alta Verapaz, Chiquimula, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos in Guatemala; and Choluteca, Cortés, Francisco Morazán, and Yoro in Honduras (see map below). The survey asked respondents about their living conditions, intentions to migrate, and the sociodemographic characteristics of household members who had migrated, among other related questions. The study sample is representative of households at the department level, and the departments included in the survey were selected based on the reported number of migrants returning to each department, as a proxy for emigration rates, and food insecurity levels to capture households in diverse socioeconomic settings.



To expand understanding of the conditions that trigger migration and of individuals' migration experiences, WFP also conducted a web survey in the three Central American countries using a Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT). More than 6,000 survey responses were collected and met validation thresholds with a minimum of 90 observations in each of the 54 departments across the three countries, making this survey sample nationally representative. The authors tested and confirmed that findings regarding respondents' migration intentions from the web survey follow similar trends as those observed in the household survey. As such, this study relies on the household survey, with supplemental information from the web survey, to draw conclusions about the three countries at the national level. For more information on the methodology and assumptions used, see Appendices A and B.

2 Migration Intentions and Behaviors

The decision to migrate is complex and depends on an array of intersecting personal and social circumstances. To explore the conditions and factors that influence Central Americans' migration intentions, profiles, and behaviors, this section analyzes household survey responses across a series of key variables. The survey collected respondents' accounts of the migration intentions of the members of their household and whether household members migrated in the past five years—not necessarily the accounts of migrants themselves. Nonetheless, these responses provide insights that supplement other studies on migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and help paint a more comprehensive picture of the factors that play key roles in migrant decision-making and the profiles of the individuals who are most influenced by these factors.

A. In-Country Conditions

In assessing the conditions in each country, the vast majority—87 percent—of household respondents reported being satisfied with the area in which they were living. Even in Honduras, the country with the lowest satisfaction level, this figure was 81 percent. The highest satisfaction rates were reported in the departments of Cabañas, El Salvador (94 percent); San Marcos, Guatemala (94 percent); and Huehuetenango, Guatemala (93 percent).

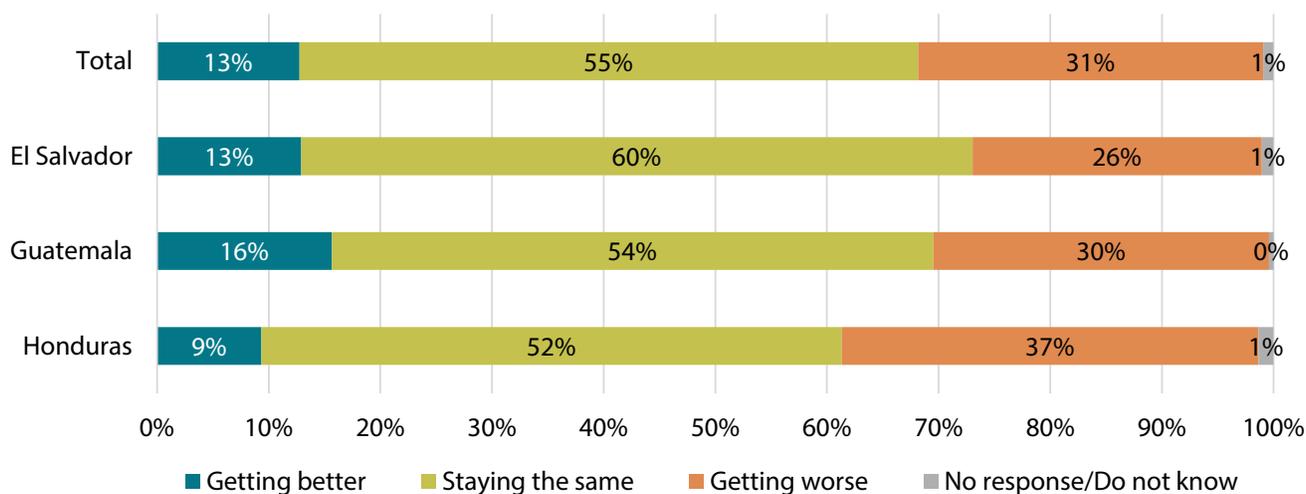
However, satisfaction is a relative indicator that does not always capture the extent to which a group's needs are being met. Examining respondents' perceptions of their standard of living complicates this picture (see Figure 1). Only 13 percent of respondents reported that their standard of living was improving at the time of the survey, while 55 percent said it was staying the same and 31 percent reported a worsening of conditions. Honduras had the highest share of respondents who expressed a negative outlook on their standard of living (37 percent) and the lowest share with a positive outlook (9 percent). Interviewees in the Honduran department of Cortés reported the lowest levels of satisfaction of any department, with more than half stating that their standard of living was deteriorating. This may be explained in part by the fact that the department is home to the city of San Pedro Sula, the economic and agricultural hub of the country, which suffered extensive damage to factories and farms from Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020 and has struggled to recover.¹⁷

The vast majority—87 percent—of household respondents reported being satisfied with the area in which they were living.

¹⁷ María Verza, "Desperation Grows in Battered Honduras, Fueling Migration," AP News, February 11, 2021.

FIGURE 1

Household Survey Respondents’ Perceptions of Their Standard of Living, by Country of Residence, 2021



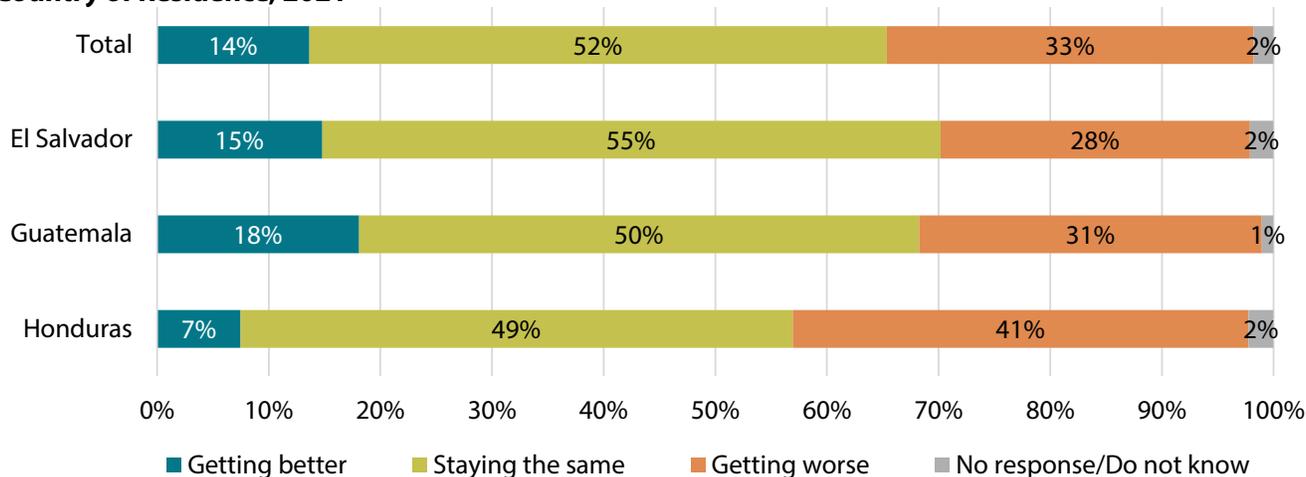
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors’ analysis of UN World Food Programme (WFP) household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Respondents’ evaluation of their economic conditions followed a similar distribution. More than half of respondents in all three countries reported feeling that economic conditions in their community were staying the same, while one-third said they were getting worse, and only 14 percent reported improvement (see Figure 2). Honduran respondents were the most likely to report deteriorating economic conditions (41 percent) and the least likely to report improvement (7 percent). Once again, more than half of all respondents in Cortés reported a worsening situation. On the other hand, although the share of Guatemalan respondents reporting improvements in economic conditions was just slightly higher than the three-country average (18 percent compared to 14 percent), the share was nearly double the average in the department of Huehuetenango, where approximately one in three respondents reporting perceived improvements.

FIGURE 2

Household Survey Respondents’ Perceptions of Economic Conditions in Their Area of Residence, by Country of Residence, 2021



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors’ analysis of UN World Food Programme (WFP) household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

The low income levels reported by survey respondents could partially explain these evaluations of economic conditions. The average level of per capita monthly expenditure among families interviewed was about USD 80, equivalent to about USD 300 per household per month. Using median expenditure as a proxy for household income, this indicates that half of all households were living on less than USD 60 per capita per month—or less than USD 2 per capita per day. In addition to the limited spending power reported among households, the fact that the median expenditure level was considerably lower than the mean points to the presence of income inequality among respondents.

The variance in expenditures reported by households indicates different income levels across the three countries (see Table 1). The average per capita monthly expenditure for households in Guatemala was USD 70, while this figure rose to USD 90 for households in El Salvador. In Guatemala, this translates into an average level of monthly household expenditure of USD 270, well below the country's basic food basket of USD 390 (the estimated cost of households' basic food expenses per month¹⁸). Additionally, in each of the three countries, the median expenditure fell considerably below the average level of expenditure, once again underscoring the spread in incomes among respondents.

TABLE 1

Household Survey Respondents' Reported Monthly Expenditures (in USD), by Country of Residence, 2021

Country		Total Per Capita Expenditure	Total Household Expenditure	Total Per Capita Food Expenditure
El Salvador	Mean	90	330	30
	Median	70	260	30
Guatemala	Mean	70	270	30
	Median	50	200	20
Honduras	Mean	80	310	30
	Median	60	230	30
Total	Mean	80	300	30
	Median	60	230	20

Note: Household expenditure values were rounded to the nearest ten.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

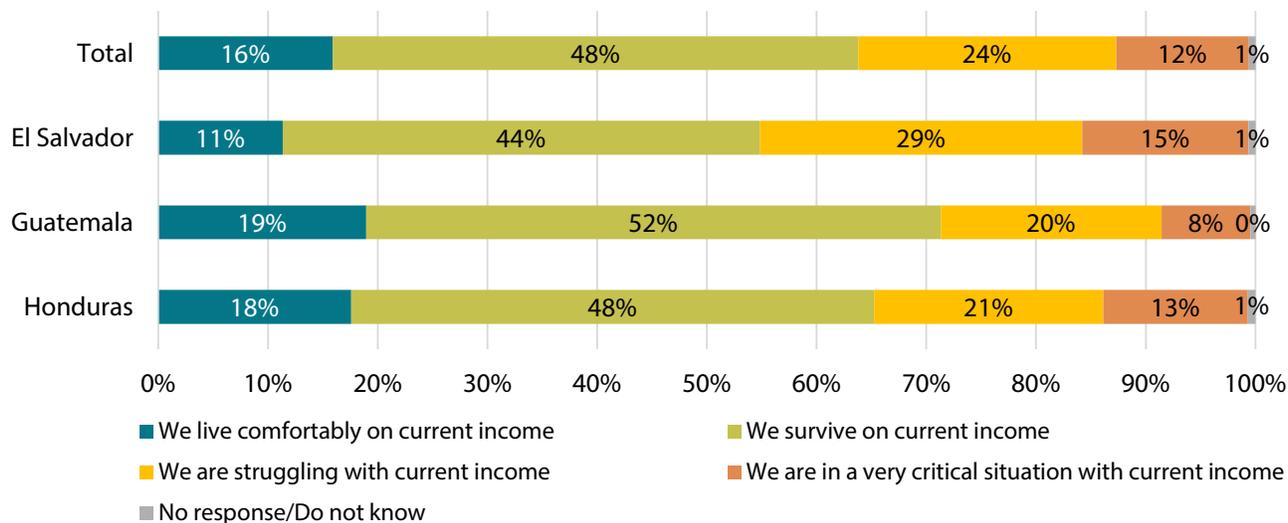
Many households reported facing difficulties subsisting on their limited income (see Figure 3). Across the three countries, 36 percent reported being in a very critical situation or struggling on their current income, and 32 percent reported that their income was insufficient to cover food expenses in the past 30 days. Almost half said that they were "surviving" on their current income, and just 16 percent felt that they could live comfortably with their income. Similarly, 35 percent of respondents to the in-depth online survey reported that their income was insufficient to meet their basic needs.

Notably, despite Honduran respondents being the most likely to describe their standard of living and economic conditions as getting worse and the least likely to report improvements, respondents in El Salvador had a lower level of income satisfaction. Only 11 percent of Salvadoran respondents reported

¹⁸ The basic food basket (*canasta básica alimentaria* in Spanish) is a standard metric used to define the average amount of money required for a household to afford standard food items. See National Statistics Institute of Guatemala, *Canasta Básica Alimentaria (CBA) Y Ampliada (CA): Mayo de 2021* (Guatemala City: National Statistics Institute of Guatemala, 2021).

that they were living comfortably, and about 45 percent reported that they were struggling or in a very critical situation. Guatemalan respondents, by contrast, reported the highest levels of satisfaction with their household income levels. About one-fifth of Guatemalan respondents said they were living comfortably on their income, as did an even larger one in four respondents from the Guatemalan departments of Chiquimula and Huehuetenango.

FIGURE 3

Household Survey Respondents' Perceptions of Their Household Income, by Country of Residence, 2021

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

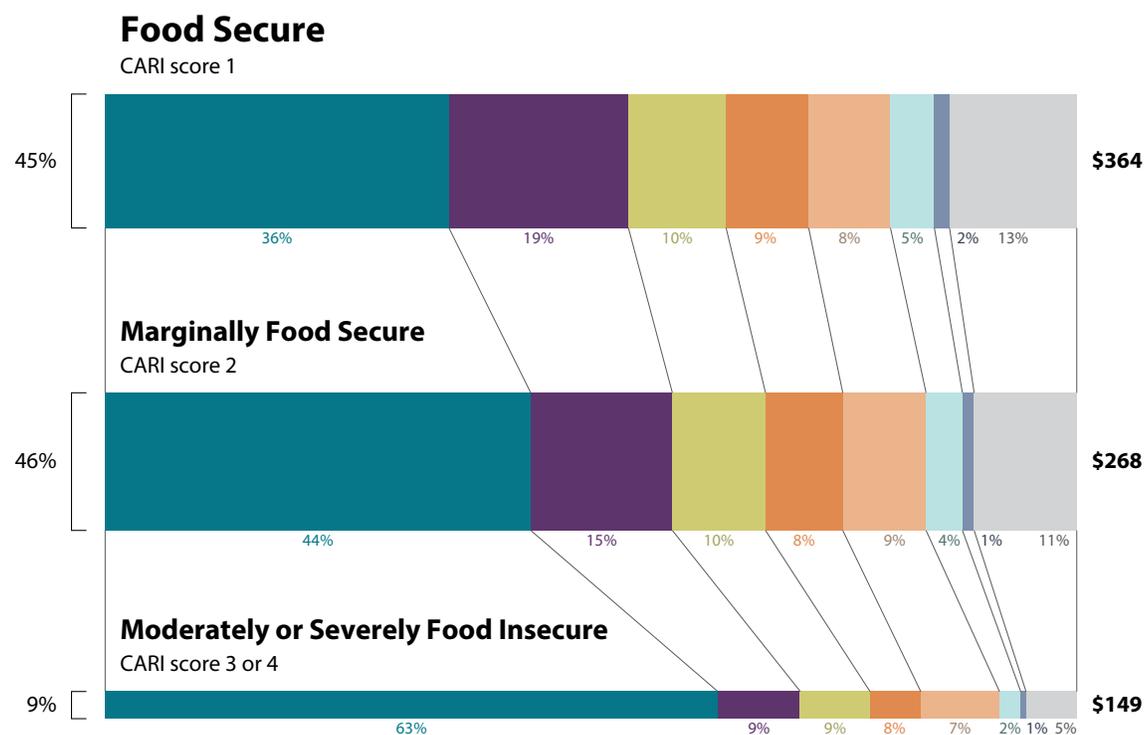
Furthermore, food insecure households in all three countries reported lower expenditures than food secure households, pointing to significant household income disparities.¹⁹ Food secure households spent an average of USD 364 per month, compared to USD 149 spent by food insecure households (see Figure 4). Most households, independent of their food security status, reported that at least half of their monthly expenditures were on food and water. But as households experienced greater levels of food insecurity, they reported less diverse expenditure patterns. This means that as households dedicated a greater share of their expenditures to food, they were less able to cover other basic needs. For instance, for households experiencing moderate and severe food insecurity, 63 percent of their monthly expenditures were on food and water, compared to 9 percent on transportation and 9 percent on housing.

¹⁹ WFP delineates four categories of food security: food secure, marginally food secure, moderately food insecure, and severely food insecure. Based on survey questions related to food consumption and survival strategies, this study defines food secure respondents as those who WFP would classify as food secure (able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical coping strategies) and marginally food secure (able to achieve adequate food consumption without engaging in irreversible coping strategies, though unable to meet some essential non-food needs). Being food insecure refers to respondents who WFP would classify as moderately food insecure (experiencing significant food consumption gaps or only marginally able to meet minimum food needs, only with irreversible coping strategies) or severely food insecure (experiencing extreme food consumption gaps or worse).

FIGURE 4

Household Survey Respondents' Average Monthly Expenditure Patterns (in USD), by Food Security Category, 2021

Percent of Population ■ Food & Water ■ Housing ■ Transportation ■ Health ■ Personal Care ■ Communication ■ Education ■ Other ■ Total Monthly Expenditure



Food Security Classification	Country	Monthly Expenditure on Basic Needs per Household		Monthly Expenditure per Capita
		Food & Water	Housing	
Food Secure CARI score 1	El Salvador	\$130	\$76	\$105
	Guatemala	\$113	\$51	\$87
	Honduras	\$146	\$76	\$108
	Average	\$129	\$67	\$100
Marginally Food Secure CARI score 2	El Salvador	\$124	\$46	\$83
	Guatemala	\$106	\$33	\$58
	Honduras	\$122	\$37	\$64
	Average	\$118	\$39	\$68
Moderately Food Insecure CARI score 3	El Salvador	\$110	\$41	\$68
	Guatemala	\$94	\$18	\$39
	Honduras	\$96	\$14	\$37
	Average	\$98	\$22	\$46
Severely Food Insecure CARI score 4	El Salvador	\$55	\$8	\$19
	Guatemala	\$111	\$2	\$28
	Honduras	\$81	\$5	\$36
	Average	\$91	\$4	\$30

Notes: The CARI score is an index used to classify households based on their food security status. The score is based on four indicators measuring the different dimensions of food security: food consumption score, coping strategy index, livelihood coping strategy, and food expenditure share. Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

While depressed wages are likely at the root of respondents' bleak outlook on economic conditions, other factors also contribute to low perceptions of living standards. For instance, violence disrupts and threatens the well-being of residents in the region. When asked about how violence in their communities has changed over the past year, 46 percent of respondents reported that violence had either increased or stayed the same. Meanwhile, 16 percent reported a decrease in violence in the year prior to data collection, and 33 percent reported that there was not any violence or crime where they lived. These figures varied by country of origin; for example, 26 percent of Honduran respondents reported an increase in violence in the past year, compared to 10 percent of Guatemalans and 9 percent of Salvadorans.

The frequency and intensity of natural disasters prior to data collection likely also contributed to respondents' reports of precarious living conditions. Forty percent of respondents said they had been affected by some type of natural threat in the three-year period prior to data collection. About 20 percent of Honduran respondents and 19 percent of Salvadoran respondents reported having been affected by hurricanes, and more than 10 percent of Guatemalan respondents reported being affected by droughts.

Low income levels, hunger, insecurity, and climatic events are deeply intertwined. For instance, violence has been shown to negatively affect local economies, as it reduces residents' likelihood to save,²⁰ dims the prospects for upward mobility,²¹ and depresses earnings for self-employed individuals.²² The reverse is also true. Research has shown that economics can affect violence, such as when a lack of employment opportunities increases participation in organized crime.²³ Similarly, natural disasters not only cause direct economic impacts but also generate indirect macroeconomic losses, especially among low-income countries and less-diversified economies.²⁴

Low income levels, hunger, insecurity, and climatic events are deeply intertwined.

In fact, the results of the household survey presented evidence of the relationship between these factors and respondents' economic outlook and livelihood perceptions. Among respondents who reported that economic conditions in their area of residence were getting worse, 48 percent reported experiencing some type of natural disaster or threat in the three years prior to data collection, while a smaller 36 percent of those who reported improvement in economic conditions had experienced a natural disaster or threat. These figures were nearly identical for respondents' perceptions of their standard of living: Of those who reported a deterioration in their standard of living, 50 percent had experienced a natural disaster or threat in the past three years, while 34 percent of those who reported improvement in their standard of living said the same.

20 Maarten J. Voors et al., "Violent Conflict and Behavior: A Field Experiment in Burundi," *American Economic Review* 102, no. 2 (2012): 941–64.

21 Andrés Moya and Michael Carter, "Violence and the Formation of Hopelessness and Pessimistic Prospects of Upward Mobility in Colombia" (working paper 20463, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, February 2018).

22 Andrea Velásquez, "The Economic Burden of Crime: Evidence from Mexico," *The Journal of Human Resources* (2019).

23 Clare Ribando Seelke, *Gangs in Central America* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016).

24 W. J. Wouter Botzen, Olivier Deschenes, and Mark Sanders, "The Economic Impacts of Natural Disasters: A Review of Models and Empirical Studies," *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy* 13, No. 2 (2019): 167–88.

Similarly, respondents who reported worsening economic conditions and standard of living also reported increases in violence over the past year at higher rates. While 22 percent of those who said that economic conditions were getting worse where they were living reported an increase in violence, a smaller 10 percent of those who reporting economic improvement reported increasing violence. Once again, the figures are almost the same when looking at the relationship between violence and standard of living (20 percent versus 11 percent).

Combined, these results illustrate the connections between natural disasters, violence, and survey respondents' perceived economic conditions and standards of living. Recognizing the complexity of these relationships is critical to understanding how respondents describe the local conditions that influence their migration decision-making.

B. Intentions to Migrate

To better understand the connection between these conditions and migration behaviors, the household survey asked respondents about their intentions to migrate. The survey was designed based on a methodology developed for the Gallup World Poll, which used a tiered set of three indicators to measure migration intentions.²⁵ First, respondents were asked if they would like to permanently move to another country if they had the chance. Then, those who responded affirmatively were asked if they were planning to permanently move to another country in the 12 months subsequent to data collection. Finally, those who indicated that they were planning to move were asked if they had made any concrete preparations to permanently move to another country.

Measuring intentions across these three indicators—desire, plans, and preparations—provides insight into the relationship between the drivers of migration and actual movement.

Measuring intentions across these three indicators—desire, plans, and preparations—provides insight into the relationship between the drivers of migration and actual movement, as well as the disparity between wanting to move and actually having the capability to do so. At the same time, this measurement of migration intentions and plans may not fully capture the experiences of individuals who, despite not having previous plans to move, are displaced or forced to migrate on short notice by unexpected natural disasters or threats of violence.

²⁵ Neli Esipova, Julie Ray, and Anita Pugliese, *Gallup World Poll: The Many Faces of Global Migration* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2011).

BOX 2**Internal Migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras**

In many cases, individuals do not need to leave a country to improve their standard of living or escape unfavorable conditions; instead, they may opt to move to another part of their country of residence. Rather than being two entirely separate phenomena, internal and international migration exist in a complex relationship with one another. While in some cases decisions to migrate internally or internationally are independent, in others, internal migration serves as a precursor to international migration, and or vice versa (research has shown that the labor shortages produced by international emigration can stimulate internal migration within migrant origin countries, for instance). Drawing linkages between the two forms of migration is critical to further understanding this complex relationship.

Survey respondents in this study were asked a series of questions about their intentions to migrate internally and recent internal migration. Respondents' intentions to migrate internally followed largely similar patterns to their intentions to migrate internationally, with some key differences. Only 24 percent of those surveyed would migrate internally if they had the chance, in comparison to 43 percent who would move to another country, indicating that internal migration is less appealing to many than international migration. The desire to move internally was higher in Honduras (28 percent) and El Salvador (30 percent) than Guatemala (14 percent).

Like trends observed for international migration, however, few respondents reported that they were actively planning or had prepared to migrate internally within 12 months of the survey. In fact, 3 percent of all those surveyed said they had begun planning, and only 1 percent of the sample reporting making concrete preparations. The reasons household respondents gave for wanting to relocate domestically were predominantly economic, with 85 percent citing reasons such as unemployment, the need for a better job or working conditions, or lack of money for food and basic necessities.

About 9 percent of respondents reported that a household member had migrated or attempted to migrate to another part of the country within the past five years. Of the nearly 700 households that reported members migrating to another part of the country, the majority (52 percent) were from Honduras, followed by El Salvador (29 percent). These internal migrants were primarily young adults, with more than half between the ages of 18 and 34. And, once again reinforcing the findings of this report regarding international migration, economic factors influenced much of this internal mobility; 71 percent of migrants chose to move for reasons related to employment or income. Furthermore, households reported that 64 percent of these recent internal migrants had moved to an urban area, compared to just 25 percent who moved to rural areas, reflecting a pattern of urbanization across each of the three countries. From 2010 to 2020, the share of the population living in urban areas increased 12 percent in El Salvador and Honduras, and 8 percent in Guatemala (8 percent).

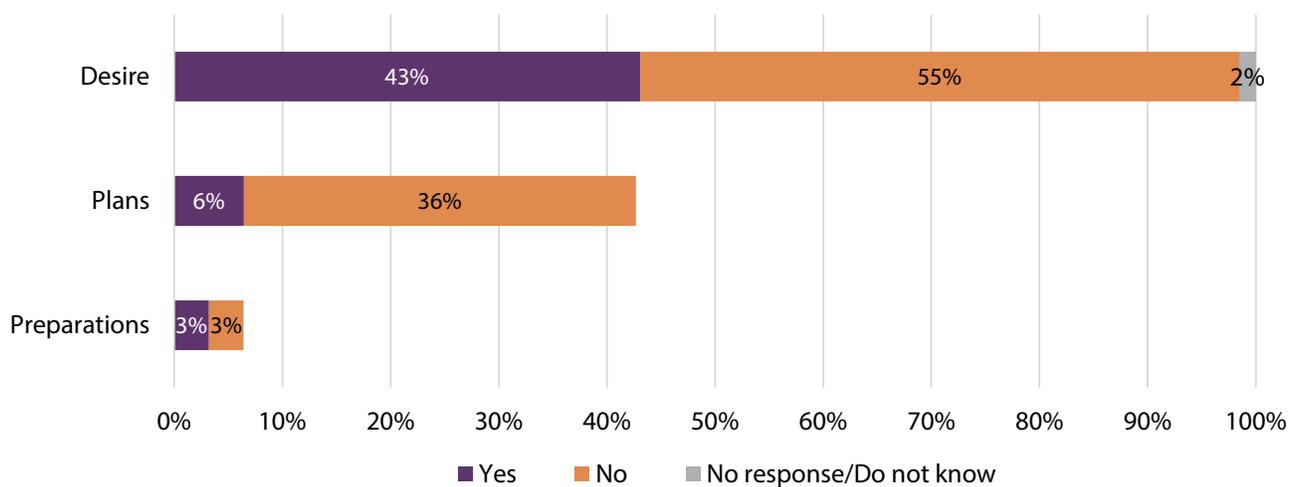
Notes: The population reported to have migrated internally over the last five years included 6 percent who moved multiple times and to both urban and rural areas. For the remaining 6 percent of internal migrants, household respondents did not know or did not answer whether the destination was rural or urban.

Sources: For data on the urban share of the population in each country, see World Bank, "Urban Population (% of Total Population)," accessed October 5, 2021. For more information on the relationship between internal and international migration, see Russell King, Ronald Skeldon, and Julie Vullnetari, "Internal and International Migration: Bridging the Theoretical Divide" (working paper 52, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, December 2008); Ronald Skeldon, "Interlinkages Between Internal and International Migration and Development in the Asian Region," *Population Space and Place* 12, no. 1 (2006): 15–30.

Despite a large share of respondents reporting the desire to migrate internationally (43 percent), there was a considerable drop-off in the share of people reporting having concretely planned or prepared to emigrate within 12 months of being interviewed (see Figure 5). Of individuals who expressed this desire, only 15 percent reported having made plans to move abroad—a share that represents 6 percent of the total sample. Among respondents making plans, about half had made concrete preparations, equivalent to just 3 percent of the total sample. Interestingly, respondents to the online survey indicated even higher levels of intentions to migrate internationally but a similar drop in the share who had made plans and preparations: 70 percent of all respondents reported a desire to migrate internationally, 31 percent of these respondents reported having plans to do so in the next 12 months (22 percent of the total sample), and 45 percent of those with plans reported having made concrete preparations to move (10 percent of the total sample).

FIGURE 5

Share of Household Survey Respondents Reporting Intentions to Migrate Internationally, 2021



Note: Percentages may not add up to the total due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

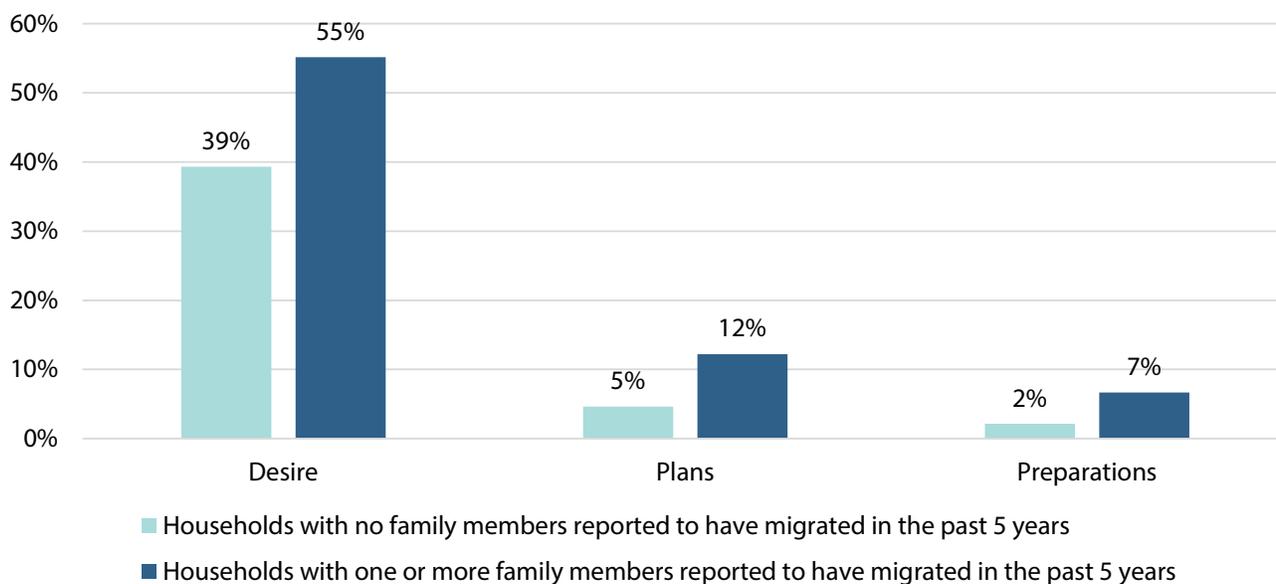
Across different sociodemographic characteristics, respondents generally reported similar migration intentions. For example, 45 percent of men and 42 percent of women surveyed expressed the desire to migrate abroad. The proportions of men and women making plans or preparations to move were also similar. However, some demographic patterns stood out. For instance, intentions varied more across age groups: While 55 percent of respondents under the age of 35 expressed the desire to migrate internationally, only 32 percent of those age 45 or older expressed this same desire.

Additionally, intentions to migrate were higher among households with a recent history of migration. Of the respondents who reported that at least one member of the household had migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to data collection, 55 percent expressed the desire to move to another country (see Figure 6). In contrast, 39 percent of respondents who reported no recent household migration expressed the desire to permanently move abroad. This could be due to the positive relationship between having established transnational social networks and intentions to migrate.²⁶ It may also reflect an interest in migrating again among recent migrants who were unsuccessful in reaching their destination or who returned to their country of origin.

²⁶ Espipova, Ray, and Pugliese, *Gallup World Poll*.

FIGURE 6

Share of Household Survey Respondents with Intentions to Migrate Internationally, by Household History of Recent Migration, 2021



Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

In the web survey, intentions to migrate internationally also varied by the level of hunger reported by respondents.²⁷ Although the desire to migrate consistently stood around 70 percent for respondents independent of their level of hunger, respondents with higher levels of hunger reported planning and preparing to migrate at higher levels (see Figure 7). Across the three countries, 37 percent of all respondents experiencing severe hunger reported having plans to migrate compared to 18 percent of those who experienced little to no hunger. Furthermore, 23 percent of all respondents experiencing severe hunger reported having prepared to migrate compared to 7 percent of those experiencing little to no hunger.

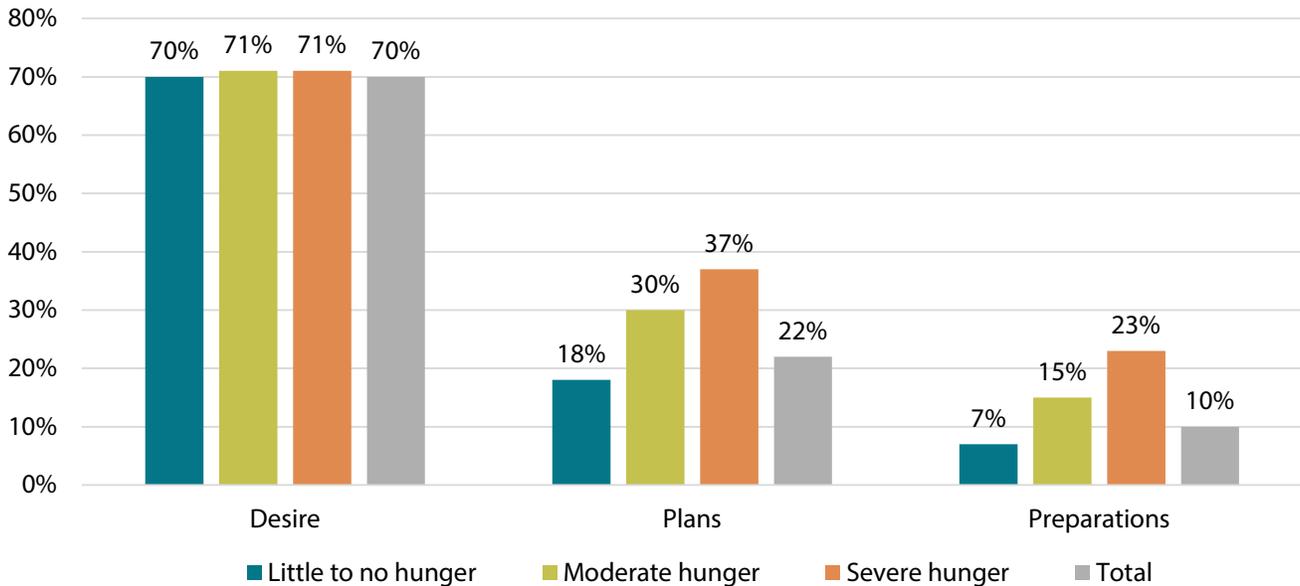
Respondents in the household survey who indicated the desire to permanently move abroad were also asked to select up to 15 different possible reasons for wishing to do so. The vast majority (92 percent) cited economic reasons related to their livelihoods as being key motivating factors, including: the need to search for a better job, salary, or working conditions; unemployment; lack of money for food and other basic necessities; and the desire to send remittances. Moreover, those who referenced a lack of money for food or other basic necessities reported average per capita monthly expenditures of just USD 50. Although economic factors are well-documented drivers of migration from the region, the extent to which they were cited by this survey's respondents is unique. For instance, a 2019 survey from Creative Associates International found that 60 percent of respondents living in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras cited

27 For the online survey, hunger categories were developed using the Household Hunger Scale (HHS), an indicator of hunger used in studies of food insecure areas. It allows for comparison across a wide variety of countries, situations, and contexts. For more information, see Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA), "[Household Hunger Scale \(HHS\): Indicator Definition and Measurement Guide](#)," accessed August 16, 2021. Though they are comparable instruments, the HHS used in the online survey is calculated differently than the CARI score used in the household survey. For reference, severe hunger under the HHS is comparable to a CARI score of 4 (severe food insecurity).

economic factors as their primary reason to potentially leave.²⁸ Respondents in that survey, however, were asked to select just one motivating factor while the present study allowed respondents to select multiple factors; therefore, the share of people citing economic factors may have been higher if they were allowed to cite multiple motivations.

FIGURE 7

Online Survey Respondents' Intentions to Migrate Internationally, by Level of Hunger, 2021



Source: Authors' analysis of WFP online survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic recessions throughout the region also partially explain these results. For example, WFP's remote monitoring of the three countries found that the proportion of households employing severe consumption-based coping strategies (such as reducing the size or number of meals consumed by adults) nearly doubled in Guatemala after the onset of the pandemic. This proportion surpassed half of all households in Honduras. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of households across all three countries reported income losses or unemployment during the pandemic.²⁹

Other factors, such as violence (including insecurity and domestic violence), family reunification, and climate and environmental change (including land use changes, direct impact of natural disasters, or degradation of means of subsistence due to natural threats) were markedly less common, each being referenced as a reason to potentially emigrate by only about 5 percent of survey respondents. In the 2019 Creative Associates study, crime and violence were cited at much higher levels, with 38 percent of Salvadoran respondents reporting this as their primary reason to leave. However, respondents cited family reunification as their reason for migrating at similar rates in the present survey (6 percent) and the Creative Associates survey (3 percent).³⁰

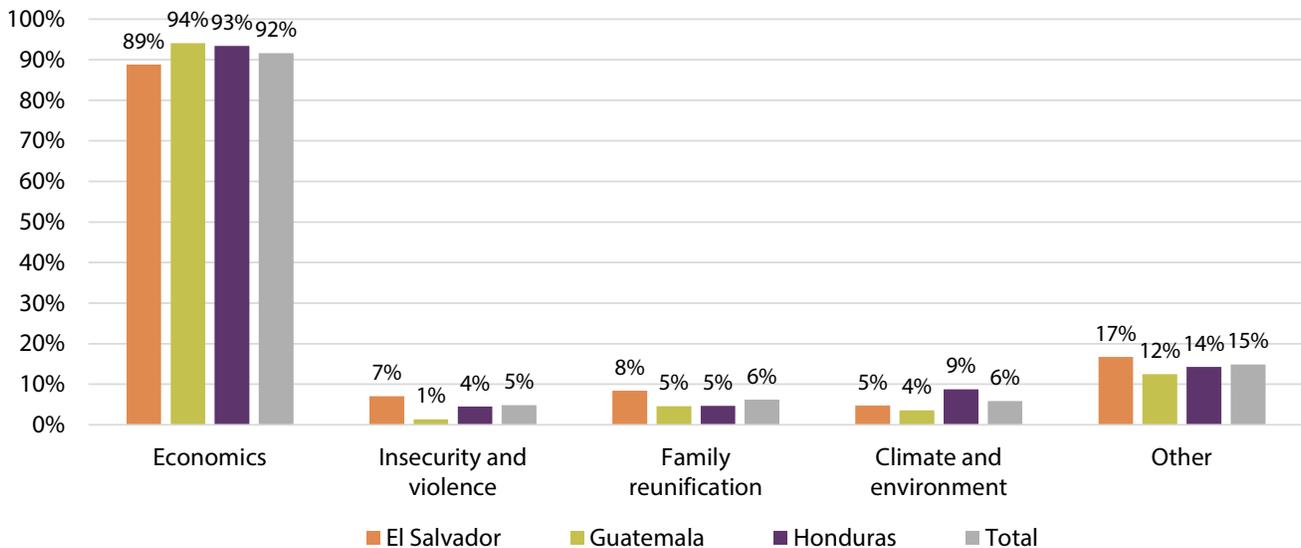
28 Creative Associates International, *Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All* (Washington, DC: Creative Associates International, 2019).

29 The WFP CATI survey interviewed 20,700 households: 6,645 households between December 2019 and February 2020 before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and 14,055 households between May and August 2020, during the pandemic. While the data collected are representative at the department level, the results included in this report are based on results representative at national level to compare before and after the start of the pandemic in the three countries.

30 Creative Associates International, *Saliendo Adelante*.

As discussed in Section 2.A., the complex relationship between economic factors, violence, and natural disasters makes it difficult to isolate a single cause of migrants’ decision-making behavior. It is possible that migrants who cite economic factors may also be indirectly affected by violence or natural disasters, given these phenomena overlap and interact with local economies, jobs, and wages. In the case of an agricultural worker whose earnings decreased due to diminished crop yields resulting from climate change, or a subsistence farmer forced into the informal labor market by a natural disaster, for instance, the subsequent economic struggles may have greater salience than their underlying environmental or climatic causes. Moreover, violence and natural disasters may prompt immediate displacement with less advanced planning and preparation, leading them to be underrepresented in the survey.

FIGURE 8
Household Survey Respondents’ Reasons for Wanting to Migrate Internationally, by Country of Residence, 2021



Notes: Only respondents who expressed a desire to migrate internationally were asked to cite factors influencing this desire. Therefore, percentages represent shares of respondents who reported a desire to migrate, not of the total surveyed population. This survey question allowed for multiple responses, meaning the sum of percentages can exceed 100 percent. The “economics” category includes looking for a better job, salary, or working conditions; unemployment; lack of money to buy food; lack of money to cover other basic needs (including health, education, housing, clothing, and utilities); and desire to send remittances. The “insecurity and violence” category includes insecurity and domestic violence. The “family reunification” category includes only family reunification. The “climate and environment” category includes deterioration of livelihoods due to natural hazards (including floods, droughts, volcanic eruption, hurricanes, and plagues); the direct impact of a natural hazard; and the loss of land due to land use changes. The “other” category includes wanting to move to study; for cultural reasons or custom; for health-related reasons (including treatments, surgeries, medical consultations, or medicines); for tourism; the “other” option in the survey; and those participants who did not respond to this question about motivating factors or who reported not knowing.

Source: Authors’ analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Nonetheless, the rate at which the present survey’s respondents cited these motivating factors was relatively consistent across each of the three countries, but with some notable differences. For example, 45 percent of Guatemalans attributed their desire to migrate to a lack of money for food or basic necessities, while a smaller 32 percent of Salvadorans cited this same reason. As described in Section 2.A., respondents in Guatemala reported the lowest levels of per capita monthly expenditure (see Table 1). In addition, Salvadoran respondents cited both insecurity (7 percent) and family reunification (8 percent) at slightly

higher rates than respondents from the other two countries, though these rates still fall well below traditionally observed levels. In a 2020 study conducted by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), 82 percent of respondents from El Salvador who were considering migrating abroad cited insecurity and 39 percent cited family reunification as their reasons for leaving. The proportion of Salvadoran respondents who cited economic factors (84 percent), however, was nearly the same as in the present study.³¹

Certain noneconomic factors took on a more pronounced role at the departmental level. For instance, the highest proportion of respondents citing environmental and climate-related issues as a factor behind their desire to migrate (13 percent) was in Cortés, Honduras, a coastal area that experienced considerable damage by Hurricanes Eta and Iota. Additionally, 11 percent of respondents in San Salvador, El Salvador, reported violence as a reason for desiring to migrate, and 13 percent of respondents in Cabañas, El Salvador, who wanted to move abroad referenced family reunification.

Certain noneconomic factors took on a more pronounced role at the departmental level.

In order to better understand why respondents' desires to migrate did not always translate into more concrete actions, the survey asked those who said they had not made plans to move about their reasons. For many, the key factors were once again economic. Across the three countries, 59 percent of these respondents reported not making plans because they did not have enough money to pay for the trip. Other commonly cited reasons included pandemic-related immigration restrictions (17 percent), fear of the spread of COVID-19 (16 percent), not having enough money to cover the cost of living in the destination country (16 percent), the dangers of the journey (16 percent), and not having documentation to travel (15 percent).

In El Salvador, respondents' reasons for not migrating stand out in several ways. Of those Salvadoran respondents who expressed the desire to migrate internationally but had not made plans to make the journey in the next 12 months, only 11 percent of respondents referenced pandemic-related mobility restrictions and fear of the spread of COVID-19 as a reason *not* to make migration plans, in comparison to 35 percent of respondents from Guatemala and 40 percent from Honduras. This may stem from the disparity in the pace of the vaccine rollout in the three countries. While the share of the total population that had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine jumped from 2 percent to 18 percent in El Salvador during the period of data collection, this figure only grew from 1 percent to 3 percent in Guatemala and 1 percent to 2 percent in Honduras.³² Another notable difference was that Salvadoran respondents cited the inability to cover the cost of living in the destination country as a reason for not planning to migrate, despite wishing to do so, at a higher level (23 percent) than Guatemalans (12 percent) and Hondurans (9 percent).

Critically, not everyone in this region wants to migrate, and the decision to stay is not necessarily indicative of the inability to migrate. Of respondents who reported not having any desire to migrate internationally, 66 percent reported wishing to remain in their home countries because they did not want to separate their

³¹ UN Development Programme (UNDP) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Movilidad humana, desarrollo y seguridad ciudadana en los países del norte de Centroamérica* (New York and Washington, DC: UNDP and USAID, 2020).

³² University of Oxford, Our World in Data, "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations," updated July 26, 2021.

family—the most commonly cited response. This proportion was slightly lower for El Salvador (59 percent) in comparison to Guatemala (66 percent) and Honduras (71 percent), possibly due to the fact that an estimated one in four Salvadorans already lives in another country.³³

Other common reasons cited by respondents who did not want to permanently emigrate included the safety of their place of residence (41 percent) and a sense of belonging (*arraigo*) to their communities or country (23 percent). In El Salvador, a smaller 32 percent of these respondents referenced the safety of their area as a reason to stay, in comparison to 44 percent of those in Guatemala and 43 percent in Honduras. Notably, the most common factor referenced by Salvadorans was their sense of rootedness or belonging to their community or country; more than half cited this as a reason to stay, in comparison to just 10 percent of Guatemalans and 13 percent of Hondurans.

C. Migrant Profiles

While data related to migration intentions provide a snapshot of respondents' needs, desires, and capabilities at the time of the survey, questions that asked respondents about members of their household who had migrated recently—whether through regular or irregular channels—offer more insight on actual migration behaviors and patterns over the past several years. In total, 24 percent of the nearly 5,000 respondents in the household survey reported that at least one household member had migrated or attempted to migrate within the five years prior to the survey, thus providing information on about 1,600 reported migrants (see Table 2).

The numbers of recent migrants described by households in each of the three countries were similar. As a result, about one-third of the total recent migrants reported come from each country. The largest shares of reported recent migrants came from the departments of Usulután, El Salvador (15 percent); Huehuetenango, Guatemala (12 percent); and Yoro, Honduras (12 percent). Most reported recent migrants were men (69 percent), and more than half were ages 18 to 34 (55 percent).

TABLE 2

Demographics of Recent Migrants Reported by Household Survey Respondents, 2021

	Count	Percent of All Households Surveyed
Total Number of Households Surveyed	4,998	100%
Number of Households Reporting Recent Migration	1,186	24%
Number of Recent Migrants Reported per Household		
0	3,812	76%
1	882	18%
2	217	4%
3+	87	2%

³³ USAID, "Country Development Cooperation Strategy: El Salvador," updated April 30, 2021.

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Demographics of Recent Migrants Reported by Household Survey Respondents, 2021

	Count	Percent of Recent Migrants Reported
Total Number of Recent Migrants Reported	1,624	100%
Age		
0–17	205	13%
18–34	901	55%
35–44	310	19%
45+	208	13%
Sex		
Female*	502	31%
Origin Country and Department		
El Salvador	515	32%
Ahuachapán	79	5%
Cabañas	119	7%
San Salvador	78	5%
Usulután	239	15%
Guatemala	524	32%
Alta Verapaz	106	7%
Chiquimula	111	7%
Huehuetenango	193	12%
San Marcos	114	7%
Honduras	585	36%
Choluteca	98	6%
Cortés	118	7%
Francisco Morazán	170	10%
Yoro	199	12%
Destination Country		
United States	1,453	89%
Mexico	31	2%
Spain	72	4%
Other**	68	4%

* Eight respondents preferred not to specify the sex of the household member who had migrated, meaning the remaining 1,114 migrants were reported to have been men.

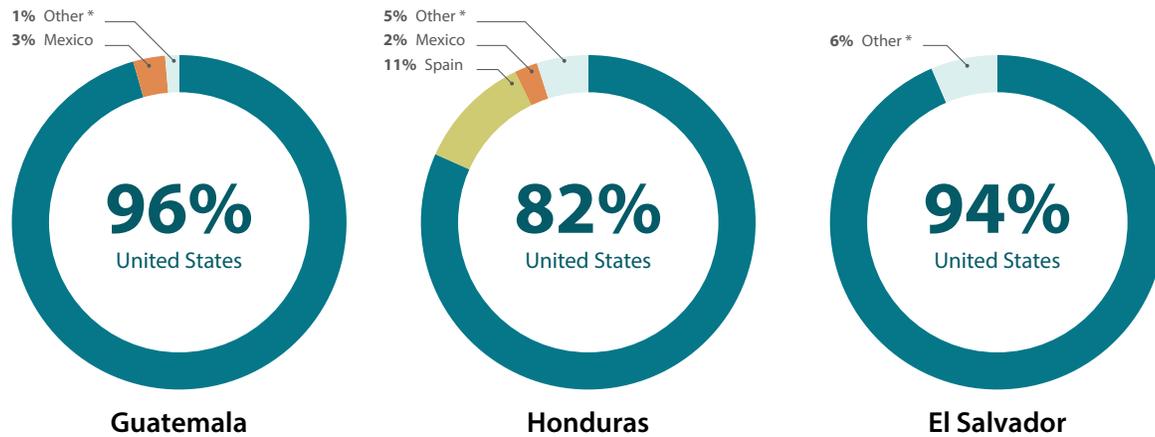
** Other countries cited included: Belize, Canada, Cayman Islands, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Germany, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Panama, Italy, Honduras, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. This category also includes six migrants who did not have a reported destination country.

Notes: Recent migration refers to households that reported that at least one member had migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to the study. Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

FIGURE 9

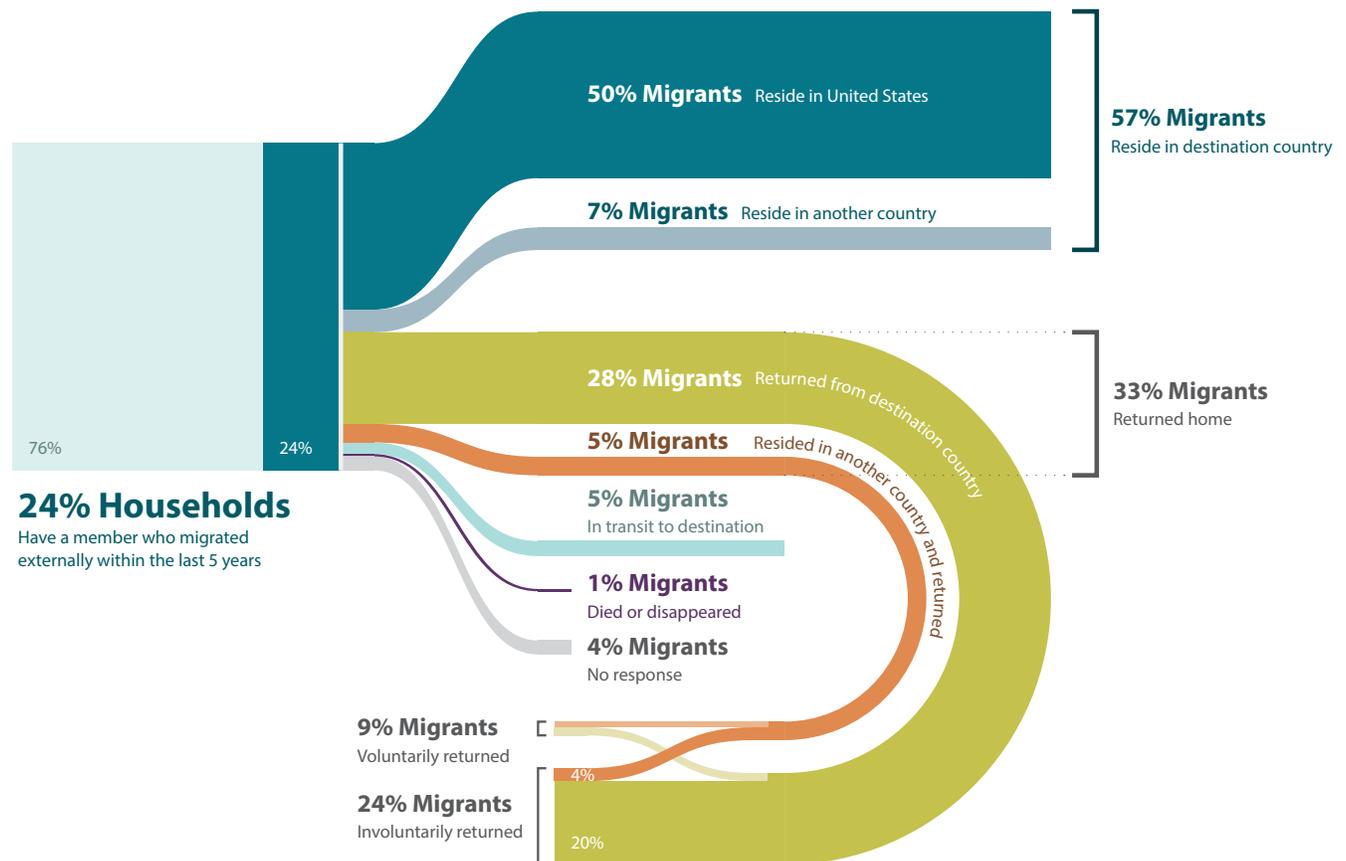
Intended Destination of Recent Migrants Reported by Household Survey Respondents, by Country of Residence, 2021



* In each chart, destination countries that did not receive at least 2 percent of survey responses were consolidated under the “other” category. These countries include: Belize, Canada, Cayman Islands, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Germany, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, Japan, Mexico (for El Salvador), Nicaragua, Panama, Spain (for Guatemala and El Salvador), Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
 Note: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey.
 Source: Authors’ analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

FIGURE 10

Outcomes of the Reported Migration Journeys Attempted by Members of Surveyed Households, 2021

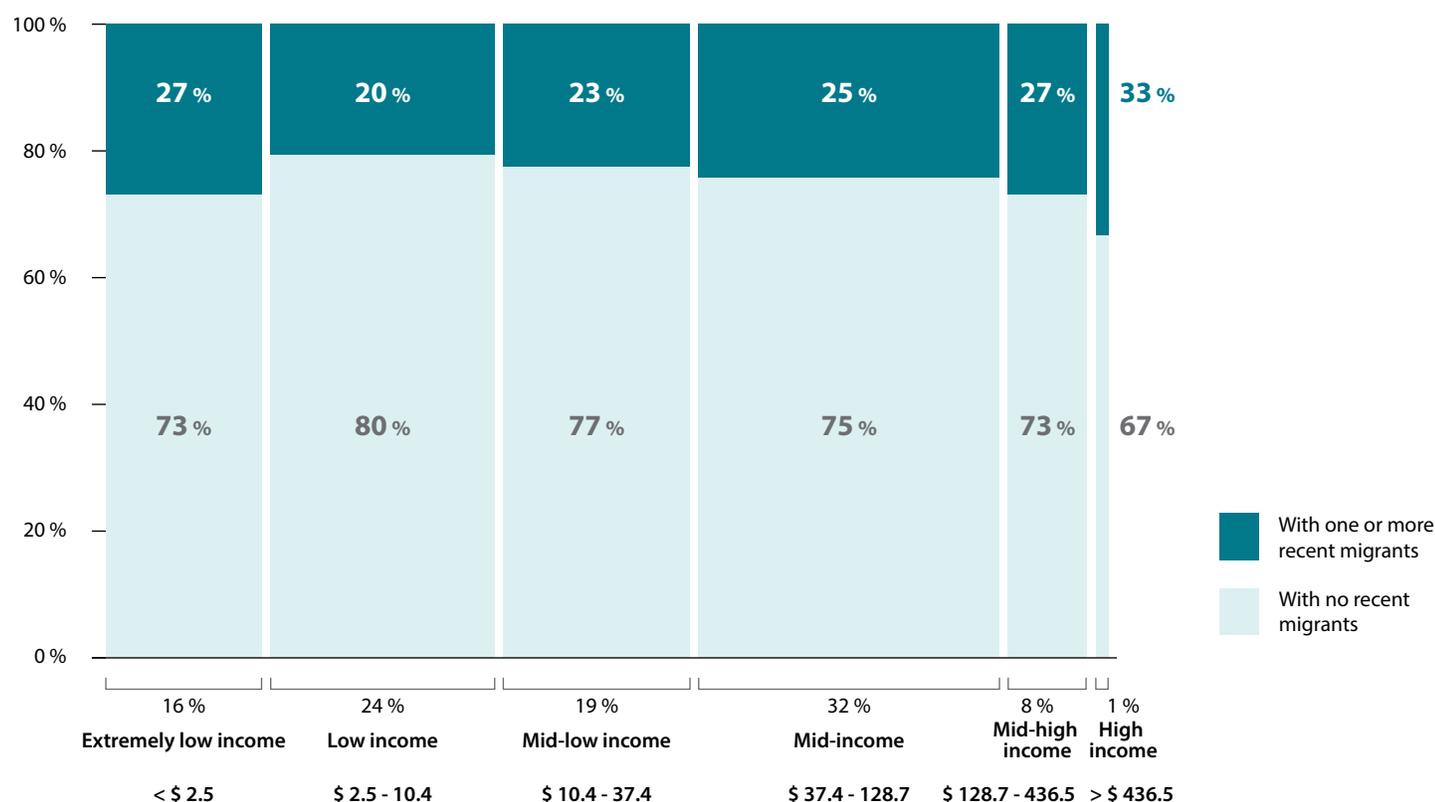


Note: “Migrants” in this figure refers to the share of household members who were reported to have migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to the survey.
 Source: Authors’ analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Of the household members who were reported to have migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to the survey, the majority (89 percent) intended to migrate to the United States. However, these recent migrants' intended destinations varied across the three countries in which the survey was conducted (see Figure 9). A notable share of those from Honduras (11 percent), for instance, were reported to have migrated to Spain. When asked about the outcomes of these journeys, 57 percent of recent migrants were reported to have had a successful journey and to be residing in their destination country at the time of data collection (see Figure 10). Meanwhile, 33 percent were reported to have returned to their origin countries, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and about 5 percent were reported to still be in transit at the time of the survey. Tragically, family members reported that 1 percent of migrants either died or disappeared while attempting to migrate.

The households that reported at least one member migrating recently span the socioeconomic spectrum, indicating that their overall interest or ability to migrate was not necessarily dependent on household income (see Figure 11). Disaggregating these households based on their monthly per capita income into six groups shows their propensity to migrate was not markedly different.³⁴

FIGURE 11
Proportion of Households with a Reported Recent Migrant, by Monthly Household Income (in USD) per Capita at the Time of the Survey, 2021



Note: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey.
 Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

34 The six household income groups were derived by normalizing the overall distribution of household monthly income per capita with a logarithmic transformation. The income per capita data were then split into six bins of equal width. All income per capita figures are in U.S. dollar values.

There are, of course, limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from such insights. Because “recent migration” refers to movement in the five-year period prior to data collection, the household income reported in the survey could be different than what it was when the migration occurred. Indeed, among households reporting recent migration, 68 percent reported that their income decreased or was totally wiped out by the pandemic, suggesting it may have been higher at the time of migration, while 27 percent reported that their income stayed the same or increased. Remittances received from migrants could have also altered households’ income from the time of migration to the period of study. Finally, the data refer to all individuals who attempted to migrate, and not specifically those who were successful in making it to their destination country.

Nonetheless, in a period of dynamic migration policy changes in the region and significant new economic pressures due to the pandemic, these findings show that individuals from households with the lowest levels of income found ways to migrate (as will be discussed in Section 3) at similar rates to those from middle- and high-income households. This is particularly notable given the ways in which migration is constrained by capital. As discussed in Section 2.A., more than half of respondents who wanted to migrate were not planning to do so because of the cost. In addition, higher income levels facilitate migration through access to education and international social networks. Indeed, research has documented a positive relationship between individual-level economic factors and emigration.³⁵ And from a macro perspective, research suggests that emigration increases as a country’s GDP per capita increases up to a certain point, often referred to as the “migration hump.”³⁶

The reasons survey respondents gave for their household members having left the country in recent years, like the factors cited as influencing future migration intentions, were predominantly economic. Across the three countries, 85 percent of the recent migrants in the sample were reported to have been motivated by economic factors affecting their livelihoods, whereas factors such as insecurity and family reunification were each cited by 8 percent of migrants. However, the predominance of livelihood-related considerations does not necessarily mean that other conditions (such as violence and climatic or environmental problems) did not play a role. As noted above, these issues exist in complex, interdependent relationships that produce different migration outcomes. A growing body of research has documented the positive correlation between homicide rates and Central American migration, and the influence of climate events—for example, that decreases in precipitation are associated with increases in Honduran migration, further compounded by high homicides rates.³⁷ Additionally, due to the nature of the household survey, entire families or households that migrated (and either successfully made it to their destination country or were in transit at the time of data collection) were not represented in these results; conditions that can cause displacement of entire households, such as violence and natural disasters, are thus likely underrepresented.

35 Michael A. Clemens, “Violence, Development, and Migration Waves: Evidence from Central American Child Migrant Apprehensions” (working paper 459, Center for Global Development, Washington, DC, July 2017); Samuel Bazzi, “Wealth Heterogeneity and the Income Elasticity of Migration,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 9, no. 2 (2017): 219–55.

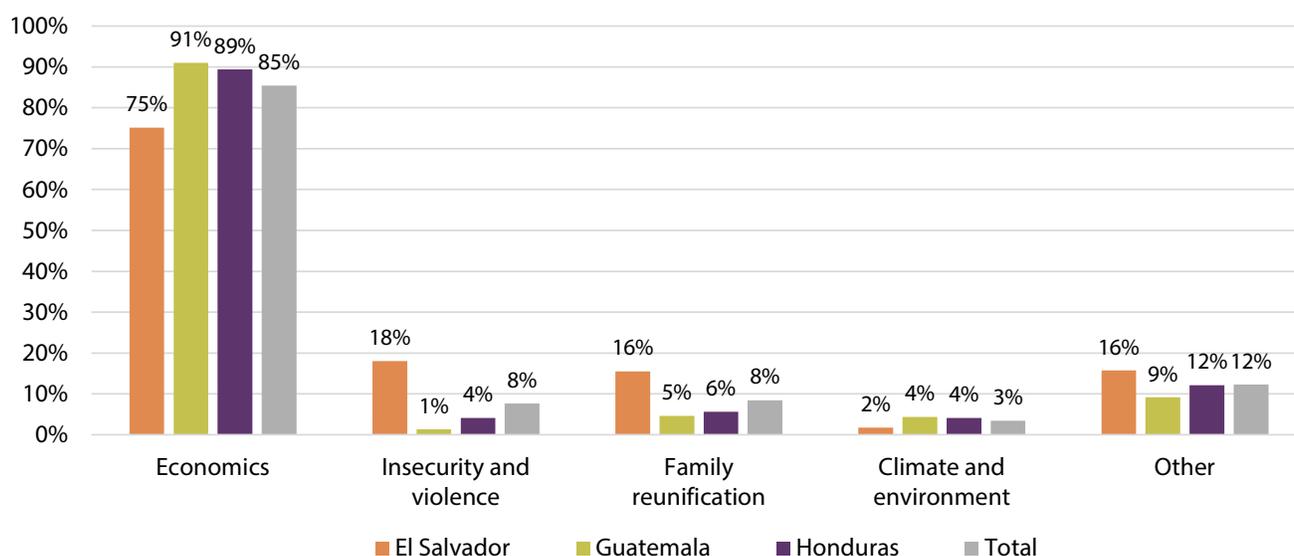
36 Michael A. Clemens and Hannah M. Postel, “Deterring Emigration with Foreign Aid: An Overview of Evidence from Low-Income Countries” (policy paper 119, Center for Global Development, Washington, DC, February 2018).

37 Betilde Muñoz-Pogossian and Diego Chaves-González, *Environmental Explanations of Central American Migration: Challenges and Policy Recommendations* (Miami: Florida International University, Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, 2021), 39; Sarah Bermeo and David Leblang, “Climate, Violence, and Honduran Migration to the United States,” Brookings Institution, April 1, 2021.

When analyzing the demographic profiles of reported migrants, age was the characteristic linked to the most notable differences in migrants' motivations. While 93 percent of recent migrants between the ages of 18 and 34 were reported to have left for economic reasons, this proportion dropped to 77 percent for migrants 45 years old or older. The role reunifying with family played in migration decisions also varied by age: 17 percent of reported migrants who were 45 years old or older were said to have migrated for family reunification compared to just 5 percent of migrants between the ages of 18 and 34.

FIGURE 12

Factors Reported to Have Motivated Members of Surveyed Households to Migrate Recently, by Country of Origin, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Percentages represent the share of recent migrants reported by surveyed households who were said to have left due to each factor. This survey question allowed for multiple responses, meaning the sum of percentages can exceed 100 percent. The “economics” category includes looking for a better job, salary, or working conditions; unemployment; lack of money to buy food; lack of money to cover other basic needs (including health, education, housing, clothing, and utilities); and desire to send remittances. The “insecurity and violence” category includes insecurity and domestic violence. The “family reunification” category just includes family reunification. The “climate and environment” category includes deterioration of livelihoods due to natural hazards (including floods, droughts, volcanic eruption, hurricanes, and plagues); the direct impact of a natural hazard; and the loss of land due to land use changes. The “other” category includes wanting to move to study; for cultural reasons or custom; for health-related reasons (including treatments, surgeries, medical consultations, or medicines); for tourism; the “other” option in the survey; and those respondents who did not respond to this question about motivating factors or who reported not knowing.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Important differences across countries of origin also underscore the mixed nature of migration from the region. Among those who were reported to have migrated or attempted to migrate from El Salvador, 16 percent were said to have been motivated by family reunification and 18 percent by insecurity, compared to just 5 percent and 1 percent, respectively, of those from Guatemala (see Figure 12). The relatively low proportions of respondents across all the countries who cited these reasons are notable, given a 2018 IDB survey³⁸ of recently arrived Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants living in the United States found that 43 percent cited family reunification and 41 percent cited insecurity as drivers of migration. In

38 Emmanuel Abuelafia, Giselle Del Carmen, and Marta Ruiz-Arranz, *In the Footprints of Migrants: Perspectives and Experiences of Migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the United States* (New York: IDB, 2019).

the present household survey, respondents from El Salvador were less likely to report that economic factors played a role in household members' migration than respondents in Guatemala and Honduras (75 percent versus 91 percent and 89 percent, respectively).³⁹

Finally, there were some noteworthy differences in responses from different departments within each of the countries. In Usulután, El Salvador, for instance, respondents were more likely to report insecurity and family reunification as factors that motivated members of their households to migrate than was the case in other departments, although the majority of these recent migrants were also said to have moved due to lack of economic opportunity. This example is notable because, despite respondents living in this department expressing the highest level of income dissatisfaction, other factors evidently also played a key role in migrants' decision-making.

3 The Economic Costs of Migration

As much as migration often represents an investment to mitigate economic precarity and improve personal livelihoods over the long term, the costs involved in migration can be significant for individuals and households over the short term. This section presents estimates of some of these costs and analyzes the means migrants rely on to fund their international migration attempts. The authors calculated these estimates using a combination of survey responses to questions about the types of migration household members engaged in and the associated costs as well as secondary data on Central American population trends. While these cost estimates may not reflect the full set of expenses migrants incur, they are approximations that provide a baseline for further research and a useful starting point when seeking to understand the impacts of these costs.

A. Regular and Irregular Migration Pathways

Respondents who reported members of their households migrating within the last five years described these journeys as taking place in one of three primary forms: regular channels using temporary tourist and employment visas; irregular channels with the assistance of a smuggler; and irregular channels on one's own or with a caravan.⁴⁰

Temporary and permanent regular migration channels are limited and not widely available to Central Americans, though they provide safety and orderly transit to

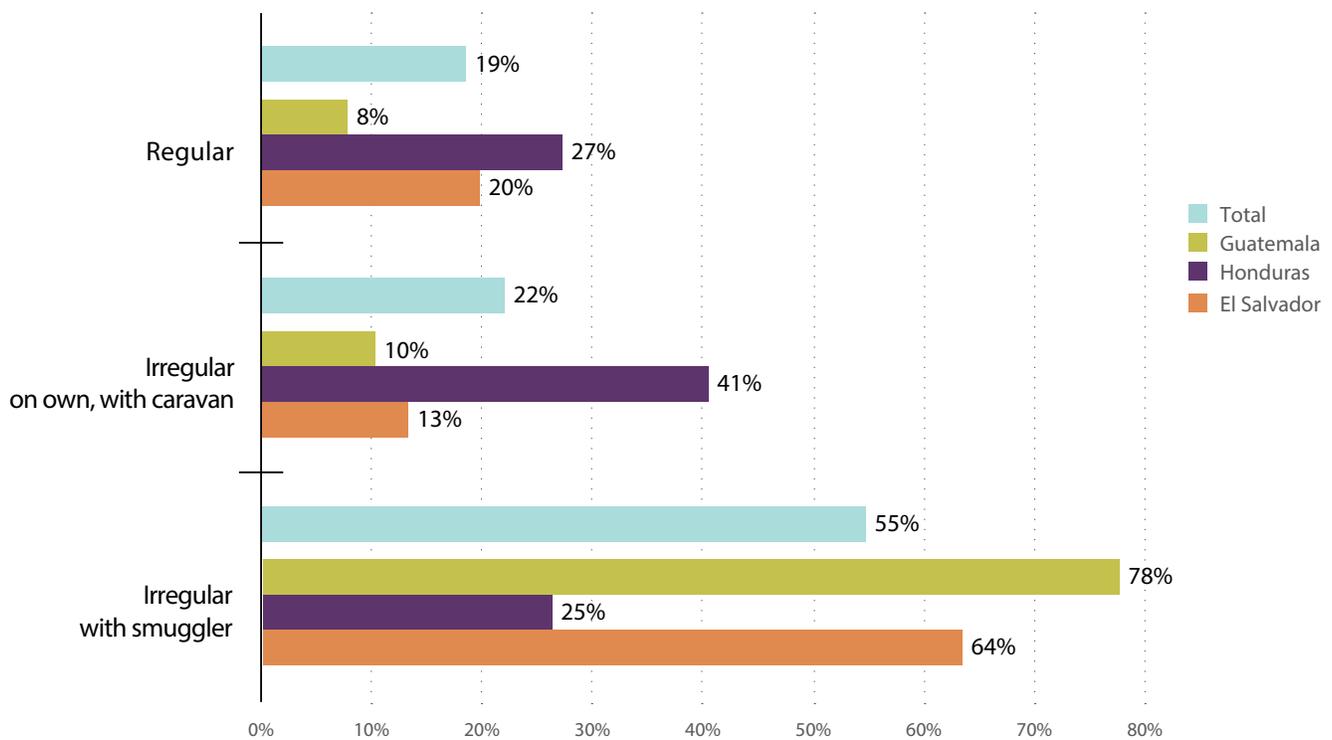
Temporary and permanent regular migration channels are limited and not widely available to Central Americans.

³⁹ These proportions are consistent with previous studies. In a 2017 survey of migrants in El Salvador, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that 74 percent of respondents cited work, 16 percent cited safety, and 9 percent cited family reunification as reasons to migrate. In a 2016 survey, IOM found that 91 percent of Guatemalans left their country for economic reasons. See IOM, *Encuesta nacional de migración y remesas: El Salvador 2017* (San José, Costa Rica: IOM, 2017), 13; IOM, *Encuesta sobre migración internacional de personas guatemaltecas y remesas 2016* (San José, Costa Rica: IOM, 2016), 42.

⁴⁰ Respondents were asked about the primary, not the only, means of transportation used to migrate, and therefore some respondents may have used a combination of these channels to migrate. Under regular migration channels, the authors coded only survey responses indicating the use of work, tourist, or student visas; passports that enable the holder to travel to the destination country without needing a visa; other national identity documents that facilitate travel to other countries that are part of the Central American Agreement for Free Mobility, or CA-4 (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua); as well as responses indicating refugee resettlement or asylum requests. Authors coded any combination of responses indicating the use of smugglers as irregular migration with a smuggler, and responses that involved smugglers but also use of other unauthorized means of travel, including caravans, as irregular migration on one's own or with caravan.

destination countries. Meanwhile, irregular migration channels expose migrants—especially vulnerable groups—to great potential personal risk at the hands of smugglers and treacherous conditions.⁴¹ Since 2018, migrants travelling irregularly from Central America have organized caravans more frequently to provide protection and pool resources during the journey, especially along the most dangerous segments of migration routes. Beyond its precarious and hazardous nature, irregular migration often results in apprehension, expulsion to a third country, and repatriation for Central American migrants, and many who still wish to reach their intended destination must make multiple attempts.⁴²

FIGURE 13
Regular and Irregular Migration Channels Reportedly Used by Recent Migrant Members of Survey Respondents’ Households, by Country of Origin, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Figure excludes individuals whose responses were coded as “don’t know” or “preferred not to answer,” and therefore these percentages may not add up to 100 percent.

Source: Authors’ analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

41 Jeff Hallock, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Michael Fix, “In Search of Safety, Growing Numbers of Women Flee Central America,” *Migration Information Source*, May 30, 2018.

42 As evidence of the number of attempts it takes to enter the United States via the U.S.-Mexico border without authorization, CBP data show that the share of migrants encountered at the border who have been apprehended within the last year is increasing from an average of 14 percent between 2014 and 2019 to 27 percent in July 2021. This is due in part to the recent implementation of migrant expulsions by U.S. authorities to Mexico, after which it is easier for migrants to make additional attempts, but it is also likely due to changes in smuggler tactics that offer migrants “packages” for one price covering multiple attempts if they are apprehended and returned to Central America. See CBP, “CBP Releases July 2021 Operational Update,” updated August 12, 2021; Victoria A. Greenfield et al., *Human Smuggling and Associated Revenues: What Do or Can We Know About Routes from Central America to the United States?* (Arlington, VA: Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center, 2019).

Household survey respondents reported that most recent migrants relied on irregular channels to make their journey: 55 percent of them contracted smugglers and an additional 22 percent migrated without authorization on their own or with a caravan (see Figure 13). Among the migrants using a smuggler, it took two attempts on average to make it to their destination country. Still, nearly one in every five recent migrants (19 percent) were described as traveling through regular migration channels, including with temporary tourist and employment visas.

The channels these migrants used to move internationally varied considerably across nationalities. Guatemalan migrants were the most likely to rely on smugglers to migrate (78 percent), followed by Salvadorans (64 percent). Honduran migrants were the least likely to contract smugglers (25 percent); instead, higher shares reportedly migrated through regular channels (27 percent) or irregularly but on their own or with a caravan (41 percent). In fact, Hondurans were three times as likely as Salvadorans or Guatemalans to travel on their own or in a caravan.⁴³ After traveling irregularly with a smuggler, Salvadorans' next most common mode of travel was said to be migration through regular channels (20 percent of recent migrants).

B. Estimating the Costs of Different Migration Pathways

The costs survey respondents reported for their household members' migration—including transportation, food, and intermediaries—varied significantly across the three principal migration pathways. Migrants using regular channels reportedly spent USD 4,500 on average and those migrating irregularly on their own or with a caravan spent USD 2,900. The average cost of migrating irregularly with a smuggler was USD 7,500, more than double the cost of using legal pathways or migrating irregularly on one's own or in a caravan. Although migrating irregularly without smuggler assistance was the most affordable option, it presents serious safety concerns, particularly for vulnerable migrants.

Based on these average costs and estimates of the number of people who migrated from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras over the last five years,⁴⁴ the authors calculated estimates of the total amounts these migrants paid in their attempts to migrate using regular and irregular channels to the United States, given it was the destination for 89 percent of reported migrants. An estimated average of 189,000 Guatemalans, 116,000 Hondurans, and 73,000 Salvadorans attempted to migrate to the United States each

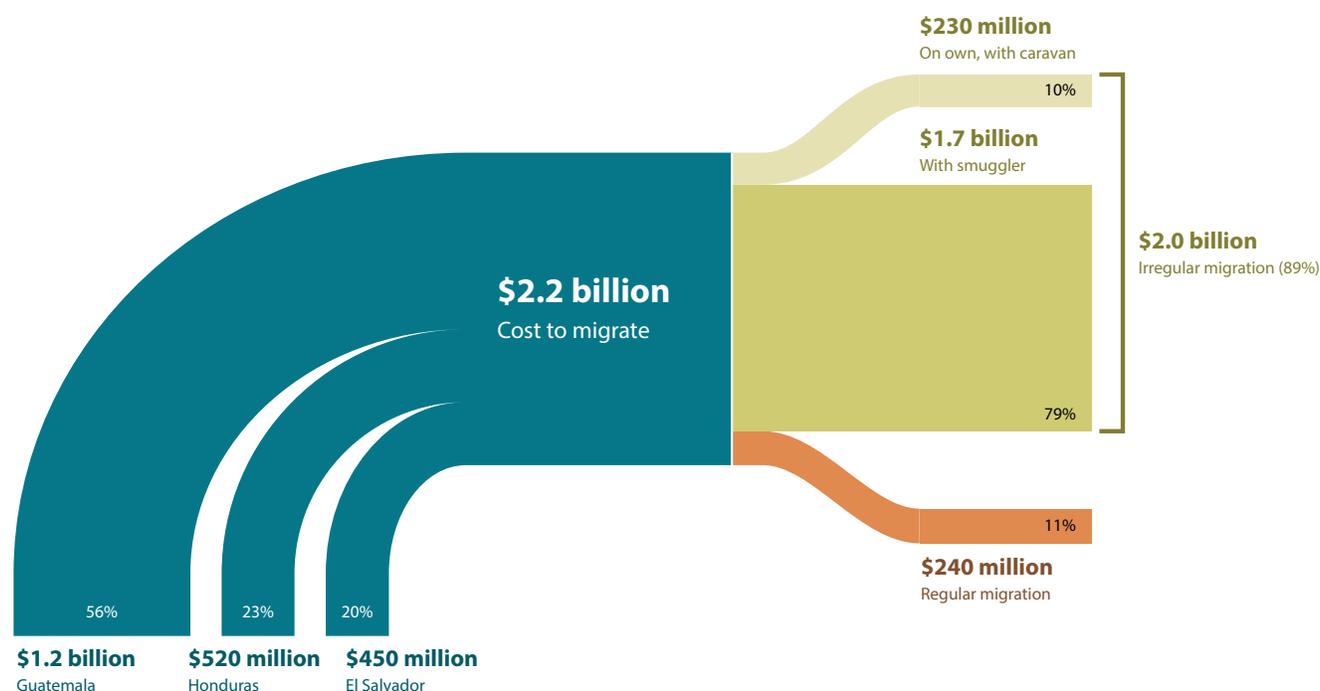
43 Within this category of irregular migration, most Honduran migrants traveled on their own; only a small share traveled in a caravan. Still, previous surveys have found that Honduran migrants have made up the majority of Central American migrants traveling in caravans since 2019. See IOM, “Encuesta: Monitoreo de Flujos Suchiate, Chiapas, México” (fact sheet, January 2019).

44 The aggregate annual cost to migrate to the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras over the last five years was estimated using survey data and 2021 population estimates. Secondary population estimates were used to estimate the number of households in the region, which was then multiplied by the number of people per household who were reported in the survey to have migrated or tried to migrate internationally in the five years prior to the survey. This calculation was used to approximate the average annual number of migrants for the last five years. This estimate was then multiplied by the percentage of migrants reported to have used regular or irregular pathways (with and without a smuggler) and the average costs associated with each channel. National population projections for 2021 were referenced from the following sources: Guatemalan National Institute of Statistics, “Estimaciones y proyecciones de la población a largo plazo. 1950-2050” (dataset, 2019); Honduran National Institute of Statistics, “Proyecciones 2014 – 2030,” accessed July 2021; Salvadoran National Directorate of Statistics and Census, Salvadoran Ministry of Economics, UN Population Fund, and ECLAC, “Estimaciones y proyecciones de población municipal 2005 -2025” (dataset, 2014).

year in the last five years.⁴⁵ This resulted in an estimated annual cost of USD 1.2 billion for Guatemalan migrants, USD 520 million for Honduran migrants, and USD 450 million for Salvadoran migrants (see Figure 14). In total, migrants traveling through regular and irregular channels spent an estimated USD 2.2 billion annually seeking to migrate to the United States, approximately one-tenth as much as total remittances sent to the three countries in 2020.⁴⁶

FIGURE 14

Estimated Annual Cost of Regular and Irregular Migration to the United States for All Migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (in USD), 2021



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Of the USD 2.2 billion migrants from these three Central American countries are estimated to have spent annually seeking to reach the United States, regular migration accounted for 11 percent of the total costs and irregular migration for the remaining 89 percent. Because irregular migrants traveling without a smuggler represented a smaller share of migration from the region and the expenses associated with this mode of travel were reportedly lower, the total estimated annual cost of this type of irregular migration was significantly lower (USD 230 million) than that of irregular migration with a smuggler (USD 1.7 billion).⁴⁷ Among the population of migrants who hired a smuggler, Guatemalans are estimated to have spent an annual average of USD 1.1 billion total, Salvadorans to have spent about USD 350 million, and Hondurans to have spent USD 260 million. These estimated costs of migrating irregularly with a smuggler represent a

45 These figures are only for migrants whose destination was the United States. In total, the authors estimate that 195,000 Guatemalans, 136,000 Hondurans, and 75,000 Salvadorans migrated annually to the United States and other countries.

46 Migrant remittances to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in 2020 amounted to USD 22.9 billion. For individual country totals, see World Bank, "Personal Remittances, Received (Current US\$) – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras," accessed July 24, 2021.

47 Estimates by UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) suggest that smuggler costs worldwide were between USD 5.5 billion and 7 billion in 2016. See UNDOC, *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018* (Vienna: UNDOC, 2018).

notable share of these three countries' GDP in 2020: 1.4 percent in both El Salvador and Guatemala, and 1.1 percent in Honduras.⁴⁸

In addition to highlighting the high costs of smuggler-facilitated irregular migration for migrants, these estimates underscore the economic inefficiency that results from the mismatch between the scale of Central Americans' desire to migrate and the much more limited opportunities they have to do so regularly. This entails both the limited temporary visas available for Central American migrants and the lack of support infrastructure to connect potential migrants to the legal avenues that do exist. These limited migratory options, coupled with the migration pressures described in earlier sections, lead to spending on irregular migration which is siphoned to clandestine markets and away from regulated markets.

C. *Financial Preparations for Migration*

Because migration costs can be such a high financial burden, migrants often receive assistance from family and friends, use personal savings, and/or obtain bank or personal loans to afford the journey. Survey respondents reported that 41 percent of recent migrants from their households financed their trip with support from relatives and friends, including 22 percent who received personal loans from loved ones abroad. An additional 19 percent paid for migration costs using their own savings and 18 percent used loans from financial institutions.⁴⁹

How migrants financed their travel varied according to the pathway they used, likely due to the large cost differences between these channels and to the different financing sources available to them. For example, looking at the most expensive pathway—irregular migration with a smuggler—55 percent of migrants reportedly relied primarily on support from family and friends (in country and abroad), 28 percent acquired bank loans, and 9 percent used their own savings or assets (see Figure 15). Among migrants who traveled using regular channels, the largest share (44 percent) also relied on friends and family, but a sizable share (30 percent) used their own means. Irregular migrants who traveled on their own or in a caravan, in contrast, were the most likely (43 percent) to use their own savings or assets to pay for migration costs, likely due at least in part to the fact that it was the cheapest option.

Migrants often receive assistance from family and friends, use personal savings, and/or obtain bank or personal loans to afford the journey.

Migrants' reliance on assistance from family and friends and on bank loans is not surprising, given that economic conditions across the three countries make it nearly impossible for migrant households to save enough earnings to finance regular or irregular migration on their own.⁵⁰ And while incurring significant

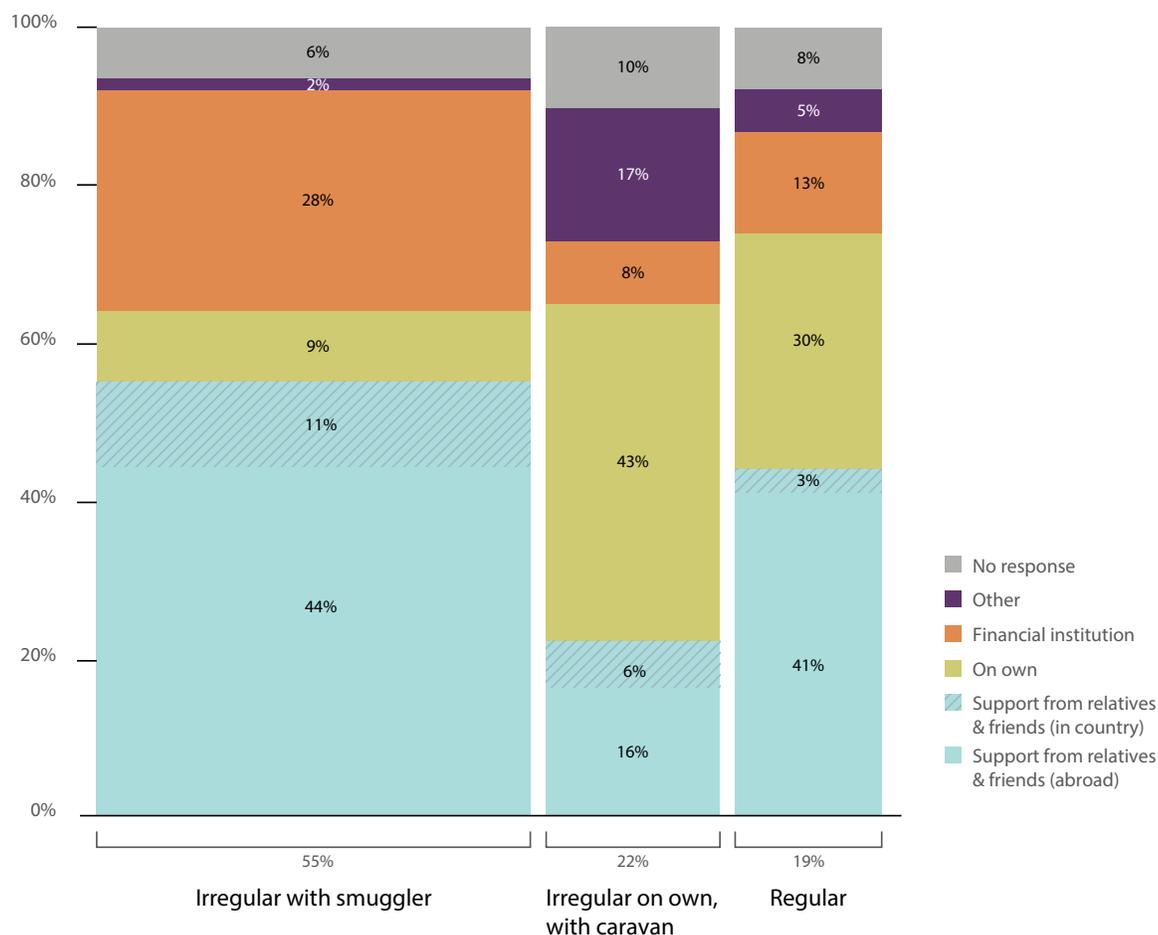
48 In 2020, GDP in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras was USD 24.6 billion, USD 77.6 billion, and USD 23.8 billion, respectively. See World Bank, "GDP (Current US\$) – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras," accessed July 24, 2021.

49 Methods for financing migration trips are not mutually exclusive; some respondents gave more than one response for how trips were financed.

50 Assuming individuals are able to save 15 percent of their monthly minimum wage, it would take 40 years for one individual alone to afford the cost of regular migration and up to 90 years to afford the cost of irregular migration using a smuggler. This approximation is based on the minimum wage estimates in El Salvador (USD 203–304), Guatemala (Quetzal 2,832–3075), and Honduras (Lempiras 6,763–12,358). External minimum wage are from: AFP, "Nayib Bukele plantea incrementar un 20% al salario mínimo en El Salvador desde agosto," *El Universo*, July 1, 2021; Government of Guatemala, "Salario mínimo 2021," accessed July 2021; Government of Honduras, "Tabla de Salario Mínimo, Vigente a Partir del 1 de Enero del Año 2020," accessed July 2021.

debt to finance migration is daunting, the prospect of earning wages three to eight times higher in the United States than in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras can make this trade-off appealing.⁵¹

FIGURE 15
Financial Preparation Methods Used by Recent Migrant Members of Survey Respondents' Households, by Migration Channel, 2021



Note: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Nonetheless, for migrants who make it successfully to the United States, paying back loans or debt can be a challenge. Depending on their job occupation, it could take between 11 and 19 months for Central Americans to pay the full expenses of migrating irregularly with a smuggler and between 5 and 8 months to pay the expenses associated with regular migration (see Figure 16). For migrants who do not make it to the United States or who are repatriated to their countries of origin, paying back loans and expenses presents an even greater challenge. As such, migration costs and debt can exacerbate difficult economic conditions and increase food insecurity as households use limited resources to cover these expenses.⁵²

51 For example, the wages for working in construction and agriculture in the United States range from the federal minimum of USD 7.50 per hour up to USD 14.00 per hour in some states. By comparison, depending on industry of employment, the minimum hourly wage ranges in each country are: USD 0.90–1.30 in El Salvador; USD 1.40–1.50 in Guatemala; and USD 1.20–2.20 in Honduras. See Andrew Soergel and Sara Clarke, “24 U.S. States Will See a Minimum Wage Increase in 2021,” U.S. News, August 2, 2021; AFP, “Nayib Bukele plantea incrementar un 20% al salario mínimo”; Guatemalan Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, “Salario mínimo 2021”; Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Tegucigalpa, “Nuevo salario mínimo 2021,” accessed August 17, 2021.

52 WFP, *At the Root of Exodus: Food Security, Conflict and International Migration* (Rome: WFP, 2017).

FIGURE 16

Estimated Number of Months of U.S. Employment Required to Pay Migration Debt (in USD), by Migration Channel, 2021



Notes: Authors’ calculations of the number of months it would take for migrants to pay back migration debt assume migrants could allocate up to 33 percent of their monthly income for these payments, which is the average share of income U.S. households spend on housing. For this proxy, the authors assume that most migrants are likely to initially reside with friends or family and, thus, would incur no housing expenses or only a fraction of the expenses of living independently. Estimates of migrants’ monthly income are based on wages in common U.S. sectors employing Central American migrant workers: approximately USD 680 in agriculture, USD 520 in construction, and otherwise USD 390 in minimum wage work.

Sources: Authors’ analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Consumer Expenditures, 2019,” updated September 9, 2020; California Department of Industrial Relations Labor Enforcement Task Force, “Protect Your Business-Prevent Penalties” (fact sheet, 2020); Annette Bernhardt, Siobhán McGrath, and James DeFilippis, *Unregulated Work in the Global City: Employment and Labor Law Violations* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2007); U.S. Department of Labor, “State Minimum Wage Laws,” updated August 1, 2021.

4 The Economic Impacts of Migration

Emigration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has intended and unintended economic impacts not only for migrants and their households in origin communities, but also for communities in their destination country, as well as macroeconomic effects in the regional labor market. At the macro level, high emigration levels from Central America can result in significant losses for labor markets in countries of origin. Survey respondents reported that 89 percent of migrants from their households were between 14 and 60 years old (i.e., working age), and 76 percent were part of the labor force.⁵³ Furthermore, 92 percent of those in the labor force were employed prior to migrating, and the remaining 8 percent were unemployed but seeking employment. Based on these survey results, the authors estimate that about 1 percent of the three countries' local labor force migrated each year for the past five years.⁵⁴

More than in any other occupation, emigration from this region has represented a key loss in agricultural productivity, considering the large share of recent migrants reported to have been previously employed in this sector. In fact, 37 percent of recent migrants from Guatemala and 32 percent of those from El Salvador reportedly worked in agriculture prior to migrating (see Figure 17). In Honduras, a smaller share (12 percent) of migrants were employed in agriculture, and higher shares were employed in informal work (24 percent) and salaried jobs (22 percent).

Survey results indicate that once in their destination countries, more than half of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants were working in similar occupations as in their origin countries, be it at higher wages. Yet, occupational shifts do appear to occur, with a notable increase in employment in informal work and salaried positions, but a decrease in agricultural work (see Figure 18). This suggests that finding stable full-time employment in the formal market is a challenge for migrants in their destination countries.

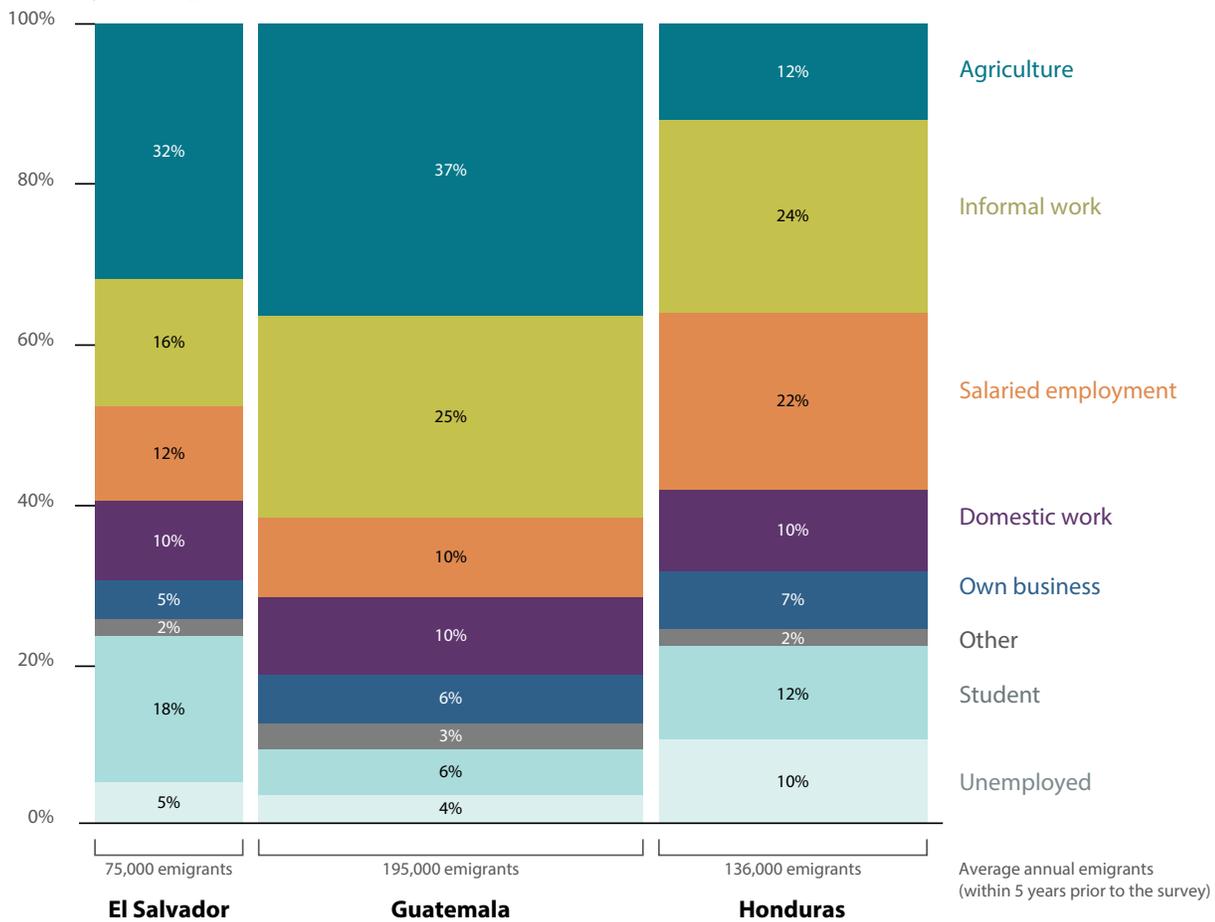
Once in their destination countries, more than half of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants were working in similar occupations as in their origin countries, be it at higher wages.

53 As defined by the World Bank, labor force includes “people who are currently employed and people who are unemployed but seeking work as well as first-time job-seekers.” See World Bank, “Labor Force, Total – Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras,” accessed August 18, 2021.

54 Of the 405,000 people the authors estimate attempted to migrate annually to the United States and to other countries, 76 percent were of working age and actively participated in their origin countries' labor force prior to migrating. About 57 percent of those who attempted to migrate reportedly made it to their countries of destination. Authors thereby estimate that approximately 176,000 working-age migrants successfully made it to their destination. This population accounts for slightly more than 1 percent of the 13 million people that make up the combined labor force of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. See World Bank, “Labor Force, Total – Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras.”

FIGURE 17

Occupations of Recent Migrant Members of Survey Respondents' Households Prior to Migrating, by Country of Origin, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Figure excludes recent migrants who were said to be retired prior to migrating or for whom the question was not applicable, as well as those survey respondents who did not respond. Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
 Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

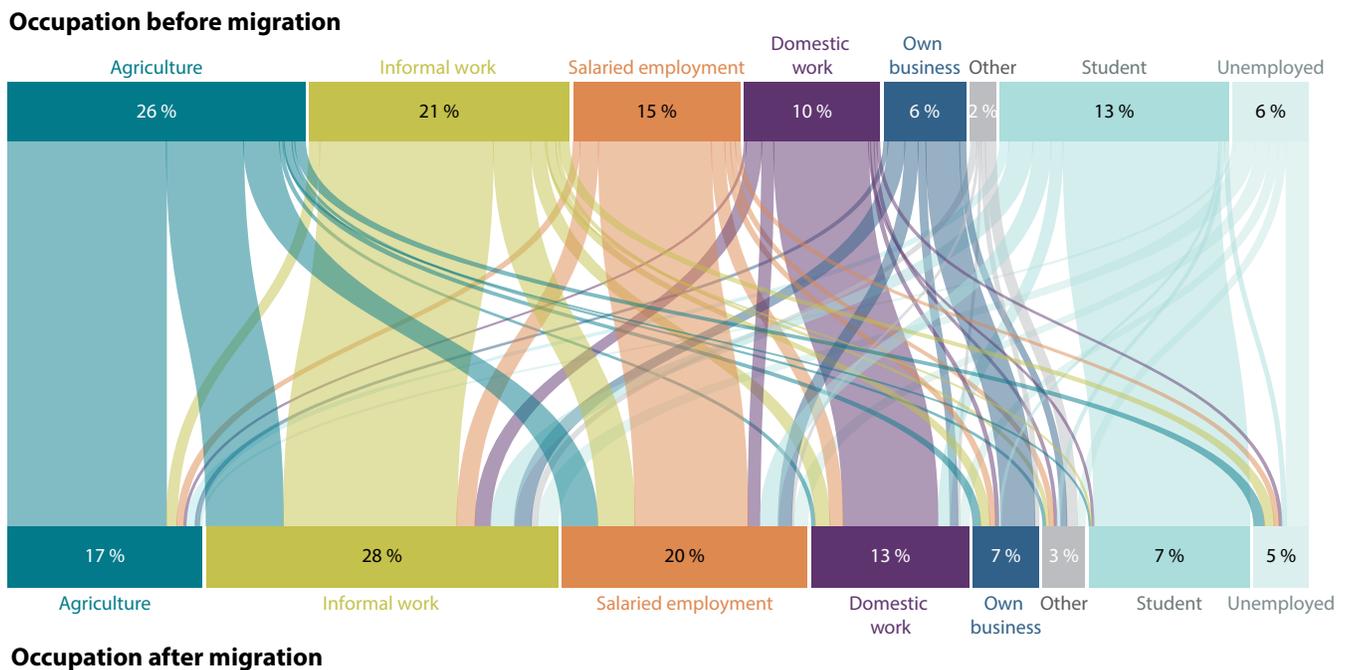
At the same time, migration responds not only to push but also to pull factors in destination countries, whereby migrants seek a higher standard of living while also productively meeting local labor demands and contributing to destination communities. In the case of the United States, Central American immigrants participate in the U.S. labor force at a higher rate than both the overall immigrant population and the U.S.-born population. As of 2019, Salvadorans and Guatemalans had among the highest labor force participation rates of all Central American immigrants, at 74 percent each, compared to 72 percent for Central Americans overall, 67 percent for all immigrants, and 62 percent for the U.S. born.⁵⁵ Nearly one-third of Central Americans were employed in service occupations, and agriculture is another sector that benefits from Central American immigrants' contributions to the U.S. economy. Moreover, foreign-born workers composed 73 percent of all U.S. hired crop labor workers in U.S. fiscal year 2016, and about half of all hired crop workers were unauthorized immigrants.⁵⁶ Mexico is the overwhelming source of migrant workers on U.S. farms, but Central Americans accounted for 6 percent of U.S. hired crop migrant workers between fiscal years 2015 and 2016.⁵⁷

55 Babich and Batalova, "Central American Immigrants in the United States."

56 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Farm Labor," updated August 18, 2021.

57 U.S. Department of Labor, "Table 1: Hired Crop Workers Demographic Characteristics, National Estimates, Seven Time Periods," accessed November 3, 2021.

FIGURE 18
Occupational Changes of Recent Migrant Members of Survey Respondents' Households, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Figure excludes recent migrants who were said to be retired prior to migrating or for whom the question was not applicable, as well as those survey respondents who did not respond. Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
 Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

As immigrants find employment in their destination country, remittances to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras represent a fundamental pillar of economic well-being for countries and communities of origin. Nearly three out of every ten surveyed households reported receiving remittances from abroad, mostly in money transfers but some also in gifts and goods. On average, surveyed households had been regularly receiving remittances for six years, although some had received remittances for as many as 30 years (see Figure 19). These remittances were typically sent by adult children to parents in Central America, followed by brothers sending money to their siblings, a reflection of the fact that most of these migrants were working-age men.

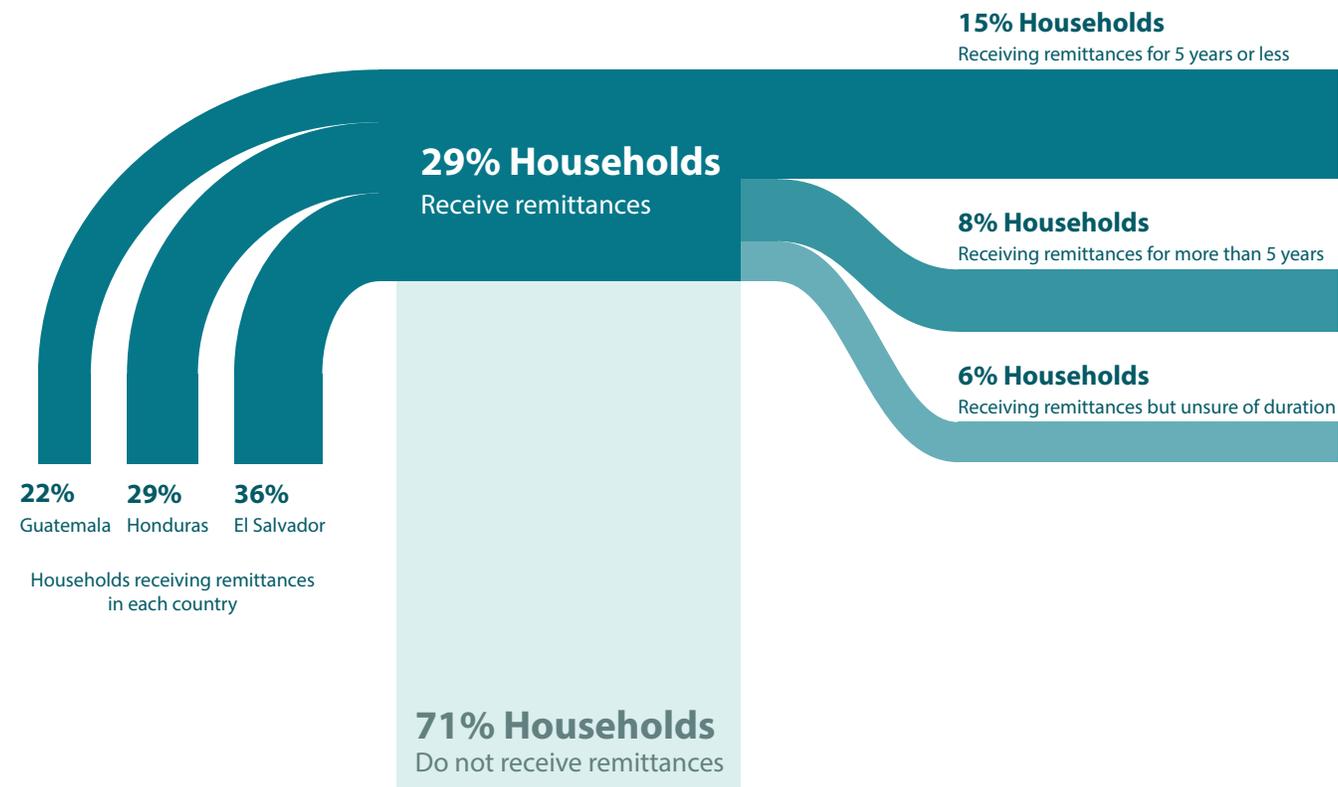
The amount of money received by surveyed households varied across countries of origin. Guatemalan households on average received USD 350 in remittances monthly, compared to USD 170 and USD 150 for Honduran and Salvadoran households, respectively. These amounts were roughly equivalent to 170 percent of household monthly expenditures in Guatemala, 70 percent in Honduras, and 62 percent in El Salvador. And despite the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant remittances to Central America increased in 2020, reaching approximately USD 11.6 billion in Guatemala,

Despite the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant remittances to Central America increased in 2020.

USD 5.9 billion in El Salvador, and USD 5.5 billion in Honduras. In fact, migrant remittances in 2020 accounted for 15 percent of GDP in Guatemala, 24 percent in El Salvador, and 23 percent in Honduras.⁵⁸

FIGURE 19

Surveyed Households Receiving Remittances from Abroad, 2021



Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

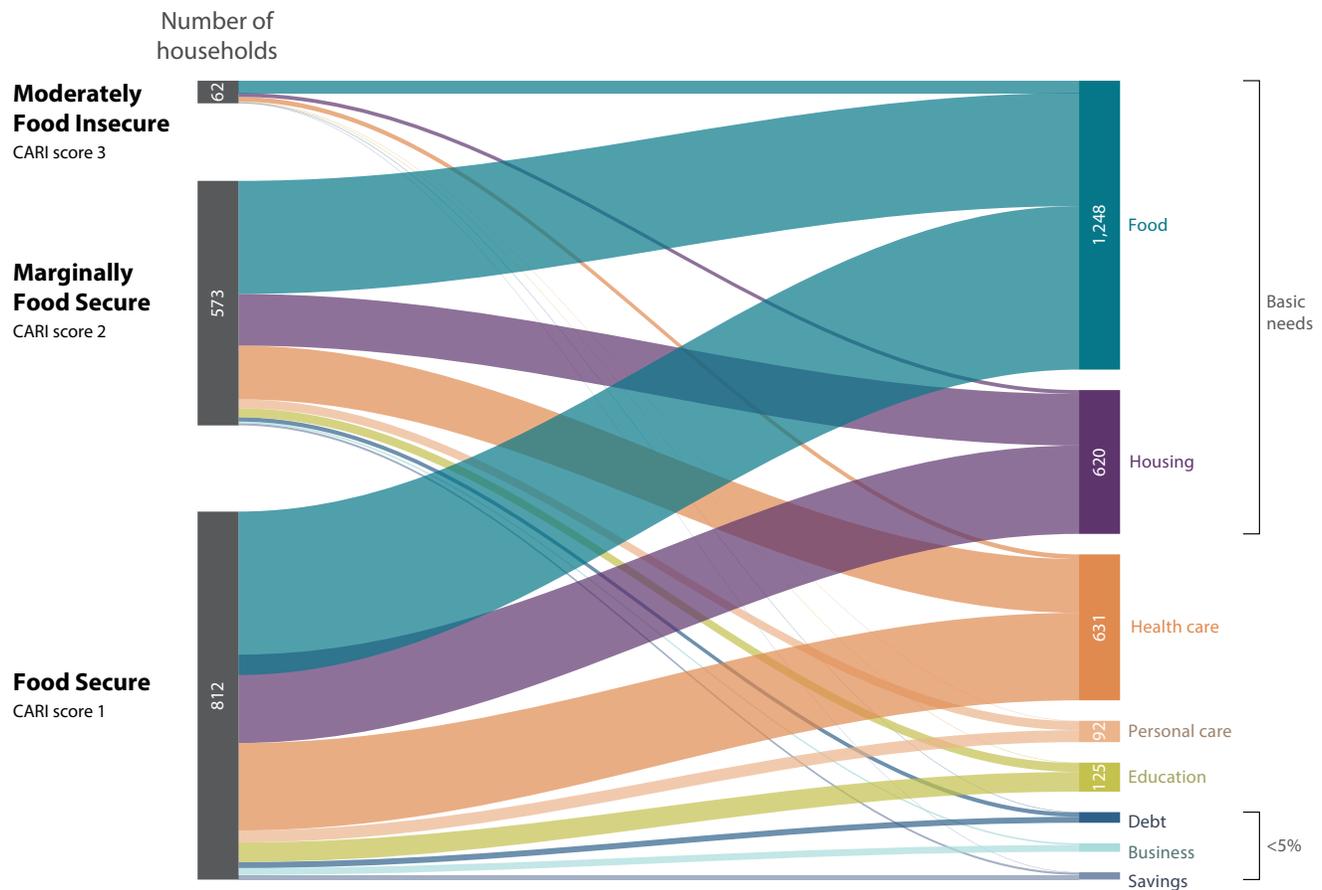
Even with increasing migrant remittances, however, surveyed households reported that they used remittances primarily as a means to meet immediate needs and subsistence costs. The most commonly cited uses of remittances were to pay for food (86 percent), health expenses (40 percent), and utility bills (30 percent). In sharp contrast, only about 5 percent of households indicated they used remittances to invest in savings, pay off debts, or purchase agricultural inputs.

Looking at remittance-receiving households across food security levels further demonstrates the dependence on remittances to cover basic needs. More than half of surveyed households, regardless of their level of food security, said they used remittances to buy food and pay for housing costs (see Figure 20). And households that were less food secure were more likely to spend remittances on food costs. Notably, households with severe food insecurity did not report receiving remittances, making them significantly less resilient to economic instability.

⁵⁸ World Bank, "Resilience COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens" (Migration and Development Brief No. 34, World Bank Group, Washington, DC, May 2021); World Bank, "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP) – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras," accessed July 27, 2021.

FIGURE 20

Household Spending of Remittances Reported by Survey Respondents, by Level of Food Security and Type of Expenditure, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
 Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Migrant remittances therefore represent a fundamental lifeline for households, enabling them to afford their basic needs and without which their living conditions would be more precarious. At the national level, remittances contribute to consumer spending and to maintaining economic stability, but these findings suggest that remittances alone are not enough to support short-term development or upward social mobility, given the small share that goes to social investment or entrepreneurial projects, which are often cited as potential catalysts of development.⁵⁹

59 Central American Bank for Economic Integration, *Remittances in Central America: The Role of CABI* (Tegucigalpa: Central American Bank for Economic Integration, 2021); Flore Gubert, "Migration, Remittances and Development: Insights from the Migration and Development Conference," *Revue d'économie du développement* 25, no. 3-4 (2017): 29-44; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "International Migrant Remittances and their Role in Development," in *International Migration Outlook 2006* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2006), 139-61.

5 Conclusions

To date, unilateral and bilateral attempts to address increasing Central American migration have been characterized by their reactive nature, limited reach, and narrow focus on reducing irregular movement. Policy responses prioritizing control and enforcement may temporarily reduce irregular migration, but they have failed to build durable solutions to manage regional migration and promote safe, orderly, and regular movement. As a result, the persistent root causes of migration—a combination of income inequality, poverty and hunger, violence and insecurity, and the effects of climate events—continue to drive Central Americans without accessible legal alternatives to make the dangerous journey toward the United States through irregular channels.

Irregular migration is a risky gamble for Central Americans seeking to increase their income and prosperity over the long term, given its substantial upfront financial costs and the uncertainty of success. It also carries economic losses for the region more broadly. At the macro level, the economic conditions that trigger migration and the legal framework that regulates it result in a loss of human capital from origin-country labor forces and an outflow of personal and external investments that are spent on migration costs but might otherwise help promote development.

Destination countries benefit from the added labor supply for in-demand occupations, but the monetary costs of irregular migration are siphoned to smugglers and unregulated, untaxed markets, which take away from potential public benefits and investments.⁶⁰ While migrants' remittances are a significant source of economic support in countries of origin, without dedicated channels to promote development projects, they are insufficient to improve the very conditions that motivate people to migrate.

Yet, an opportunity to address these root causes, rethink migration policies, and thereby lay the foundation for a sustainable migration management system appears to be opening, with growing consensus around the importance of regional cooperation. The long-term objective underlying such consensus is ensuring that migrating becomes an option for Central Americans, not the only recourse to escape extreme poverty, hunger, and limited opportunities at home.

Charting this new regional course of action must start with understanding the key drivers of migration and its costs. From the overwhelming effect of economic conditions on migration desires to the reasons people decide to stay and the costs of irregular migration, this report's findings point to the following potential opportunities for collaboration:

- 1 Expanding national social protection programs and stimulating investments to increase economic opportunities, eradicate hunger, and alleviate poverty for at-risk populations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** Despite small differences across each country, households

Policy responses prioritizing control and enforcement may temporarily reduce irregular migration, but they have failed to build durable solutions to manage regional migration and promote safe, orderly, and regular movement.

⁶⁰ Greenfield et al., "Human Smuggling and Associated Revenues"; UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Smuggling of Migrants: A Global Review and Annotated Bibliography of Recent Publications* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011).

reported that the lack of economic prosperity and difficulty meeting basic needs had significant and far-reaching impacts on decisions to migrate. Social protection programs that address unemployment and offer work training are pivotal to reaching vulnerable populations who may be considering emigrating. Additionally, taking steps to address these conditions should go hand-in-hand with supporting programs that build resilience and address violence, insecurity, and climate change, prioritizing and expanding those programs that also create economic opportunities.

- 2 Tailoring ongoing economic development and investment initiatives to municipal-level conditions with robust monitoring and evaluation metrics.** Even as the survey's results overwhelmingly underscored the effect economic factors have on migration desires, they also pointed to small but notable differences across municipalities. Internal and external development efforts and investments to address the root causes of migration—for instance, agricultural programs to build resilience to climate events or anti-gang programming for youth—will be most effective if tailored to these local circumstances, based on information gathered through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
- 3 Creating incentives and opportunities for diasporas to invest in the development of local communities and to become agents of change in their countries of origin or ancestry.** Remittances are a lifeline that mitigates local economic instability for Central American households—in effect, buffering against economic migration pressures. But to amplify the impact of remittances beyond individual households, governments and international organizations should consider diasporas as potential agents of economic development and governance. Creating incentives for members of a diaspora to invest in public works can magnify the reach of government efforts while simultaneously enriching transnational partnerships to improve governance, for example, by matching diaspora donations with transparent and accountable commitments from the national, departmental, and municipal governments.
- 4 Incorporating programs and initiatives that underscore the positive conditions that give people the option to seek opportunities at home into broader migration management strategies.** Governments and civil-society leaders alike can influence how migration is portrayed publicly by investing in programs that build family unity, highlight existing perceptions of safety, and foster a sense of belonging to local communities. Highlighting these positive aspects of local life and targeting efforts to groups most likely to migrate irregularly (e.g., households with members who migrated recently) can foster hope and bolster socioeconomic investments, such as entrepreneurial and infrastructure projects. To improve their chances of shaping migration decision-making, such initiatives must be paired with efforts to address the concrete drivers of irregular migration, with the aim of giving people the possibility to choose.
- 5 Expanding legal pathways for Central Americans interested in migrating to the United States and other destination countries to redirect migration from irregular to regular channels.** Coordinated efforts to increase access to temporary employment visas, for example, could help meet the overwhelming demand for employment opportunities abroad. Shifting even a fraction of irregular migration to regular channels would decrease the estimated USD 1.7 billion that Central Americans

spend annually on irregular migration with a smuggler and instead increase state revenues—for instance, through reasonable application fees—which can then be invested in initiatives to address other drivers of irregular migration.

Implementing these recommendations will contribute to efforts to eradicate hunger, alleviate poverty, and craft a new approach to the management of Central American migration. These efforts require collaboration across and within regional governments, as well as coordination with UN agencies, civil-society organizations, and the private sector. And while reconfiguring existing U.S. immigration policies is fundamental to several of these objectives, the success of the broader strategy will depend on efforts and initiatives led by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The findings of this study regarding the drivers of migration and migrants' sociodemographic profiles provide governments an opportunity to design tailored programs and initiatives for populations most likely to migrate irregularly, linking these efforts to economic recovery measures. Additional research will also be needed to craft regional responses, given the complex and dynamic nature of migration in the region. This includes a closer look at how drivers of migration may change as the pandemic eases, and at the interactions between economic factors and violence, insecurity, and climate change. Addressing the root causes of migration from Central America is a long-term strategy, but by alleviating poverty and implementing a regional migration management strategy, governments can shape this movement in the near term and promote migration that is safe, orderly, and lawful.

Addressing the root causes of migration from Central America is a long-term strategy, but by alleviating poverty and implementing a regional migration management strategy, governments can shape this movement in the near term and promote migration that is safe, orderly, and lawful.

Appendices

Appendix A. Household Survey Methodology

Designed by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and following Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis guidelines,⁶¹ the face-to-face, household survey used in this report asked respondents in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras about their living conditions, intentions to migrate, and the sociodemographic characteristics of household members who had migrated, among other related questions. The survey was administered in person by trained enumerators between April 20 and May 15, 2021, and captured valid responses from 4,998 households (see Table A–1 for sample distribution and selected demographics).

The survey is based on a two-step stratified cluster sampling design with two analytical strata: households reporting having at least one household member who had migrated within the five years prior to data collection, and households reporting having no members who migrated during the same period. To approximate representativeness at the departmental level, WFP calculated a required sample minimum of 1,500 households with 90 percent confidence, 5 percent precision, and 1.5 design effect. The main parameter used to calculate the sample size was the percentage of people directly receiving remittances in the country, as a proxy for migration. The proportion of people directly receiving remittances was derived from national migration and remittances surveys conducted in the three countries between 2016 and 2018; the results were 17 percent for El Salvador, 9 percent for Guatemala, and 17 percent for Honduras.

Though the initial intent was to survey a larger set of departments, WFP administered the survey instrument in 12 departments—four in each of the three Central American countries—due to mobility and health restrictions resulting from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These departments were selected based on the reported number of migrants returning to municipalities in each department, as a proxy for emigration rates, and food insecurity levels (as measured by their most recent Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, including CARI indicators) to capture households in diverse socioeconomic settings.⁶² Municipal-level figures for returnees were kindly provided by the International Organization for Migration. The selected departments of study were: Ahuachapán, Cabañas, San Salvador, and Usulután in El Salvador; Alta Verapaz, Chiquimula, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos in Guatemala; and Choluteca, Cortés, Francisco Morazán, and Yoro in Honduras.

In each department, 25 communities were randomly selected using land scan data, and once in the communities, enumerators were trained to randomly select households using a systematic approach based on a randomly selected number. Enumerators conducted at least 15 interviews per site and visited a total of 100 communities in each country. From design to execution, administrators conducted the survey seeking to capture as robust a cross-section of each country as possible (i.e., rural and urban settings, areas of low and high out migration, and those with low and high food security).

61 WFP, “Comprehensive Food Security & Vulnerability Analysis (CFSVA) Guidelines - First Edition, 2009,” updated January 30, 2009.

62 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, “IPC Analysis Portal,” accessed September 30, 2021.

TABLE A-1

Selected Demographics of Respondents in the Household Survey, 2021

	Sample Count	Percent of Total
Total Number of Individuals Interviewed	4,998	100%
Age		
0–17	29	1%
18–34	1,583	32%
35–44	1,028	21%
45+	2,358	47%
Sex		
Female*	3,675	74%
Origin Country and Department		
El Salvador	1,703	34%
Ahuachapán	526	11%
Cabañas	313	6%
San Salvador	353	7%
Usulután	511	10%
Guatemala	1,730	35%
Alta Verapaz	405	8%
Chiquimula	392	8%
Huehuetenango	437	9%
San Marcos	496	10%
Honduras	1,565	31%
Choluteca	386	8%
Cortés	408	8%
Francisco Morazán	385	8%
Yoro	386	8%

* One respondent preferred not to specify their sex, meaning the remaining 1,322 respondents (26 percent of the sample) identified as men. Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Limitations

Despite best efforts to capture a fully representative sample of household respondents, WFP was not able to administer the survey questionnaire beyond the 12 selected departments because of COVID-19-related mobility restrictions. As a result, findings from this household survey are representative at the departmental level, not nationally, despite its large and randomized sample in departments known to have high emigration rates. To draw conclusions about migration intentions and costs at the national level, however, the authors cross-referenced and confirmed the findings of the household survey with those of a separate, nationally representative, online survey with certain assumptions as described in Appendix B.

In addition, this survey relies on household members' responses by design and not on those of migrants themselves. The enumerators were instructed to only collect information related to direct family members who were part of the household before their migration and who are still members, if remotely (e.g., spouse, parent, or brother or sister if still in the paternal house). Findings about migrants' characteristics, experiences, and costs thus capture household members' perception and memory of events. This limitation is inherent to studying populations in transit, and these personal accounts nonetheless represent significant contributions to understanding migration dynamics and policy impacts.

Appendix B. Web Survey Methodology

In June 2021, WFP conducted a survey of individual web users in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras using Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT),⁶³ with the objective of expanding public understanding of changes in migration drivers and of individuals' migration experiences. A total of 6,064 survey responses were collected and filtered to exclude non-human responses to meet validation thresholds. The sample included a minimum of 90 observations in each of the 54 departments across the three countries, making survey findings nationally representative (see Table A–2 for sample distribution).

RDIT administers short, opinion assessments to large samples of randomized online users by redirecting them to questionnaires when they input a broken or misdirected URL. In this case, individual web users in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who searched or reached broken websites were redirected and invited to anonymously participate in a survey about their intentions to migrate, past migration history, experience of food security, and living conditions. Participants could access the survey across devices (e.g., desktops, laptops, tablets, and cell phones), and the survey was conducted in participants' native language, primarily in Spanish.

The authors tested and confirmed that findings regarding respondents' migration intentions from the web survey follow similar trends as those observed in the household survey. The authors also confirmed demographic characteristics across samples are similar. As such, this study relies on the household survey, with supplemental information from the web survey, to draw certain conclusions about the three countries at the national level, including population inputs to calculate migration costs.

TABLE A–2
Web Survey Sample Distribution by Country of Origin

Country of Origin	Valid Number of Surveys
El Salvador	1,253
Guatemala	2,957
Honduras	1,854
Total	6,064

63 Real-time Interactive World-Wide Intelligence (RIWI) Technology, "Random Domain Intercept Technology," accessed September 30, 2021.

Limitations

An important limitation of this online survey is that it excludes by default populations that do not have internet access. Estimates suggest that the share of the population with access to the internet varies across Central America: 65 percent of Guatemalans were estimated to have internet access in 2020, followed by 59 percent of Salvadorans, and 42 percent of Hondurans.⁶⁴ This means that significant shares of these populations may not be equally represented under this survey instrument. At the same time, reports suggest that migrant populations are increasingly using social media and the internet to communicate and learn about migration opportunities and to make plans.⁶⁵ Therefore, it is unclear the extent to which (would-be) migrants were included versus excluded from this survey compared to other groups.

In addition to populations with limited internet access, other groups may have been excluded from participating in the survey. Central Americans who do not know how to read are another important demographic that may not be equally represented in survey results. Additionally, WFP generally collects information on the age and education level of respondents, which has shown that people above age 45 are generally less likely to answer randomized web surveys. Estimates of internet access also indicate that women are less likely to have access to the internet than men worldwide, and therefore they may be less able to respond to web surveys.⁶⁶ To account for age and gender discrepancies, WFP weighted these factors against the normal population distribution when analyzing survey results.

64 DataReportal, “[Digital 2020: Guatemala](#),” accessed November 2, 2021; DataReportal, “[Digital 2020: El Salvador](#),” accessed November 2, 2021; DataReportal, “[Digital 2020: Honduras](#),” accessed November 2, 2021.

65 This has prompted the U.S. government to monitor these channels more closely and enhance its messaging against irregular migration through these platforms. See Ailsa Chang, Amy Isackson, and Miguel Macias, “[How Social Media Has Changed Migration to the United States](#),” National Public Radio, October 14, 2021; Julia Ainsley, “[Biden Admin to Build Intelligence-Gathering Cell to Track Groups of Migrants Headed North](#),” NBC News, October 18, 2021; Ted Hesson, “[U.S. to Push More ‘Aggressive’ Messaging Effort to Deter Migrants](#),” Reuters, March 18, 2021.

66 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2020* (Geneva: ITU Publications, 2020).

About the Authors



ARIEL G. RUIZ SOTO

 @ruizags

Ariel G. Ruiz Soto is a Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), where he works with the U.S. Immigration Policy Program and the Latin America Initiative. His research examines the interaction of migration policies in the region that stretches from Panama to Canada, as well as their intended and unintended consequences for foreign- and native-born populations. He also analyzes demographic trends across the region and methodological approaches to estimate the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States.

Mr. Ruiz Soto holds a master's degree from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration with an emphasis on immigration policy and service provision, and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Whitman College.



ROSSELLA BOTTONE

Rossella Bottone is a Vulnerability Analysis Advisor for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). Currently based in the Panama regional office, she has more than 15 years of experience in the humanitarian sector and is an expert in emergency food security assessments, vulnerability surveys, and data analysis in support of early warning and emergency preparedness. She has worked in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala, Haiti, Italy, Nepal, and Senegal, and has conducted needs assessments for WFP in more than 20 countries in Latin America and Africa.

Ms. Bottone holds a master's degree in international cooperation from the University of Pavia in Italy and is pursuing a master's in humanitarian action from SOAS, University of London.



JARET WATERS

 @jaretwaters

Jaret Waters interned with MPI's Latin America Initiative, where he supported research on Central America and Mexico. His research interests include border management, migration governance, and Indigenous migration throughout Latin America, with a specific focus on Brazil's migration regime. Previously, he interned at the U.S. Embassy in Brazil, the Latin America Working Group, and the Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina in Brazil.

Mr. Waters holds bachelor's degrees in economics and Spanish from The Ohio State University.



SARAH WILLIAMS

 @datasew

Sarah Williams is an Associate Professor of Technology and Urban Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where she is also Director of the Civic Data Design Lab and the Leventhal Center for Advanced Urbanism. Ms. Williams combines her training in computation and design to create communication strategies that expose urban policy issues to broad audiences and create civic change. She calls the process Data Action, which is also the name of her 2020 book published by MIT Press. Williams is co-founder and developer of Envelope.city, a web-based software product that visualizes and allows users to modify zoning in New York City.

Before coming to MIT, Ms. Williams was Co-Director of the Spatial Information Design Lab at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. Her design work has been widely exhibited, including work in the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, Venice Biennale, and the Cooper Hewitt Museum.



ASHLEY LOUIE

 @_ashsicle

Ashley Louie is a Research Associate at MIT's Civic Data Design Lab, where she works at the intersection of design, data visualization, and interactive web development. With a passion for engaging people and serving communities, she has developed a multi-scalar approach to systems and spaces in the public realm. She analyzes data, designs visual graphics, and creates a narrative to advocate for public good.

Ms. Louie holds a master's degree in architecture and urban design from Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, where she was awarded the Visualization Award; and a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Southern California.



YUEHAN WANG

Yuehan Wang is a Research Affiliate at MIT's Civic Data Design Lab and focuses on data analysis. As a recent MIT graduate, she has a background in urban design and social science. At MIT, she developed a passion for exploring technology and data's role in urban intervention and expanded her skillset to data analysis and visualization.

Ms. Wang holds master's degrees in city planning and in real estate development from MIT and a bachelor of engineering degree in urban planning from Sichuan University, China.

Acknowledgments

This report was made possible by support and coordination from the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the Organization of American States (OAS).

The WFP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean coordinated the study and implemented both the household survey and the remote data collection in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Many WFP colleagues supported the study in a variety of functions, particularly Annette Castillo, Johanna Costanza, Carlos Martinez, Adriana Moreno, Luis Penutt, Hector Roca, Claudia Saenz, Francesco Stompanato, and Andrea Vega, who led the survey deployment; Angie Lee, who helped with the planning and secondary data review; and Krishna Krishnamurthy, who conducted the climate variability analysis.

The authors are also grateful for the planning support and implementation of data collection provided by teams from the Information Systems Program for Resilience in Food and Nutrition Security at the Central American Integration System (PROGRESAN-SICA), Oxfam, Action against Hunger, and WeWorld-GVC. Likewise, the authors recognize the invaluable contributions of the local and national authorities across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which made it possible to reach 300 communities. And most importantly in this effort, the authors are immensely grateful for the participation of the nearly 5,000 families who welcomed the survey implementors and shared insights about their households' migration experiences. This study could not have been possible without them.

For their creative design and visualization of a number of the figures in this report, as well as for their creation of a related website to showcase the data presented here (<http://migration.mit.edu/>), the authors thank the Civic Data Design Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, including Octavie Berendschot, Luis Alberto Meouchi Velez, Zoe Kuhlken, Victor Chau, and Carlos Centeno.

Finally, the authors express their gratitude to Migration Policy Institute (MPI) colleagues Andrew Selee and Diego Chaves-González for reviewing earlier versions of this report; Lauren Shaw for editing it; and Michelle Mittelstadt and Julia Yanoff for strategic outreach.

MPI is an independent, nonpartisan policy research organization that adheres to the highest standard of rigor and integrity in its work. All analysis, recommendations, and policy ideas advanced by MPI are solely determined by its researchers.

© 2021 World Food Programme, Migration Policy Institute, and Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior permission from the World Food Programme, the Migration Policy Institute, or the Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

This document has been subject to an editorial review. A full text pdf of this report can be downloaded at: www.migrationpolicy.org.

Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI

Layout: Yoseph Hamid, MPI

Cover Photo: World Food Programme/Julian Frank

Suggested citation: Ruiz Soto, Ariel G., Rossella Bottone, Jaret Waters, Sarah Williams, Ashley Louie, and Yuehan Wang. 2021. *Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration*. Rome, Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: World Food Programme, Migration Policy Institute, and Civic Data Design Lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

