



Understanding the adverse drivers and implications of migration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras

A comprehensive analysis building on the report on “Complex motivations and costs of Central American migration”

Full report available at the following links:

<https://rosanjose.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11446/files/documents/understanding-the-adverse-drivers-and-implications-of-migration-from-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras-iom-and-wfp-2022.pdf>

<https://es.wfp.org/publicaciones/comprendiendo-los-factores-adversos-y-las-implicaciones-de-la-migracion>



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



A. OVERVIEW

WFP and IOM collaborated on a study to enhance the understanding of migration profiles and adverse drivers of migration in NCA, which consists of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. This publication serves as an in-depth research report as a follow-on to the initial policy brief on a survey elaborated by WFP, the MPI and the Civic Data Design Lab at the MIT, [Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration](#), published in November 2021.

This research follows previous studies coordinated by both United Nations Agencies in the region and globally. It is aligned with the first objective of the GCM, which calls for the collection and use of accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies. Furthermore, the research is aligned with the first priority of IOM's Regional Strategy for the region of Central America, North America and the Caribbean, which aims to address the adverse drivers of migration, as well as WFP's Strategic Plan (2017–2021), which aligns WFP's programmes and activities with the SDGs to end hunger and contribute to revitalized global partnerships. The main component of this study consists of a multisectoral household survey with a focus on recent migrant outflows and respondent migration intentions conducted in four departments of each country in March and April of 2021.



B. CONTEXT: MIGRATION FROM THE THREE COUNTRIES OF NORTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA

The countries in NCA have experienced sustained outflows of migrants in recent decades. The United States has by far been the main country of destination of migrants from the three countries during the last 30 years. While the three countries experienced moderate economic growth in the same period, this growth has not been inclusive or led to a significant improvement in living conditions, with a persistent lack of economic opportunities and decent work, low and/or stagnant wages, food insecurity, poverty and inequality, high levels of informality, weak institutions and other adverse economic drivers. All three countries have per capita incomes 15 to 30 times less than the United States. These contextual factors, along with the impact of natural hazards (both rapid- and slow-onset), violence at the community, familial and individual levels, as well as family reunification and pull factors in key destination countries continue to play a role in the decision to migrate.

Access to regular pathways to migrate to the United States and other key destination countries are limited for many migrants from NCA. Those who manage to migrate through regular channels do so primarily through temporary worker programmes or family reunification channels. Many migrants who cannot avail of these mechanisms are instead left to journey thousands of kilometres by land from their origin in Central America through Mexico in search for a better life abroad. Land journeys are expensive, dangerous and usually rely on networks of local intermediaries, or smugglers, which are sometimes linked to other forms of organized (including violent) crime. Dangers for migrants include a wide array of protection concerns including violence, human trafficking and various health and safety risks. Tragically, many migrants never reach their destination, and there are many deaths and disappearances on these routes. Since 2014 and through October 2021, a total of 1,350 migrant deaths and disappearances were recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project in Central America, as well as 2,703 migrant deaths and disappearances in North America (mainly, near the United States–Mexico border).



C. SURVEY METHODOLOGY: QUESTIONNAIRE AND SAMPLING DESIGN

The questionnaire asked households to provide multisectoral information on living conditions at the time of data collection while also asking respondents to report on their intentions, plans and preparations to migrate in the future. The sample includes households with recent migration outflows (having at least one family member who migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to data collection) and households without recent migration. For households with recent migration, information was collected on the characteristics of each individual who migrated in the specified period.

The survey assessed 4,998 total respondents, one per household sampled. Respondents answered questions about themselves, the household as a whole and members of their household. Enumerators collected data in face-to-face questionnaires between 20 April and 15 May 2021. The sample design had two analytical strata, consisting of households with recent migration outflows (at least one member who migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to data collection) and households without members who migrated in the same period. Households were selected in 12 departments, four per country. In each department, 25 communities were randomly selected using land scan data.

Survey results are indicative at the level of all four departments surveyed in each country and are not nationally representative. Differences reported between countries refer only to respondents located in these 12 administrative units assessed and are not generalizable or representative of departments or at the aggregate country level. Information on recent migrants themselves was collected by proxy from household respondents, which may affect the accuracy of survey results.



D. KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDINGS: MULTISECTORAL PROFILE OF ALL SURVEYED HOUSEHOLDS

1. **Income and expenditures. A quarter of households reported that they were in a critical or difficult situation regarding levels of household income at the time of data collection. Approximately half of surveyed households were estimated to be living on less than USD 2 per capita, per day.**

- Just over half (52%) of all individuals ages 15 and older identified in the sample were reported to have worked to earn an income in the 30 days prior to data collection, with considerable variation by sex – 73 per cent for males compared to 29 per cent for females ages 15 and older.
- Twelve per cent (12%) of households reported that they were experiencing a “critical deficiency” of household income (that is, not being able to meet even the most basic needs), while 32 per cent reported that they were facing a “very difficult situation” in terms of levels of household income at the time of data collection. Around 48 per cent of households reported that they were “surviving” on current income, and just 16 per cent reported feeling that they could live comfortably with their levels of income at the time of data collection.

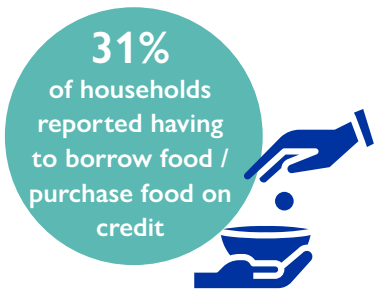
42%
of households reported
struggling or not
being able to meet
basic needs at current
income levels



- Median monthly expenditures were considerably low among the surveyed population in all three countries. Estimated median monthly per capita expenditures amounted to just USD 60, while median monthly household expenditures were estimated at USD 230. Median household expenditures were well below basic food baskets in both Guatemala and Honduras.

2. Food insecurity. It was calculated that approximately one in ten (9%) surveyed households were food insecure at the time of data collection.

- By country, the prevalence of food insecurity was 12 per cent among surveyed households in Guatemala, nine per cent in Honduras and five per cent in El Salvador.



- There were also signs of deficient quality in food consumption, with a notable lack in dietary diversity across many surveyed households.
- More than half of households (52%) reported buying cheap food or less preferred food as a coping strategy, followed by a reduction in meal proportions (32%) and borrowing food/purchasing food on credit (31%) in the 30 days prior to data collection.

3. COVID-19 pandemic. A large proportion of surveyed households (67%) reported that their household income decreased as a consequence of COVID-19.

- Approximately one-third (34%) of households reported that at least one household member had lost their employment or business during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the highest percentage seen among surveyed households in Guatemala (39%).
- Approximately one-third (32%) of all surveyed households reported perceiving that the living standards in their place of residence had worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Social assistance. During the pandemic, 48 per cent of the surveyed households reported having received some form of support from the government and/or other institutions.

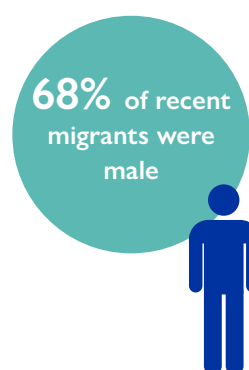
- In El Salvador, more than nine out of ten surveyed households (92.4%) reported having received support from a governmental programme in the six months prior to data collection. Of those surveyed households reporting that they had received governmental support in this period, 95 per cent reported that they had received in-kind food items.
- In Honduras, 16 per cent of surveyed households reported having received any support from a governmental programme in the six months prior to data collection, while in Guatemala 36 per cent of surveyed households reported having received support from the government in this period, mainly in the form of cash assistance.

KEY FINDINGS: RECENT OUTFLOWS OF MIGRANTS^A**1. Emigration. Results from the study show significant levels of recent migrant outflows from the subregion.**

- Nearly a quarter (24%) of surveyed households reported at least one member who migrated or attempted to migrate internationally in the five years prior to data collection, ranging from 22–23 per cent in El Salvador and Guatemala to 27 per cent of surveyed households in Honduras.

2. Profile of migrant outflows. Most recent migrant outflows identified within surveyed households were composed of young males of working age, with more feminized migration from Honduras.

- Seven in ten (68%) of the 1,200 individuals reported to have migrated from surveyed households in the five years prior to data collection were men, the vast majority between the ages of 18 and 41. Female migrants constituted just 32 per cent of recent migrants identified in the sample.
- Female migrants accounted for 21 per cent of recent migrants identified in surveyed households in Guatemala, 33 per cent in El Salvador and 38 per cent in Honduras.

**3. Adverse drivers. Most recent migrants left in search of better employment, wages and job opportunities abroad and to cover food and other essential needs. Low proportions of recent migrants were reported to have migrated or attempted to migrate due to violence/insecurity or natural hazards.**

- Three quarters (76%) of individuals reported to have migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to data collection were reported to have done so to search for a better job, salary or working conditions, 14 per cent to cover food and 22 per cent other essential needs. Two in five (38%) were reported to have migrated due to unemployment in their countries of origin.
- Violence/insecurity was reported as motivation for only seven per cent (7%) of recent migrants identified in the sample, while natural hazards were only cited as a motivation for three per cent (3%).
- Motivations for migration did not differ significantly between recent female and male migrants.

4. Widespread migrant smuggling. Many recent migrants completed their journeys alone. Others went with friends and family. Over half of recent migrants reported using the services of smuggler(s).

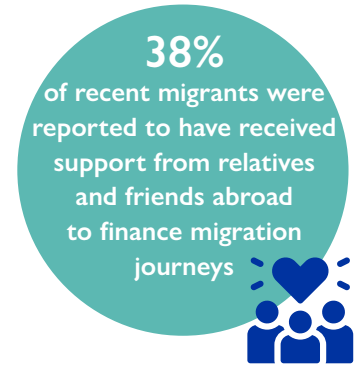
- Nearly three in five (58%) recent migrants were reported to have completed their migration journeys without friends and family, while approximately two in five were reported to have migrated with family members and friends. Female migrants were more likely to have migrated with friends and family when compared with male migrants.

^A Information in this subsection on individual migrants was collected by proxy from household respondents. For the most part, individual migrants were not interviewed directly, unless they happened to return to their communities of origin by the time of data collection and responded to the survey on behalf of their household. Household respondents were asked to report on the characteristics of each individual who migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior to data collection.

- Fifty-five per cent (55%) of recent migrants were reported to have used the services of smugglers during their migration journeys. This was lower in Honduras (28%) compared to El Salvador (63%) and Guatemala (79%).

5. High migration costs. Recent migrants incurred significant costs in order to finance their migration journeys. Many financed their journeys through assistance from relatives and friends abroad or by taking on new debts.

- Of those recent migrants for whom respondents reported migration costs, the average quantity spent was approximately USD 5,000, between transportation, subsistence (such as food and water and other non-food items) as well as payment of intermediaries/smugglers.
- To finance their journeys, 38 per cent of recent migrants identified in the sample were reported to have received support from relatives and friends abroad, while 22 per cent were reported to have financed their journeys through loans and 18 per cent from savings.



6. Significant return migration. Substantial proportions of individuals who migrated or attempted to migrate in the five years prior had already returned to their household by the time of data collection.

- One in three (33.3%) recent migrants were reported to have returned to their households by the time of data collection. The majority of those who returned (64%) were reported to have been returned involuntarily to their countries of origin.

7. The power of remittances. Remittances were found to form the foundation of many recipient households' ability to afford daily necessities.

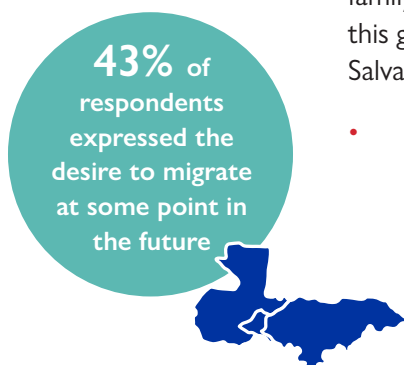
- Twenty-nine per cent (29%) of all assessed households reported having received remittances in the 12 months prior to data collection – ranging from 22 per cent of assessed households in Guatemala, 29 per cent in Honduras and 36 per cent in El Salvador.
- Households with recent migrants reported having monthly expenses of USD 50 more than households without recent migrants, possibly due to remittances received in recent years.
- The vast majority of households that reported receiving remittances reported spending money received on meeting basic needs such as food, health care and housing-related costs. Sixty-four per cent (64%) of all remittances received were spent on food alone.

8. Migrant deaths and disappearances. The survey captured dynamics on the tragic loss of life during migration journeys. There were cases in which respondents reported that an individual who attempted to migrate from their household in the five years prior to data collection had lost their lives during their migration journey or whose whereabouts were unknown, highlighting the grave risks that migrants undergo each day embarking on migration routes through the region.

KEY FINDINGS: MIGRATION DESIRES, PLANS AND PREPARATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRATION

1. Migration desires, plans and preparations. Significant proportions of respondents – 43 per cent, or over two in five – reported that they would like to move permanently to another country if they had the opportunity to do so at any point in the future. However, very small proportions of respondents – six per cent in total – reported that they were actually planning on migrating in the 12 months following data collection. Even fewer respondents – just three per cent in total – reported having already engaged in specific preparations to migrate at the time of data collection (such as taking on a loan, saving money or organizing transport).

- Of those respondents reporting the desire to migrate at any point (across all three countries), approximately 80 per cent reported searching for a better job, salary or working conditions abroad as one of their main motivations for wishing to migrate.
- Of those respondents who were not planning to move to another country in the next 12 months (corresponding to 1,812), 59 per cent expressed the lack of resources to pay for the trip as the main reason preventing them from migrating.
- Of the 2,486 respondents (49.7%) who expressed the desire to remain in their communities of origin (that is, who did not report the desire to migrate permanently to another country or internally at any point in the future), the main reason reported for wanting to stay was to avoid family separation – this was reported by 66 per cent of respondents in this group in Guatemala, 71 per cent in Honduras and 59 per cent in El Salvador.
- Of respondents in El Salvador expressing the desire to remain in their communities of origin, over half (55%) reported a sense of rootedness in their country and community as a reason for intending to remain.



2. Perceptions of migration: migration is viewed ambivalently among survey respondents, who perceived the process to bring both positive and negative impacts to themselves, their families and their communities.

- Forty-six per cent (46%) of respondents reported perceiving that migrating internationally brings both positive and negative consequences to their families
- Among the positive perceptions of migration, respondents in all three countries mentioned improvements in levels of household income and family living conditions.
- Regarding the main negative consequences reported by respondents, among the three countries and for both men and women, family separation was the most frequently reported negative impact of migration (cited by 73% of respondents in total).

KEY FINDINGS: COMPARING SELECTED HOUSEHOLD AND INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS WITH OUTCOMES ON KEY INDICATORS

3. Adverse migration drivers. Economic variables such as employment, savings and income presented statistical associations with recent migration.

- The main identified drivers that had a measured and tested relationship with recent household migration profiles were income and economic-related factors. The following economic, livelihood, monetary and financial variables showed a statistical association with recent migration: jobs or businesses lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, being dissatisfied with standards of living, lack of savings in the household, current debt or credit in the household, insufficient income for non-food items, insufficient income to buy food and whether households received remittances in the 12 months prior to data collection.
- Other variables which were found to be associated with recent migration were: households headed by a single female, households affected by the coffee rust disease^b, the lack of electricity in the household, as well as household roofing materials (often used as a proxy to understand broader living conditions).
- The following variables showed no association with recent migration: whether households were in rural versus urban areas, as well being satisfied with current living conditions.
- Exposure to natural hazards was not determined to have a significant association with recent migration, except for households exposed to the coffee rust disease. On the other hand, exposure to natural hazards was determined to have a statistically significant relationship with whether respondents expressed the desire to migrate permanently to another country at some point in the future, specifically the exposure to hurricanes and tropical storms or the exposure to floods during the three years prior to data collection. This could become a trigger for migration if exposure in the future is more frequent and severe.



CONCLUSIONS: ADDRESS THE ADVERSE SOCIOECONOMIC DRIVERS OF MIGRATION AND CREATE REGULAR PATHWAYS.

Findings on the nexus of factors influencing migration from NCA would suggest an urgent need for comprehensive policy responses oriented toward addressing the adverse socioeconomic drivers of migration. While investments in economic development, building food security and poverty alleviation measures are meant for the long term, it would be also important to create additional and more inclusive regular pathways of migration, such as circular labour mobility, in the short- and medium-term.

Full report available at the following links:

1. <https://rosanjose.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1446/files/documents/understanding-the-adverse-drivers-and-implications-of-migration-from-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras-iom-and-wfp-2022.pdf>

2. <https://es.wfp.org/publicaciones/comprendiendo-los-factores-adversos-y-las-implicaciones-de-la-migracion>



^b Coffee Leaf Rust (CLR) is one of the main limiting factors of Arabica coffee production worldwide. The causal agent *Hemileia vastatrix* (fungus) produces large orange spores' masses on the lower leaf surface, leading to premature leaf fall (Talhinhas et al., 2017).

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