U.S. Involvement in the Northern Triangle and its Effects on Immigration

Emma Smith,*† Scarlett Alysforth,‡ Molly Garyantes,‡ Francesca Duong,‡ and Medha Krishen†

*To whom correspondence should be addressed: smithemm@umich.edu

†mkrishen@umich.edu

‡Equal contribution of authors

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how U.S. involvement in transnational violence and gang violence affects immigration waves to the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Specifically, we examined the effects of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and the Alliance for Prosperity Plan. To do so, we compared the immigration and homicide rates in each of the three countries during the time periods in which the legislation was enacted. The data suggest that both legislative acts were relatively successful in achieving their goal of reducing criminal violence. An overall decreasing trend was noted for the years of 2009-2012 and 2016-2018. Yet, the CARSI and Alliance for Prosperity Plan had a relatively small effect on immigration. This was due to their main purpose of decreasing crime rates in the Northern Triangle.

Introduction

A majority of immigrants currently coming to the United States originate from the Central American Northern Triangle, which consists of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These three countries are connected by their economic integration (i.e. same trade agreements). Current migration crises from this region have ultimately stemmed from violence and political chaos; in particular, transnational and gang violence have forced many to flee for their lives. This transnational violence is often attributed to the countries' locations between some of the world's largest drug producers in South America and the world's largest consumer of illegal drugs, the United States. The immigration debate in the United States has been quite salient over the recent years, with U.S. President Donald Trump deciding to pull all funding for direct foreign assistance programs from the three countries just before April 1st, 2019. However, pulling funds or closing borders does nothing to ameliorate the migration flow; people will continue to attempt flight as long as there is conflict in their respective countries. Thus, an interesting question emerges as to how U.S. involvement in transnational violence and gang violence affects resulting immigration waves to the United States. Understanding how U.S. policies influence migration waves would provide keen

insight into the immigration debate and further steps that can be taken to tame this issue.

Literature Review

Scholars in this field of research tend to focus on thematic trends found in the Northern Triangle: historical context of U.S. intervention in Latin America and how that has impacted violence to the region, quantitative analyses of migration patterns, descriptive analyses of gang violence and transnational terrorist groups, and U.S. action toward stemming violence in the Northern Triangle and whether or not it has been effective. These themes, while connected in our central question of research, stand rather separate and distinct in current literature. Thus, we seek to understand and interlace all of these themes in order to analyze U.S. policies in relation to immigration patterns (as opposed to discussing and describing these as separate phenomena or failing to talk about their relationship).

I: Historical Context of U.S. Immigration Policy in Latin America and its Political Effects

When examining background information pertaining to past immigration policies implemented by the United States, it

becomes clear that most policies have failed to combat the growing waves of immigration coming to the United States from the Northern Triangle. Both Massey and Pren (2012), as well as Rosenblum and Brick (2011), call attention to the moderate success of the Bracero Program, which created a circular flow of migration through the granting of work visas to seasonal workers. However, the Bracero Program came to an end in 1965, and since then, the United States has enforced a variety of stricter immigration policies with little to no effect on current immigration.

Massey and Pren (2012) delve further into the negative connotations created by politicians surrounding immigration, particularly emphasized in Northern Triangle Countries. In referring to immigration as a “crisis” that the United States needs to avoid or as a “wave” that will overtake the United States and its vulnerable citizens, politicians seek to gain support from potential voters based on their own implicit and explicit biases. The usage of immigration as a platform for political campaigning has had detrimental effects on the increasing concern over the southern border of the United States. This, in turn, makes it difficult for policymakers to create unbiased and effective immigration policies that parallel the success of the Bracero Program.

However, both groups of scholars have been centrally focused on how the United States has historically prevented illegal immigrants from crossing the border. This represents a different perspective than emphasizing what the United States has done in order to solve pertinent domestic problems in the Northern Triangle, which then force people to seek safety elsewhere.

II: Gang Violence and Transnational Violence

Another large portion of the research previously conducted on the Northern Triangle pertains to the presence of transnational violence and violence (i.e. gang violence) within the countries in this area. This information provides both background and important theoretical frameworks. It also highlights the question of how U.S. involvement in transnational violence and domestic violence affects later immigration waves to the U.S., which has not previously been addressed.

Medrano (2017) gives a background on how Central America has come to be regarded as one of the most dangerous places in the world. The violence remains constant, but over time, there have been changes in the actors—the people have evolved from military persona to criminals and gangs. It examines several countries, including El Salvador and Mexico, and gives a broad overview of the problems

in the Northern Triangle. Medrano ends by examining cases through reference to human rights instead of political means. One of the more substantial events was the redefinition of the word “refugee” and the incorporation of that word into the UNHCR Guidance Note on Refugee Claims Relating to Victims of Organized Gangs and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. This article gives important background on the Northern Triangle conflict and showcases the cyclical nature of emigration out of the area, which plays into our question of how U.S. intervention affects later immigration to the U.S.

Farah (2013) then goes into considerable detail about the declining power and legitimacy of national governments in the Northern Triangle, a result of the simultaneous rise of transnational organized crime groups (TOC). Following a historical analysis of the rise of TOC, Farah discusses the changing political nature of the Northern Triangle, where rule of law has been replaced by transactional relationships based on the flow of goods and services (a product of globalization). This article provides compelling contextual evidence and a lens through which to analyze the United States’ failures to deter conflict in the Northern Triangle. While the United States has primarily interacted with national governments, the shifting power dynamic to TOCs (which Mexican drug cartels dominate) may perhaps be useful in understanding why such attempts have failed. This prompts us to do further research into the emerging role of TOCs and how the United States should perhaps look into combatting their increasing stature in the region. This article does work to explain how and why the U.S. has previously failed to deter conflict in the Northern Triangle; however, it points to the following question of how U.S. involvement affects later immigration waves from the area to the U.S.

These previous two articles pose and answer the question of whether the U.S. has made any attempts to curb transnational organized crime in the Northern Triangle (it has) and whether it has been successful (it has not). They provide evidence of a potential reason why the U.S. is not targeting the correct culprit. A single national government cannot stem the international stature of transnational organized crime groups and if they want to, the U.S. may need to direct its efforts toward deterring TOCs. If the U.S. only provides aid to specific national governments and migration rates continue to rise, this may be a potential reason for the U.S.’s failure.

To narrow our scope of violence in the Northern Triangle, we looked towards gang violence due to its prominence in the area. To effectively analyze and understand the situations, a basic understanding of gang violence in Latin America

must be built. Schuberth (2016) highlights the background of the functionality of gangs and gang interaction. The paper analyzes the interactive strategies gangs employ and recommends methods to handle criminal gangs. It also touches on the social and economic factors of gangs.

Furthering this discussion, Glebbeek and Koonings (2016) give background to the influence of social and economic factors in slums. It is noted that the most prominent gangs are founded by deported immigrants from Los Angeles. Because they grew up in dangerous parts of Los Angeles, they mimic gang culture when they arrive at their homelands. The research demonstrates that there is a greater divide between social classes as citizens are becoming “walled-in” to protect themselves from dangerous conditions. Yet, due to the instability of government and government police, the situation results in a paradox; much crime is still occurring within these gated cities, and violent vigilante groups are growing.

Carlson and Gallagher (2015) delve into the United States’ connection with gang violence in the Northern Triangle in relation to children. Like the aforementioned paper, Carlson and Gallagher give a brief overview of the situation. In addition, it illustrates the need for the United States to further improve the protection of unaccompanied deported children by using the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and gang-related asylum case law. This article, in a sense, introduces a different angle to the immigration debate that we are questioning: while it describes how the United States can work to better its procedures in relation to gang violence, we seek to understand how the United States’ actions of humanitarian aid fail in curbing gang violence in the first place. This paper delves deeper into the issue and provides recommendations on how to prevent deportation of minors, hinting at the detrimental effects of deportation to said children.

III: Migration Patterns

Differing from a qualitative discussion of violence patterns that have emerged in the Northern Triangle, Del Carmen and Sousa (2018) quantify the migration out of the Northern Triangle since 1990 using data on the percentage of migrants currently residing in the United States. Pertinent findings suggest that the cost of migration is high in terms of lost human capital; this indicates that migration has had significant negative economic implications on countries within the Northern Triangle. It does not make reference to how U.S. policies shape and influence migrant movement.

IV: U.S. Policies in the Northern Triangle

Perhaps the most applicable and practical trend found in current research is the analysis of current and previous policies in the Northern Triangle. Abt and Winship (2016) evaluate the results of a meta-review and field study conducted by the United States Agency for International Development. In particular, they found a spectrum of effectiveness of U.S. policies in reducing community violence: while cognitive behavioral therapy and focused deterrence contributed to the greatest reduction in community violence, and scared straight and gun buyback programs exhibited negligible effects, most programs had weak to moderate effects on violence in the region. Also pertinent were the *six elements of effectiveness* that characterized the most successful interventions: maintaining specific attention to those most at risk for violence, proactive efforts to mediate the potential for violence, increasing the legitimacy of strategies and institutions, meticulous attention to program implementation and fidelity, a well-defined and understood theory of change, and partnership with critical stakeholders. From this analysis, it can be affirmed that focused deterrence and cognitive behavioral therapy require greater implementation. From Abt and Winship (2016), it will be useful to compare whether or not successful cases of deterrence and cognitive behavioral therapy decrease the rate of migrant caravans.

More focused, Garcia (2016) criticizes the United States’ Alliance for Prosperity Plan, using analysis from individuals on both sides of the debate to inform her argument. While intentions may be in the right place, she cites several reasons for its failure: the vast majority of funds are granted to sectors that are likely to have an overall detrimental downward trend (despite short-term improvement); the initiative to bring in foreign investors may be a new self-interested attempt to provide access to U.S. manufacturers in order to exploit local natural and labor resources; and too many funds are allocated to the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) which, in the past, has led to historic increases in violence in Northern Triangle countries through the militarization of the fight against organized crime and drugs. Using Abt and Winship’s (2016) *six elements of effectiveness*, the Alliance for Prosperity Plan fails to provide specific attention to those most at risk and seems to be a continuation of previous policies, instead of providing a new theory for change. Garcia fails, however, to provide complementary migration statistics at the time the Alliance for Prosperity Plan was engaged.

The four trends in the research discussed are all interde-

pendent to the current crisis in the Northern Triangle. However, said trends exist separately from one another and fail to contextualize the relationship between U.S. policies and resulting immigration patterns. Thus, this is a major gap in the research: while it is important to analyze the violence taking place in the Northern Triangle in and of itself and to provide distinct quantitative investigations of migration patterns, the two should be talked about in tandem. In describing both in detail, scholars of different fields and expertise provide important information, yet seemingly forget that a correlation (if one exists) should be noted and discussed.

Methodology

In order to assess how the United States' initiatives to curb violence in the Northern Triangle have influenced immigration rates, two primary variables should be discussed. The independent variable of our research is U.S. initiatives; in order to specify this, we have opted for the comparison of two initiatives, namely the Central American Regional Security Initiative adopted in 2008 and the Alliance for Prosperity Plan adopted in 2016. While both initiatives target more than just violence and are rather broad in social and economic scope, they likewise dedicate themselves to reducing criminal violence:

Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI):

According to the U.S. Department of State (2017), CARSI was established as an attempt to curb the rapidly deteriorating security within Central America. In effect from 2009 to 2012, CARSI sought to assist law enforcement, build the justice system of Central American countries, and advance gang prevention through social programming for at-risk youth. CARSI can be characterized by its 5 main goals: creating safe streets, disrupting the movement of criminals and contraband, supporting Central American governments, re-establishing effective state presence, and fostering cooperation on both a global and international scale. Although the implementation of the program appears to remain constant throughout the year in which it was in effect, the effectiveness of the program has been less than originally hoped. This is possibly due to the fact that only \$642 million out of the original \$1 billion appropriated by the U.S. government was actually allocated to the program. However, a comprehensive study on the effectiveness of the program has yet to be conducted.

Alliance for Prosperity Plan:

According to the Luna (2017), the Alliance for Prosperity Plan works to strengthen programs to prevent violence at the local level in the Northern Triangle, including making schools safe and creating counseling centers for at-risk youth. The plan also seeks to modernize the justice system by strengthening criminal investigation and penal action and improving the prison system. First introduced by Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and then partially subsidized with funds from U.S. foreign assistance for the region. The U.S. Congress allocated \$750 million in the 2016 Fiscal Year budget to this plan. The amount was reduced to \$655 million in the 2017 Fiscal Year and \$460 million in the 2018 Fiscal Year. Implementation of the program appears to remain fairly consistent throughout its application. Due to the recency of the implementation of the program, no credible studies have been conducted relative to its success in reducing security threats in the Northern Triangle.

The dependent variable is migration rates of citizens from the Northern Triangle to the United States, which can be quantified by the percentage of people leaving their country and seeking asylum in the United States. For the first initiative, we choose to focus on the years 2009-2012; in 2014, there was a particular surge in unaccompanied children and women from the Northern Triangle that certainly inflated migration rates and could possibly skew results from that time period if it were to be included. Similarly, 2009-2012 is comparable to the two-year time frame of 2016-2018 for the Alliance for Prosperity Plan (since it was recently initiated). Although this involves comparing a three-year time frame to a two-year frame, this should not be a problem as we will be considering the trends in year-by-year transformations during both programs. Thus, the difference in time frame will not impact our results since we are not comparing the initiatives directly against one another but rather examining the success of the individual initiatives. In other words, for CARSI, we compare rates from 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 rather than just jumping between 2009 and 2012. We will follow a similar structure for the Alliance for Prosperity Plan, making yearly comparisons between 2016, 2017, and 2018. As a result, we will see yearly changes in rates for each initiative, rather than just comparing two dissimilar time frames against each other.

In order to determine our results, three comparisons are needed. First, we noted the relationship between the level of incoming migration to the United States and the initiative that was installed at that particular point in time. For in-

stance, we will compare how migration rates have increased, decreased, or changed in the period 2009-2012 based on the Central American Regional Security Initiative. A similar process will be done for the Alliance for Prosperity Plan from 2016-2018. We will also compare the reduction (or lack thereof) of crime, specifically homicide rates, in these respective years based on these plan's objectives and see if a correlation exists. Finally, a comparison of the success of the individual initiatives will culminate our findings.

Results

Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI): 2009-2012

Crime:

El Salvador and Guatemala experienced an overall decreasing trend in their homicide rates. As shown in Figure 1, the homicide rate per year per 100,000 in El Salvador remained relatively constant from 2009-2011 (with a minor increase in 2011). However, the country did experience a large decrease in 2012. Whether this decrease had anything to do with the effectiveness of CARSI is difficult to determine due to the variety of other factors that influence crime rates. Similarly, Guatemala also experienced a steadily decreasing rate of homicide in this time interval. Differing from this, Honduras exhibited the opposite: it shows a steady increase in homicide rates from 2009-2011 and only a very minor decrease between 2011 and 2012. Figure 1.0 shows the opposite trend between El Salvador and Guatemala with Honduras.

Figure 1. Homicide Rates in the Northern Triangle from 2009 to 2012.¹³

Immigration:

Immigration rates from both El Salvador and Guatemala to the United States increased at fairly constant rates from 2009-2012. The years did not experience any sudden or shocking increases. Figure 2 exhibits the largest jumps in migration rates between 2009-2010 when CARSI first started. As shown in Figure 2, Honduras differs in that its migration rates fluctuated from 2009-2012, not increasing or decreasing in the overall trend. Overall, migration from the Northern Triangle to the U.S. increased between 2009 and 2012.

Figure 2. Immigration Rates to the U.S. from Northern Triangle Countries during the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).¹⁴

Alliance for Prosperity Plan: 2016-2018

Crime:

Summary: As shown in Figure 3, it can be seen that crimes are gradually decreasing in total. The biggest drop in this decrease was from 2016-2017, the first year in which the Alliance for Prosperity Plan was initiated. El Salvador, ultimately, has the greatest reduction in murder rate.

Immigration:

Although information is not currently available for 2018, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras experienced increases in migration rates (see Figure 4). In total, between the two years, migration from the Northern Triangle increased.

Figure 3. Homicide Rates in the Northern Triangle from 2016 to 2018.¹³

Figure 4. Immigration Rates to the U.S. from Northern Triangle Countries during the Alliance for Prosperity Plan.¹⁴

Discussion

Prior to answering our central question, our findings suggest that both CARS and the Alliance for Prosperity Plan were relatively successful in achieving their goal of reducing criminal violence. This is evidenced by the overall decreasing trend in violence in the region: homicide rates dropped 22.7 percent between 2009-2012 and perhaps more shockingly, 53.87 percent between 2016-2018. In fact, for each year of the Alliance for Prosperity Plan, all three countries experienced a constant downward trend in the number of homicides per year. It is important to note that both initiatives have much wider scopes and targeting areas than just the reduction of criminal activity. Our findings, then, do not seek

to judge the success of the entire program, but rather its one sector in reducing crime in the Northern Triangle. Considering that crime is a prominent social problem in the Northern Triangle, the United States' efforts have had some pertinent impact. Such a favorable outcome can be attributed to some of the six elements of effectiveness mentioned by Abt and Winship (2016), namely maintaining specific attention to those most at risk for violence and increasing the legitimacy of institutions. Both CARS and the Alliance for Prosperity Plan place a prime focus on at-risk youths through counseling centers and educational programs. This is vastly significant considering that adolescents are typically those most susceptible and inclined to commit violence and those most vulnerable (i.e. youth are both the most likely perpetrators and victims of violence). Similarly, both initiatives are interested in strengthening institutions like the justice and prison systems. Having strong political and legal institutions ultimately fosters a more stable and well-functioning state.

However, our findings refute our main hypothesis that, if U.S. initiatives were successful in reducing crime, this would decrease the number of citizens fleeing the Northern Triangle each year and attempting to seek asylum (either lawfully or unlawfully) in the United States. We hypothesized that reduction in crime would correspond to a reduction in net-out migration rates in the Northern Triangle; however, we have found just the opposite. Instead, it seems that U.S. initiatives have had little to no effect on immigration rates. In fact, in both time periods, net-out migration increased in total for the region: the total number of migrants increased by 235,551 from 2009-2012 and 42,240 from 2016-2017. These findings most likely result from several underlying causes, the main one being the complexity of immigration in general. Individuals' reasons to migrate from the Northern Triangle could be motivated by numerous factors other than crime: political instability, interest in family reunification with members who have already voyaged to the United States, civil war, education, health, and impoverishment. CARS or the Alliance for Prosperity's work to reduce homicides, then, would not alter these people's desires to attempt migration. Since the choice to migrate is often a personal issue, it is difficult to disentangle the motivations of the many different actors.

It is also important to recognize that both CARS and the Alliance for Prosperity Plan were not directly intended to influence migration, whereas they specifically targeted crime. Both initiatives sought to improve the domestic situation of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, irrespective of whether or not that would alter people's decisions on whether or not to migrate.

While our findings yield credible conclusions, there are certain limitations to our analysis: time, resources, and the limited scope of quantitative data used. As a result of a restricted time frame in which to conduct this study, we were only able to examine two initiatives (not even in full, just looking at their impact on crime). Ultimately, we were unable to perform a more comprehensive analysis of United States' aid to the Northern Triangle, such as looking at U.S. aid and work in the region along a time continuum for the last 15-20 years. In addition to this, the Alliance for Prosperity Plan is a recent initiative that lacks information accounting from some of its effects. Since we lack quantitative data for immigration rates in 2018, we only see how it has influenced migration within a one-year time span. Its effects, in only being recently created, have yet to be fully realized and or manifested.

In terms of the quantitative data we used, measuring crime only according to the number of homicides per year limits our analysis. Although homicides are the worst possible crime (and thus the best indicator), it leaves out various other forms of crime that could produce an unstable and violent atmosphere in the Northern Triangle: robbery, assault, battery, sexual violence, and rape. Measuring all of these forms of crime with separate indicators and trying to combine them into one variable would have produced haphazard and confusing results; yet, in leaving them out, it is hard to fully judge if the streets of these countries are actually safer and whether or not the standard of living has been elevated. Because we are seeking to understand social phenomena, quantitative data in the form of numbers and rates sometimes cannot capture the true essence of what is being studied.

Conclusion

Immigration has always been a prominent aspect of both the history of the United States and the policies that have been enacted. Within recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been shifted to the rising immigration rates occurring at the southern border of the country. While this issue spans across many different areas of both domestic and international policy, it is mainly focused on national security and the effects that immigration could potentially have on the economy. Citing loss of jobs, increasing crime, and a plethora of other dangers, President Trump proposed, during the announcement for his presidential campaign in 2015, that his plan to remedy this situation was to erect a wall spanning the entire Southern border of the United States. While

this was the first mention of the creation of a border wall, it has since remained a popular idea and talking point for voters, mainly of those identifying with the Republican party. A recent survey conducted by Statistica found that 84% of Republicans favor building a border wall compared to the 39% of Independents and 13% of Democrats.¹⁵ However, the border wall would offer a temporary solution to a much more intricate problem as the issue of immigration is highly complex and encompasses a vast range of elements. Specifically, in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, it could be postulated that the cause of the widespread immigration is due to the high crime rates of the region. Through our research, we sought to establish a link between the implementation of policies that aimed to reduce crime rates within the Northern Triangle countries and the rates of immigration to the United States from these countries within the years of their implementation.

Despite the findings observed in this study failing to support the original hypothesis that reducing the crime rates within Northern Triangle countries would in turn reduce immigration rates from these countries into the United States, a more comprehensive study would be needed in order to draw a more certain conclusion. Since the issue of immigration is highly complex and encompasses a vast range of causes that could not be fully understood within the limited scope of the research shown here, future studies should focus on a wider range of time and broader definition of 'crime', as well as an analysis of other factors of immigration in addition to crime. Although evidence to support that lowered crime rates would result in lower immigration rates was not found, this does not mean that there is no connection as many other factors may have caused the increase in immigration rates. While policies that reduce crime are generally viewed as favorable by most of the population, a link that proves diminished crime rates results in lowered immigration into the United States would motivate more international and domestic policies to aid in the minimization of crime within Northern Triangle countries.

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