Understanding Central America's Migrant Crisis
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Introduction:

With the 2016 presidential election fast approaching, immigration in the United States has become a controversial topic. Many candidates focus their attention on the factors pulling immigrants to the United States, such as what they consider easily attainable immigration benefits, amnesty programs, or an easily penetrable border with Mexico. However, little attention is given to the factors pushing the immigrants from their home countries.

In 2014, the southern border states were overwhelmed by a surge in the number of unaccompanied minor children migrating from Central America. That year alone, nearly 60,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended at the U.S.-Mexican border. This number is nearly triple that of 2013. Additionally, 98% of the migrants were nationals of Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, or El Salvador, whereas in 2012, 75% of the unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border were Mexican citizens. The United States struggled not only with how to resolve this problem, but how to prevent it from happening again in the future. In addition, many policymakers blamed “amnesty” type programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) for pulling these children to the United States. Alternatively, a majority of the minors listed domestic factors as the reason for their migration. For example, about 60% of El Salvadoran children apprehended at the border listed crime, gang threats, and violence as their main motivating factors for emigrating.

This information suggests that by learning what is causing people to leave their homes, the United States may be able to better avoid situations such as the 2014 Central American migrant crisis through proactive changes in foreign policy rather than reactive changes in domestic policy. Alternatively, the U.S. could also use this information to determine if their existing foreign policy efforts might be causing increased migration. Examining and comparing specific factors in Latin America with immigration trends in the U.S. will show where the U.S. should focus its foreign policy efforts in order to best curb migration from the region.

I have two major hypotheses regarding this study: first, I predict that there will be no increase in migration from Latin America to the United States after the implementation of DACA; and second, I predict that there is a strong correlation between both corruption and violence and migration to the United States from Latin America.

Literature Review:

History supports my hypothesis that violence and distrust of the government can cause spikes in migration from Latin American countries, or more specifically

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Central American countries, to the United States. During the 1970’s and 1980’s, large numbers of Central Americans began migrating to the United States fleeing civil wars and social unrest that was spreading through the region. U.S foreign policy likely influenced this migration spike. The U.S. sent millions of dollars and provided military training to violent and oppressive right-wing governments in Central America that were known for the systematic violation of human rights of their citizens. Even though Congress was aware that these regimes supported death squads, mass killings of innocent civilians, disappearances, and assassinations of public figures, it renewed support year after year. These violent regimes left a total of over 250,000 Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans dead. Those that were not killed fled the country. More than 465,000 Salvadorans and 225,000 Guatemalans were living in the United States by 1990, most of which had arrived during the time of these violent and corrupt regimes.

The United States created many policies, both foreign and domestic, in response to this spike in Central American migrants. First, a domestic response was to take a strict stance against gangs. During this time period, a large amount of these Central American migrants landed in Los Angeles. They were poorly integrated into society and faced violence from the already well-established African American gangs. In order to defend themselves from these gangs, they came together and formed their own. Meanwhile, in the 1990s, the U.S. took additional domestic policy measures and shifted its immigration policy to be more restrictive and security driven and started to rapidly deport criminals, including gang members. The U.S. deported thousands of dangerous gang members each year back to Central America. The U.S. failed to consider the long-term effects of these policies. Deportation transformed what was originally a relatively concentrated problem to a widespread crisis throughout the region. Currently, the two most dangerous and prominent L.A. gangs of that time period, MS-13 and Calle 18, are now well established both throughout the U.S. and Central America. Now, even if the deportees want to get out of the gangs, they cannot because they are faced with members when they return to their home countries. The strict immigration policy changes did not stop migration, but actually contributed to another migration crisis decades later.

The picture looks strikingly similar today as it did during the Central American migration influx during the 1970’s and 1980’s. In 2014, “the Independent Monitoring Group estimated that every day between 200 and 300 Salvadorans leave their country en route to the United States as undocumented immigrants.”Like in
the past, there are many factors that are likely to be pushing citizens from their home countries. Central America is both the poorest and most violent region in the world. Only decades after the previous crisis, Central America is facing a new type of violent regime prompted by gangs essentially taking over the states. “According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, more than 180,000 people have been murdered in [El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras] since 2000, including nearly 49,000 in the last three years alone.” According to the United Nations, in 2014, Honduras ranked number one in the most per capita killings with 90 per 100,00 people, with El Salvador at a close second. Most of these murders are connected to gang violence, a result of the events discussed above. According to the Salvadoran Ministry of Public Security and Justice, El Salvador currently has over 60,000 active gang members. To put this into perspective, El Salvador only has a population of about 6.1 million.

The most dangerous part of the gang networks for ordinary citizens in the region is recruitment. Gangs heavily recruit children once they reach their adolescence. When parents try to keep their children out of the reach of gangs, the families as a whole get threatened. “The families are threatened for all sorts of reasons: because their sons didn’t want to join a gang, because a family member filed a police report, because they won’t let a gang member rape their daughter, [o]r simply because they visited their grandfather in enemy territory.” When families abandon their homes and move elsewhere, the gangs still find them; they are never able to find safety. Their only option is to flee the country. If the children do not flee, their options are gang membership or death. In 2013, gang violence alone claimed the lives of 15,328 Central Americans. Taking history in to account, it makes sense that this violence could be a major cause of the extreme influx in unaccompanied minors.

Poverty is also likely to contribute to the migration from Central America. Another reason involvement in gangs is so widespread in Central America is because it offers more of a living than the legal economic opportunities available, most of which barely reach minimum wage. Therefore, joining a gang makes a better living.

Finally, there is also a strong perception of corruption and little faith in the government’s ability to protect citizens from these gangs. “Many say gangs have sources of information among police, attorney general offices, and neighborhood residents.” These gangs are so well armed they are essentially a criminal army. A

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14 Goodman
15 Goodman Page 28
16 Martinez
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19 Kennedy
20 Martinez Page 33
21 Goodman
22 Martinez
23 Kennedy Page 4
recent police raid of a clique’s strong house revealed an arsenal of more than ten assault rifles and over a dozen grenades. In addition to the advanced weaponry, they have intricate and effective systems of surveillance and security that allows them to exploit local authorities. For example, in May the Salvadoran director of forensic medicine made a statement that the gangs were extorting his technicians for entering their turf to retrieve dead bodies. In addition to the gangs, many citizens fear the authorities as well.

Many right-wing politicians in the United States blame lenient immigration laws for the spike in migration. One common scapegoat is President Obama’s 2012 executive action called the Dream Act, which created Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). DACA allows migrants that have been physically present in the United States since 2007, entered before their 16th birthday, and did not have lawful status on June 15, 2012, among other qualifications, to receive deferred action, meaning they will not be deported, as well as employment authorization. It is important to understand that this action does not give the migrants any type of legal status or path to obtaining residency in the United States. President Obama has since used another executive action to expand the age requirements of DACA, and create a similar program called Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), which gives the unlawful parents of U.S. citizen children deferred action and employment authorization. However, this action has been tied up in litigation since it was created, and was recently heard in the Supreme Court and is currently awaiting a determination.

The U.S. immigration policy has had an impact on the child migrant crisis, however, not in the way that most Americans think it has. Many people blame the Dream Act for causing the increase in child migrants. They argue that it causes the migrants to believe they will be given amnesty if they surrender themselves at the border. This assertion is a myth. One issue with this assertion is that a migrant has to have resided continuously in the U.S. since 2007 in order to qualify for DACA. However, ignoring the logistical errors of the assertion, even blaming the perception of DACA qualification is unfounded. Of the more than 400 children Kennedy interviewed, only one knew about the Dream Act or Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Therefore, it is more likely that domestic factors are pushing Central Americans from their home countries, rather than American policy pulling them to migrate to the United States.

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27 United States Citizenship and Immigration Service
28 United States Citizenship and Immigration Service
29 Kennedy
Methodology:

I started with a broad approach by looking at the number of new arrival lawful permanent residents in the United States coming from several different Latin American countries, including Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Belize, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Cuba. New arrival lawful permanent residents are those that petition and undergo visa processing from their home country, and does not include those already in the United States adjusting to lawful permanent resident status. I chose this category because new arrivals demonstrates foreign nationals leaving their home countries, while adjustment of status applicants are those who have already been in the United States for a number of years and would not adequately reflect the factors pushing them to the United States during any specific time period. I acknowledge that this will not be an accurate assessment of those migrating to the United States, as many migrants come to the United States by unlawful means. Unfortunately, there is no way to accurately track how many undocumented migrants are living in the United States, where they came from, or when they arrived. Because that data does not exist, I have only analyzed migrants coming to the United States lawfully in assumption that the undocumented migrants will be following a similar trend.

Next I decided to examine a wide range of push factors. These factors include poverty, violence, unemployment, and faith in government. For poverty, I am using the measurement of percentage of the population below the national poverty line. I chose this standard because I want to examine the poverty of the people relative to their own countries rather than relative to the world standard.

Next, for violence I am using the measurement of intentional homicides per 100,000 people. Under the UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s definition, this is an estimate of “unlawful homicides purposely inflicted as a result of domestic disputes, interpersonal violence, violent conflicts over land resources, intergang violence over turf or control, and predatory violence and killing by armed groups.” This standard does not include killings in armed conflicts by fairly large cohesive groups generally exceeding over hundreds of members. This definition encompasses much of what I am looking to target in the region, including gang fighting in Central America and drug violence.

Additionally, for unemployment, I am using total percent of the labor force that is unemployed. I am defining unemployment using the International Labour Organization’s definition that unemployment “refers to the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking unemployment.”

Finally, for faith in government, I am using Transparency International’s corruption perception index. This index measures the perceived levels of corruption in the public sector for each country. It originally used a scale of 0 to 10, with zero being highly corrupt and 10 being very clean. However, in 2012, they switched to a scale of 0 to 100. Therefore, in order to maintain consistency, I changed all of the numbers to the 0 to 10 scale with decimal points.

After examining the data, I found that there was no strong correlation between the immigration data and any of the push factors. I realized that there may
have been other variables impacting migration to the United States, like geographic proximity, and needed to narrow my study accordingly. Due in part to the recent migrant crisis, and in part to the diversity in migration patterns, I chose to focus more closely on Central America. I found it to be interesting that El Salvador and Honduras had increasing migration trends, while Guatemala was decreasing, and Panama and Costa Rica stayed about the same. I decided to choose these five countries to focus on in order to see which factors may have accounted for the differences in migration patterns in countries so close in location to one another.

Finally, in order to determine a correlation between any of the four factors and the rate of new arrivals, I calculated the correlation between each fact against the new arrivals. This told me which factor has the strongest correlation with migration from each country in Central American to the United States.

**Data Analysis:**

According to Figure 1.1, migration from Costa Rica, Panama, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Belize, Paraguay, and Uruguay remains relatively unchanged from 2006-2016. Brazil, Peru, and Guatemala decrease, while the remaining countries, including Mexico in Figure 1.2, increase in migration rates.

According to Figure 1.3, the poverty rates of all of the countries during the past ten years decrease, except for Honduras and El Salvador, and in recent years Venezuela. There is a correlation between the increase in poverty rates in these three countries and an increase in migration to the US. However, as migration to the US from Colombia increase, poverty decreases. Alternatively, another Central American country such as Panama has unchanged migration rates, yet has a decrease in poverty. Finally, Costa Rica has relatively stable migration and poverty rates.

Similarly, according to Figure 1.4, Honduras, Venezuela, and El Salvador were the three most violent countries, with Honduras and Venezuela steadily increasing, and El Salvador decreasing.

Surprisingly, Belize and Colombia had the highest unemployment rates under Figure 1.5, while most of the countries stayed relatively the same over the ten-year period. Finally, El Salvador and Uruguay by far had the highest perceived corruption rates.

Upon examination of the narrowed study using the correlation coefficients, it appears that poverty, faith in government, and violence have the strong and most consistent correlation in Central America with new arrivals in the United States. Unemployment consistently had a very weak correlation coefficient across the region.

Finally, upon examination of the new arrivals from 2012, the year DACA was created, and forward, it does not appear that there is a significant increase in migration to the United States.
**Results:**

Based on the analysis of my data, my hypotheses are partially correct. First, violence, faith in government, and poverty appear to be the factors that contribute most to migration from Central America to the United States. Second, DACA did not appear to have an effect on migration to the United States.

**Policy Recommendations:**

Based on the results that I found, the United States should focus on foreign policy measures rather than domestic policy measures in its efforts to reduce migration from Central America. Some potential policies are to send aid to the region to help reduce poverty. This will both provide people a higher standard or living as well as help keep people out of gangs since they will be earning better wages. The U.S. should also focus foreign policy efforts on removing the gangs from the region. This would both reduce violence and help to reestablish faith in government. The U.S. could do this by cooperating with the Central American governments, using international organizations such as the OAS, to remove the gangs from their communities. The U.S. could also work with the OAS could pass resolutions, sanction the governments, or provide aid to help them regain control of their countries. Although this would take a lot of time and effort to produce results, it would be a proactive solution getting to the root of the problem causing mass migration rather than formulating reactive solutions when confronted with the immediate crisis of floods of children at the border. The U.S. should not, however, directly intervene, especially militarily. As seen with what happened in the Cold War era in the region, this could create even greater instability and violence and result in even more people migrating to the U.S.

**Conclusion:**

If the U.S. were to treat immigration as a foreign policy issue rather than a domestic policy issues, it would likely see more results in the long-term. All too often, like in the case of the child migrant crisis, the U.S. finds itself looking at reactive whether than proactive solutions. In this case, creating foreign policy in Central America to decrease poverty and violence and increase faith in government might have helped to resolve the child migrant crisis.
Appendix 1: Tables & Graphs

Figure 1.1
New Arrival LPRs from Latin America: 2006-2015
Figure 1.2
New Arrival LPRs from Mexico: 2006-2016

![Graph showing new arrival LPRs from Mexico, 2006-2016.](image)
Figure 1.3
Percentage of the Population Below National Poverty Rate: 2006-2016
Figure 1.4
Number of Homicides per 100,000: 2006-2016
Figure 1.5
Percentage of the Labor Force Unemployed: 2006-2016
Figure 1.6
Corruption Perception Index: 2006-2016

Figure 2.1
Guatemala:

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<td>Violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
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</table>
Figure 2.2

New Arrivals

Figure 2.3
Figure 2.4

Violence

Figure 2.5

Unemployment
Figure 2.6
El Salvador:

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<td>Corruption</td>
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Figure 2.7

Figure 2.8
Figure 2.11

Unemployment

Figure 2.12

Corruption
**Honduras:**

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<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
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**Figure 2.13**

New Arrivals

**Figure 2.14**
Figure 2.15

Poverty

Violence
Costa Rica:

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<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
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Figure 2.19

New Arrivals

Figure 2.20

Poverty
Figure 2.23

Corruption

Figure 2.24

Panama:

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<td>Unemployment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>-0.733774078</td>
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</table>
Figure 2.25

New Arrivals

Figure 2.26

Poverty
Figure 2.27

Violence

Figure 2.28

Unemployment
Figure 2.29

Corruption

![Corruption chart showing a trend with years from 2006 to 2015 and values ranging from 0 to 4.5. The chart shows a general decrease in corruption over the years.]
Works Cited


United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

United States Department of State

World Bank Organization