



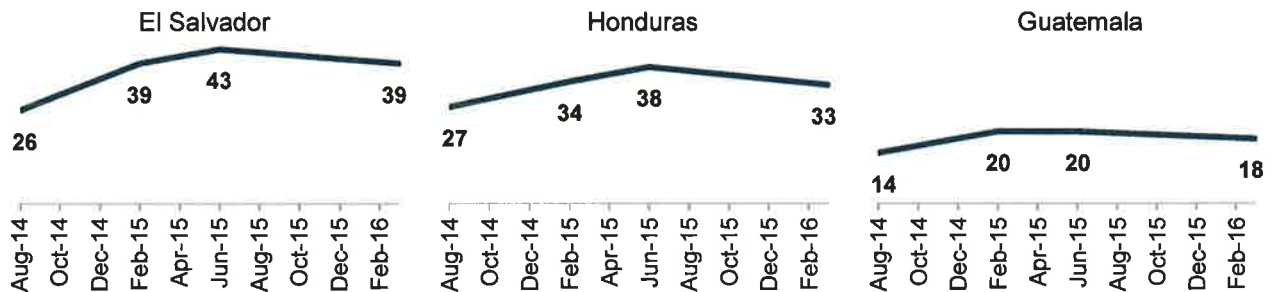
Central American Children and Families Follow Networks

Following a surge in 2014, apprehensions of families and unaccompanied children at the U.S. border are again angling upward. INR/OPN polling and focus groups reveal that parents with personal ties to the United States are keener than others to send their children, either alone or accompanied. Violence, limited economic and educational opportunities at home, and the prospect of a better life in the United States continue to be the most common motivations, though the mix varies by country.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection statistics, the proportion of children and families from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala apprehended at the U.S. border has increased this year. They have outnumbered adults traveling alone every month since last July—something not seen since the 2014 surge (appendix figure). Total numbers of child and family apprehensions have more than doubled over the same time last year, and they are expected to increase this summer in line with seasonal trends, though they will likely remain lower than the 2014 surge. **In all three countries, significant numbers of parents continue to want to send their children to the United States** despite consistent messaging by U.S. and Central American governments on the journey’s dangers, high-profile news stories about deportations, increased Mexican enforcement, and overcrowded U.S. detention facilities (Figure 1).¹

Figure 1. Little Change in Desire to Send Kids to the United States

*If you had the means and opportunity, would you send your children to another country?
(% "yes, to the United States")*



Source: INR/OPN surveys, 2014-16

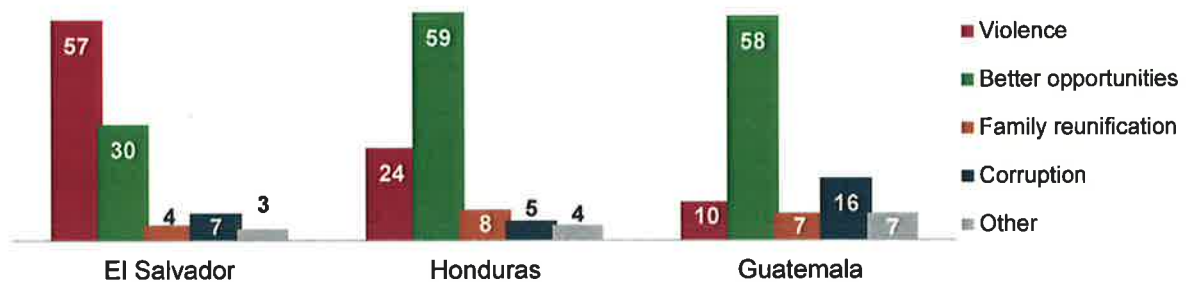
Links to United States put life there within reach

Parents who would send their children to the United States if they had the chance name a variety of reasons—primarily violence in El Salvador, and the lack of economic and educational opportunities in Honduras and Guatemala (Figure 2, next page). Though the mix of factors differs by country, **across the region parents with existing ties to the United States are more likely than others to want to send their kids north.**

¹ The number of parents who want to send their children north is probably considerably larger than the number who are likely to do so. This would be consistent with the pattern among young people themselves. Roughly 4-in-10 Northern Triangle residents 15 to 17 years-old say they would migrate to the United States given the means and opportunity, but only 2-in-10 say they are “very” (5%) or “somewhat” (15%) likely to go to the United States soon.

Figure 2. Economic Opportunity, Violence, Top Reasons for Sending Kids North

What is the main reason you want to send your children to the United States?
(%, among parents who would send their children to the United States)



Source: INR/OPN surveys, Mar 2016

In fact, significant minorities of Northern Triangle parents either have family in the United States (39%), know someone who has tried migrating there in the past year (37%), or receive U.S. remittances (25%). These connections make it easier for subsequent migrants to attempt the journey.² In INR/OPN interviews in Huehuetenango in April, one Guatemalan man talked about how a relative in California helped him send his son to the United States: *“My cousin paid for it. He gave me the chance to send my boy.”* The money enabled him to hire a coyote he knew and trusted who had sent other people from his community. Stories like this, where community and family networks facilitated child migration, were common in focus groups in all three countries.

Roughly three-quarters of Northern Triangle residents feel their countrymen in the United States live better lives than they do (19% say “worse”). And although images of American life come from a wide variety of sources, those with personal connections are slightly more likely than others to believe their U.S.-based countrymen are better off.

In El Salvador and Honduras, *“It’s most dangerous for young people”*

The narratives in El Salvador and Honduras—vicious cycles of insecurity and diminished opportunities—closely mirror one another. Time and again, focus group participants in both countries described the omnipresent specter of violence and how it compelled them to insulate their children at the expense of education or other opportunities.

In focus groups in San Salvador, young participants discussed how the police and gang members alike accosted them to search for signs of gang affiliation: *“After school I was forced off a bus and gang members made me take off my shirt in the street. They threatened to kill me if I didn’t join them, so I stopped going to school.”* One Salvadoran mother said her son went to school three blocks from their home, and one day after dropping him off, *“a neighbor told me, ‘The gang threatened your son.’ I was shocked. I took him out of school; all because he lived in an ‘enemy’ area.”* In both countries, parents recounted how “payments” to gangs or criminals were the key to family survival: *“If you don’t pay, they kill you.”* One father from San Pedro Sula succinctly described how people in both countries changed their habits to avoid being victimized: *“Good people are locked up in their houses while the criminals run free.”*

In both El Salvador and Honduras, parents who have moved or pulled a child out of school due to fear of violence have a greater desire than others to send their children away. The same is true among Honduran parents who have been victims of crime. Despite high crime rates in El Salvador, a plurality of parents who want to send their kids to the United States say it’s mostly for better educational and economic

² “Social networks connect members of the sending community with immigrants in a receiving community and thereby draw new migrants into the network by lowering the costs and risks of migration.” Elizabeth Fussell, “The Cumulative Causation of International Migration in Latin America,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol 60, pp162-177, July 2010. See also INR/OPN Opinion Analysis, [“Central Americans: Family Networks Aid Migration,”](#) May 19, 2015.

opportunities. Roughly 3-in-10 Salvadoran parents think their family's economic situation will worsen in the coming year, and 44% expect no change. Both groups are more likely to want to have their children leave than the 20% who think things will get better.

In Guatemala, "*We can go without food, but our children can't*"

While Salvadoran and Honduran child and family migration is primarily an urban phenomenon, **most Guatemalan children apprehended at the U.S. border come from the rural Western Highlands region.**³ Like their counterparts in Honduras, Guatemalan parents who want their children to go north primarily cite the better opportunities they'd have there. In focus groups in Huehuetenango, one mother described why she would like her sons to emigrate: "*I want them to go and make money and come back home.*" One 17 year-old boy concurred: "*I'd go and look for a job in order to build a house here, and come back.*" Participants discussed the challenge of having enough food for the family, and a number of them said they skipped meals in order to feed their children. Few held out hope that the government would address economic problems, largely because of corruption.⁴

But violence, and particularly domestic violence, also plays a role in the decision to leave. Half of Guatemalans say that such violence is common in their community (compared with about a third in El Salvador and Honduras). One 17 year-old girl from Huehuetenango described why she decided to leave for the United States last year: "*Sometimes there wasn't anything to eat. I decided to go because I wanted to help my parents—and also because it can be dangerous here, there's a lot of rape and violence.*" The same girl endured much along the journey—she saw fellow travelers die, witnessed girls being raped, and in the end she was deported from Mexico. She said she would try again soon.

³ See DHS/I&A Reference Aid, "(U//FOUO) El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras FY 2015 Unaccompanied Children (UAC) by Place of Birth," February 18, 2016.

⁴ See OSE/INR Brief, "Central America: Corruption Viewed as Widespread, With Some Exceptions," May 4, 2016.