

## Violence, Development, and Emigration:

### Evidence from Central American Children Detained in the United States

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In and after 2012, there was a large and sudden increase in the number of child migrants arriving in the United States from the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—without any adult. Unaccompanied Alien Children (UACs) from the Northern Triangle outnumbered those from Mexico for the first time in 2013, and made up 75 percent or more of all UACs at the southwest U.S. border by 2014. During this time, violence related to drug trafficking, gang activity, the widespread availability of firearms, and relatively weak criminal justice systems in the Northern Triangle, and Central and South America generally, has been on the rise. Surveys of child migrants have typically found that escaping violence may drive their decision to leave. Also important are educational concerns, the desire for family reunification, and linkages to smuggling networks.

This Brief presents results from a study funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to examine relationships between rates of violence (measured by homicides per 100,000 people, per year) and rates of UAC apprehensions (per 100,000, per year) in the United States between 2011 and 2016. The study finds that a higher homicide rate in a municipality in the region leads to a greater UAC apprehension rate, all else equal. Importantly, the average municipality's UAC apprehension rate is explained as much by recent increases in homicides there as by average income, poverty, and unemployment rates.

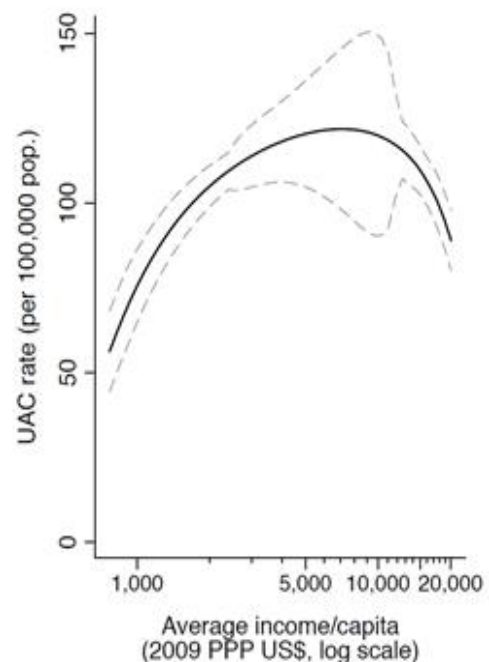
#### How Violence and Poverty Affect Migration

Although the effect of violence on migrants has been well studied in Latin America, there is little scientific evidence on the impact of violent crime on international emigration from any country. In studies that consider the relationship between national-level

#### What Did the Study Measure and How?

outbreaks of violence and international migration, researchers have found that arrivals of UAC and other migrants in the U.S. has been associated with the national-level homicide rate in the countries from which migrants leave as well as with outbreaks of civil conflict in their home countries. Research, however, has yet to demonstrate that violence at home directly leads to the decision to emigrate to the U.S. Meanwhile, the relationship between economics and migration is much better understood. While the financial gains of migrating to the U.S. are significant, it takes financial resources to make this move. Research shows that those with relatively greater wealth are better able to emigrate to the U.S. Further, social networks, especially for first-time migrants, influence the emigration decision, as potential migrants learn from friends and relatives.

#### Exhibit 1. Income Per Capita & UAC Rates (2009)

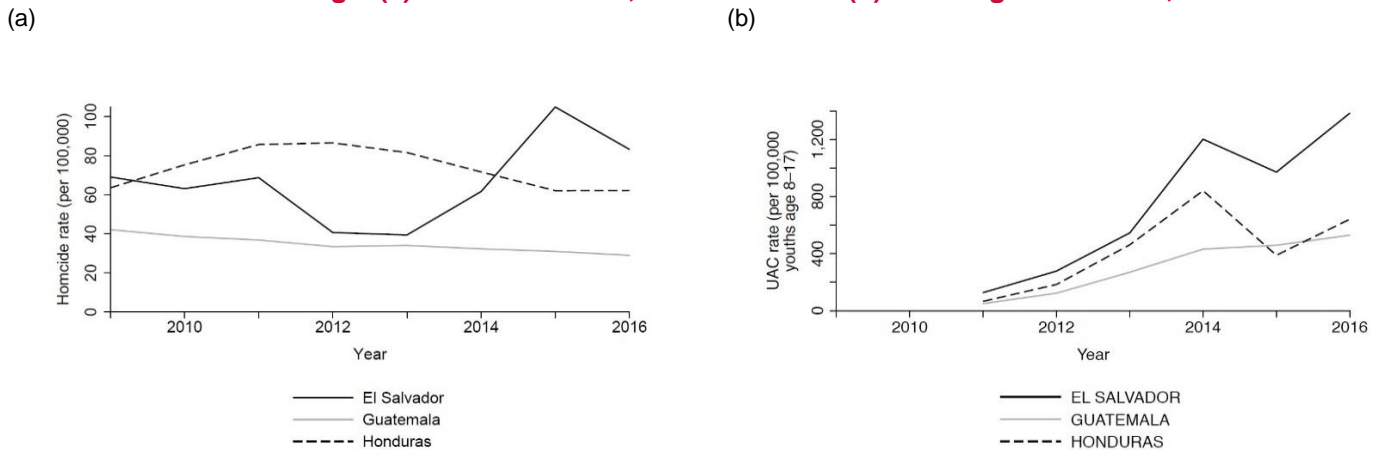


Using data collected from nearly 180,000 UACs apprehended in the United States from Northern Triangle countries between 2011 and 2016, the study matched the UACs with data on violence, economic conditions, and demographic conditions in their originating municipalities. The UAC data contain only those unaccompanied children who succeed in reaching the U.S. and were discovered and detained there. Violence was measured by official counts of homicides at the municipal level within the country of origin. Homicides are a more reliable measure of violence because they are more accurately recorded in official statistics. For this study, homicide levels were compared between the 893 municipalities listed for apprehended UACs.

### What Are the Study's Findings?

The study finds that higher levels of homicides caused greater numbers of UAC apprehensions in the U.S. from 2011 to 2016. Specifically, one additional homicide per year in an average municipality of the Northern Triangle, sustained each year from 2011 to 2016, causes a cumulative total of 3.7 additional UAC apprehensions in the U.S. This relationship remained after controlling for local differences related to migrant networks, urbanization, poverty, ethnic mix, and country. As homicides increase, so do UAC apprehension rates, roughly doubling the amount of UACs coming from municipalities with a rate of 100 or more homicides per year.

**Exhibit 1. Northern Triangle (a) Homicide Rates, 2009–2016 and (b) UAC Migration Rates, 2011–2016**



The study also found that past increases in UAC emigration due to historically high rates of homicide can lead to future increases of UAC emigration (as experiences are shared across social networks), but that current persistent increases in homicide rates play a more significant role in the emigration decision. Specifically, this study shows that about one third of the UAC flow occurs after past UACs inform, assist, or inspire other UACs to leave. UAC rates were also higher in municipalities with persistently high unemployment (longer than 3 years).

### What Does the Study Mean for Policy and Practice?

Determining the exact causes of emigration is complicated by the fact that violence, economic development, and social networks are not only independent causes but also deeply intertwined, collectively suggesting that past violence can shape emigration not only through immediate threats to security but through enlarging migrant networks and through affecting local economic conditions. For the first time, this study shows that community-level violence, as measured by homicides, along with economic determinants, are important drivers of child migration from the Northern Triangle to the United States. Policy and practice interventions focused on economic development as well as violence prevention can have important effects on child emigration from this region.