

An illustration of three people of different ethnicities holding hands in a circle. A woman with dark skin and curly hair is on the left, wearing a white top and blue skirt. A man with glasses and a red shirt is on the right, wearing a green backpack and blue pants. A woman with light skin and blonde hair is in the center, wearing a blue top and green skirt. They are standing on a yellow ground with small colorful footprints. The background is a large, abstract shape in yellow and orange, with a white and light orange shape at the bottom. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, colorful map of Central America.

In the footprints of migrants

Perspectives and experiences of migrants from
El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the United States

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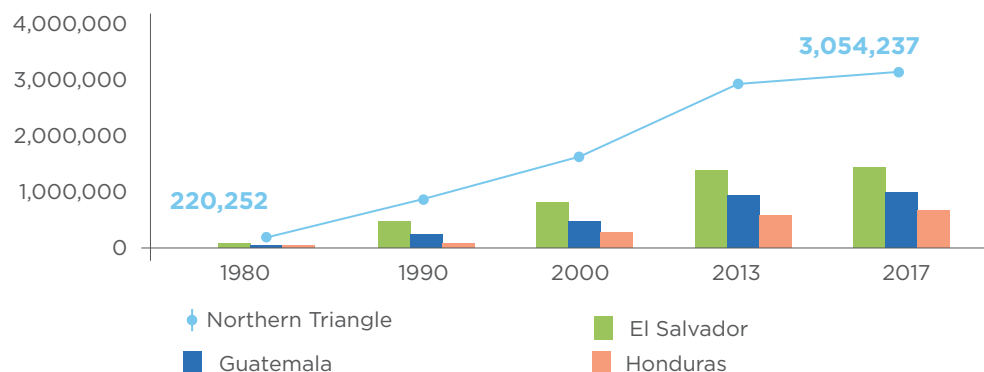
Motivation



Nine percent of the total population of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras live in the United States.¹

Migrant outflows from these three countries to the United States constitute a migration system that sprang from political conflicts in those countries in the 1980s, and that has substantial effects on the countries of origin and on political discourse in the United States². Between 1980 and 2017, the number of migrants from these three countries climbed from 200,000 to more than 3 million. As of 2017, 9 percent of these countries' total population and 8, 10 and 30 percent of the working-age populations of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, respectively, lived outside their home countries, mainly in the United States. Each year more than 300,000 people from these countries, primarily young, undertake the journey to the United States and only some of them reach their destination (Abuelafia, 2018). It is estimated that 16–36 percent of the demographic dividend of these countries has left to live abroad (Canales, Fuentes y de León Escribano, 2019), partly constraining the countries' growth potential (graph 1).

Graph 1. **Emigrants in the United States by Year and Country of Origin**



Source: Bilateral Migration Matrix, World Bank.

Migration flows from the region to the United States have increased even though US immigration policies have hardened.

In recent years, irregular migration from the region has been on such a scale that it has surpassed migration from Mexico, traditionally the leading source of migrants across the US southern border³. This has occurred at a time of tightening US immigration policy, leading to a decline in circular migration⁴ and more permanent settlement⁵. The strengthening of migrant networks and the pursuit of family

1. IDB estimates based on data from the Bilateral Migration Matrix 2017 for the migrant population living in the United States, and the National Statistical Institutes of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador for 2017 population estimates.

2. IDB estimates based on data from ACS, 2017 and World Development Indicators, 2017. Population between the ages of 15 and 64.

3. Measured by the total number of detentions on the US southern border by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Source: CBP.

4. Circular migration is defined as migration in which, during a 10-year period, the migrant has crossed the border of the destination country at least three times and has stayed in one of the countries for at least 12 months. https://www.unecce.org/fileadmin/DAM/stats/documents/ece/ces/bur/2016/February/14-Add1_Circular_migration.pdf

5. According to Pew Research Center, for all the unauthorized migrants living in US, the share of migrants that are living in the country for more than 10 years increased from 38% in 2005 to 66% in 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>

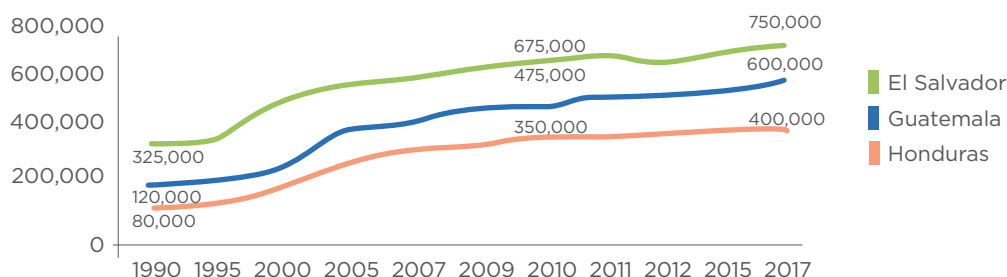
reunification influence the dynamic of these flows. At the same time, remittances have become a key element of the Northern Triangle's economic activity, accounting on average for 18 percent of the countries' GDP.

In an effort to understand migration systems in the region and provide information to help design public policies geared to creating opportunities and encouraging people to stay in their home countries, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has carried out a series of empirical studies, including the compilation of primary data on the characteristics of migrants living in the United States. This report summarizes the main findings.

Migration from the Northern Triangle is generally irregular and low in human capital.

It is estimated that more than half of migrants from the Northern Triangle in 2017 were irregular^{6,7}, (750,000 Salvadorians, 600,000 Guatemalans and 400,000 Hondurans) (graph 2). This circumstance seriously constrains their job prospects and their opportunities to generate income in the United States. It also encourages them to settle⁸, lessening the prospect that they will return to their countries of origin on their own initiative. Moreover, the average education level of the NT migrants is below the average level for all migrants living in the US.

Graph 2. Irregular Migrants in the United States



Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on US Census Bureau data.

Few sources of information allow for a robust analysis of this population's motivations, perspectives and migration experience.

Household surveys and censuses are regularly conducted in the United States and efforts have been made in the countries of origin, but they do not provide enough information to enable systematic analysis of migrants' motivations, perspectives and experience.

6. Irregular migration is understood as migration that takes place beyond the laws, regulations and international treaties that regulate entry into (or departure from) countries of origin, transit countries, and destination countries. <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#irregular-migration>

7. Estimates of the population of irregular migrants: <https://www.pewhispanic.org/interactives/unauthorized-trends/>. There are no official counts of irregular migrants in the United States, but residual estimation methodologies are used to compare the total number of migrants measured in household surveys and censuses with official statistics on migrants living legally in the United States. (For example, (Passel and Cohn 2016; Warren and Warren 2013).

8. Due to tightening of migration policies in the United States since the 90s.



The Survey



To gain a better understanding of the migration experience from the Northern Triangle, a survey on recent migrants was conducted in the main metropolitan areas of residence in the United States (see Box 1). In 2017, 36 percent of the migrant population from these countries was living in one of these three selected metropolitan areas: Washington, DC; Los Angeles, CA; and New York, NY⁹.

Trying to conduct surveys of this population has numerous methodological challenges. One of the main challenges is that there is no possibility of having contact information for this population that could facilitate the use of traditional survey methodologies. Additionally, most of recent migrants have, in general, an irregular immigration situation, which makes them reluctant to participate in this type of initiative. The options available also had their limitations, mostly because of how to adjust for the non-randomness of the sample.

The objective of this study is to characterize migrants, their motivations, migration experience, and life in the United States, in order to improve the design and effectiveness of public policies geared on this phenomenon in their countries of origin. Given the substantial outflow of people from the NT countries to the United States, it is important to gain a better understanding of the push and pull factors, as well as of the migration experience, in order to design public policies that make the population more likely to remain in their place of origin, mitigate the impact of migration on families that remain in their home countries and facilitate the reintegration of returning migrants.

Box 1. Characteristics of the survey

- The survey focused on migrants ages 18 and above from the three countries of the Northern Triangle who arrived in the United States for the first time in the past 10 years¹⁰.
- The Response Driven Sampling (RDS) methodology was applied (Heckathorn et al., 1997). This sampling method is used to survey population groups that are hard to access and often “hidden” but form part of a network, and for which there is no preexisting and effective sampling framework.
- Statistics were captured from a representative sample of this population: 1,859 respondents.
- The interviews lasted on average 35 minutes and were conducted in Spanish.
- The final data were weighted to provide nationally representative estimates of each country’s migrant population.
- The margin of error for all respondents is +/- 2.3 percentage points, with a 95 percent confidence interval.
- Some specific conditions of the target population’s characteristics must be met in order to ensure success in using the RDS methodology: (i) the respondents are known to each other as members of the target population: and (ii) the recruitment links are reciprocal. The most crucial premise is that the respondents are known to each other as members of the target population. This means that the population is linked by a preexisting pattern of contact and that these relationships are reciprocal (i.e., coupons and screening sheet prepared before the survey. See the technical annex).
- See the technical annex for more details on the methodology.

9. IDB using data from the American Community Survey (ACS), 2017.

10. Between January 1st, 2007 and December 31st, 2017.

Migrant characteristics: family, education and job opportunities



Most migrants from the three countries are young and unmarried, and a large proportion are members of an indigenous community.

In the past decade, the education levels of migrants from the Northern Triangle have been lower than those of other migrants, but high in comparison to the general population in their home countries.

Migrants' families tend to break up. Half of the migrants' children are in their country of origin.

Most Northern Triangle migrants are irregular and hope to remain in the United States permanently.

Analysis of the migrant population reveals brain drain, especially among the youth¹¹.

Migrants are markedly young and more educated than the population of their countries of origin. The average age of recent migrants is 32¹². Fifteen percent of respondents identify themselves as members of an indigenous population or culture, a proportion that reaches 33 percent in the case of migrants from Guatemala¹³.

Migrants from the Northern Triangle in the United States are more educated than the general population in their countries of origin.

A higher proportion of migrants living in the US have completed secondary education, relative to the inhabitants of these countries. However, Guatemalan and Honduran migrants have a significantly lower educational level than Salvadorians. At the same time, the educational attainment of the Northern Triangle's migrant population has risen in the past two decades. Only three of every 10 migrants who arrived in the United States between 1990 and 2000 had at least a complete secondary education; a decade later, almost half of those arriving had reached at least that level¹⁴. Approximately 43 percent of recent NT migrants claim to speak English well or very well, and a similar proportion (45 percent) claim to write English well or very well. Nonetheless this share is lower than the average migrant in the US (52 percent)¹⁵. Some 51 percent of recent migrants were employed in their home country before they migrated, although much of the employment was informal¹⁶.

11. The three Northern Triangle countries have been identified as those with the biggest brain drain (Docquier, Frederic and Rapoport, Hillel, 2011).

12. IDB estimates based on data from ACS, 2017. Population aged 18 and above that arrived in the United States between 2007 and 2017.

13. The estimated proportions for the total population are 0.2 percent for El Salvador, 7.2 percent for Honduras, and 41 percent for Guatemala. Estimates from World Bank (2015). World Bank. 2015. *Latinoamérica Indígena en el Siglo XXI*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

14. IDB estimates based on data from the US Census Bureau, 2000 and IDB survey of Northern Triangle migrants, 2018. *Data for the Northern Triangle population living in the United States who are 18 or older and arrived in the country before the survey year*.

15. Pew Research Center - Hispanic Trends. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/chart/immigrant-statistical-portrait-english-proficiency-among-u-s-immigrants/>

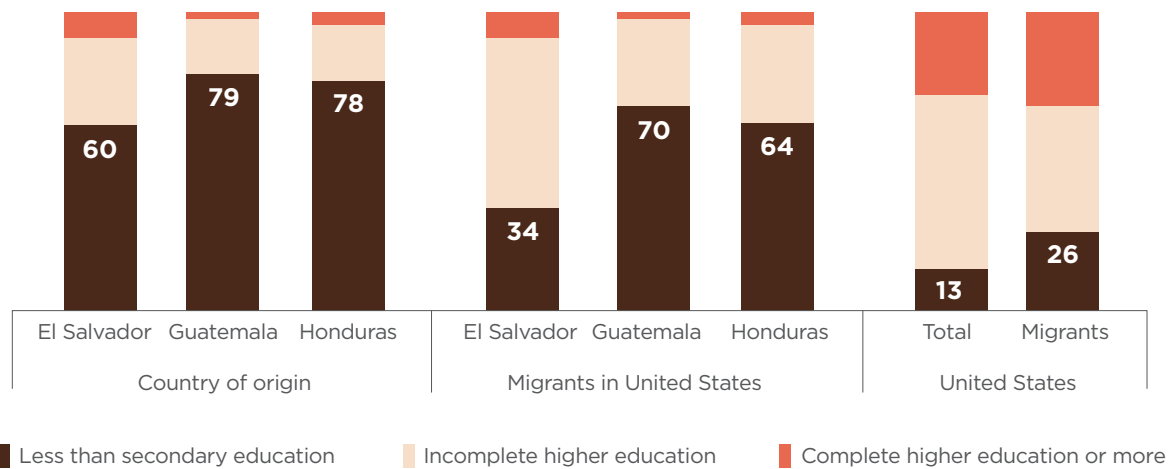
16. Only 24 percent of migrants had social security coverage at work in their place of origin, ranging from 34 percent for El Salvador and 7 percent for Guatemala.



Migrants from the Northern Triangle tend to be less skilled than other migrants in the United States.

Half of the NT migrants have less than a complete secondary education and only 44 percent have had some form of higher education or training. By contrast, seven of every 10 migrants in the United States have had a complete secondary education or more¹⁷ (graph 3). Thirteen percent of Northern Triangle migrants continued their studies in the United States, with the largest share from El Salvador (16 percent). Moreover, 11 percent undertook some form of job training.

Graph 3. **Educational Level for the Population in the Country of Origin, Migrants in the United States, and the US Population (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018 (question: what was the final year and level of schooling that you completed?). Data for country of origin from the household surveys in these countries, 2017 for Honduras and El Salvador, 2014 for Guatemala. Data for the United States from ACS, 2017.

Note: Population aged 18 and above. The category “less than secondary education” includes individuals with no education, with primary education, and with incomplete secondary education. The category “incomplete higher education” includes individuals with complete secondary education and incomplete higher education.

The impact on the countries of origin includes family breakdown, affecting the future of their children.

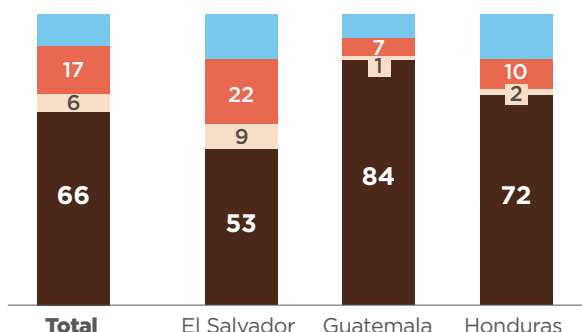
Some 47 percent of migrants report they have children, and 54 percent of those children are living in the Northern Triangle region. In general, the children live with one of their parents (34 percent), grandparents (30 percent), or another family member (8 percent). Migrants report they are in frequent contact with their children (50 percent every day and 30 percent every week), mostly by telephone and over the internet. This contact does not relieve the responsibility of one of the parents or grandparents for the care of the children. Other sources have recorded an increase in risk-taking attitudes among minors when the mother migrates. The presence of children in the country of origin, together with the decline in circular migration, increases the pressure to reunify families, and thus one or both parents send for their children (Box 3).

17. IDB estimates based on data from ACS, 2017. Data for the US population living who are 18 or older.

In most cases, migration is irregular and was not preceded by an earlier process of internal migration.

Approximately 66 percent of migrants define their legal status on entering the United States as “undocumented” (graph 4). The high degree of irregularity in migration is a barrier to finding a well-paid, high-quality job. Some 93 percent of migrants arrive in the United States directly from their birthplaces; of the three countries, Guatemala has the highest percentage in this regard (97 percent).

Graph 4. **What was your immigration status on arriving in the United States for the first time? (%)**



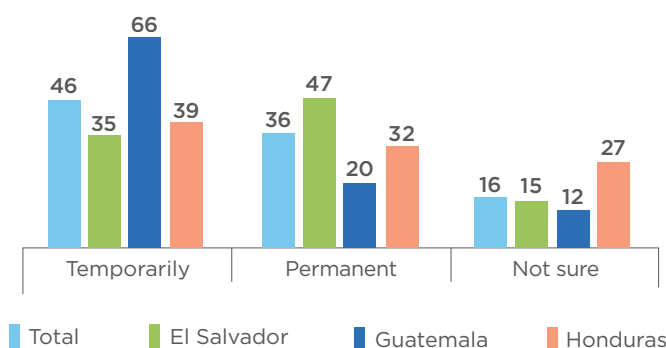
Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

■ Undocumented ■ Permanent resident or U.S. citizen ■ Other ■ Do not now/Refuse to answer

Less than a third of migrants expect to return to their country of origin. The desire to remain became stronger between the moment of deciding to emigrate and the time of the survey.

Asked about their expectations of how long they planned to be in the United States after taking the decision to migrate for the first time, 46 percent of migrants said that they planned to live temporarily in the country (graph 5).

Graph 5. **When you made the decision to come to live in the United States for the first (or only) time, did you think of living in the United States only for a while or permanently? (%)**

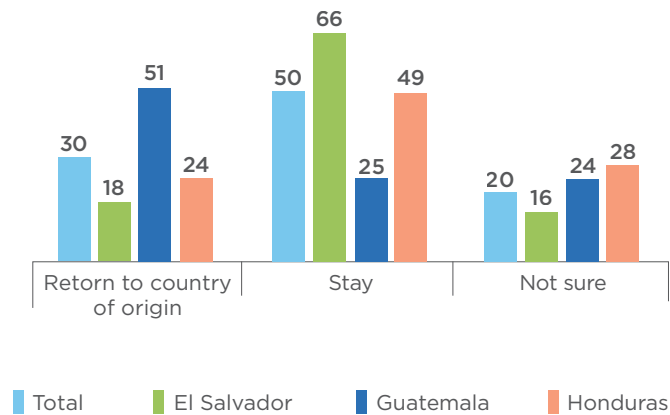


Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.



Nonetheless, when they were asked—independently of their migrant status—about their predisposition to return to their countries of origin now that they were living in the United States, only 30 percent said they wanted to go back to their home countries (graph 6). There are marked differences among migrants from the three countries. Guatemalan migrants regard migration as temporary, both when they make the decision and when they are in the United States. In contrast among Salvadorian migrants, it is evident that the aim of migration is to remain in the destination country.

Graph 6. **Independently of your immigration status, do you currently want to return to your country of origin or stay in the United States? (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Motivations and perspectives of Northern Triangle Migrants



Most of those who emigrate report having done so for economic reasons, including lack of employment.

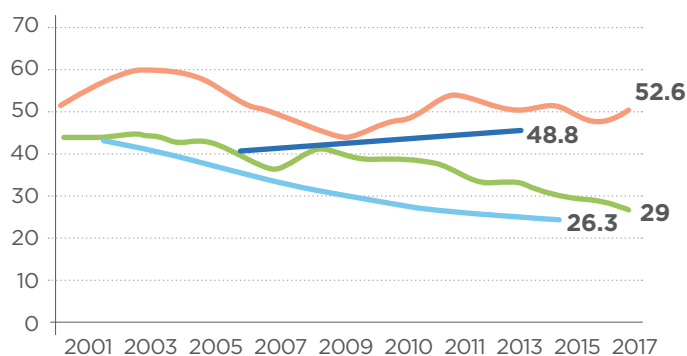
Crime and violence are identified as other reasons for migration.

The family drives and facilitates the migration process.

Lack of economic opportunities and high poverty levels have prompted emigration from the Northern Triangle.

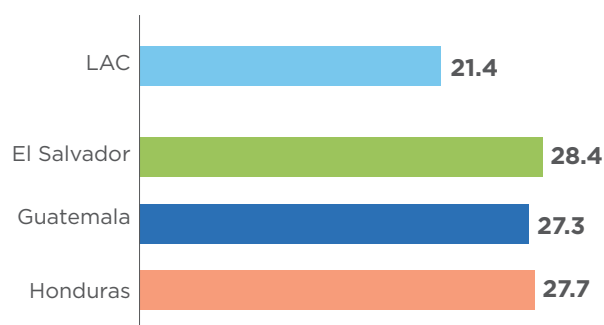
Economic growth in the Northern Triangle countries is below that of their Latin American counterparts (IMF, 2019). Moreover, these countries have some of the highest poverty rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) (graph 7). In 2017, 53% percent of Hondurans, 49% of Guatemalans and 29% of Salvadorians were living on less than US\$ 5.5 a day (purchasing power parity, 2011). Although income distribution has improved in the past 20 years, it is still above the regional average. The lack of opportunities is also evident among the youth. Each year, about 100,000 youths enter the labor market in the Northern Triangle, and the prospects of finding quality jobs is limited in view of the low rate of economic growth¹⁸. This is reflected in the large proportion of young people who are neither studying nor working (known in the region as “*ninis*”). More than a quarter (28 percent) of young people in the Northern Triangle were *ninis* in 2017, exceeding the LAC average (graph 8).

Graph 7. **Poverty Rate (US\$ 5.5/day, 2011 PPP)**



LAC El Salvador Guatemala Honduras

Graph 8. **Proportion of youth between 15 and 24, Neither in school nor Working, 2017 (%)**



Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank)

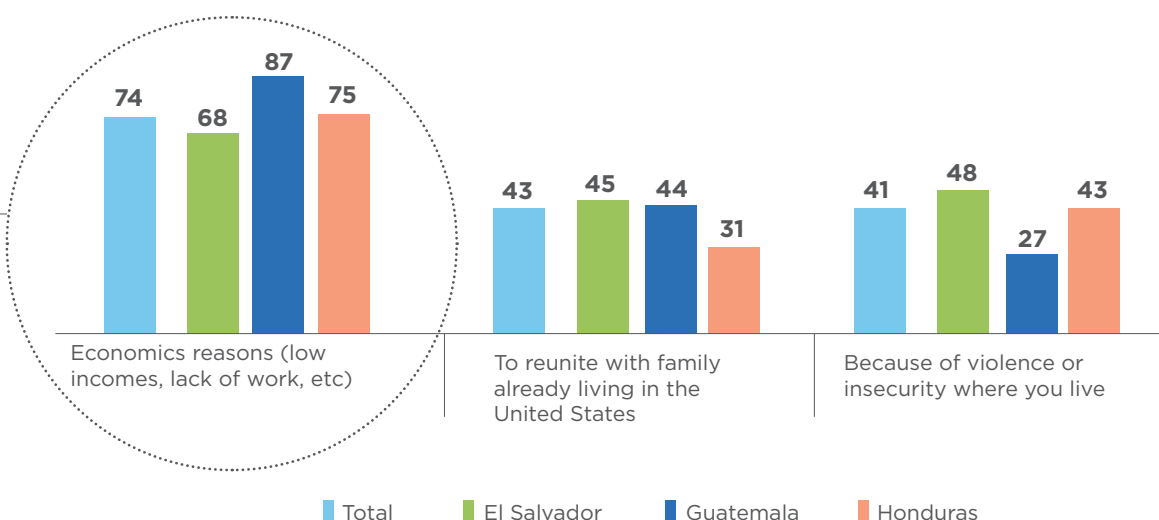
18. Authors' calculations based on data from CELADE – Population Division of ECLAC, 2019 Revision and United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, online edition.



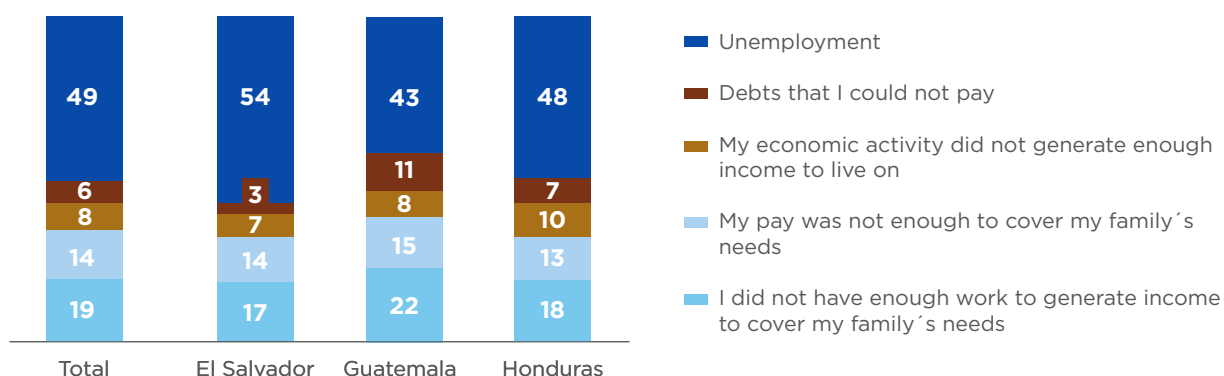
The survey of Northern Triangle migrants in the United States confirms that the search for employment and better wages are key factors in the decision to migrate.

Seven of every 10 migrants list economic reasons as one of the main motivations behind their decision (74 percent); this is a stronger reason for migrants from Honduras (75 percent) and Guatemala (87 percent) than for Salvadorians (68 percent) (graph 9a). Among those who say they migrated for economic reasons, half report being motivated by unemployment in their home country (49 percent). A higher proportion of Salvadorians (54 percent) identify unemployment as the main economic reason for migration. Additionally, 35 percent of migrants indicated that there is not enough work or wages are too low to cover their needs (graph 9b).

Graph 9a. **What were the main reasons why you left your country and emigrated to the United States for the first time? (%)**



Graph 9b. **Can you specify what best describes your [economic] motive for migrating? (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Box 2. Economic migration: the case of Guatemala



Although migration is a multicausal process in which push and pull factors influence the decision to migrate, Guatemalan migrants report a tendency towards economic migration relative to those from other countries.

The information gathered in the survey makes it possible to characterize Guatemalan migrants, allowing us to infer a difference in the aim of their migration process, relative to migrants from other NT countries. The matters analyzed include the reasons given for migrating, the expectations of remaining, and the destination of their investments.

The main reason given for migration is economic. Almost 90 percent of Guatemalan migrants allude to economic reasons as their prime motivation for leaving Guatemala. The economic reasons reported include unemployment in the country (43 percent), lack of enough work to cover their needs (22 percent), and low wages (15 percent). This contrasts with the fact that 64 percent of Guatemalan migrants worked before migrating, compared to lower figures for the other two NT countries.

Guatemalan migrants are less likely to expect to remain in the United States permanently relative to migrants from other NT countries. In 66 percent of cases, the decision to migrate was based on the assumption that the move would be temporary; this decision did not

change radically once they found themselves living in the United States. Another indicator of the temporary nature of migration, relative to the other NT countries, is the expectation of bringing their children to the United States. Among Guatemalan migrants, only 11 percent of those who are currently separated from their children are planning to bring them to the United States, compared to 26 percent of Salvadorian migrants and 29 percent of Hondurans.

Guatemalans report saving more and their investments are concentrated in their country of origin.

More than 50 percent of Guatemalan migrants report having savings, compared to 46 percent from El Salvador and 43 percent from Honduras. Only 2 percent of Guatemalan migrants say they have bought a home in the United States, compared to 7 percent of Honduran migrants and 8 percent of Salvadorians. Moreover, just 36 percent of Guatemalan migrants keep their savings in the United States, compared to 83 percent of Salvadorian migrants and 58 percent of the Hondurans. Guatemalan migrants report to a greater extent (28%) that they have bought or built a home in their country of origin (or are in the process of doing so), compared to 18 percent of Hondurans and 13 percent of Salvadorians. Nineteen percent of migrants have invested their savings in some productive activity, compared to 6 percent of migrants from El Salvador.

Family reunification is the second main reason given for the decision to migrate.

The decision to remain for longer periods in the United States increases the migrants' desire to be reunited with their families. Two out of five migrants identified family reunification as one of the main reasons for migrating, mostly to be with their parents. A higher proportion of migrants from El Salvador (45 percent) and Guatemala (44 percent) indicate that they moved to the United States to be reunited with a family member than do migrants from Honduras (31 percent) (graph 9a). Additionally, 16 percent of interviewees first entered the United States as minors: the biggest proportion in this regard was from Honduras (20 percent), mainly to be reunited with family members (50.1 percent).

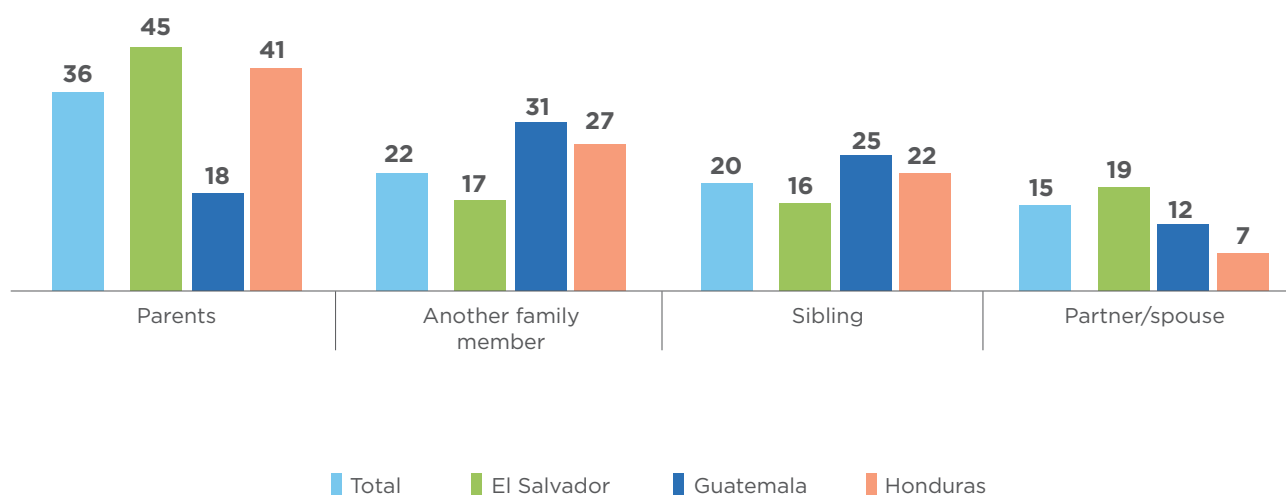


When analyzing the migration experience, the relevance of migrant networks and the family reunification process are evident.

Migrant networks that have developed in the United States lessen the uncertainty surrounding the decision to emigrate. Several studies have shown that migrant networks are particularly important for poorer and less skilled migrants, and for those unauthorized (Massey, 1988; Orrenius, 1999; Palloni et al., 2001; Orrenius y Zavodny, 2005; Dolfin y Genicot, 2010).

Forty seven percent of recent migrants from the Northern Triangle arrived at the home of a close relative, 27 percent to other family member, and 19 percent at the house of a friend. Only 6 percent of migrants report not having arrived at a house in particular. Moreover, 45 percent of migrant report that they migrated due to family reunification reasons. Of those migrants, 36 percent reported that they migrated to reunite with their parents, and 15 percent with their partners (graph 10). There is a marked pattern among Salvadorian migrants, where family reunification seems to be a stronger motive than migrants from the other countries, as discussed in Box 3.

Graph 10. **With whom were you reunited? (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Box 3. Family reunification: the case of El Salvador



Although migrants from El Salvador report economic reasons as their main motivation to migrate, it is clear that family reunification is also very relevant. Some 45 percent reported family reunification among their main reasons for migrating, especially to reunite with spouses and parents. Relative to migrants from the other NT countries, Salvadorian migrants are more prone to stay in the homes of close family members upon arrival in the United States (56 percent). Even further, family members tend to cover most of the cost of the trip (see the “Migration experience” section).

The civil war in El Salvador (1979–1992) was a significant trigger for emigration to the United States. In that period, the country lost an average of 29,000 people a year due to migration. This continued after the conflict ended: in the 1990s, more than 60,000 people left the country each year. As a result of the crisis, many Salvadorians moved to the United States and became eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in 1992.

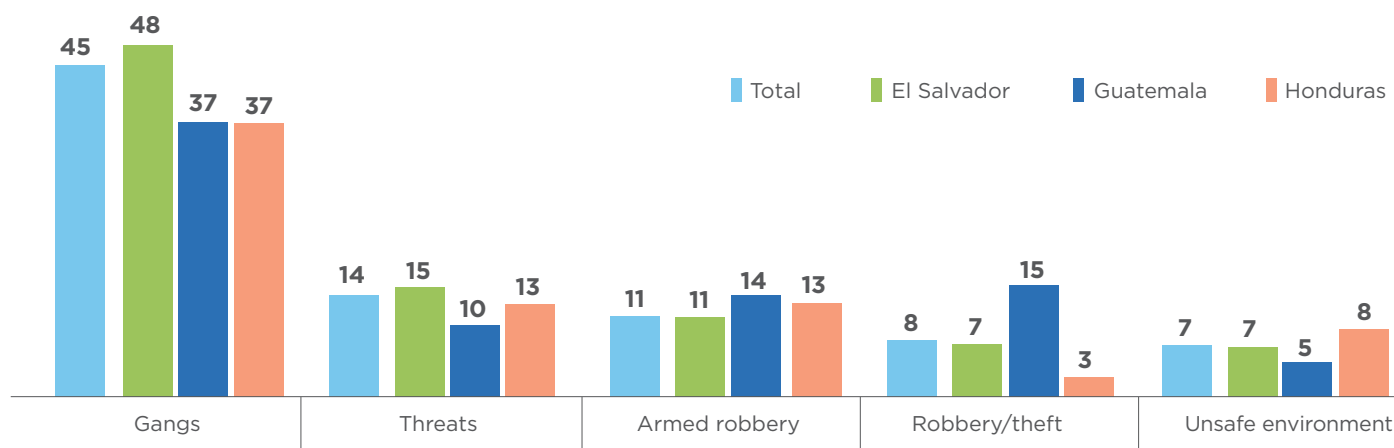
Moreover, a higher percentage of Salvadorian respondents see the migration process as permanent. A larger proportion of them have sought protection through asylum. Other signs of their greater willingness to settle in the United States, relative to migrants from the other countries, include the smaller proportion of Salvadorian migrants who are buying or building homes in their country of origin, and the smaller percentage who send remittances to their country of origin (see the “Remittances” section).

On the other hand, natural disasters have also pushed many to seek refuge in the United States. El Salvador suffers annual losses of about 2.5 percent of GDP because of such events. The 2001 earthquakes resulted in economic losses of about US\$ 1.85 billion, equivalent to 13 percent of GDP. More than 1.6 million people were affected, which also resulted in more Salvadorians becoming eligible to obtain TPS. (Calvo-González y López, 2015).

In third place, 41 percent of respondents identify crime and violence among their main reasons to migrate.

Migrants from El Salvador report a greater incidence of offenses, crime and violence (58 percent) than migrants from the other two countries. Among those who reported violence as a cause for migration, the presence of gangs (45%) – in particular for Salvadorians – was a main factor to move to the United States (graph 11). In line with this, violence is the main reason for not returning to their country of origin (43 percent).

Graph 11. Which act of violence in particular pushed you to decide to migrate? (%)



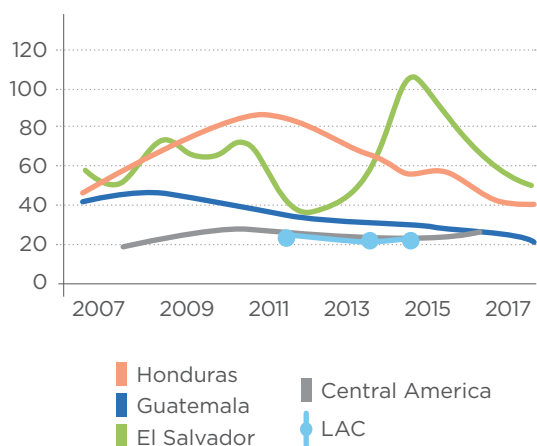
Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.



Homicide rates in the three countries have fallen markedly in recent years, but the Northern Triangle still has one of the world's highest homicide rates among regions not in war¹⁹.

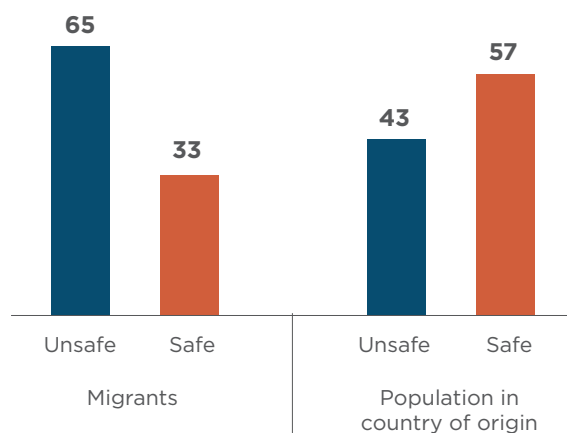
The Northern Triangle countries average murder rate of 38 per 100,000 inhabitants is higher than the world rate (6.1) and the rate in LAC (22.3) (graph 12). The prevalence of gangs, extortion and drugs trafficking is conducive to the constant outflow of people seeking new opportunities in the United States. In particular, migrants say that they felt less safe in their countries of origin than the average of inhabitants who remained there.

Graph 12. **Homicide Rate**
(per 100,000 inhabitants)



Source: 2008–2016, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; 2017–2018, official data. Data for LAC: World Development Indicators (World Bank).

Graph 13. **Perception of Insecurity (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle migrants, 2018 and Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) 2016/17.

19. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Available at: <https://dataunodc.un.org/crime/intentional-homicide-victims>

Migration Experience



Migration is not solely by land.

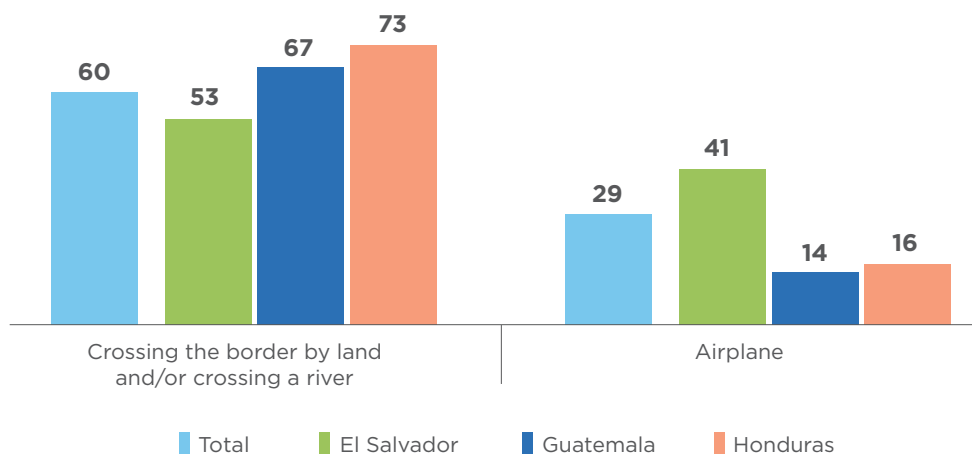
The “coyote”²⁰ or guide is fundamental in the migration process.

Migrant family covered the migration cost for many of the migrants.

Three of every five migrants enter the United States by land or river, and a little more than a quarter by airplane.

Contrary to the expectations, 29% of the recent migrants entered the US by plane, and 60% by crossing the border by land. However, there are difference among countries. Salvadorians report having entered the United States by plane (41 percent), whereas a greater proportion of Hondurans and Guatemalans arrived by land or crossing a river (73 and 67 percent, respectively). This is partly explained by a larger share of Salvadorian migrants who entered with a tourist visas (16 percent) or legal residence (8 percent) relative to the migrants from the other two countries (graph 14).

Graph 14. **When you entered the United States, you did so by ...? (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Having the help of “coyotes” during the journey is essential for migrants to reach their destination.

Only 15 percent of interviewees did not hire someone (a coyote, guide or migrant smuggler) at some stage of the journey to the United States. In general, migrants report having hired someone for the whole trip (43 percent) and a greater proportion of Guatemalans (62 percent) pay for these services. In 27 percent of cases, smugglers are hired only to cross the border between Mexico and the United States. Whether migrants manage to enter the United States partly depends on paying for these services. According to the 2018 Survey on Migration in Mexico’s Southern Border (EMIF Sur, for its Spanish acronym) (EMIF Sur, 2018)²¹, only a small number of migrants repatriated by the Mexican authorities had hired the service of coyotes²¹, while 30–66 percent of migrants

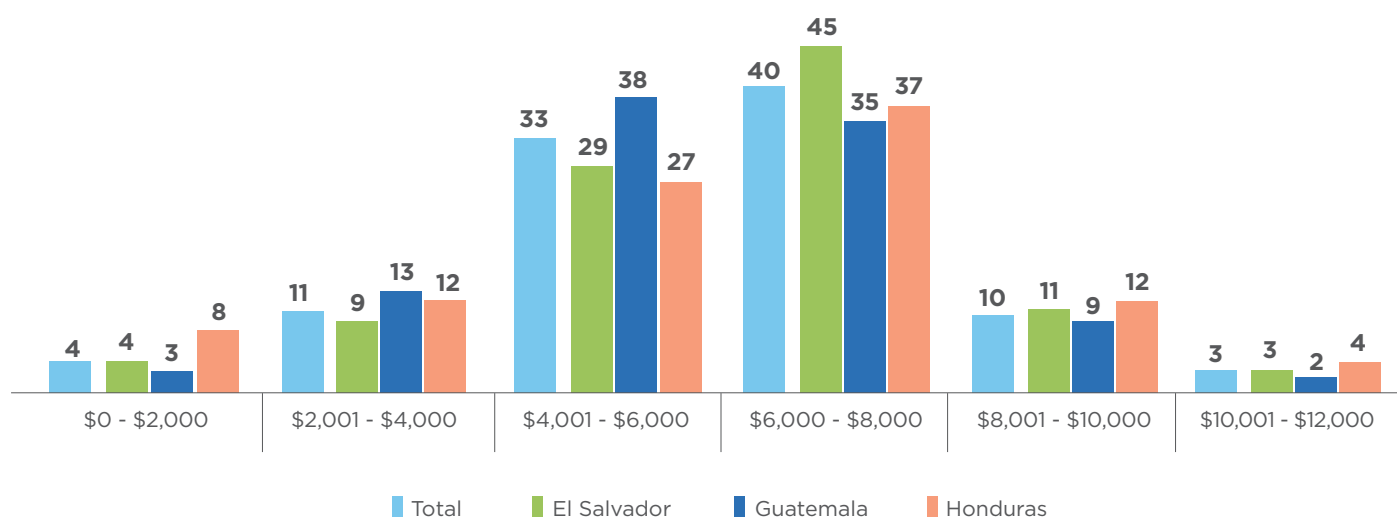
20. Colloquially known as “coyotes” or “polleros,” people smugglers provide a service to transport migrants for all or part of the trip from their home countries to the United States. Most of these people are members of criminal organizations.

21. The College of the Northern Border, Secretariat of Labor and Social Security, and National Population Council, Migration Policy Unit, Secretariat of Foreign Relations, National Council to Prevent Discrimination, Social Development Secretariat (2018) - Survey on Migration at Mexico’s Southern Border.



that reached the US southern border had hired such assistance. This is in line with the findings of the survey of migrants living in the United States. Migrants who used such services paid a coyote between US\$ 4,000 and US\$ 8,000, varying by country, with Salvadorians paying the highest prices compared to Guatemalans and Hondurans (graph 15).

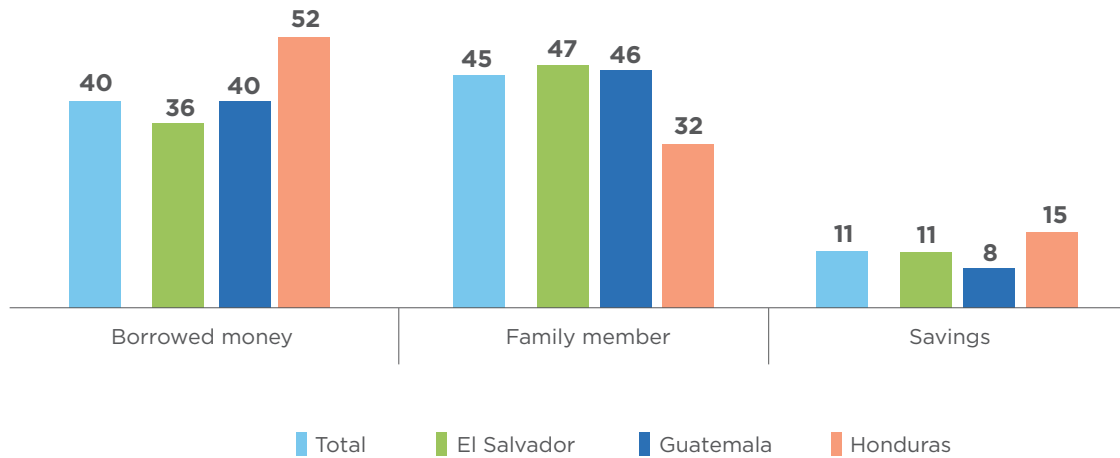
Graph 15. How much did you pay a coyote/guide or smuggler? (%)



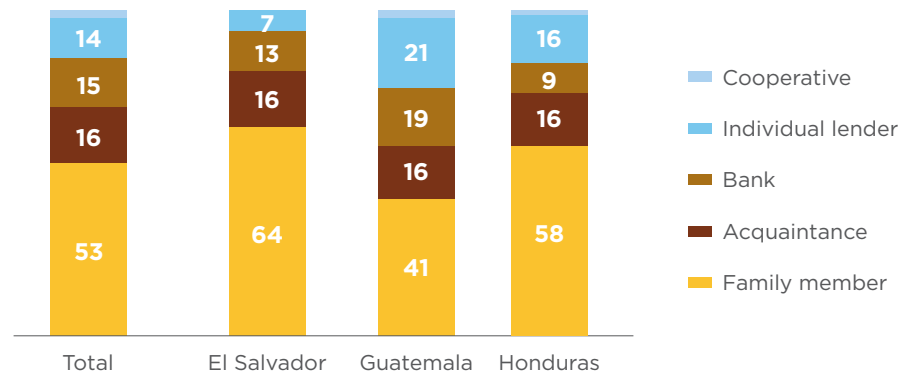
Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Family support is crucial to funding the migration process.

Some 45 percent of interviewees report that a family member paid for the cost of the trip, 40 percent sought financing (also including family members), and only 11 percent used their savings to finance the trip (graph 16). The large share of families that pay for the trip reflects the family reunification process, a circumstance that is even more apparent when it is examined in conjunction with the high proportion who reunite with parents or partners. Financing from other sources poses a risk if the migration process is curtailed: in such cases, migrants have not reached their financial goals and have a debt with family members, acquaintances or financial institutions (graph 17). A comparison across countries shows that family members living in the United States met the cost for 33 percent of Salvadorians. On the other hand, 28 percent of Guatemalan migrants received financial help from family members in their country of origin, and they did not have to repay. These findings are consistent with the idea of a strong process of family reunification in the Salvadorian case and an economic motive seen as an investment in the case of Guatemalan migrants.

Graph 16. **How did you pay the cost of the guide (or coyote or smuggler) (%)**

Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Graph 17. **Who lent you the money? (%)**

Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.



Life in the United States



Most migrants work and pay taxes in the United States.

Few receive welfare benefits.

About half have managed to accumulate some savings.

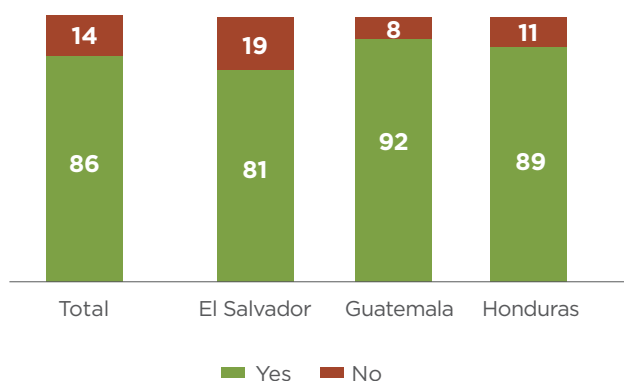
As discussed earlier, most migrants are low-skilled and irregular.

This combination seriously constrains their formal job prospects and their opportunities to generate income in the United States. Although the survey results indicate that most Northern Triangle migrants have worked in the United States in the past two years (86 percent)²² (graph 18), the majority have low-paid jobs. Northern Triangle migrants are clustered in only a few occupations, with almost half working in construction, housekeeping or food preparation, compared to just 20 percent for the overall migrant population in the United States (graph 19)²³.

Although most of them pay taxes, few receive welfare benefits in the United States.

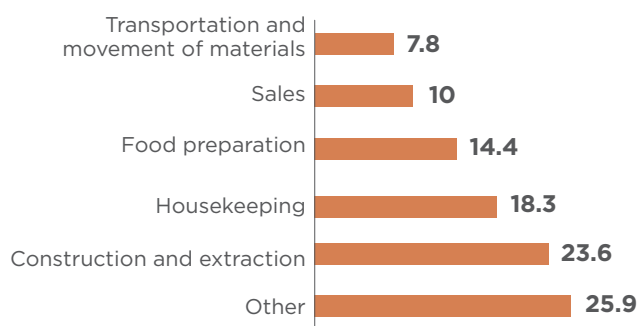
Some estimates suggest that irregular workers in the United States paid a total of US\$ 11.7 billion in taxes in 2014 (Gee et al., 2017). Three of every five Northern Triangle migrants report that they pay taxes on their income. Significantly more Hondurans (64 percent) and Salvadorians (77 percent) pay taxes than Guatemalans (49 percent). Only 23 percent received benefits from a social program (graph 20).

Graph 18. **Are you or have you been working in the United States in the past two years?**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Graph 19. **Main Occupation, Recent Northern Triangle Migrants in the United States (%)**

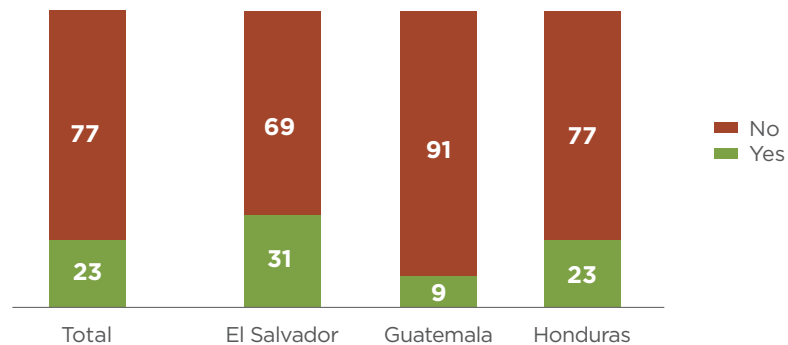


Source: IDB estimates based on data from ACS, 2017.

Note: Data include Northern Triangle migrants aged 18–65 who entered the United States between 2007 and 2017

22. The employment rate in the United States for those aged 16 and above is 60 percent, and 63 percent for Hispanics (ACS 2016). The median income for Hispanics is US\$ 46,300, compared to US\$ 47,800 for Salvadorian migrants, US\$ 40,000 for Guatemalan migrants, and US\$ 37,000 for Honduran migrants in 2016.

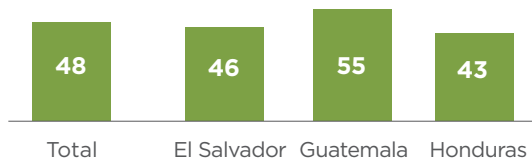
23. IDB based on data from ACS, 2017 and IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018

Graph 20. **Do you receive any kind of welfare benefit in the United States? (%)**

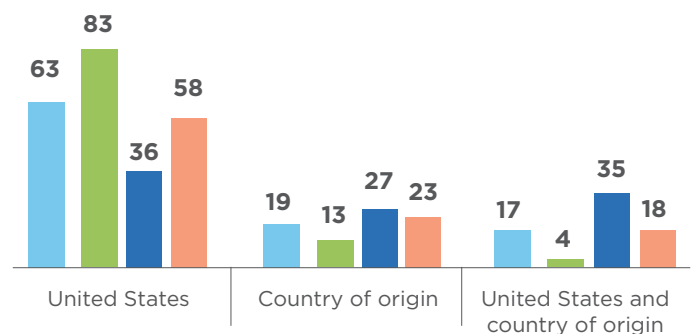
Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

Most migrants keep their savings in the United States, but one in five keeps them in their country of origin.

A little less than half of the migrants have managed to save cash for emergencies (48 percent), especially the Guatemalans (55 percent) (graph 21). Of those with cash saved for emergencies, most keep it in the United States (63 percent). This is significantly more common among Salvadorian migrants (83 percent) than Hondurans (58 percent) or Guatemalans (36 percent) (graph 22). Some 12 percent of migrants say they have made productive investments in their countries of origin. Substantially more Guatemalans (19 percent) and Hondurans (14 percent) have done so than Salvadorians (4 percent). This result is in line with the findings mentioned earlier: Guatemalan migrants have largely economic aims, and it is not their prime goal to settle in the United States.

Graph 21. **Have you managed to build savings in case of an emergency? (%)**

Yes

Graph 22. **Are those savings in the United States or in your country? (%)**

Legend: Total (light blue), El Salvador (green), Guatemala (dark blue), Honduras (orange)

Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.



Remittances and Connections to the Country of Origin



More than half of Northern Triangle migrants send remittances to their country of origin.

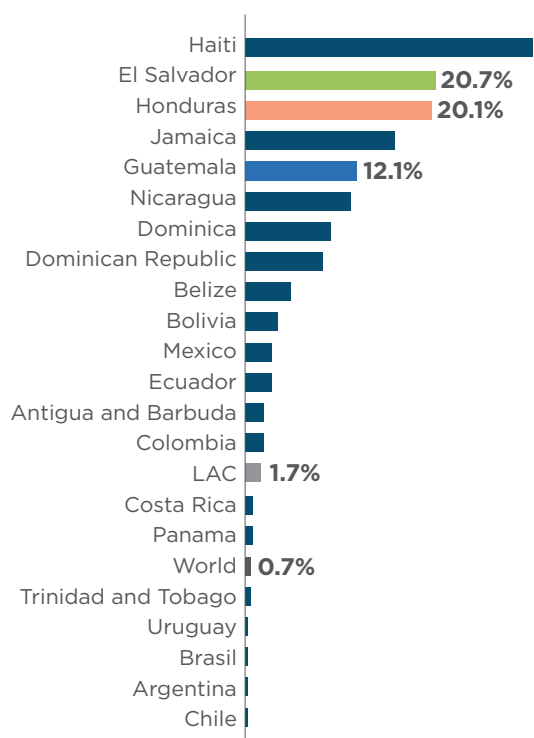
Parents are the main recipients.

Remittances cover most of the basic household expenses.

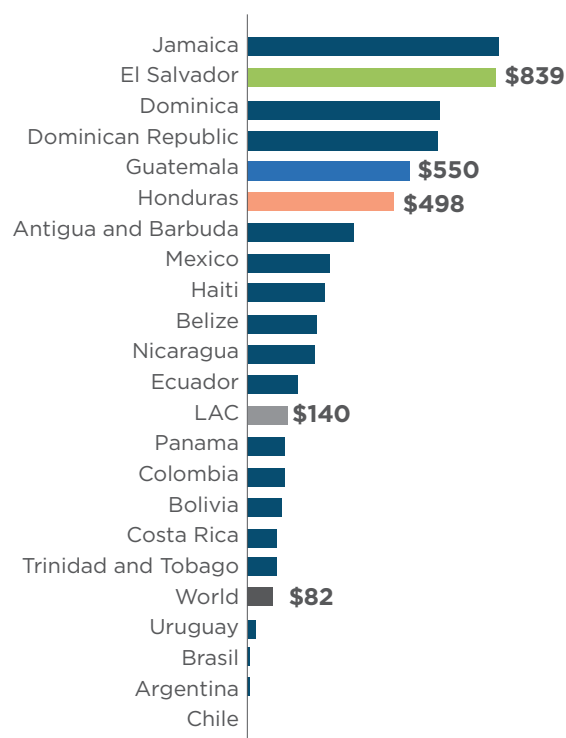
Remittances are a crucial element of economic activity in the Northern Triangle.

In 2018, international remittances to the region exceeded US\$ 19 billion, which is more than a fifth of total remittances in LAC. These remittances accounted for 20.7 percent of GDP in El Salvador, 20.1 percent in Honduras, and 12.1 percent in Guatemala, compared to less than 2 percent for LAC and 1 percent worldwide (graph 23). El Salvador has the highest remittances in per capita terms (US\$ 839), followed by Guatemala (US\$ 550). Even though Honduras has the lowest per capita level of remittances in the Northern Triangle, the country's remittance flows are still almost four times bigger than the LAC average (graph 24).

Graph 23. Remittances, 2018 (% of GDP)



Graph 24. Per Capita Remittances, 2018 (US\$)

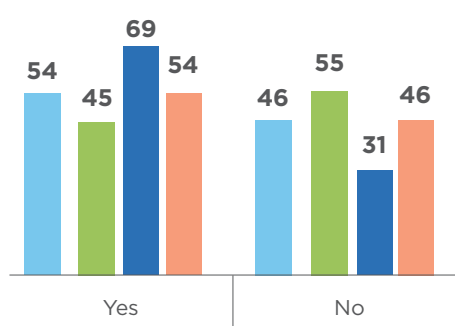


Source: World Development Indicators (World Bank).

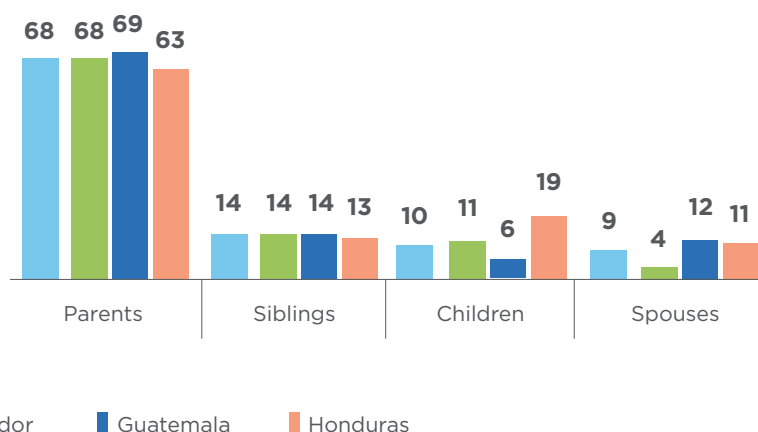
More than half of the interviewees report sending money to their country of origin.

Seven of every 10 Guatemalan migrants send remittances to their home country, compared to half of those from Honduras and El Salvador (graph 25). This pattern of remittances reinforces the argument that a greater proportion of Salvadorians in the United States wish to remain permanently in the country, whereas the majority of Guatemalans expect to stay temporarily. In turn, parents are the most frequent recipients of remittances (68 percent), followed by siblings (14 percent), children (10 percent) and spouses (9 percent). Although it is most common to send remittances to parents, Honduran migrants are also more likely than the rest to send money to their children (graph 26).

Graph 25. **Do you send money or remittances to someone in your country of origin? (%)**



Graph 26. **How are the people who directly receive your remittances related to you? (%)**



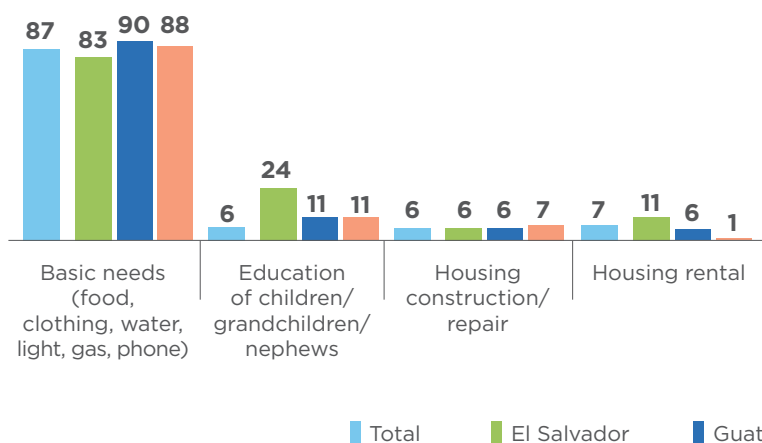
Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

The bulk of the remittances is used to cover basic needs (87 percent).

More Salvadorians send home remittances to support education (24 percent) than do migrants from Honduras or Guatemala (11 percent in both cases) (graph 27). Moreover, only half of those who send money home respond that it covers most of the recipients' expenses, the proportion of Guatemalan and Honduran migrants being higher (77 percent and 56 percent, respectively), compared to less than a third of Salvadorians (graph 28).

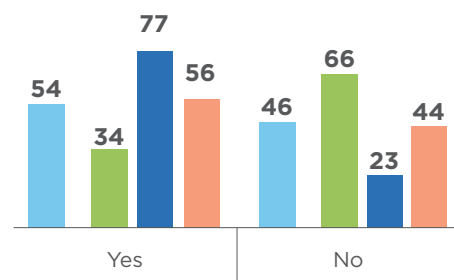


Graph 27. **How is most of the money or remittances you send to your country of origin used? (%)**



Source: IDB survey of Northern Triangle Migrants, 2018.

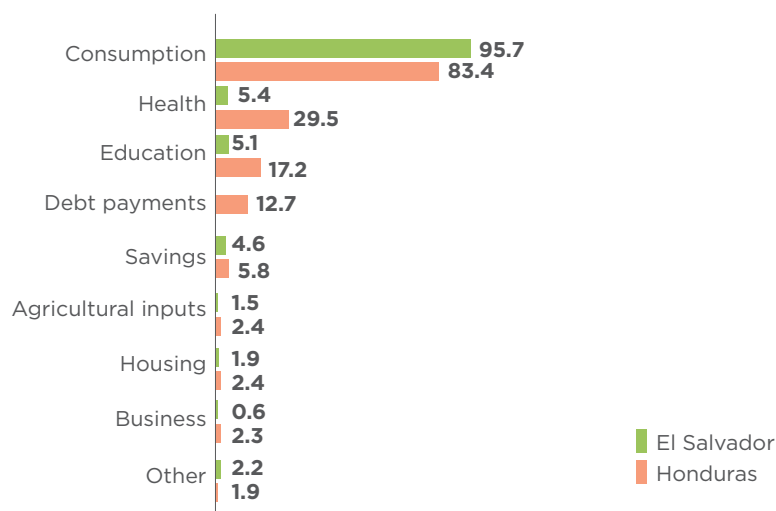
Graph 28. **Does the money you send cover most of the expenses of the people who receive it? (%)**



Recipients of remittances in Honduras and El Salvador also confirm that the money is used mainly for consumption²⁴.

More than 95 percent of Salvadorian households that receive remittances indicate they use it mostly for household expenses, as do Hondurans households (83.4 percent). Contrary to the responses of migrants living in the United States, Honduran recipients tend to use these resources more for health (29.5 percent), education (17.2 percent) and debt payments (12.7 percent) than do Salvadorians.

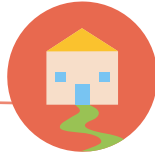
Graph 29. **Main Destination of Remittances in Honduras and El Salvador, 2018 (%)**



Source: Honduras, National Statistics Institute (INE, for its Spanish acronym), Permanent Multipurpose Household Survey (EPHPM, for its Spanish acronym) 2018. El Salvador, General Directorate of Statistics and Censuses (DIGESTYC, for its Spanish acronym), Multipurpose Household Survey (EHPM, for its Spanish acronym), 2018.

24. Data unavailable for Guatemala.

Return Migration



The flow of migrants returned by immigration authorities to the Northern Triangle has increased in recent years.

According to official statistics from the NT governments, in 2018 the Mexican and US immigration authorities sent approximately 200,000 migrants back to their country of origin (graph 30). A significant proportion are migrants apprehended by immigration authorities on route to the United States. Nevertheless, this does not rule out that they might try again.

In recent years the United States has toughened its immigration policy to discourage migration to the country.

The measures adopted include actions centered on the US southern border: i) strengthening the border, with an increase in the presence of military personnel and US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) staff; ii) a change in policies on dealing with families; iii) construction of physical barriers at the border; and iv) a zero-tolerance policy towards migrants²⁵. In line with the zero-tolerance policy, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began to separate thousands of families when the parents were referred for prosecution. However, this ended on June 20, 2018 with an executive presidential order. Policies within the country included the following changes: i) guidelines on the priorities for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) were set aside; ii) improvements were made to the electronic verification system E-verify, which enables employers to corroborate whether new employees are authorized to work; and iii) efforts were made to strengthen collaboration with local governments by means of 287(g) agreements for the purpose of detaining irregular migrants^{26,27}.

As part of the tightening of US immigration policies, there has been an increase in what are termed “interior deportations” from the United States²⁸.

Even though the total deportations increased 6% between fiscal year 2016 and fiscal year 2018, ICE reported that a total of 95,360 migrants had been returned from the interior of the country (from all countries, not just the Northern Triangle), an increase of 46 percent since fiscal year 2016 (ICE, 2019). Unfortunately, there is no official information on those who returned on their own initiative.

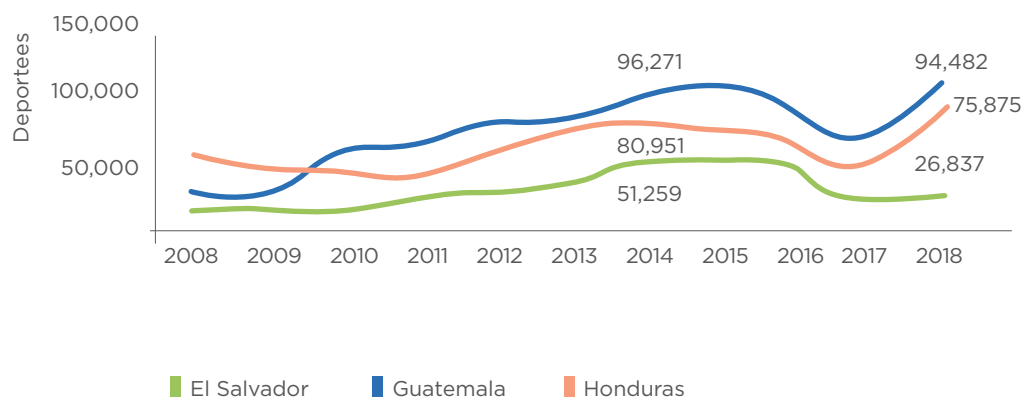
25. In May 2018, the Department of Justice announced that the Department of Homeland Security would send all those who crossed the border illegally to the Department of Justice for prosecution. Since then, some areas of the border have softened the zero-tolerance approach and decline to charge migrants who cross illegally. Moreover, since the executive order of June 20, 2018 that ended family separations, this policy is not applied to parents traveling with children.

26. In August 2018, ICE had 287(g) agreements with 78 law enforcement agencies, a 160 percent increase on the 30 agreements in force in January 2017.

27. For more information, see Pierce (2019).

28. Interior deportations refer to those that are not carried out by CBP close to the border, and involve identification, detention and deportation by ICE.



Graph 30. **Number of Migrants Deported**

Source: Secretariat of Foreign Relations, Honduras. General Directorate of Migration, Guatemala. General Directorate of Migration, El Salvador.

The countries of origin are making efforts to facilitate the process of reintegrating migrants.

The national governments implemented several programs focus on return migrants, including the construction of shelters and labor intermediation centers. Lack of resources and scant follow-up on migrants once they have returned limits the authorities' chances of assisting them in the process of social reintegration.

Returned migrants, especially those who have lived for a time in the United States, offer a singular opportunity to their countries.

There is potential for these migrants to make a productive contribution to the Northern Triangle countries. The experiences of Albania and the former Yugoslavia exemplify how return migration—massive in both cases—enabled an improvement in the growth potential of the countries of origin (Hausmann y Nedelkoska, 2017; Bahar et al., 2019). First, countries enjoy a positive impact on their growth potential as a result of the return of citizens with a higher-than-average level of education. Second, exposure to the standard of living and customs of a developed country might have had a positive influence on their productivity. The survey makes it possible to identify certain factors that give an idea of how different a migrant's profile is. For example, the workforce participation rate of migrants living in the United States is higher than in the countries of origin²⁹.

Moreover, migrants use the financial system more than people living in their countries of origin.

Some 31 percent of migrants living in the United States have a credit or debit card, compared to 10 percent of residents of the Northern Triangle who have made a purchase by such means in the past year³⁰. As regards access to technology, although there are no great differences in access to cell phones, there is indeed a gap between migrants and residents of the countries of origin with respect to technology and

29. 86 percent of the total population, compared with 57 percent for El Salvador, 54 percent for Honduras, according to ECLAC (2018).

30. Based on the World Bank's FINDEX database, 2017.

the internet. Some 42 percent have a computer in the household. This figure is lower than that for US residents overall, but it is much higher than the 16 percent in the region³¹. Circumstances are similar about internet availability in the household: 61 percent for migrants and 17 percent for residents of El Salvador. It can be expected that these differences might have a positive effect on the productivity of returning migrants relative to those who did not migrate.

Migrants have savings, and in some cases they invest them in their country of origin.

Half of the recent migrants from the NT countries living in the United States have savings. This is a bigger proportion than among people in the region (between 38 percent and 42 percent) and higher than the Latin American average³². Assuming that migrants save 20 percent of their disposable income, they would have average savings of US\$ 4,000 a year. As mentioned earlier, about 20 percent of Guatemalan migrants are making productive investments in their country of origin, as are 14 percent of Honduran migrants. In 45 percent of cases, the investment is to buy agricultural land, followed by the retail business. Furthermore, 18 percent of migrants report that they have bought, are buying or are building a house or apartment in their country of origin, the largest proportion being among Guatemalans (28 percent).

Return migration also poses challenges to the countries of origin.

From the individual perspective, the reintegration of migrants into society could present them with a challenge of adaptation, and they might need psychological support during the process. Moreover, especially if the migrants have been forced to return, they might face a debt: as mentioned earlier, 40 percent of migrants borrowed to finance the costs of their trip. According to IDB estimates (IDB, 2019), the NT countries would have to grow by 0.25–1 percent more a year to absorb the migrants who return and the citizens who decide not to emigrate because of the toughening of US immigration policies. From the standpoint of the governments, it is important to reintegrate the migrants into productive activity and channel what savings they might have in order to reap the rewards of their return. Analysis suggests that a policy geared to agriculture could benefit returned migrants in view of the concentration of their investments in that sector.

31. ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database.

32. Based on the World Bank's FINDEX database, 2017.



Concluding Remarks



Migration from Central America's Northern Triangle (NT) springs from a combination of push and pull factors

Migrants are mainly pulled by the search for economic opportunities and family reunification; they are pushed by high levels of violence and insecurity in their countries of origin.

The search for work, as well as low incomes, are key factors in the decision to migrate.

Seven of every 10 migrants report economic reasons as the main motivation behind their decision to emigrate. Outflows from Guatemala have a bias towards economic and temporary migration. Compared to their regional counterparts, moreover, a higher proportion of Guatemalans have savings and invest in their country of origin.

Family drives and facilitates the migration process

The findings confirm that family reunification is one of the main reasons for migration, especially from El Salvador. Almost half of the Northern Triangle respondents indicated that a family member living in the United States financed the cost of the trip.

High rates of violence and insecurity also push many to migrate

The interviewees report high rates of victimization and personal experience of crime and violence in their countries of origin. This is particularly marked among Salvadorians and Hondurans.

Migrants are highly integrated to the host country economy

The recent migrants from the NT have a high participation rate in the labor market and a significant share of them pay taxes in the United States, although they are unlikely to benefit from welfare programs. However, a substantial proportion of this population is low-skilled and their migration is irregular. This seriously constrains their job prospects and their opportunities to generate income.

Migrants retain close connections with their countries of origin.

More than 50 percent of them send remittances to their home countries, and the figure reaches 70 percent among Guatemalans. These remittances account for a substantial share of the countries' economies. About 20 percent of migrants are investing some of the income they earn in the United States on productive activities in the Northern Triangle countries, as well as in buying and/or building homes.

Return migration can offer an opportunity to the countries of origin

The migrants have more human capital than local populations and, if they return, they will have not only that capital but also a better command of English, exposure to US culture and working practices, and savings that will enable them to make a substantial contribution to their countries' economic growth. Return, however, also poses challenges from a personal and family perspective, and the authorities should be prepared to tackle such challenges. According to estimates by Abuelafia (2018), remittances could fall by up to 7 percent because of the toughening of US immigration policies, and there will be greater pressure on the economies to create more jobs.

Box 4. Looking forward, analysis of the surveys leads to some conclusions that have clear implications for public policy.

1. Migration, especially flows related to family reunification, will probably continue. Some 50 percent of migrants with children have left their offspring in their countries of origin under the care of their partners or parents. Settlement by migrants in the United States will continue to drive flows, most of which will be irregular migration, and family members living in the United States will remain the main sources of funding for this process. Calculations based on the number of children and their place of residence suggest that almost 270,000 children of migrants are living in the countries of origin. Not all parents want to bring their children to the United States, but the survey responses indicate that parents could be sending for almost 62,000 children and youths.

2.2. People smuggling by coyotes will remain lucrative and pivotal to the migration process. The toughening of immigration policies has spurred changes in how coyotes operate, as well as an increase in the price of their services. According to the empirical information collected, however, they are fundamental in reaching the United States. The fight against people smuggling will lower expectations of being able to enter the United States irregularly.

3. Lack of productive opportunities and the limited response of the State in the countries of origin remains a push factor. There is a need to create quality jobs so as to encourage people to remain in their countries, and to expand social protection networks in order to improve people's quality of life in their own countries.

Each year, 100,000 young people join the region's labor market, and the economies of the Northern Triangle countries lack the dynamism to absorb that many youths.

4. A reduction in the incidence of violence will increase the incentives to stay in the country of origin. The deepening of the fight against the maras and the reduction of violence, will improve the quality of life of people as well as increase the economic opportunities for them.

5. Countries will benefit from the successful reintegration of returning migrants. The authorities will have to implement public policies that ease the reintegration of returnees into their home countries. Such policies should focus not only on attending to them when they arrive but should also entail monitoring them during the period of their adaptation, offering psychological support, and facilitating their reintegration into the productive sector.

6. It is crucial to work with migrants' families. The family that stays in the country of origin benefits from the resources sent by the migrant in the form of remittances, but also faces the costs attendant on dislocated families. A heavy burden falls on the adult who has remained to look after the children. There is a need for policies and programs that support this vulnerable group, not so much economically (given the remittances) but more from the viewpoint of social risk.

Analysis of the findings also raises the consideration that a more in-depth investigation would make it possible to find a response to issues such as family break-up, the impact of migration on children's education, the productive use of remittances, and other matters.



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Technical Annex: The Survey



Country of origin	United States	3 core-based statistical areas (CBSAs)	Coverage (%)
El Salvador	240.215	91.430	38
Honduras	155.150	40.943	26
Guatemala	219.604	43.930	20
Total	614.969	176.303	29

	% Pob.	Total	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Seeds
DC	34	636	216	214	206	6
LA	30	554	185	184	185	6
NY	36	669	225	221	223	9
Total	100	1859	626	619	614	21

Study confined to three key population centers: NY, LA and DC.

Power analysis shows an appropriate N: N = 2,400

Population analysis shows that these cities are appropriate to represent the United States within reason.

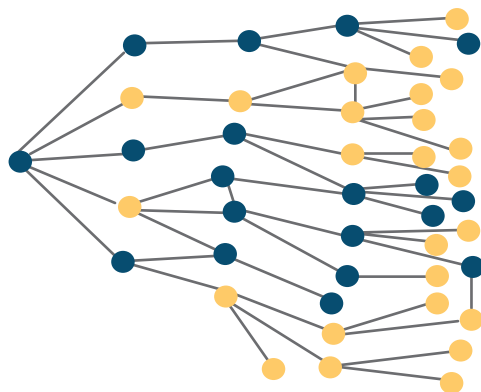
Interviews proportional to the population size: goal of 100 interviews through seeds.

Metric	3 CBSAs (%)	Total (%)
Own home	21	21
Linguistically isolated	56	58
Single person home	19	19
Child	41	41
Wife	46	45
Married	34	36
Speak English well/very well	33	32
Secondary school or less	83	83
Employed	72	71
Has not moved	80	76
Aged 18-29	48	49
Migrated <2 years ago	22	25
Migrated 6-10 years ago	52	49

Response Driven Sampling (RDS)

RDS is a sampling/analytical methodology to survey populations that are hard to access and often “hidden” but online, and for which there is no preexisting and effective sampling framework. It is based on network theory and analysis assumptions and is different from snowball sampling. It begins with a set of “seeds” who recruit associates, who in turn recruit associates, and so on. The recruits are linked by coupons with unique identification numbers³³. Incentives are given for each completed survey and each successful recruit.

Response Driven Sampling (RDS)



IDB survey of Northern Triangle migrants, 2018.

The following assumptions are necessary to use the RDS methodology:

- The target population is within a social network.
- Absence of barriers (“bottlenecks”) so that derivation of the chain in theory reaches all parts of a population.
- Sampling with replacement is viable (the size of the sample is a small fraction of the total population).
- Respondents are recruited at random.
- Respondents can report precisely on the size of their social network.
- Respondents recruit few associates (three or fewer).
- Homophily is attained (that is, balance or convergence, a state in which diversity is reached or the interviews and the sample come to reflect the larger population). Normally, there must be at least six rounds in the chain.

Pilot

In the pilot phase, interviews were held with community leaders, as well as other key and representative members of the community, to understand potential barriers/bottlenecks that might arise during the field work, as well as the composition of the network. In summary, the required assumptions for RDS are as follows.

³³. Recruitment is limited by a minimum set of coupons.



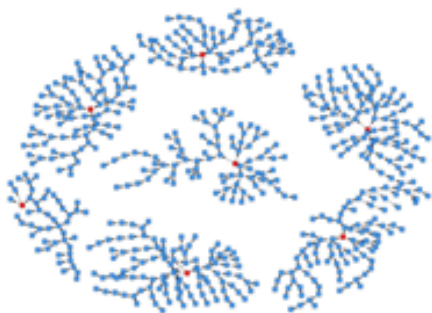
Field work

- Find central locations that facilitate interviews, or consider the need for several sites or mobile sites. Staff with people from among the target population groups.
- Understand the appropriate level of incentives. It is important to note that there are more incentives for recruits to participate instead of conducting their own survey.
- Find “seeds:” they should have extensive social networks, be closely connected to the population, and be motivated to help.
- Develop a screening system to assess qualifications and measure the size of the network.
- Create coupons: seeds are given three, and they give them to three people in their network.
- Some or all these three recruits are surveyed: they are assessed and, if they qualify, they are interviewed. At the end of the interview, they are given three coupons and a “sales pitch” on the importance of ensuring that three people will soon take part.

The process continues for as many rounds as possible until the condition of convergence is fulfilled:

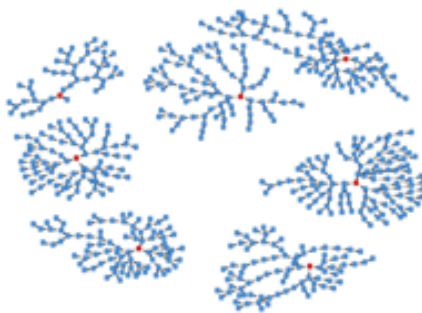
Honduras social networks

N= 619; 14 rounds



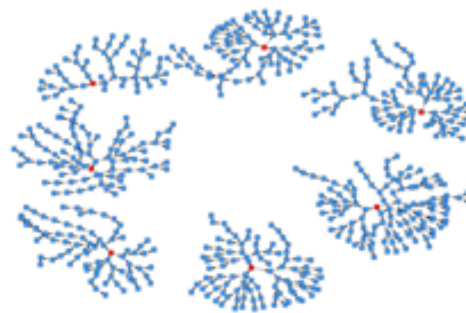
Guatemala social networks

N= 614; 13 rounds



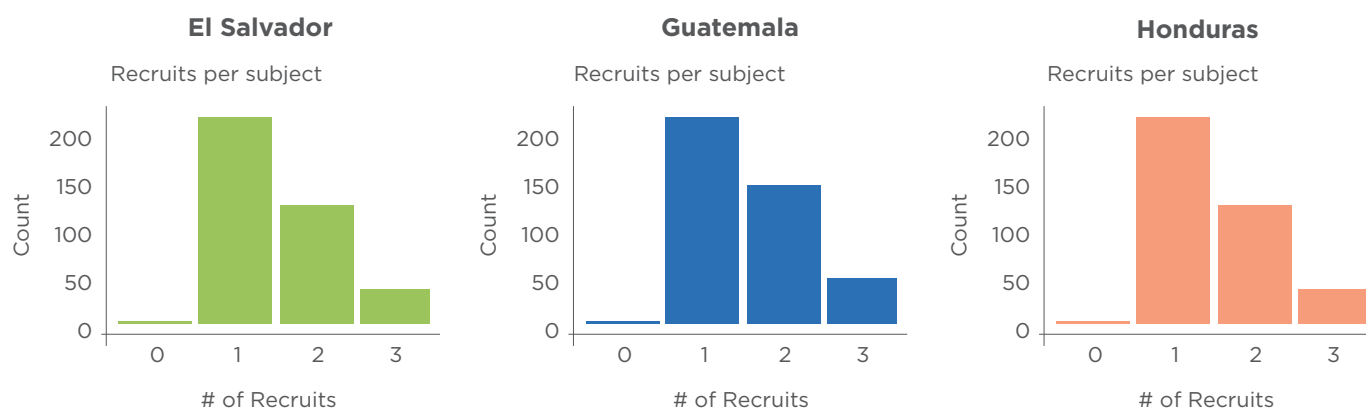
El Salvador social networks

N= 626; 12 rounds



The pilot phase began at the start of December 2017 and continued until the end of January 2018. The field work was carried out between June 22 and September 19, 2018. Central offices were set up in each city. The work was carried out in close coordination with community leaders in order to build trust and begin to identify potential seeds. Interviewees were spoken to wherever they felt comfortable, including the central offices, fast food restaurants, workplaces and churches.

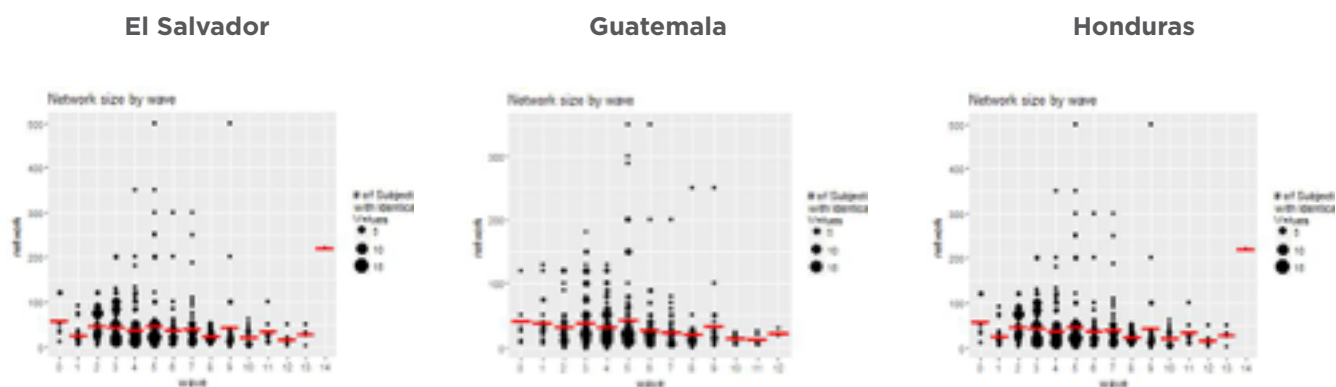
Most people recruited at least one or two others. Few people recruited nobody, which is a good sign that they are networked and are interested in taking part. This pattern is regarded as normal in successful RDS surveys.



Participants can provide a network size

1. How many people are you acquainted with who know you were born in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras and you live in [target city]?
2. How many of them are above the age of 18 and have not lived in the United States for more than 10 years?
3. How many of them have you seen in the past two weeks?

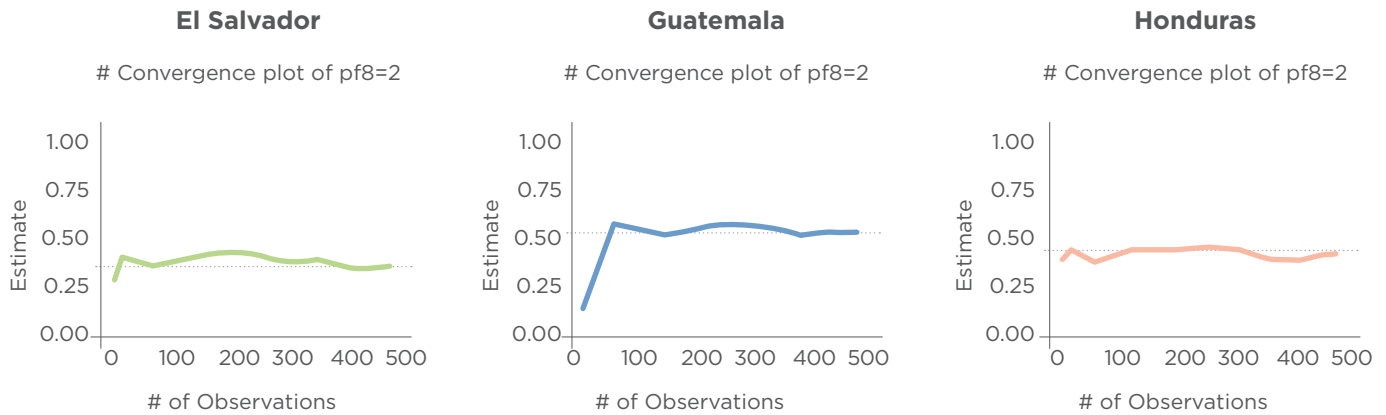
There are some outliers, but these can be corrected using statistical smoothing. Moreover, the network sizes present a normal distribution, evidencing the validity of the measurement of the network size.



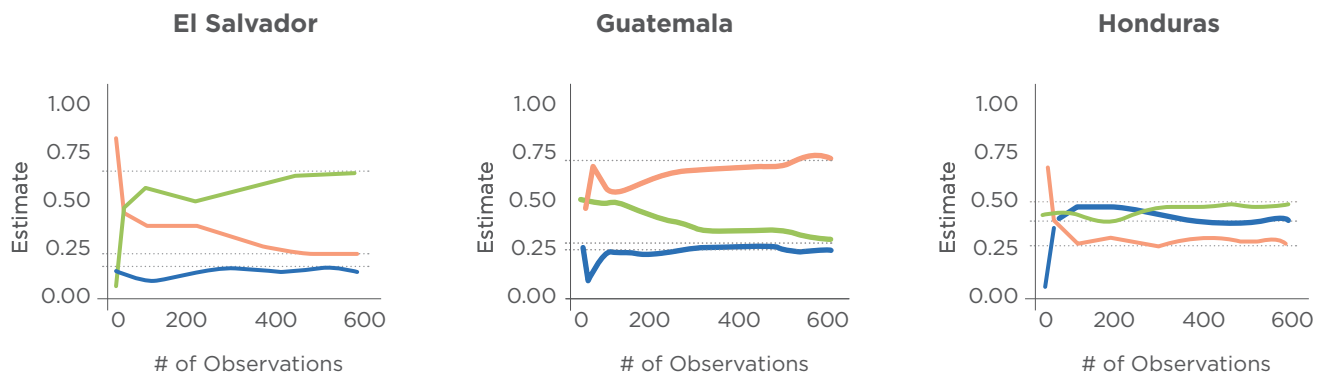
Convergence

All populations are reaching the point of convergence, indicating that the estimates are not affected by the non-randomly chosen seeds. This is essential for RDS. Nonetheless, there are indications that more observations are needed (a bigger sample) to reach full convergence.

- Question analyzed: **do you pay taxes in the United States on your income from work?** (2 = no)



- Question analyzed: **independently of your immigration status, do you currently want to return to your country of origin or remain in the United States?** 1 = return to country of origin, 2 = remain permanently, 3 = not sure



Converge plot of pb14 1 2 3

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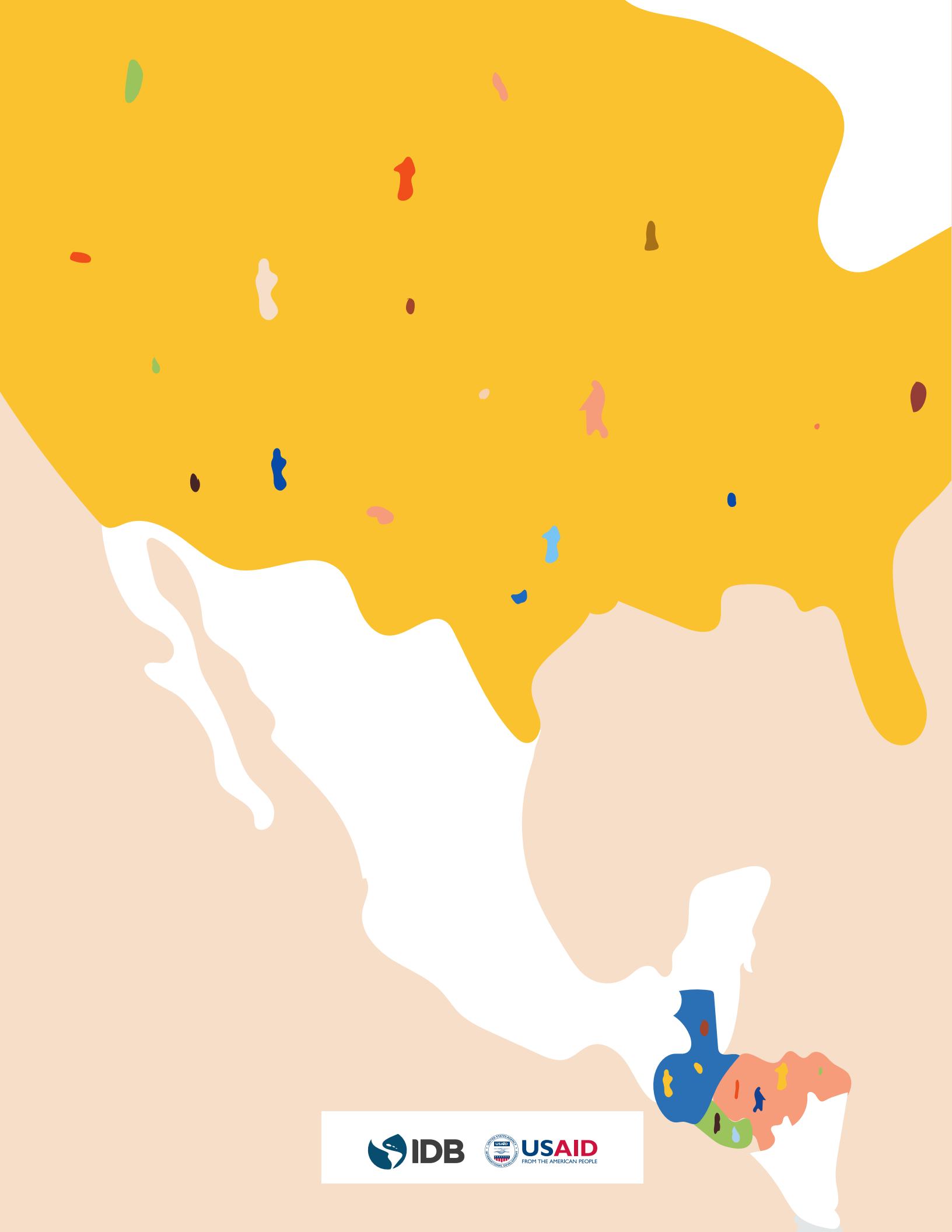
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